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JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE (1871-1909)

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It was his famous first meeting with the poet W.B. Yeats that turned J.M. Synge into a legend of the Irish Literary Revival. Encountering the somewhat younger writer in Paris in December 1896, Yeats claims to have given him crucial advice on his career: 'Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine . . . Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression' (Synge 1968, 63). The turn away from metropolitan literary sources to direct inspiration by the lives of the Irish people was a key concept for those writers seeking to create a new national literature at the end of the nineteenth century. Synge, who did travel to the rocky islands in the mouth of Galway Bay in May 1898 and who found, in the four annual visits there in successive years, the materials from which he was to create many of his plays, was the perfect illustration of the principle.

He was in many respects a somewhat unlikely recruit to the movement. Born in April 1871, the youngest of five children of a Dublin lawyer, who died when John was just a year old, he was brought up by his devoutly evangelical Protestant mother, who no doubt hoped he would follow the career path of his successful professional brothers: engineer, land agent, medical missionary. In fact, he lost his faith at the age of sixteen (like so many young Victorians as a result of reading Darwin), and showed no interest in anything more profitable than music, much to

the disgust of his family. In his four years as a student in Trinity College Dublin (1888-92), though he followed courses in Hebrew and Irish among other things, most of his time was spent on his studies at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. Two years in Germany convinced him that he had not the temperament to be a musician, and from 1895 on he spent his winters in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne with a very ill defined desire to be a writer. He had, however, very little to show for this ambition besides a few derivative poems and autobiographical prose pieces before the momentous visit to Aran.

Though he soon began to write the travel journal eventually published as *The Aran Islands* (1907), it was not clear just what first motivated his interests in the islands, whether gathering folklore or re-learning the Irish language. But it was the simplicity of the life there and its difference from the familiar urban worlds of Dublin or Paris which evidently held his imagination. He had always been a lover of the natural world, and the sheer struggle for existence of those who had to survive in the barest of rocky environments appeared to him a vivid metaphor for the human condition itself. That is certainly the force of his remarkable one-act tragedy *Riders to the Sea* (1902), in which the old woman Maurya mourns the last of her six sons taken by the ocean. Drawing on omens of death of which he had heard on Aran, and using a spare dialect of Irish English based very largely on Gaelic constructions, Synge was able to create within the tiny compass of the play the resonance of classical tragedy.

Although Aran inspired Synge with the 'shock of the new', he had early been familiar with the mountainous terrain of County Wicklow on the east coast south of Dublin where his ancestors were long established landowners and where he with his mother had spent many extended family holidays. Wicklow was to prove the setting for two other plays, both written in the same remarkable summer of 1902 as *Riders to the Sea*; these were the ironic one-act tragicomedy *The Shadow of the Glen* and a first draft of the two-act farce *The Tinker's Wedding*. *The Shadow of the Glen*, based on a folk-tale told to Synge on Aran about a man pretending to be dead to

establish his wife's infidelity, was re-located to Wicklow and turned into a drama of mood in which the allegedly unfaithful wife, Nora Burke, became a lonely younger woman trapped in a loveless marriage with a jealous older man. The denouement, in which she is rejected by her supposed 'lover' but goes off with a Tramp when evicted from the family home by her husband, caused a storm of protest when first produced in 1903 as Synge's stage debut. Though warmly defended by Yeats, who from the beginning proclaimed the genius of his protégé Synge, for a nationalist audience looking for positive images of their countrymen in what was aspiring to be a national theatre, the play represented a travesty of Irish peasant life in general and of Irish countrywomen in particular.

Synge had never apparently been particularly interested in drama before he wrote his first plays but from 1903 on he became a key figure in the Irish national theatre movement. When the Abbey Theatre opened in 1904, Synge was to be one of its founding directors together with Yeats and Yeats's close friend and collaborator Lady Gregory. In fact, as he was the only one of the three directors who actually lived in Dublin – with his mother, having given up his flat in Paris – he often had most to do with the day to day running of the theatre. He was very friendly with W.G. and Frank Fay, the two brothers who led the acting company; he fell in love and became engaged to the young actor Molly Algood, who used the stage name of Maire O'Neill. While Yeats and Gregory had been instrumental in conceiving and establishing the national theatre movement, Synge was the first major practicing playwright the movement produced.

Although *Riders to the Sea*, when produced in 1904, came to be widely admired, Synge's work was not popular with nationalist audiences. His first full-length play, *The Well of the Saints* (1905), a dark fable about two blind beggars who are miraculously cured but so dislike what they see of the world that they prefer to return to blindness, was coldly received. Yeats's belief in the importance of Synge as a playwright, however, was vindicated by the early European interest shown in his work. In 1906 *The Shadow of the Glen* was translated into Czech and

staged in Prague, while *The Well of the Saints*, translated into German, was produced by Max Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater in Berlin.

Such an international reputation counted for little in Synge's favour when his three-act play *The Playboy of the Western World* was premiered at the Abbey in January 1907. Based on a story he had heard on Aran about a young man who had killed his father but was sheltered and enabled to escape from the police by the islanders, it had been developed over a prolonged two and a half year process of composition into Synge's most complex and, as it turned out, most controversial work. It was conceived initially as a comedy of situation in which the hero, Christy Mahon, who appears in a remote Mayo pub, is idolised by the locals when he tells his story of having killed his father. In fact, the opening act, which dramatises this situation, was well received on the play's first night. However, the atmosphere changed in Act II, when the father Old Mahon, turns up very much still alive though visibly injured from his son's attack on him. The tone turned blacker still in the final act when Christy, whose reputation has grown ever stronger to the point of winning the love of the heroine Pegeen Mike (a part created by Maire O'Neill), is publicly exposed by the resurrected father. When the whole community, including Pegeen, turn against the supposed parricide, he is goaded to the point of assaulting his father again, and apparently killing him in earnest. At this point, as the villagers prepared to lynch Christy for the supposed 'murder', the first night audience had had enough and broke out in riots of protest. Nobody was able to hear the play's ironic 'happy ending' when Old Mahon reappeared once again unmurdered and he and Christy left the stage triumphantly together, while Pegeen remained to lament the lost 'playboy of the western world'.

The *Playboy* riots have come to be seen as a landmark in Irish theatre history and the motives for the audience reaction have been much debated. Certainly, a great deal of the sense of outrage was provoked by the negative representation of the Irish country people in what was supposed to be an Irish national theatre committed to combating pejorative stereotypes. It was the more

offensive because set in the West of Ireland, a sacred part of the nationalist imaginary of the time because the least Anglicised. The Dublin protests against the play were reproduced in other nationalist communities when the play was produced in the United States. But it may be, also, that the unfamiliarity of the play, its modern instability of dramatic form and violent subject left audiences deeply uncomfortable and disturbed. It is certainly the case that this most unpopular of Synge's works at first production has come to be one of the most often revived not only in Ireland but across the world where it continues to be staged in translated and adapted form.

Synge had suffered from illness, particularly asthma, for much of his life, but this did not stop him leading a very active life, walking and cycling in remote parts of Ireland. His accounts of these travels, the people he met there and the stories he heard, were published as essays in newspapers and journals, collected after his death as the volume *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara* (1910). He had undergone an operation for the removal of a tumour in his neck in 1897, and during further surgery in 1908 he was diagnosed as suffering from Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymph glands. Though he was never told that he was terminally ill, he was sufficiently sick not to be able to marry his fiancée Molly Allgood as they had planned. At this stage he turned to the dramatisation of one of the best known legends of Irish mythology, the story of the fated Deirdre, chosen as the bride of the High King Conchubhor, and the tragic consequences of her elopement with her lover Naisi. Unlike earlier dramatic versions by Yeats and George Russell (AE), Synge sought to realise the characters of the myth, giving them a version of the same Irish-English dialect he had used for his contemporary peasant plays. Though his *Deirdre of the Sorrows* went through many drafts, it was still unfinished at the time of his death in March 1909, and was produced posthumously in 1910 with Maire O'Neill in the lead. At the time of his death, Synge was also preparing a collection of poems which appeared shortly afterwards with an appreciative preface by Yeats.

Synge's international reputation grew rapidly. Already in his lifetime, James Joyce had translated *Riders to the Sea* into Italian and this was the play that appears to have had most immediate impact on other writers. D.H. Lawrence was an admirer who modelled his *The Widowing of Mrs Holroyd* on *Riders*, while later it provided the basis for Bertolt Brecht's *Senora Carrar's Rifles*. Vaughan Williams in adapting the play as an opera, very unusually retained virtually the whole original script as his libretto. Synge has been a landmark figure in Irish theatre, influencing many of later playwrights from Sean O'Casey to Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Martin McDonagh. His dramatic dialect, though often parodied for its lyricism, created a precedent for a special sort of Irish theatre language. Central to many of his plays is the vision of a dissident individual, set satirically against the perspectives of a conformist community, in the form of ironic tragicomedy that has been seen as anticipating the later modernist practice of Samuel Beckett.

Synge has long been primarily associated with the Abbey as a founding director and pioneering playwright of the theatre, and his work has been regularly revived there, if sometimes in productions that tended to settle into rather routine conventional form. This tradition of staging his work was challenged from the 1980s by much more realistically grounded productions by the Galway-based Druid Theatre Company, directed by Garry Hynes. These productions toured widely both in Ireland and abroad, culminating in the marathon *DruidSynge* of 2005-6, when all six plays of Synge were staged as a single event. Normal modern theatre conditions have made it difficult to find occasions for staging shorter plays. *DruidSynge*, in putting together well-known full-length works such as *The Playboy of the Western World* with less often staged pieces such as *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Tinker's Wedding*, provided a unique showcase for the continuity and development of the dramatic vision of this extraordinary Irish playwright.

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