

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

RETURNING LIGHT

THIRTY YEARS ON THE
ISLAND OF SKELLIG MICHAEL



ROBERT L. HARRIS

“A HEARTFELT, PROFOUND MEMOIR ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE
OF PLACE AND WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO BELONG.”

—BELFAST TELEGRAPH

RETURNING LIGHT

Thirty Years on the Island of
Skellig Michael

Robert L. Harris



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Dedication

For Maigread,
and for Daniel and Lillian

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Dedication

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Introduction

Over forty years ago now, I traveled westward from Edinburgh in winter to the Western Isles of Scotland. I was a student, and I thumbed, or took buses and trains if I could, to reach this luminous coastline. Over time, I came to love making these journeys to walk out upon the furthest edges of the Scottish coast, beyond which the North Atlantic seemed to stretch endlessly ahead. On one of these excursions to the shore, late on a dark afternoon, I found myself standing on the western rim of the island of Mull and staring across toward Iona. I would be taking the next morning's ferry there.

The next day, I stood on a little beach at the far end of this further island, where St. Columba, exiled from Ireland, had established a monastery in the sixth century. The heavy skies were filled with seabirds. They circled irregularly overhead in crosswinds and dispersed toward the horizon, careening out to sea on their short forays, returning out of the gray emptiness. In the far mist, at the very edge of my sight, they would regather and bank to return. I watched them appear and disappear for over an hour. I would almost lose them; suddenly, they would be overhead once more. Edinburgh seemed very far away, and I was utterly alone, having walked a good distance away from the settlement on the island. The birds were ordinary coastal birds I might see above any beach or headland. And yet, suddenly, I was startled by them circling overhead and held, spellbound, by the endlessly unfolding permutations in the patterns of their flight. At once, I recalled spirals and unraveling lines I had seen in reproductions of early Irish manuscripts. I saw the strange creatures from the Book of Kells, the Book of Lindisfarne, taking shape in the sky above me on that deserted western beach. The lines in the sky unfolding over my head and unraveling out to sea merged into the penned lines of an artistic language used many centuries before, there at Iona, and at many other early Christian monasteries spread along the seaboard of Britain and Ireland.

These ancient manuscripts, which I was familiar with through

reproductions, suddenly came alive before my eyes. Within a glance, I saw records of line and spiral differently than before while standing upon that Scottish shoreline. These forms registered at once with something deep within me.

Often since, I have found myself along Atlantic coasts, staring westward, fascinated by the trails of bird flight tantalizingly held in the air overhead and disappearing out to sea. In particular, since 1987, I have made a yearly sojourn on the island of Skellig Michael, off the southwestern coastline of County Kerry, and I have lived there over the summer months for the past thirty years. Traveling out to that Irish island, surrounded suddenly by great numbers of birds, I have often recalled the shock of sudden awareness on the Scottish coast long ago. For in the waters surrounding the Skelligs some six thousand or more puffins may gather overhead. Nearby, gannets in great numbers erect towers in the empty air, working their flight by thermals that form between these isolated islands. Observing these wonders, I—and, I am sure, countless others—have often been reminded of ancient recordings of natural line and form, as found in early manuscripts, which had suddenly come to life before me in the skies over Iona.

On Skellig Michael, thousands of birds appear and disappear, coming together in wings of movement that build and unravel over the empty sea. They pull me away from my established frames of reference. Often, no one else is there to stand beside me on the island, and the skies and surrounding rock edges are empty. The mind wanders; links with the past are easily made; ancient ways of viewing things come alive.

Lack of human contact, the diminution of human society, contributes to a full engagement with these fluid lines of flight, superimposed as they are upon the endlessness beyond. We know that people long ago came to engage with this endlessness permanently, came to ride within these curves and spirals of evanescent bird flight on the edge of apparent nothingness. Ancient monks came to spend their lives on bare rock. To us, looking back, there was no real need for these men to come here, no reason for the journey to make a home at such a bleak place. Perhaps, though, they too were intrigued by the natural profusion and the exuberance of light, glimpsed just beyond the last bit of land, the last standing place to be seen on a horizon. Perhaps they were entranced by movements overhead. A deep desire remains, crossing creed and time and hidden within the human heart, to explore, to become a part of, such realms of the border. Inner springs, by which the soul stretches along and above the curvature of the earth, tighten at the edges of all things, so that the soul is suspended

beyond the lines of beach or rocky shore and is carried and released by bird flight, whale song, shark and dolphin fin—beyond the realms of normal sight, normal apprehension.

How many rooms can be seen: ahead,
Over the open sea, within the empty air?
What is spoken or written there?
A silence descends, breaking from the waves,
Revealed in a language of the heart
Rarely spoken: out of nothingness
Air is charged upon deserted shores
And is honed to make a space apart,
To take a meaning from emptiness,
Over time, within an empty place.
In this air, at these extremes,
We begin to recognize one another;
We have traveled long distances
To arrive at edges suddenly familiar,
The rock cliffs at the terminus
Of each pathway we have chosen.
Doorways appear before us empty,
We pass through to be charged.
Rarely speaking. Yet calling, at times,
One another, over the silences beyond:
“What hovers ahead upon those empty
spaces, drawing us out here again, looking
for further speech within the silence?
drawing us further out along the shore?”

Part One



Chapter One

A Lost Map

I was exhilarated by the sights before me, standing on that remote Scottish coastline so many years ago. I had been a student in Edinburgh for a few months by Christmas 1977, but my life for the most part lacked any direction. I was unaware that my mother was dying in the United States and that I would soon need to leave Scotland to assist my father with her care. Embarking on the discipline of a thesis toward which I felt very little commitment, I felt utterly isolated. I found the city, and the countryside, beautiful, but I also experienced a continual sense of unease and was unsettled there.

At a loss, I roamed out into the countryside whenever that became possible: the more remote the destination, the further away from an uncertain, unresolved commitment, the better I seemed to feel, regardless of any physical or financial hardship to be undertaken. And so, I found myself on the coast of the mainland that Christmas, looking out into the empty western sky, to see the birds suddenly appear out of nothingness. The call of the eternity beyond seemed almost overpowering there, just then.

I sensed a tight spring of unease, of restlessness, which had been mine for months and wound ever more tightly, now pulled toward release at the sudden expansion of vista, at the miraculous opening of the sea and the sky. And then the birds' flight began to unravel before me in spellbinding patterns that, somehow, I already knew.

I traveled to the United States to spend those last few months with my mother, and then returned to Edinburgh once more. I was employed in a small bar and continued to work on my thesis for another eighteen months. I knew instinctively that this period of my life was coming to an end. I met a young woman from County Kerry and, in 1980, we migrated from eastern Scotland to the west of Ireland, becoming acquainted with other

shores. We rented a small cottage overlooking Ballisodare Bay in County Sligo. Maigread and I began a family. Among other attempts at providing for ourselves, we slipped out at low tide onto the estuaries nearby, picking bags of winkles for pay and for transportation to the food markets of France. For a while, this became a mind-numbingly cold and exhilarating occupation, undertaken in the company of seals and oystercatchers who were lounging on the sandbanks beside us. We wrapped our infant son in layers of plastic homemade oilskins; he, too, seemed half seal in the dawn light upon the shore.

We had relatives in Kerry and spent much time there. In the summer of 1985, we woke at a friend's house, in Kenmare, with two free days on our hands. We headed west, in the little tin can of our second- (or third-)hand postal van: now eager, but on its last legs. We were not particularly heading for the Skelligs—which had always beckoned somewhere, vaguely, within my internal geography. We set out more to wander the then-wild coastline of Cork and Kerry at random. We were set loose, our son was minded, and we rolled along small roads that morning, encountering one beach after another, one estuary after another—or so it seems, though I cannot find these places anymore—to see a sign pointing toward Ballinskelligs Pier and a journey to the Skelligs advertised, under the helm of skipper Brendan Walsh.

We were two of a dozen or so passengers, and were rowed out from the pier in a small dinghy to board a larger half-decker for the ninety-minute trip. I recall piped music welcoming us aboard, though I hardly heard it. I remember being extremely happy. Suddenly, I was aware once more of being completely surrounded by sea and sky, aware of the sensations that one apprehends on leaving land and that I had not experienced for a long time. I was thirty-one years old.

Looking back, it seems to me that many things were being abandoned during the course of that journey, but of course I could not have known that then.

What were these things? I was traveling out to an island connected to the modern world by historical associations going back over fourteen hundred years and by the trails of the protected birds that filled the sky overhead. Otherwise, and in different light, it was a bare rock at sea. Perhaps a youthful prejudice, or arrogance, was being abandoned on that crossing. I would learn, over time, that occasions would arise at this place when I would hear a call to speak secretly with those far away, and to receive messages across the lines of living and dying. At the same time, I would come to experience something of the sense of desolation, and

imprisonment, known by those who are incarcerated and secluded, through no fault of their own—the outcasts spread in lonely places across all the edges of the world.

We passed between thick hedges of raised flight on the way out from the mainland. Showers of gannets cascaded into the sea at each side of the advancing boat, their homes glistening on the crags overhead as we neared the islands. Every ridge of stone shone, alight with new life. Countless chicks sheltered above us, indistinguishable orbs of white woolly down packed upon the cliff edges. Their parents hurled themselves into the empty air: veering out upon, and returning from, horizons miles away.

Beyond the first island (Little Skellig), I saw—first a handful, then hundreds of—puffins falling away from the further rock, Skellig Michael. They formed great rings in the air; the sky ahead seemed full of jewels. Translucent carmine beaks, aglow in the trapped sunlight, circled toward and above us, caressing the curvature of the rock along sheer ledges, establishing opposing fields of movement between the two islands. The little vessel was pulled up high upon a mountain of raised spirit, in the nether region between Little Skellig and Skellig Michael, one mile apart from one another. Suddenly, we moved into a charged place, having passed over empty water on our journey from the shore. We moved into a field of endeavor unspecified except as a place for the exploration of unfolding light: a space where our perspectives became unsettled, and then thrown open.

And I was utterly aware of the light falling on us all, there at that exposed point on the sea: falling in the softest of caresses on the skin, the arms, the hair of my wife, aglow in the beaks of the revolving birds, stretching in little fingers even below the surface, so that the light trails left by diving birds shimmered in running and electrical currents as we neared Skellig Michael.

Emptiness. And light charging, and changing, the vision of ourselves.

A different order of light formed ahead of us, within a small field, defined by circling waters.

We were descending from this raised ridge of trapped ocean, of confined water between these two remote islands, pushed onto first footfall and to our first leap onto steps to rise upon a concrete pier, bathed in the sunlight running down the shoulders of the mountain. And we were starting to ascend along the road curving ahead—each turn revealing a new vision, a new perspective on the empty ocean beyond, so that these visions and instances gathered and enhanced the brightness around us. Frame after frame of bright empty light accumulated at every turn of the

little island road unfolding ahead. The road continues to unfold, and stretch ahead of me in my mind's eye, even after all this time.

On dry land, we climbed along the lighthouse road, along the way where nineteenth-century lighthouse keepers' names were carved into the stones. All of the light from far beyond seemed to be falling there, the light from all eternity absorbed and distilled upon those vanes of rock, rising out of the sea at a sheer angle, reaching into the sky overhead, far beyond the edge of the mainland. And so the rock stands now, at this distance of time, held in the intense glare of descending sunlight, the beams falling from behind the summit and picking out the circling birds, exposing an architecture of revolving light utterly unique. Creating a vision held together by bird flight and by the continual dissolution of all static things. Ahead of us, ancient and enigmatic steps rose: climbing, layer upon layer, through the surrounding emptiness and into the emptiness above, rising to a high vantage point, rigged as a lookout upon the even further emptiness beyond.

We ascended onto bedrock behind the ancient monastery, some six hundred feet above a bright summer's ocean. We sat, Maigread and I, and watched my map lift, almost effortlessly, in a warm breeze, crinkling happily in soft air, flitting outward, downward, slowly toward the sparkling and eternal sea spreading before us out toward the Arctic, to the northwest, away from this warm, fragrant rock, this mild summer's day in June 1985. And it was as if something of myself had been given away or taken away into the emptiness of the air and into the teeming ocean beyond. Something lost forever—though inessential, irredeemable. Some interior logic had been broken open.

Sometimes, the light that holds everything before us changes; the lines of our communication break. We stand exposed; chance openings heave into view. The thin film that separates us from what is beyond alters. We wait and wait, and suddenly a drastic action is forced on us. Finally, there is one choice to be made.

And then the map disappeared, and there was only the light falling over us.

Chapter Two

A New Home

Maigread and I had little interest in the guided tour when we visited the island that day. A resident archaeologist gave a daily talk in the monastery at the time, but we quickly steered ourselves past. We climbed up onto the high rocks hidden behind the monastery, from where we could survey the peak stretching into the air just beyond us and the open sea twinkling below. The world spread out on all sides. It was possible to roam the island more freely then than now, as the numbers coming to the island were much smaller. In fact, over the years, I have met elderly returning visitors telling me of happy days in their youth when they were dropped off for the day by relatives who were fishing locally, to be picked up again in the evening, having had a day on the island to themselves.

At any rate, that morning, as we climbed onto the rocks behind the monastery, our sense of freedom was palpable. We felt a bit like the wild goats who roamed the island into the 1950s. In the nineteenth century, lighthouse keepers even brought a cow onto the island, guiding her up the steps to graze in Christ's Saddle, the ridge that separates the two peaks on the island, halfway up the steps to the monastery. We were high on this day, having sensed the completion of an excursion to a bright edge of all things; we sailed back ashore, found a restaurant, enjoyed a long and involved meal, and pitched our tent in darkness. We drove home northward with a new light ablaze upon our internal geography, and within ourselves.

Two years passed. We had to move inland from our little rented cottage isolated on the shores of Ballisodare Bay, and away from the basking seals we would see out on the sandbanks in the early morning, and from the running breakers we could see over at Strandhill and behind the dunes at Culleenamore, around the corner of the bay. We moved into the hill country of north Leitrim and rented a house by the lake at

Loughadoon. Right behind the house a steep hill rose, topped by ancient, worn earthworks, from which we could yet view Knocknarea and the far ocean, now ten miles away. Whooper swans came to overwinter right beside us, calling out on the frozen night air. Daniel, now six, said that they were having parties, with their laughter reverberating through the ice and cold. At least twice we were snowed in; and when we were able, after two or three days of seclusion, to drive down to Sligo town, we found to our surprise that there had been no snow at all below our hills during the time we had been isolated. Everyone else had been going about their normal business as we had been sledding on cardboard.

I joined a small theater group, and Maigread continued to work on her landscape drawings. But our trip to the Skelligs had opened a perspective on a further distance, both in space and in time, and we often remembered, and spoke about, our trip there. And aside from the sheer magic sensed on our journey out that day, the visit to the island was for me, in a certain sense, a culmination of the shore hopping that had long been a part of my life. I had known of the Skelligs long before I had stood on that beach in Iona, in Scotland, staring at the patterns the birds were making in the sky and remembering the similar patterns in old manuscripts. On arrival, it wasn't so much that I had dreamed of the place before, as others were later to tell me. It was more as if, almost without thinking, I was suddenly embarked—once out at sea—upon a journey that seemed somehow utterly correct, for which unknown preparations had been made, leaving me open to accept the absolute freedom of the falling light I would experience there. I was embarking on some altogether fresh experience, which made me instinctively aware of why men would have wanted to establish a toehold, a lookout, at this far place. These things I sensed, without overly thinking about them, outside of any studies concerning this establishment and its community, which I would have been engaged in during my college days, years before.

My wife's mother was housebound for the last decade of her life in Killarney. She loved to meet Daniel and called for him to visit as often as it was possible. In May 1987, I took him on a bus trip to visit with his grandmother. In the house, I idly picked up a week-old *Kerryman* and, just by chance, saw in its back pages an advertisement for a position as part of a new guiding team to be established on Skellig Michael.

I had to reread the ad several times. The deadline was practically immediate. My mother-in-law assured me—quite wisely—that it was very unlikely I would get the position and be employed on that far island. I walked out to the interview a few days later, held just beyond the limits of

Killarney town, on a brilliant summer morning. I remember rows of huge, orange Oriental poppies in full bloom in the little front gardens of the old estate cottages along the way, lining the road. After the interview, I walked back into town again along the Muckcross Road and stopped in the old hotel bar, long gone now. The jarveys were inside; a man was singing.

The new team was needed on the island immediately. Within just a few days, I learned that my application had been successful. There was hardly any time for deliberation; we had just a short while at home to discuss what this change might mean. Maigread and I both decided that an opportunity was being presented that should not be refused. So, within a very brief interval of time, I was uprooted and was heading down the western coast once more to embark upon this completely new, and unanticipated, venture.

This time, I was setting out to establish residency on the island, and the trip out was different from my earlier one. The day itself was different: rain bucketed from the heavens as I was dropped at Portmagee Pier by my brother-in-law. There was one fellow newcomer—Eugene—aboard, as well as two workmen, who carried out essential maintenance and repairs on the island. They took great delight in stressing to Eugene and myself, the two new guides, both the dangers and the length of the forthcoming journey, not to mention the perils awaiting those spending nights on the island. This banter was lighthearted and good-natured. At the same time, I knew that all of my possessions related to the upcoming two-week stay—during which I would need to quickly familiarize myself with the island and learn to speak with visitors as knowledgeably as I could—were packed within an ancient American Army duffle bag, certainly not waterproof. My bedding, change of clothes, and food for the fortnight sat forlorn, wrapped up in a very small package, stowed in a corner of the deck awash with rain and spray. In truth, I had no idea of what lay in store for me with regard either to the physical accommodation to be provided or to the company I would be keeping.

Two years earlier, I had taken no notice of the temporary housing on the island (two men had been spending four nights weekly there). On this second trip, in 1987, I had been told that I would be sharing a hut, that there would be crockery, a gas stove, and a portable Elsan toilet. And so, traveling out in the pouring rain on the *Agnes Olibhear* to begin employment, I imagined a roof of corrugated iron, the company of mice, and a dirt floor. But this in no way dampened my enthusiasm. I was unconcerned regarding any living conditions I might find, hastily—and of necessity—prepared for us, the new arrivals to the island. I was elated

concerning my good fortune at landing any employment at all in a country in the midst of severe economic depression. However, staring at my duffle bag, which was steadily darkening in the continual downpour during the ninety-minute journey, I wrapped up quietly in my oilskins for a while. I seriously considered present prospects, especially with regard to my health.

On the way out, we passed the Lemon (a small bare rock, over two-thirds of the way there, and a marker all seamen know). Joe—one of the workmen—informed me that we would be nearing “halfway” to the island before long. We were actually nearing our destination but, as far as I knew, we still had far to travel. I could not see where we were; the island stood invisibly ahead due to the squally rain and thick mist. I smiled at the joke made at my expense. My cheap oilskins were soaked through, and the trip seemed long; the surrounding seas were now uninviting. After some time, though, gray, jagged rock began to emerge from transparencies in the gloom, and the Little Skellig appeared. I encountered again the otherworldly company present at this far place. Gannets began to draw their cloaks of white flight trails over the boat, dissolving into the rock, then suddenly immediately ahead once more. Suspended before us—hundreds of them, it seemed, just at arm’s length—they lifted the orange hull of the *Agnes* forward, into the otherworld of Skelligs waters, weaving the spell of the place again and marking their territory, creating the barriers of a world utterly apart from the life ashore.

I sailed into the landing on Skellig Michael for the second time. Peaks disappeared above us in the fog; the birds screamed as they circled overhead in the confined space of the cove. We slowed at the pier; bright-green tresses of seaweed rose ahead of the prow, glistening within trapped light. The pink sandstone of the inner cove, exposed by countless assaults of the sea, appeared as raw skin above the waterline, almost fleshlike along the intertidal spaces, just at the surface as we made quickly in. I climbed the steps from the pier onto dry ground. Joe—as I always saw him do after this—knelt quickly and kissed the holy ground of Skellig Michael. My soaked bag was tossed into the bucket of the mechanical Device—a strange skeleton of an enlarged wheelbarrow powered by its erratic engine, and deadly dangerous; only one man was allowed to drive it, and I was perfectly happy that it wasn’t me. I remained always somewhat frightened of the Device, but it faithfully powered our materials up and down the lighthouse road; it took my bag and delivered it to the door of my new home. And I found that this was much more than I had expected. This tiny box cabin stood at the bottom of the steps rising to the monastery, about

fifteen feet square, with three tiny rooms: an enclosure at the rear for two bunk beds; a place partitioned for the Elsan; and then a very compact living and kitchen area, containing a small gas stove and a gas-run camper fridge. All told, it was not much larger than a caravan. Most magically, though, there was a table by a small window, looking out at the narrow road and then the sea, and an apparently solid floor covered with clean linoleum.

This hut was tied down with cable, which hummed and whistled all throughout that season but kept my accommodation rooted to solid ground. There were gaps in the floorboards the mice and gusts found convenient. The linoleum sometimes buckled and curled underfoot in storms. But the hut was solid enough for Skellig Michael and the open Atlantic weather. We had gas lamps for the night. An hour after arrival, I was drying bedding by the little gas stove and cooking rashers. Not having any idea of what lay in store, I felt that I had established a small foothold. My new companion, from the very first meeting (and always afterward), was extremely amiable, and this hut was to serve us well throughout that first season on Skellig Michael.

A Second Ascent

Looking back, life over those first few days unfolded naturally. Eugene and I shared the small hut. We were given twenty-liter drums of water and advised to watch rations carefully. Josie and Ger, the two workmen, stayed further down the road. The lighthouse had been automated the previous year, 1986, so there was no one else on the island that first week besides the four of us, but for the tourists coming and going in the late morning and early afternoon, when the sea was fit. When our third guide, Claire, arrived, she was given a tiny hut further down the road.

Josie and Ger came out on a Monday morning and left on Friday afternoon. Eugene and I and Claire stayed for two weeks at a time in rotation—for a while in the 1990s this was increased to a three-week stint. We went home for six days between stays on the island. The first Monday turnover, the sea was rough and the *Agnes Olibhear* never arrived. Eugene sat on the wall for a while, looking out at the white horses, philosophical concerning our weather-enhanced isolation. We would learn to be flexible regarding our arrivals and departures and come to know that it would always be the state of the sea that dictated possibilities. So our system of changeover, and our approaches to rigid scheduling, developed over time.

The birds were everywhere. One of my strongest impressions is of gray light filling the cabin, making it suddenly a luminous, self-contained

space. Outside, beyond the window, the Atlantic progressed along inscrutable, ever-changing rhythms that were hypnotizing; they have always been so since. A knock at the door was shocking.

We had little. I had my green duffle bag and a box of food hastily purchased in Portmagee. Eugene, though he lived locally, had not much more. There were two saucepans, cups, and a small amount of cutlery. The few shelves still seemed empty after our supplies were stowed. Tea, coffee, Ryvita, peanut butter, bread, eggs, legumes, rice, and pasta. There must have been some chocolate as well. Not much fare; yet, perched on those narrow shelves, they seemed exotic and out of place, greatly changed from their relative plenitude on the shop shelves back on the mainland. We would quickly learn to ration and calculate supplies. There was little contact with people back on the shore at that time; we hardly saw the boatmen, except when the relief was taking place.

There was a sense of not knowing what to do and a sense of the endlessness of time. I had a copy of a book about the Skelligs, a history of Ireland, and several copies of articles concerning the island, which had been left for us. There were the visitors to attend to; there were maintenance duties on the steps and up at the monastery. Somehow the rhythm of each day evolved—almost without thought or planning, it seems now. But for each of us, in our own way, this became a rhythm set and organized to balance our physical requirements against and within a remote and isolated place, and always a place of overwhelming and changing light.

There would be little further communication during our time there, besides our conversations with each other or with the visitors; back then, there was only one VHF handset, and it was with Josie and Ger down the road. Though a much larger master set came into continuous use in later years, and we came to know the great radiomen at the Valentia Coast Guard Station well, those first few years were marked by radio silence for the most part. I don't recall using the radio at all during my first two years on the island, even to call the Coast Guard or the boatmen. The boats simply arrived, as if by magic, when visibility was poor.

* * *

That first afternoon on the island, after the rain had cleared away, Eugene and I climbed up to the monastery. This was my first ascent as a resident; I had only been on those steps once before, on the journey with Maigread two years previously. I sensed that sudden strange Skelligs vertigo once

again: the strange and steep rise of the curving stairways, the sudden wrench from solid ground, perhaps as dramatic as any first setting sail from shore, departing the ground for the air. For we were rising—it seemed—almost perpendicular to solid ground, the angle of ascent much higher than seemed natural, the ground falling away at times from either side, the birds scattering the loose, friable soil, scampering away from us as we climbed; and no one else there.

At the top, above the domes of the beehives, we sat along the sharp edge of the bedrock, looking out over the wide range of open sea reaching beyond us in almost a full circle, a circle only broken by the thin spiral of the South Peak rising above and overhead and a few hundred yards away. I can see the day clearly: a pale-blue sky, ragged clouds, the headlands of the shore gleaming to the east eight miles away. In the distance, the little lights from a few houses glimmer in the late afternoon, reflecting the sun's rays. The isolated beach at St. Finian's Bay stands alone and cut off from the rest of the main peninsula—a little beach from which, legend has it, the monks first rowed out to the island—empty now, only a faint pink line at the bottom of the cliffsides. And the sea, the sky are everywhere, and the far coastline seems extremely remote from the perspective of that day long ago. Each step of ascent, each disembodied leap and scamper in places where there was no path, behind and above the cells, seemed to cement the permanence of that isolation.

There was a different air, a different calculation of movement here. Every step or gesture was briefly held, outlined, drawn out within thin, clear air, in this element of height and exposure. And there was a continuous sense, a barely conscious one, of being suspended far above the ground and sea. The whirring birds everywhere only added to the sensation of existence along a suspended and altered plane of life.

We made idle chat, standing on the bedrock that first afternoon. I made some comments about the monks, wondering aloud with regard to their motives and purposes: what were they doing here, how many lived here, when had they come, what had the island been like on their arrival? Josie looked over to where Eugene and I were standing: "No one really knows, boy. And don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Between the Peak and the Bedrock

I wandered a bit further along the bedrock that first afternoon. The bedrock behind and above the monastery stretches over the top of the cells at a sheer angle to a ridge, beyond which there is a steep drop into the sea. Just over the lip of this ridge are a few natural ledges where one can sit. Over