



The Last Journey of Aloysius: notes on the making of ‘Aran Diary’ (2023)

Maurizio Cinquegrani, June 2025

With thousands of miles of stone walls and remnants of prehistoric settlements, the three Aran Islands in Galway Bay, Western Ireland, recently served as the setting for a short film essay entitled *Aran Diary* (2023) by researcher and filmmaker Maurizio Cinquegrani. This piece shares glimpses of the walks and ideas behind the film along with the voices that inspired it, all trying to hold onto a landscape too elusive to grasp.

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In the summer of 2025, I made yet another journey to the Aran Islands. It was my fifth visit to the Inishmore.

Aboard the ferry from Doolin, County Clare, to Kilronan, I leafed through three issues of *National Geographic* from 1931, 1971, and 1996. The oldest featured an article by the American ornithologist Robert Cushman Murphy, titled “The Timeless Arans: The Workaday World Lies Beyond the Horizon of Three Rocky Islets off the Irish Coast.” The 1971 issue included a piece by the Irish writer Veronica Thomas, “The Arans, Ireland’s Invincible Isles,” while the most recent contained “The Aran Islands: Ancient Hearts, Modern Minds” by the American author Lisa Moore LaRoe.

Each of these articles includes striking photographs that captured the struggle between continuity and change, between the pull of modernisation and the quiet perseverance of the past that defines life on the islands. On the ferry, I lingered over the photographs. I recognised certain places, speculated about others, observed the faces of those long gone, and reflected upon the landscapes

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mutating ever so slightly across the passing decades.

My mind wandered back to my first trip to the Aran Islands. I pictured myself, not yet twenty, burdened with a large backpack and the youthful recklessness of arriving without a place to stay in a destination with limited vacancies during the height of the tourist season. It was the summer of 1998 and an Interrail journey carried me from Venice through Central Europe, across England and Wales, and finally to Ireland.

In Inishmore, I rented a bicycle and, for the first time, photographed the ancient forts and weathered ruins that have since become such familiar ground to me. I still have four of those photographs, which are reproduced here. Three depict locations I would film twenty-five years later, including the Iron Age fort Dún Dúchathair and the nearby cliffs (Pics. 1–2), and the monastic site of Dísert Bhreacáin (Pic. 3). The fourth captures a man playing an accordion in Kilmurvey (Pic. 4).



1. Iron Age fort Dún Dúchathair (Inishmore, 1998).

The islands remained in my thoughts for many years, but I did not return until May 2022, at a time when the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic finally began to lift and travel once more became possible. That second visit left a lasting impression on me, and it seemed almost inevitable that I would return to the islands three months later. I longed to see Inishmore in the same season as on my first visit and, above all, to set foot at last on Inishmaan, the neglected middle island, still largely spared the reach of tourism.

By this time, having taken hundreds of photographs, I began to wonder how I might capture my fascination with these craggy islands in a more tangible and personal way, and I started to think about making a film. I considered what kind of film might best serve this purpose and, recalling the works that had inspired me over the years, decided to explore the form of the essay film, a hybrid mode that weaves together documentary realism with fictional or poetic narration.



2. Cliffs near Dún Dúchathair (Inishmore, 1998).

Rather than constructing a linear narrative, I sought to privilege personal voice, literary reflection, and associative editing as ways of exploring spaces and ideas. My aim was not to prioritise factual exposition, but to embrace ambiguity, self-reflexivity, and my own experience of the islands as an integral part of the film's texture. During my visit to Inishmaan in August 2022, I began to write a script that intertwined my own vision of the Arans with the books I read about them, framing it as the story of a young Irishman of the same age I was when I first stepped ashore at Inishmore in 1998. I named my character Aloysius, after one of James Joyce's middle names.

I made him watch obsessively Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (1934), and read James Joyce's short story *The Dead* (1914) and his article *The mirage of the fisherman of Aran* (1912), John Millington Synge's play *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and his journal *The Aran Islands* (1907), Martin McDonagh's play *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), and Seamus Heaney's poems *Lovers on Aran and Synge on Aran* (1966). In the fictitious context I created, Aloysius died under uncertain circumstances not long after his journey to the islands. Among his few remaining possessions were reels of footage captured on Inishmore and Inishmaan, along with a series of entries from his voice diary, fragments that stand as the only testament to his final voyage.

My principal inspiration for what was to become *Aran Diary* derived from the work of Chris Marker, particularly his film *Sans Soleil* (1983), in which a female narrator reads from letters ostensibly written by the fictitious cameraman Sandor Krasna. The letters, layered over images of travel and meditations on memory, history, and society, create a rich interplay between the real and the imagined.

I was also influenced by Patrick Keiller, whose films *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) interpret urban and political landscapes through the voice of a fictional narrator, an unseen researcher named Robinson, exploring the condition of contemporary England. My narrator, Aloysius, may be viewed as a descendant of Sandor and Robinson. Yet his world lies not amid the urban landscapes explored by his predecessors, but within the confined, self-contained realm of Inishmore and Inishmaan, where his voice diary weaves the film's narrative thread.



3. The monastic site of Disert Bhreacáin (Inishmore, 1998).

In May 2023, I returned to the islands for filming. Over the course of a week, following an itinerary I had carefully devised in the preceding months, I captured the locations that would appear in the film, interwoven with the words of Aloysius. The resulting footage functions as found footage, as if filmed by Aloysius himself during his fatal journey to the Aran Islands. I shot the film entirely with a handheld camera to evoke the raw, unpolished quality of found footage, echoing the kind of material an explorer like Aloysius might have left behind. A few months later, I recorded the voice-over in Dublin with my former student, now actor, Felix A. Morgan.

I edited *Aran Diary* in Premiere Pro later that year. I sound-edited Aloysius' narrative using a range of sounds I associate with the islands, creating a soundscape that stands apart from both the physical locations and the narration. Wind, waves, birds, footsteps on the ground, rain, and even the eerie whistles and clicks of dolphins intertwine to form an imagined acoustic landscape. I didn't aim at realism: for example, I have never actually heard or recorded the sounds made by dolphins, yet those sea creatures linger in my memory from the ferry journey to the islands in 1998, when I first saw dolphins in my life, a moment that has remained inseparable from my recollection of that crossing.

I thus wanted to create a film in which the experience of the Aran Islands unfolds in an uncanny, slightly disquieting way. The camera remains still, yet we hear footsteps; the sea lies calm, yet the sound of waves persists; no birds appear, yet their calls fill the air. There is no human presence, only the suggestion of an island long deserted.

Moreover, my aim was to evoke the illogic of a dreamlike narrative. I wanted *Aran Diary* to come across as a feverish dream of a journey to the islands. This quality resonates in Aloysius's own recollections: his dreams of fishermen, cottages filled with harps, seaweed, and broken shells, and in John Millington Synge's haunting line quoted by Aloysius: "Some dreams I have had in this cottage seem to give strength to the opinion that there is psychic memory attached to certain neighbourhoods."

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4. Man playing an accordion in Kilmurvey (Inishmore, 1998).

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Aran Diary is ultimately about that psychic memory attached to the islands, with their Iron-Age forts, their stone walls, and dilapidated houses; it's inspired by the countless hours I have spent walking and cycling on the Arans and by the films and books cited in the Aloysius's voice diary.



5. The grave of Coleman "Tiger" King, Flaherty's Man of Aran, at the Cill Éinne graveyard in Killeany (Inishmore, 2025).

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Sharing their fascination with memory and place, Aran Diary is my attempt to drift through the otherworldly landscapes of the Aran Islands, losing myself in the labyrinth of stone walls that has long captured the imagination of many. Looking back at the photographs I took in 1998 and the film I made in 2023, I'm reminded of those three issues of National Geographic. The landscape has changed little, and yet the grain of the images reveals the passage of time and the quiet persistence of tradition.

I had expected my fourth journey to the Aran Islands to be my last, and yet, as I mentioned in the opening lines of this article, I found myself returning once again. Last August, on a rain-soaked afternoon on Inishmore, I stumbled upon the grave of the Man of Aran for the first time (Pic. 5). In Flaherty's film, the clash of waves and shore reflects how past and present merge, and in that tension, the soul of the Arans becomes visible. I tried to build on this idea in the film which you can see here: <https://animalocistage.wordpress.com/aran-diary-an-essayistic-film/>

About the author

Maurizio Cinquegrani is a Senior Lecturer in Film and Media at the University of Kent. He is the author of three books exploring film, memory, and place, and is currently developing a series of films centered on islands. Following Aran Diary (2023), he travelled to Taiwan to complete Formosa 228 (2024), a short experimental film that, like its predecessor, has been selected for numerous international film festivals. His current project focuses on Douglas, Isle of Man, and examines the theme of internment during the Second World War.

Footnotes & references

Cover image. Benan's Temple (Inishmore, 2023).