

Interview with an Robert Harris

Dr. Rita Day

Editor-in-Chief, DBS Applied Research and Theory Journal
Academic Director for Business, Dublin Business School
Dublin, Ireland

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Introduction

Nestled off the southwestern coast of Ireland, this UNESCO World Heritage site is renowned for its rugged beauty and historical significance. I had the pleasure of sitting down with an extraordinary individual whose connection to Skellig Michael goes beyond the ordinary. I am delighted to be joined by Robert L. Harris, author of *Returning Light* and a former warden of this enigmatic island for the last 36 years. The author offers insights into researching and writing a book and gives us, the readers, a beautiful and celestial piece of writing.

Skellig Michael, with its ancient monastic settlement perched on towering cliffs, has long been a subject of fascination for history enthusiasts and adventurers alike. As a warden, Robert L. Harris has not only witnessed the island's awe-inspiring landscapes but has also delved into the daily life and challenges faced by those entrusted with its preservation. In more recent times the monastic settlement has also been the location of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*.

In this exclusive interview, we will unravel the layers of experience gaining insights into the unique responsibilities, poignant moments, and the deep connection forged with this remarkable island during his tenure. This is an interview about a literary journey exploring the intersection of history, conservation, and personal reflection. We will hear about windswept cliffs and echoing chambers of Skellig Michael offering a glimpse into a world where the past meets the present in a harmony that only an island of such profound significance can provide.

Interview with Robert L. Harris

The inspiration for "Returning Light" in the context of my time on Skellig Michael

When I first travelled westwards from the Kerry Coast in 1987, I was following a sea route forged by monks over a thousand years earlier. While I did not know this on that first journey, I would be retracing my way out to the island of Skellig Michael for

the next 36 years. The island, over time, became an anchor upon which each year came to revolve for me. I came to live on the island over a period of five months each year and I became acutely aware of seasonal progressions and natural rhythms at this exposed place. The island was often cut off, due to the Atlantic, from the mainland and I knew quickly that my surroundings and observations were little different from those my predecessors a millennium earlier had experienced. And so, I also soon came to know that I had been provided with a unique perspective in the context of our modern world as I bided there in the late 20th century. I felt that it would become necessary to describe these things, in some way, before long.

How the surroundings of Skellig Michael influenced my writing process

The trip out to Skellig Michael by sea poses great challenges to the senses: immediately upon embarkation one leaves what we know as the ordinary world behind. The hour-long trip induces a sea-change in the spirit. The open surroundings of sea and sky are exactly those encountered by the first travellers. Past and present converge into a timeless realm. Then, suddenly, birds are everywhere in the sky overhead; it can almost seem, sometimes, that they are lifting the tiny vessel upon which one travels on toward the island which looms overhead as one nears. There is very little flat space there, and suddenly, one is climbing steep stairs of stone, a chain of ascent which drops away towards the sea on either side, rising to a tiny terrace floating near the summit where the monks made their home. The sense of vertigo can be real, and one's sensory apparatus can be sprung open on a first encounter, and long afterwards. It became necessary to assimilate these things and to communicate the details of my new surroundings as clearly as possible.

The challenges and Obstacles faced in researching the island

First of all, I found my experiences of the island overwhelming. On the other hand, where was I? Stranded on a rock in the Atlantic surrounded only by the sea and sky. In some ways, my life on the island could have been whittled down to a description of my simple movements along these natural divisions and empty horizons. Often, there was very little in the way of human interaction to be had, beyond giving brief histories of the island to visitors who would come for a few hours when the weather was fit. It was difficult to pin down my experiences, based as they were upon subjective and internal experiences, and balanced against the astounding and unusual sensory display which I was experiencing daily. The sea moved before me in a thousand moods and ways; the incredible variety of bird flight was continually unfolding over my head. Yet, life on the island could also be pared down to a few sentences, paragraphs. I began making diary entries which sometimes seemed to say more or less the same things. Slowly, though, the unique vision and perspective possible on the island began to take hold. The sense of connectedness with the entire world beyond became apparent. And I began to see the lookout, the observation post, that Skellig Michael might be, and my sense of place in all things began to evolve and develop in ways undefined upon my first arrival.

The memorable and unexpected experiences that impacted my work

These are innumerable. Two come immediately to mind, from my first days on the island. Skellig Michael has two peaks and a valley between them. The more easterly

is the one upon which the monastery was built facing back towards the mainland. The other is much more precipitous: it snakes upwards in a narrow spiral 715 feet above the sea. There are no stairs leading to the top, only handholds and footholds which are not immediately easy to make out. At one stage, near the summit, it is necessary to climb through a narrow crevasse known as the "Needle's Eye." Emerging from this keyhole, one enters a different world. A small terrace somehow -- inconceivably -- built there 1300 years ago, was a place of solitary prayer. Sometime in my first weeks on the island in 1986 I slowly picked my way up there on a bright afternoon. Nothing lay ahead of me but the open sea, nothing below but empty space. My whole life was suddenly laid open. Often, I have returned in the intervening years, and sometimes I have spent the night upon that peak, but that first climb, and the attraction to the place that I have known ever since, is indelibly printed within my memory.

The heights of the Peak provided an uncanny lookout upon things far away; sea depths, though, pulled my observations and thoughts in other ways altogether. The first year that I spent on the island, I walked many times in the darkness along the lighthouse road to the pier. On bright nights, the little lights from the mainland are clearly visible from St. Finian's Bay, and the dark hills of Iveragh and Beare rise against the night sky. These things are only eight miles away, but the island can be cut off for days, even more, in bad weather, and the mainland seemed often, on those first walks down in the darkness, to be an eternity away. One night, early on, I turned the last corner of the road to see the sea alive with what seemed [to be] endless starlight-- phosphorescent plankton swirling continually just below the surface. I was utterly taken aback, not knowing at all the nature of what I was seeing. Another world, another galaxy had opened before me. And ever since, sometimes waking in the middle of the night and staring out from my bunk upon a high sea, from time to time, I have been revisited by this swirling brilliance of moving and myriad light.

On balancing caretaking responsibilities with the demands of writing a book

My caretaking responsibilities very often provided a sense of rhythm to my time on the island. When I met with visitors, it would be most interesting to see what their initial responses might be on arrival at this strange new place. I soon came to see that their initial experiences, and those gleaned by me after spending extended periods of time on the island, had many features in common. I had been afforded time to investigate these experiences in depth: becoming acquainted with the wildlife on the island, the archaeology, and the progression of the seasons. In many ways, my caretaking responsibilities formed the backbone of these observations, keeping me from making hasty conclusions, allowing the natural rhythms of the island to settle in with me over time. I would come to know, over the following months and years, individual birds that I would meet in my daily rounds, see the effect of sudden storms upon vegetation and bird life, and learn over the course of a season, by casual observations, just when the gannets might veer near the island and when they would disappear.

The unique rituals and practices which helped me connect with the island and its environment while writing

The island is a small compact place. The main routes one traverses there are limited and confined. One is always climbing or descending climbing up from the huts up the chain of steps along the spine of the island to either of the two peaks, or down over the Saddle into the North Cove; or descending along the lighthouse road to the landing, the access point where all arrive at Skellig Michael. Every day I would make journeys along these routes. To some this might have seemed monotonous because of the continual repetition. But after a while, I began to realise that the outlines of the entire island were being internalised within me, and that I was over time drawing an actual map of the place within my consciousness. And these basic routes began to extend in little flourishes: along the ridge behind the monastery, I began to regularly monitor the beautiful fulmars which would hang at arm's length, face high, directly before me as I wandered along the ridge. In the tiny oratory, I would find myself singing vestiges of choral music remembered from decades before in a personal reanimation of that confined charged ancient space.

The impact of the island's biodiversity and ecosystem on my research and how it may have shaped my writing

In the summer months, Skellig Michael teems with life; suddenly, in October, it is scoured clean, the birds are mostly gone and much of the vegetation is pared down to bare rock. This natural progression is marked by very dramatic events: in June, at the height of fledgling season, thousands of puffins fill the air, following continually unfolding trails over empty sky, leaving, for a moment, bright sparks behind them as the sunlight is caught briefly in carmine beaks and feet. Thousands of luminous breasts of a variety of seabirds are aglow along sheer cliff-edges, even in the near dark of late evening. But thousands of birds nest underneath the ground as well, and there is an understanding which comes over everyone who spends any length of time on the Skelligs that the whole island is literally alive. The place is charmed with life, and then, emptied -- but this emptying out of a small rock at sea off the coast of Ireland takes its emissaries -- the puffins, shearwater, razorbills, petrels and all the others-- far off across horizons. Some hover off South American and African coasts, south of the Equator, others travel to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Over time, I have come to understand that this tiny island is literally stretched over the entire Atlantic during the winter months and then drawn back tightly onto cliffs and into burrows as the summer approaches.

Moments of personal growth and self-discovery

And these realisations -- of the tiny living representatives from Skellig Michael stretching far and wide upon their journeys and then withdrawing towards the island again-- inevitably impressed upon me a sense of personal interconnectedness with things, people, and events far afield, even though I supposedly stood more or less alone upon an empty island. Deep darkness might sometimes overcome me when alone: failings from the past, both personal and general, and the sadness so prevalent in the human realms just beyond -- on the mainland and along the shores extending far southwards. The mere accumulation of everything going on beyond the horizons ahead would suddenly come to weigh more heavily and seem more dreary than it might if I were caught up within society ashore. The return of the birds each evening, each spring, after every sortie out upon the water in the eternal search for

sustenance -- an awareness of these great rhythms regulating time and life beyond -- came ultimately to sustain me, connecting me almost without my knowing with sequences going back and forward and enriching, immeasurably, the random encounters. I would have with the passing birds, the seals and dolphins rearing from the surface, and - of course - with the random human visitors I would continually encounter, if only very briefly, before they would also depart, embarking for the mainland.

Anecdotes and stories of people and encounters which contributed to the narrative of the book

Some encounters on the island were very brief, but also extremely significant. A sense of common humanity was often not far away when making brief encounters, relatively superficial, with people who would be soon to go, leaving the small core of island inhabitants-- sometimes only two of us -- alone for the night once more. People would occasionally unfold tales of personal tragedy or illness to me in just a few words, over a few minutes, taken as they were out of their normal situation and exposed after a journey over the open sea in a half-decker and following a long climb up a steep stairway. Once a yacht pulled into the little island pier in the late afternoon hoping to make harbour for the evening. It can be very dangerous to do this at the exposed pier on Skellig Michael, as the sea can change very quickly, and there is no real protection from the open ocean to be had there. I wanted these people to head for shelter for the night on the mainland as I had encountered dangers from overnights before. Eventually, it was agreed that they would eat dinner at the tiny landing, rest for a few hours, and that I would come down after midnight to see them on their way. They were heading for the continent; they would be safe upon the open sea. I lost my irritability when they invited me to sit with them for a while. Briefly, these three travellers and I shared their little cabin, exchanging stories of ourselves in spite of language difficulties. Something clicked. "You should come with us, Bob," they said. While naturally this wasn't possible, the whole brief episode illuminated other strange encounters which often occurred on the island. Hours later, after they had rested, I walked down the half mile to the pier once more. The yacht's running lights were on. We exchanged warm farewells and they departed in the darkness of an ocean that seemed incredibly wide, the three tiny disappearing lights representing my departing brief acquaintances, taking their experience of the island with them. No one else on earth knew anything of this encounter between four random humans, stretching now by bright lights upon the sea and heading into the darkness beyond.

Recommendations

I have lived on islands for long periods of my life, and they are all different, but most have distinct and unique identities. Outsiders soon may learn that it is acceptable to voice criticisms of fellow islanders if you happen to be an islander yourself. If not, beware making any comment. In a way, this is true of any close-knit society, but islanders are different. They are usually very conscious of their differences from mainland society, and this enables them to survive as a distinct unit. I lived a great portion of my youth in Bermuda, an island known as a haven for tourists and honeymooners. But old islanders there are known as "onions," while they can be the most generous of people, they are also known for keeping their opinions to themselves, for having a sharp and inscrutable sense of humour and language and

for not tolerating silly behaviour. To put this in a nutshell, islanders see people come and go, but they remain. So, it came to be for me on the Skelligs: almost unawares, I came to spend years there, and for better or worse, became part of the place during my time.

My advice to people living in similar enclaves of any description might go as follows: there are islands or unique situations even in the densest urban environments. Regardless of whether its boundaries are the sea or the sky or social ones -- if one wants to write about any island, to describe it, to advocate for it or have dialogue with any tight-knit or remote place, to perhaps eventually see it within the context of the wider world - it is essential to move slowly, abandon preconceptions and look to find and describe for one's self a sense of common humanity upon that island, but a common humanity which also exhibits a wide variety of flowers, aromas, sensibilities. The islands I have known - and perhaps I have been lucky in this regard - have ultimately required an abandonment of preconceptions, and an openness to possibilities. That has been a function of their being cut off from the rest of the world. You will not have a choice with regard to circumstance or company you might find on a small island, and so you, and your fellow islanders, will be required to make the very best from the situation where you find yourselves. Paradoxically, while such restrictions can be frustrating, they can also be, unless there is danger involved, very liberating as well.

Other Irish island life writers who were influential to me

Early Irish writings provided an important context for my writing about the Skellig's. I remember reading the "Voyage of St. Brendan" lying on my bunk in a passing storm my first summer on Skellig Michael. As I read, the plywood walls which were buckling in the howling gales outside were instantly transformed into the caulked hides of Brendan's Currachs, struggling out in the open Atlantic, searching for the "Promised Land of the Saints," beset by storms, monsters, fears of the spirit, for seven long years. For in some early Irish tales, the open sea, in particular the Atlantic, becomes a realm of both spiritual as well as physical commerce. Bede writes of monks setting sail into the "Western Seas," not steering their boats in any direction, trusting that God would find them a desert place beyond the horizons ahead. Abandonment to the sea, to the sweep of natural forces holding sway just beyond the coast, are themes which recur often in such early tales. Brendan and his men abandon themselves completely to the will of God and to the natural forces which provide His instruments, but by doing so they encounter magical wonders; on one island, where they rest, they are greeted by innumerable white birds who intone the Psalms during the monks' vigils. Walking out of my hut in the early morning to bright sunshine, a dazzling blue sea, and the passing of thousands of huge and brilliantly white North Atlantic gannets overhead, it was easy for me to imagine that I had been reading about my new island home.

How the Island environment's connections with the central themes of the book were communicated effectively to the readers

The island is stark, rugged, and self-contained. For much of my time there, and until the last few years only, communication with the outside world was tenuous, achieved only through VHF radio or by the timber boats which took 90 minutes, and sometimes much more, to make the passage to the tiny pier. And yet, at times, while

living there, an uncanny sense of close contact with distant places, people, and events - distant in time or space or both - would come over me. In the isolation, I could sometimes hear voices long forgotten. And this sense of a different kind of access and communication came to be intensified as over the years I became more familiar with the inescapable natural rhythms of the island. Puffins nested directly under my bed, below a thin floor sheeting. Through the summer I was acutely aware of the developing chicks as their voices deepened and became louder. Sometimes they wandered into my hut. Daily they progressed through the skies over the island following a complicated maze of untraceable pathways. And then, in August, suddenly they were gone, the seabirds hovering near other shores, though not touching down upon them, along all the shorelines, beyond the horizon ahead, where the whole gamut of human life and the human condition was being played out. And then, of course, in the spring, they would return, their beaks on fire, breasts aglow, bringing that message of continuity and some very tenuous but real promise of a future with them.

Advice to readers concerning researching and writing a book

There are an endless variety of books, genres, and subjects. Fiction and science would entail, in many ways, completely different writing styles and different systems of research when compared with what was necessary for me. Except, I think I might give the same advice to everyone: expect nothing and abandon preconceptions and be willing to start all over. One never knows where an idea might strike and take root. And writing, and giving an account, is often a mental process just as much as one involving pen on paper. Figure out shorthand ways to remind oneself of what has been playing out in your mind in the midst of all daily hubbub. Ideas are lost in seconds and they might not return. But most of all I would advise to abandon the arrogance of preconceptions (as if that's not recommended in all walks of life). I suppose I believed I had a relatively clear idea of my pursuit - in spite of storms and sea and rain - when I embarked to work on the island of Skellig Michael for the first time in 1987. However, it was not long before all of my sense of understanding - as well as a youthful arrogance, hopefully - became dissolved within the endlessly unfolding natural patterns and the exuberance of the displays of life on the island. Sometime into my second year, there I dawdled for hours aimlessly in the monastery upon a sunny afternoon, and after a while the awareness of identification - with the others who had bided in that lonely place as well over long intervening centuries before me - became very strong. Throughout the afternoon, shafts of light moved regularly, steadily over the platforms, along dark walls within the cells, briefly illuminating nooks and lintels otherwise hidden in the dark. Over time, I began to notice that the light followed the same patterns moving through the monastery and up within the dark walls of the cells day after day, year after year. And I saw the obvious after a while, that this organisation of light was intentional on the part of the builders of these structures so long ago. The place had been built as an engine of moving light, in a way similar to a Gothic cathedral. And consequently, I learned one more obvious thing, that there was so much more here, hidden before me, than a set of ancient lifeless constructs, built and abandoned long ago. Rather, what was there as a field of endeavour and exploration was a place made continually alive with the movements of light and wild birds.