

## Synge Observations Irish Life

### *John Millington Synge and the Irish theatre*

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#### Synge's observation of Irish Ireland

“ When I was a young man we'd have given a lifetime to be in Ireland a score of weeks ; and to this day the old men have nothing so heavy as knowing it's a short while they'll lose the high skies are over Ireland, and the lonesome mornings with birds crying on the bogs. Let you come this day, for there's no place but Ireland where the Gael can have peace always.”

These words, spoken by Fergus in the second act of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* [1] Synge's last tragedy, might as well be taken as a retrospective confession of Synge himself. Synge in Paris and elsewhere on the Continent was little short of a literary *déraciné*. He might have achieved criticism, though it had many drudgeries which he was perhaps too lazy to overcome ; but, had he not discovered Ireland, he would never have really discovered himself. Like all geniuses, he was contradiction incarnate : he resided abroad because he could find himself at home only in his native environment. Foreign influence moulded and perfected but the outward form or manner of his art ; the solid human matter remained to be found in Ireland. It is this profound social reality which underlies all his later work that we must now investigate.

With the exception of Borrow's romances, we know of no “ books of errantry” more delightful and attractive than the four series of prose essays which embody the results of Synge's exploration of Erin. Although they were written at various dates, and describe widely different districts of Ireland, [2] we may be permitted to take them as a whole, for they represent either Synge's early initiation to the ways and humours of Irish peasant folk, or the subsequent observations whereby he freshened his memories and first-hand knowledge of things Irish.

It will be at once noticed and possibly wondered at that in these sketches of travel Synge writes only of rural Ireland. A double reason accounts for this general limitation of Synge's field of social inquiry. On one hand, it is to be borne in mind that Synge had grown weary of the conventionalities of town life, which he could escape only by an almost Wordsworthian return to nature. “ One wonders,” he writes, “ why anyone is left in Dublin, or London, or Paris, when it would be better, one would think, to live in a tent or hut with this magnificent sea and sky, and to breathe this wonderful air, which is like wine in one's teeth.” [3] Further, the well-known fact that the distinction between town and country is perhaps less marked in Ireland than anywhere else is not to be overlooked. Barring the few large centres, which are English or Scotch rather than Irish, and of which Synge never speaks, Irish towns are but small towns, [4] merged in an indistinct provincial atmosphere. Ireland remains essentially an agricultural island, a nation of peasants. To find Ireland, Synge had to ramble in the country ; and Abbey Theatre plays are typically Irish because they do not as a rule deal with urban life.

There is ample reason to believe that it was in Wicklow—which was, if not his native

county, his home during the longer portion of his youth—that Synge commenced his study of Irish life and scenery. The supposition is borne out by characteristic passages shewing that the Wicklow papers must have been written long before their publication (1905-8). [5] At all events the observations themselves undoubtedly date back to a very early period of Synge's life.

In this day when “ regionalistic ” literature is so much talked of, it is noteworthy that almost every modern Irish dramatist has a definite geographical area which he takes as the locale of his plays. Thus Mr. Padraic Colum writes of the Irish Midlands ; Mr. S. Lennox Robinson and Mr. T. C. Murray, of their native county of Cork ; Mr. Joseph Campbell, of Donegal ; Mr. William Boyle sets his delightful comedies amidst Co. Louth surroundings [6] ; and the Ulster Literary Theatre shews its provincial limitations by its title. Synge, likewise, is inseparable from the Irish countryside where he first lived. The Wicklow peasant had all his heart ; and to some extent it was the Wicklow peasant that he was to put on the stage, even when he professed to portray Western Gaeldom.

We need not in our turn re-tell the miscellaneous experiences that Synge encounters “ on the road.” [7] In these Wicklow notes we are confronted with a number of wayside incidents which would seem trivial, were they not told in such graphic though unaffected style that the memory of them haunts one for many days. Exception may perhaps be taken to the strange way in which Synge derives his information from wholly untrustworthy guides—tramps, tinkers, ballad-singers and other vagrants who, like the proverbial Irish jarveys, [8] are apt to misinform the inquisitive visitor. Yet it is charming to listen to the humorous, and oftener tragic stories that Synge's chance acquaintances narrate, in the familiar and genial way so highly characteristic of the Irish nature.

In one of the Wicklow papers Synge states his standpoint of observation with forcible lucidity. “ In all the circumstances of this tramp life,” he says, “ there is a certain wildness that gives it romance and a peculiar value for those who look at life in Ireland with an eye that is aware of the arts also.” [9] His is less the curiosity of the professional sociologist, with his statistics and frequently pseudo-scientific methods, than of the intuitive æsthetician who realizes the collective consciousness by abrupt self-identification. Synge does not present us with a comprehensive gallery of Hibernian types—such as, for instance, the *Silhouettes Irlandaises* so exquisitely delineated by Mrs. William O'Brien in another part of the country [10]—but rather a selection of arresting trick-characters that possess a picturesqueness of their own and stand out in bold relief. It so happens that those “ variations from the ordinary types of manhood ” [11] especially appealed to the morbid side of Synge's nature. Yet in this first series of impressions he also depicted other phases of life, less shabby and abnormal, though flavoured as it were with a peculiar zest which made them suitable material for his art.

It was this right kind of local colour, this differentiating essence or “ virtue ” of the Irish temperament, that Synge was primarily bent on disengaging. No wonder, then, that these records of rambles in Co. Wicklow—although, in our judgment, by far the best written of all Synge's sketch-books—should have but a minor importance as compared with the rest. Just as the Ulsterman is more Scotch than really Irish, the Wicklow peasant is more or less Anglicized ; the typical Gael has been driven by the invaders from the Eastern to the Occidental seaboard, unless, pursuing his westward course, he has fled to the Hy-Breasail confines of “ Greater Ireland ”—America. It was therefore in the half-barbarous “ Western World,” in yonder self-contained microcosm where the people talk of all that is outside their immediate vicinity as a detached unknown thing called *an domhain mor*—“ the big world ”—that Synge was to find the genuine Celt, with his dreaminess, his imaginative exuberance, his puzzling combination of mysticism and practicality.

.....Mr. W. B. Yeats's clear-sighted advocacy had led Synge to betake himself to the Isles of Aran, a triad of treeless rocks in the Galway Bay, about ten leagues out to sea. Personal inquiries made on the islands (the results of which do not substantially differ from the facts already recorded in the excellent Introduction compiled for the American edition [12] of Synge's book by Mr. Edward J. O'Brien, who has had the advantage of supplemental information furnished by the little colony of Aran Islanders now residing in the United States) enable us to give particulars of Synge's mode of life on this sequestered Atlantic outpost. Synge's first visit to Aran was paid in May, 1898, and lasted exactly six weeks. It was during this first residence that he began his book, [13] which he slowly completed during his subsequent sojourns, being at pains to re-write it in France, Wicklow and London in the meantime. There are but few accounts of life in Aran ; [14] and Synge's own production, if perhaps too much of a diary, is an incomparable storehouse of entirely novel experiences, and contains many a page worthy of the greatest stylists. It is to be remembered that M. Loti's influence had probably something to do with its literary merits. On the whole, the book as it stands is the best possible return that Synge could make to his island friends for their "kindness and friendship" [15]—though they do not themselves think so. It would be simply criminal on our part to attempt a resume of a book so full of interesting details. Moreover, we are concerned with Synge, not with Aran. However great may be what we shall venture to term the geographical, archaeological and social guidebook value of The Aran Islands—which the present writer has had ample occasion to test for himself—there is no need of our dwelling at length on this side of the subject. The book has many aspects in common with Synge's other travel sketches, as we shall later point out. All that is needed at present is an analysis of the especial note or element that appealed to Synge in Aran.

The central impression is, we think, one of utter primitiveness. [16] Primitive life is of particular interest to sociologists, on the one hand, with whom Australian and other savages have of late become great friends ; and, on the other hand, to artistically-minded travellers : witness R. L. Stevenson's *Vailima Letters*, which he wrote in Samoa, or Alexander Smith's *A Summer in Skye* and André Savignon's Ushant book, *Filles de la Pluie*—two works, by the way, singularly analogous in subject, if not in treatment, to Synge's own. Synge, by living in common with Aran fishermen and observing them in his own peculiar manner, was tilling practically virgin soil. He touched the rough grain of peasant nature. He got down to the bare elemental substance of a basic humanity ignorant of the world-made man and of the man-made world alike. And the prehistorically childlike quality of the Aran aborigines was felt by Synge all the more acutely as he was coming straight from over-civilized countries. He could not help comparing notes, and perceiving that, though the two social types are at bottom one and the same, the wilder one possesses a kind of aristocratic superiority. [17] The daily toil and struggle for existence of those "beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas," [18] the sheer conflict of Man and Nature left to confront each other without a single barrier between them, transcends the combatants into legendary supermen.

How this *leitmotiv* of primitiveness is harped upon and diversified throughout Synge's impressions of the Aran Islanders, with their endless talk of war, [19] their insensibility, [20] their fairy superstitions, [21] their perpetual mingling of the natural with the supernatural [22]—any reader of the book will be able to discover for himself. Inversely, it may be of interest to place on record the islanders' impressions of Synge. First, we are in a position to fix Synge's whereabouts in Aran, [23] and to lift the veil of disguise which he has thrown with such gentle delicacy over the identity of his island friends. [24] It was primarily to learn Irish again that Synge had gone to the islands. [25] And yet the people felt that he was peculiarly different from the many Irish scholars who had visited Aran before him. To-day, if one asks them, they say that the man they called John was so strange and silent that no one actually

knew him. He would wander about by himself, or lie on the rocks, basking in the sunshine for hours at a time or looking out over the heaving Ocean. Yet all greatly appreciated his gentleness. One islander shewed us his own photograph, which had been taken by Synge. Another exclaimed with delight : “ He used to play the fiddle, and was a great conjurer.” In the book we find him shewing them gymnastic feats, going a-shooting with them, and even rocking the cradle of the “ old woman” ’s little grandson.

That Synge, nurtured on the heady brew of Continental art, should not have hesitated thus to settle on rock-bound Inismeadhoin, and, despite his bad health, “ rough it” amidst the ruder conditions of a life “ almost patriarchal” [26] and so utterly estranged from his own, is indeed highly meritorious. Yet at first sight one finds it hard to realize how a writer endowed with such refined European culture could well adapt himself to those primal realities—could, indeed, at all understand the mind of the wild islanders. We are already but too familiar with the “ littery gent” who brings his own store of æsthetic conventionalities and sophistications to bear upon an alien world, and with the artificial descriptions which generally follow. Not so with Synge. His European learning did not hamper his perception of Aran life, or of Irish life at large ; nor did it make him artistically-insincere. He did his best to feel at one with the people, to “ start afresh” and live a new fashion of life altogether. Whether he quite succeeded is, however, a little doubtful.

Indeed, though he loved the Aran Islanders and was *with* them, he keenly felt that he was *not of* them. Not that his purely æsthetic stand-point was synonymous with unemotional detachment or objective lack of sympathy ; but simply because he was cultured, and they were not. “ I feel,” he says, “ that I am a waif among the people. I can feel more with them than they can feel with me, and while I wander among them, they like me sometimes, yet never know what I am doing.” [27] And again : “ Below the sympathy we feel there is still a chasm between us.” [28] Just as the Wicklow peasant considered him as one of the “ quality” and addressed him as “ your honour,” in Aran they regarded him as a *duine uasal*—“ noble person.” And this sense of social distance and psychological incomprehension naturally made him very sad.

Curiously enough, we know for certain that the islanders took exception to several passages in Synge’s book. For instance, they strongly resented the anecdote recorded by Synge of how Old Mourteen, on passing the slated house where the schoolmistress lived, said to him, “ Ah, master, wouldn’t it be fine to be in there and to be kissing her ?” [29] Likewise, I am told that for a long time “ Michael” had a grudge against Synge (he afterwards forgave him) for having quoted *in extenso* the letters which he had addressed to him. Mr. Yeats and Lady Gregory often conferred with Synge on the subject before the publication of the book, pointing out to him that people as perceptive as the Aran Islanders would surely object to being used as literary material, and that despite Synge’s precaution to change the names of the inhabitants and to disguise their real identity, their very fewness would always make them easily recognizable. The fact is that however dearly the Aran Islesmen cherish the memory and regret the early death of the man who first made them famous, on the whole they rather dislike Synge’s book. This is indeed bound up with a general state of mind in Ireland—a curious supersensitiveness to adverse criticism in the foreign Press. Nobody likes to be written about, and the Aran Islanders have been so victimized in this respect—especially by American lady journalists—that they have everybody’s sympathy. I find an interesting example of that feeling in the sad scathing which some unhappy gentleman, whose crime was that of recording personal impressions of the Aran Islanders, received in a little book of Irish small-talk entitled *Mion-Chomhrádh : Leabhar Cainte Gaedhilge-Bearla*, by Mr. Tomás Ua Concheanainn (known as Tomás Ban), crowned at the Oireachtas in 1901, and published by the Gaelic League in 1904. The dialogue shews a fine fury which would not be disowned by

the enemies of the *Playboy*, were the passage intended for Synge himself, which it is not. Here it is in all its vigour—

“ Chuala mé go raibh aon ghlincín amháin a sgríobh ag na páipeir, agus ag páipeir Shasana freisin, ag stealla-mhagadh faoi mhuintir na n-oileán.”

“ A’ ndeir tú sin liom ?”

“ Deirim maise.”

“ Tumadh maith faoi’n sáile badh cheart a thabhairt do’n chladhaire, agus barr na bróige ’san mása i ndiaidh an fholctha.”

“ Shaothruigh sé go maith é.”

“ Ta na mílte fáilte roimhe gach aon ’san oileán, acht creid mé ann nach gcuirfidh muid suas le masladh ná tarcuisne.” . . .

“ Creid mise ann go mbeidh súil agam-sa i ndiaidh an bhuachalla úd a rinne magadh fúinn ins na paipeir.”

Which, being literally interpreted, signifies :

“ I heard there was one ‘ ghlincín’ [silly person] who wrote to the papers, and to the English papers at that, hurling ridicule on the islanders.”

“ Do you tell me so ?”

“ I do indeed.”

“ A good ducking under the salt water the coward should get, and the top of a boot in the tender part after the bath.”

“ He well deserved it.”

“ There are thousands of welcomes before everybody to the island ; but, believe me, we will not put up with insults.” . . .

“ Believe me, *I* shall have an eye after that boy who ridiculed us in the papers.”

The adventures Synge met with in 1903, during his tour in West Kerry and Blasket Island, do not materially differ from those he encountered in Aran. Needless to say, he had to put up with very doubtful comfort in the wilds, and suffered hardships which may have impaired his health. This third series of impressions, however, deserves a brief notice, not only because of its beautiful style, but also as throwing a flashlight on Synge’s methods of observation. He now tried—whether attending a performance at a country circus [30] or watching the quaint humours of Puck Fair [31]—to see the people in the mass. And this slight change must be borne in mind as a transition to Synge’s subsequent attitude.

He later continued to explore the Irish hinterland by starting with Mr. Jack B. Yeats on a tour through the Congested Districts (June 3 to July 2, 1905), the routes followed being from Galway to Gorumna and Carna, then from Athlone to Ballina and Belmullet. Mr. Jack B.

Yeats kept diaries of the excursion which we expect have been preserved, and he has set down his memories of his travelling companion—who, he informs us, being the elder one, was in command of the trip—in a short but charming essay entitled *With Synge in Connemara*. [32] As to the twelve papers in which Synge himself has recounted his experiences on the mainland, they are distinctly journalistic, and, perhaps, did not quite demand republication. [33] Yet they are interesting in view of the fact just referred to—Synge's slight swerving from his original standpoint. *In the Congested Districts* consists of articles rather loosely strung together, and intended for the English readers of an English newspaper, most of them unacquainted with social conditions in Ireland. Synge therefore adopts the less artistic and more distinctively sociological attitude of the descriptive reporter, investigating with real economic insight the causes of pauperism in this distressed countryside. He directly interview's the peasantry, and is almost overwhelmingly impressed by the countless evils—the greatest of all being emigration—that the Gael is heir to in these so-called “uneconomic holdings.” He delves into the reports of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, [34] or describes with unsparing exactness social life as such in the typical small town of the West. [35] And, to conclude, the thoughtful Synge goes even to the length of suggesting “possible remedies.” [36]

This is the place to say something of Synge's politics. In the Connemara papers he avowedly subscribes himself a Home Ruler, [37] and although the Irish wail or whimper against English oppression is practically never given vent to in his works, [38] yet his leaning to the national side was indubitably sincere. Still he never was—and this is another trait which distinguishes him from the common Irishman—politically inclined. There is a consensus of opinion among his friends on the point. “Synge seemed by nature unfitted to think a political thought,” writes Mr. W. B. Yeats, [39] “and with the exception of one sentence, spoken when I first met him in Paris, [40] that implied some sort of Nationalist conviction, I cannot remember that he spoke of politics.” Mr. J. B. Yeats describes him in the margin of Mr. Warren Barton Blake's copy of the *Playboy* as “an ardent Home Ruler and Nationalist ... yet so little pugnacious that he never declared his opinions unless under some sort of compulsion. A resolute peaceful man.” [41] In the words of Lady Gregory, “he seemed to look on politics and reforms with a sort of tolerant indifference.” [42] “He was,” says Mr. John Masefield, [43] “the only Irishman I have ever met who cared nothing for . . . the political . . . issue.” This puts the truth admirably. Synge was a man of practically no opinions in an opinion-ridden country. Had he taken an interest in politics, it would have been with the interest of the man who watches a dispute for the fun of the thing, and, with a mischievous wisdom, forbears from taking sides. [44]

Even the sharp contrast between his æsthetic attitude in the Wicklow essays and in the Aran book and his more or less sociological standpoint in the Kerry and Connemara papers is only apparent; for, if we examine the later more closely, we find that the “remedies” he advocates are remedies coming from within, not from without; in other words, that he essentially relies on the old resources of tradition and conservatism, not on wholesale transformations based on up-to-date ideals. One perceives him a little incredulous even of the Gaelic League [45] which, however, was perhaps the only one of all present-day Irish “movements” that he personally patronized. His view is that “one's first feeling, as one comes back among these people . . . where nearly everyone is interesting and attractive, is a dread of any reform that would tend to lessen their individuality rather than any very real hope of improving their well-being.” [46] Of course, “it is part of the misfortune of Ireland that nearly all the characteristics which give colour and attractiveness to Irish life are bound up with a social condition that is near to penury.” [47] But this is “the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world.” [48] Nay, it is “the utter loneliness and desolation of the place that has given these people their finest qualities.” [49] And we daresay

that, had Synge been given the choice between the local note of distinction and the peasant's material welfare, there is little doubt that, for all his abundant sympathy, he would have chosen the former.

The gist of the matter lies in the fact that, even in this last series of articles wherein Synge professes to deal with contemporary social problems—and this mainly, if not solely, for the sake of his English reader—he remains more profoundly interested in the Ireland of the past. [50] By placing his confidence, not in radical legislation, but in the common sense and deliberate procrastination of the peasant, he shews that he is a man with the “ould knowledge.” Below the primitiveness of the Irish countryman of to-day, he finds the old-world civilization of the ancient Gael. Modernness to him means un-Irishness. [51]

It is significant in this connection that Synge throughout his prose observations hardly gives us any idea of perhaps the most striking feature of the Irish peasant : his intense Catholic piety. One would never suspect, on reading these essays, that the Irish country-folk are Christian worshippers whose religious feeling is often carried to an absurd excess of superstition and almost to fetishism. To Synge, the Irish peasant is a latter-day Pagan, on whose old-time heathendom the Christian faith has been artificially and superficially grafted —

“ Before they covered the coffin an old man kneeled down by the grave and repeated a simple prayer for the dead. There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation.” [52]

This was at a funeral in Aran. But in West Kerry [53] also Synge met people who believed in the Tir-na-nOg, the Elysium of pre-Christian Ireland. It therefore becomes evident that the Irish peasantry as portrayed by Synge in his essays is closely akin to the aboriginal Gaedhealtacht ; in other words, that Synge's solely artistic preoccupations led him to take an interest in the modern Irishman almost only in so far as he typifies a survival of the dateless Irishman of the sagas.

This attempt of Synge to cut himself adrift from current associations and to disentangle the antique Irish race from the formidable complexus of present-day life is, in the first place, a national service. But it is simultaneously a means of self-expression. Ireland is to Synge what the colours on a palette are to a painter, a something wherewith to depict one's own soul. He does not perhaps so much use himself to interpret Ireland as he uses Ireland to interpret himself. And this is the general import of these *Reisebilder* : they are both a revelation of Synge's intimate nature and a direct preparation to his art.

On the one hand, the typical Irish scenery is in strange unison with his individual outlook. Synge is a man of many moods ; and the temperamental scenery of the West, in its alternate sunny gaiety and rain-soaked sullenness, with the red dresses of the women ever and always dotting the background, awakens an equally varied response. Sometimes, as in that wonderful sentence in which Synge describes himself as “existing merely in his perception of the waves and of the crying birds and the smell of seaweed,” [54] the harmony is so supreme that his feeling for Nature is almost carried to the pitch of a neurotic hyperæsthesis. Very seldom indeed is the scenery painted for its own sake—but rather to convey some psychical essence or human atmosphere. Nearly all the descriptions of Wicklow landscapes are meant to carry with them the baleful “ shadow of the glen” and give the reader a sense of the “ oppression of the hills.” [55] At the same time Nature is freed from all glamour and meretricious romance ; nothing is unduly prettified, and Synge, in deliberately brushing past externals themselves to grasp the inner significance of the scene, hints at and suggests rather than fully develops his

landscape, generally confining his descriptions to succinct and so to speak parenthetical asides. “ Bars of purple cloud stretched across the sound where immense waves were rolling from the west, wreathed with snowy phantasies of spray. Then there was the bay full of green delirium, and the Twelve Pins touched with mauve and scarlet in the east.” [56]

But the typical Irish peasant equally fits in with his subjective humour. Not that he sees him whole in his mind’s eye ; on the contrary, these essays can in a way be taken as actual documents ; [57] but with his singular gift of vision, and his constant comparative attitude, he succeeds in implicitly fusing all the provincial types he has seen into an average mental representation of the Irish peasant. The peasant as he conceives him is characterized by his essential gloominess. He is as different from the “ ragged, humorous type that was once thought to represent the real peasant of Ireland” [58]— the dare-devil, harum-scarum peasant of Anglo-Irish fiction—as London is from Aran. No wonder that Synge’s picture of his fellow-countrymen should be so pessimistic, since he is treating of old Ireland in its decadence, not of young Ireland in its sanguine expectations. Moreover, his nature draws him to the darker side of Irish life, not—to borrow a phrase from “ Fiona MacLeod”—to the “ blither Irish Celt.” In Wicklow or Kerry, in Mayo or Aran, the peasant’s extraordinary wildness and the mad scenes met with in those parts are congenial to Synge’s ironical brooding. “ Some incident of tramp life gives a local human intensity to the shadow of one’s own mood.” [59] But the impression culminates in what may be styled the spirituality of the Irish countryfolk. They are born poets, the descendants of the ancient bards that were chased to the West. Hence the “ affinity between the moods of those people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists and in certain forms of alienation.” [60]

In brief, Synge discovers mirrored in the scenery and people of his native soil all that lies concealed within himself. But it is not only the food his soul hungers for that he finds in Ireland ; it is also the material exactly suited to his literary genius. And we may now conclude by drawing attention to the three elements of interest common to all these prose topographies, wherein all his later work is as it were virtually contained.

There is, to begin with, the linguistic interest. What Synge finds in the cabins of his Eastern and Western friends is good talk. We are told that he took down curious phrases wherever he went, [61] and in these note-books of day-to-day experiences we find him listening to the bewildering speech of the people [62] and making countless remarks and comparisons about their intonation and way of pronouncing. [62] It is not only his knowledge of Gaelic that he improves by roaming through the country ; it is also his familiarity with Ireland’s English speech. The peculiarities of the Irish peasant’s broken English are reproduced with painstaking accuracy. Very likely Synge would never have achieved much through the medium of ordinary English ; only dialect, and dialect used in a fashion hitherto unknown, could serve his artistic purpose. This he discovered in the wilds, and the reader of these essays more than once comes across whole sayings, tirades and fragments of dialogue that will, with very slight alterations, be found in Synge’s plays. [63]

Next, there is the folklore interest. Synge hears from the lips of the peasants stories as fresh and rude as anything in the literature of the Middle Ages, and these he records just as they are told. These narratives are by far the best things in the travel notes, being remarkable not only for their variety and picturesque extravagance, and the vivid style in which they are couched, but also for the aptness with which Synge, possessed of wide European learning, likens them to similar tales that can be heard in other lands and presents us with short studies in comparative folk-literature. [64]

Last, but not least, there is the specifically dramatic interest. The prose essays are the raw

material out of which Synge will fashion all his plays, the matrix in which the dramas, comedies and farces remain like jewels not yet cut, polished and set. All his plots, or incidents which will be incorporated in the scenarios of the plays, have their germs in the folk-tales just referred to. The odd characters he meets are understudies for his future personages ; it seems as if the play-wright and his *dramatis personæ* were in anticipation rehearsing off the stage. [65] It will be interesting to compare in due time the sources of the plays as they are found in the journals with the dramatized versions. Still this question of “origins” is comparatively immaterial. What is far more important is to find in these impressions of rambles characteristic observations which clearly announce the awakening of Synge’s dramatic propensities. Thus, in *Wicklow*, he remarks that “if a playwright chose to go through the Irish country-houses he would find material, it is likely, for many gloomy plays that would turn on the dying away of the old families, and on the lives of the one or two delicate girls that are left so often to represent a dozen hearty men who were alive a generation ago.” [66] In *The Aran Islands* he strikingly refers to “the dramatic emphasis of the folk-tale,” [67] and he perceives infinite dramatic possibilities in the contrast between “the strangely reticent temperament of the islanders” and “the passionate spirit that expresses itself at odd moments only with magnificent words and gestures.” [68] Again, in *The Congested Districts*, he informs us that the Geesala district “has, unexpectedly enough, a strong branch of the Gaelic League, and small Irish plays are acted frequently in the winter.” [69] The texts here speak for themselves, and bear witness to an irresistible calling.

With good reason, then, Synge will write in the preface to the *Playboy* that “all art is a collaboration.” [70] His collaborators are the whole Irish peasantry. A nation will speak through him. And it will speak in the dramatic way, which best of all can express the profuse vitality of these prose observations—of the people observed and of the observer himself.

[1] *ii.* 156.

[2] Apart from the four districts described in the prose essays—Wicklow, Aran, Kerry, and Connemara—Synge also knew Donegal, to which he refers in *Between the Bays of Carraroe* (iv. 173).

[3] *In West Kerry* (iv. 81).

[4] *The Small Town* (iv. 232).

[5] Synge re-wrote them several times. Cf. *The People of the Glens* (iv. 37) : “I came back from France two months ago.” In *At a Wicklow Fair* (ibid. 47-8) we find the origin of *The Tinker’s Wedding*, which was first written about 1902. We may mention by the way that Synge contributed to the *Gael* (April, 1903, p. 117) an unreprinted Wicklow sketch entitled “An Autumn Night on the Hills.”

[6] Or at least is closely connected with Co. Louth, where he was born. See his charming volume of humour and pathos of country life in that county, *A Kish of Brogues* (London : Simpkin Marshall, Hamilton, Kent ; Dublin : Gill and O’Donoghue, 1899).

[7] *iv.* 20.

[8] *iv.* 210.

[9] *The Vagrants of Wicklow* (iv. 12).

[10] *Silhouettes Irlandaises. Au Pied de Croagh Patrick*, Par Madame William O’Brien (Sophie Raffalovich). (Paris : Guillaumin, 1904.)

[11] *iv.* 12.

[12] John W. Luce Company, Boston, 1911. The book is got up with the characteristic illustrations by Mr. Jack B. Yeats.

[13] “*The Aran Islands* was begun before any of the plays. He told me himself, and there is no doubt of it” (Mr. John Masefield in a letter to the writer).

[14] The opening of Charles Lever’s novel, *Luttrell of Aran*, takes place in Inishmore ; cf. also *Grania : The Story of an Island*, by the Hon. Emily Lawless (London : Smith, Elder) ;

and *Hurrish : A Study*, by the same (London : Methuen ; N.Y. : Harper) ; “ Vers l’Occident : à travers l’Irlande,” by Henri Potez (*Revue de Paris*, Sept. I, 1901) ; one chapter in E. C. Somerville and Martin Ross’s *Irish Yesterdays* (London : Longmans, eleventh thousand, 1908) ; *Smuainte ar Arainn* (Sketches of Aran Life), by “ Una ni Fhairceallaigh,” M.A. [Miss Agnes O’Farrelly], published by Clodhanna for the Gaelic League, Dublin ; the latter portion of *Bilder aus Irland*, by Prof. Hermann Osthoff (of Heidelberg), reviewed in *Revue Celtique*, vol. xxix, 1908, p. 89 ; *Leahhar an Athar Eoghan* (The O’Growney Memorial Volume), by Miss Agnes O’Farrelly, M.A. (Dublin : Gill ; London : Nutt, 1904), pp. 137, 138, 170, 174-5, 372 ; “ The Aran Islands,” by Maude Radford Warren (*Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, May, 1910) ; “ The Edge of the World,” by Miss Ethel Rolt-Wheeler (*English Review*, March, 1913).

[15] *The Aran Islands*, Introduction.

[16] “ The life is perhaps the most primitive that is left in Europe” (iii. 10). This is what Synge calls “ the real spirit of the islands” (49), “ their distinction” (56).

[17] iii. 33.

[18] iii. 52.

[19] iii. 20, 119. [20] iii. 218.

[21] iii. 52. and passim. [22] iii. 149.

[23] Cf. chronology of Synge’s visits to Aran.

[24] See *The Aran Islands*, Introduction. “ Pat Dirane,” the old story-teller who could tell “ as many lies as four men” (99), is Pat Doran, now dead, but distinctly remembered by Aran folk—especially by Miss Costello, the daughter of the cess-collector who lives in Kilronan, Inishmore. The “ old man” and the “ old woman” are Patrick MacDonagh and his wife. Mr. MacDonagh had visited a relative of Synge’s in Dublin when he first left Inishmaan as a cabin-boy (186). “ Michael” (16-7) is Martin, his younger son, now married, and residing on the island. His elder brother has married an Inishere woman who does not remember Synge, and lives with her in America. As a rule the islanders say that *The Aran Islands* would have been a better book if Synge had spoken less of the people and more of Nature. (Cf. Edward J. O’Brien, loc. cit.)

[25] He did not come as a total stranger, as his family was known to the islanders, and a relative of his had spent some time on Aranmore forty-two years ago (iii. 9).

[26] iii. 181.

[27] iii. 120. [28] iii, 122.

[29] iii. 13.

[30] *In West Kerry*, iv. 74.

[31] *Ibid.*, 120 et seq. For another description of Puck Fair see Mr. Robert Lynd’s *Rambles in Irish Places* (London : Mills & Boon, 1912). Cf. also Mr. Jack B. Yeats’s *Life in the West of Ireland* (Dublin : Maunsell, 1912).

[32] *Ap.* W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-43. Mr. Jack B. Yeats had already exhibited at 9 Merrion Row, Dublin, from October 23 to Nov. 2, 1901, a series of sketches of life in the West of Ireland (cf. *Samhain*, No. i ).

[33] It is because of the reprinting of the articles that Mr. W. B. Yeats withdrew his introduction to the Collected Edition, now published separately as *Synge and the Ireland of his Time*. The Executors said that a scrap of paper had been found with a sentence by Synge to the effect that selections might be taken from the Congested Districts series. The Wicklow and Kerry articles alone were intended for republication : “ I have a lot of Kerry and Wicklow articles that would go together into a book” (Synge in a letter to Mr. W. B. Yeats, May 4, 1908, printed in *op. cit.*, Preface).

[34] iv. 189. [35] iv. 232. [36] iv. 239.

[37] iv. 245. Synge “ indoctrinated” his nephews, causing them to become Nationalists “ without their knowing it.” Synge was an ardent Parnellite.

[38] Synge said he had given up reading Irish history “ because it made him sick.”

- [39] *Op. cit.*, p. 11.
- [40] In Paris Synge had been intermittently Socialist. He felt that things went wrong. But he violently disagreed with the methods of French nationalism and anti-semitism, which he called “une fumisterie.”
- [41] W. B. Blake, “John Synge and his Plays,” *The Dial* (Chicago), January 16, 1911, p. 38.
- [42] *English Review*, *art. cit.*
- [43] C. R., *art. cit.*
- [44] “One night when we were still producing plays in a little hall, certain members of the company [most patriotic in those days] told him [Synge] that a play on the Rebellion of ’98 would be a great success. After a fortnight he brought them a scenario which read like a chapter out of Rabelais. Two women, a Protestant and a Catholic, take refuge in a cave, and there quarrel about religion, abusing the Pope or Queen Elizabeth and Henry VIII, but in low voices, for the one fears to be ravished by the soldiers, the other by the rebels. At last one woman goes out because she would sooner any fate than such wicked company.” (W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. ii). When Lady Gregory’s *White Cockade* was first produced in December, 1905, Synge said that her method “had made the writing of historical drama again possible” (Lady Gregory, *Irish Folk-History Plays*, Putnam’s, 1912, ii. 194). Very characteristic of Synge were the lines by Raleigh which he was wont to quote and which he inscribed on one of his portraits (cf. Appendix B, No. 7) :
- “If Church and State reply,  
Give Church and State the lie.”
- [45] *iv.* 245. Synge loathed the idea of “movements” or “schools.” He wanted individual writers, and said that one of his young Irish fellow-dramatists had lost a good deal of his talent by joining the Gaelic League.
- [46] *iv.* 158. [47] *Ibid.*
- [48] *iv.* 71. [49] *iv.* 98.
- [50] Cf. Synge’s remark in the introduction to *The Aran Islands* : “The other islands are more primitive, but even on them changes are being made, *that it was not worth while to deal with in the text.*” Cf. also the synopsis of persons in *The Well of the Saints* : “Scene—some lonely mountainous district in the east of Ireland *one or more centuries ago.*”
- [51] He detested all influences modernizing the Irish peasantry : “I saw him visibly moved once to sadness when someone told him how tourists had spoiled the country people in Ireland” (John Masefield, *art. cit.*). Synge added : “The Irish peasants spoil quickly because they are so simple.”
- [52] *iii.* 52, [53] *iv.* 131.
- [54] *iii.* 153. [55] *iv.* 13. [56] *iii.* 113.
- [57] Throughout the prose essays he compares the people and the scenery of one district of Ireland with those of another district or of Continental Europe (*iii.* 136, 148, 179, 181, etc.).
- [58] *iii.* 173. [59] *iv.* 6
- [60] *iii.* 49.
- [61] W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 31.
- [62] *iii.* I and *passim.* [63] *iii.* 8, 180, etc.
- [63] Thus the place-name “The Stocks of the Dead Woman” in the *Playboy* (*ii.* 13) was borrowed from *In West Kerry* (*iv.* 119) ; Michael James asking Christy’s name (*ii.* 26) recalls to mind the Blasket Islander asking Synge the same question (*iv.* 90) ; the publican’s eugenic condemnation of bachelordom (*ii.* 99) is but an echo of Old Mourteen’s remarks in *The Aran Islands* (*iii.* 133), etc.
- [64] *e.g.* *iii.* 30-1.
- [65] Compare, for example, Pegeen Mike of the *Playboy* with the little Hostess of *In West Kerry*.
- [66] *iv.* 53. This has been achieved by Mr. Edward Martyn, *e.g.* in his play *Grangecolman*.

[67] *iii.* 110. [68] *iii.* 82.

[69] *iv.* 222. Cf. his letter (August, 1906) on Gaelic plays *ap.* Lady Gregory, *art. cit.*, p. 564.

[70] *ii.* 3.

### A Chronology of Synge's Successive Visits to Aran

(i) May, 1898 : *The Aran Islands*, Part I.

A fortnight on Inishmore (*iii.* 1-10) at Thomas Concannon's inn at the Seven Churches.

One month on Inishmaan (10-92) : " In France a month from this day" (p. 16), at Patrick MacDonagh's cottage.

Outing to Inishere (p. 92).

Back to Galway (p. 100).

(November, 1898 — May, 1899 : Paris (90 Rue d'Assas), publishes " A Story from Inishmaan" in *New Ireland Review*, November, 1898, p. 153.)

(ii) September, 1899 : *The Aran Islands*, Part II (" After an absence of many months,!" p. 107).

Three or four weeks on Inishmaan (105-25) at MacDonagh's.

Outing to Inishmore (125-33).

Returns on October 5, 1 899 (" eve of the Parnell celebrations," p. 136).

November, 1899 : Paris (" A letter has come from Michael while I am in Paris," p. 143).

(iii) Autumn, 1900 : *The Aran Islands*, Part III.

Autumn, 1901 (had published " The Last Fortress of the Celt" in the *Gael*, April, 1901, p. 109.

Inishmaan (145-70), at MacDonagh's (" September," p. 152).

Inishere (" a few days" : 170-7) at Michael Powell's. Inishmaan (177) at Thomas Connelly's " inn" (p. 192).

(" I told them I was going back to Paris in a few days to sell my books and my bed" (p. 178) ; actually gives up Paris towards end of 1902.)

Publishes " A Dream of Inishmaan," in the *Gael*, March, 1904, p. 93. . . . ,

Publishes " An Impression of Aran," in the *Manchester Guardian*, January 24, 1905, p. 12.

April, 1907 : *The Aran Islands* first published in book form.

(iv) Autumn, 1902 : *The Aran Islands*^ Part IV.

Inishmaan (196-225).

Inishere (225).

End of 1902 : London (4 Handel Street, W.C.), (cf. Masfield, *art. cit.* : " I first met John M. Synge ... on a Monday night of January, 1903 ... A week, or perhaps a fortnight, later, I met him again").

John Millington Synge and the Irish theatre (1913)

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