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We are now happy to be able to announce that another Irish author has also "arrived" on Mayflower Hill. All admirers of *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) will join us in greeting the arrival at Colby of Mr. James A. Healy's collection of John Millington Synge. Although Synge died at the early age of thirty-eight, his writings have come to be universally regarded as having been among the most influential in the modern Irish revival, and it is therefore with particular satisfaction that we welcome this Synge Collection into the Colby College Library and devote this first issue of this quarterly in the New Year to the latest Dublin arrival—"last but not least"—to put in an appearance on the Colby campus.



SYNGE AND THE IRISH

By DAVID H. GREENE

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A DUBLIN wit once defined a literary movement as a group of writers who live in the same town and hate each other cordially. One of the ironies of that remarkable movement known as the Irish Renaissance was the mixture of acclamation and abuse showered upon John Millington Synge, in which he was alternately hailed as a genius and a slanderer of Ireland. The tumult with which his plays were greeted not only by the Irish at home but by the Irish abroad—*ipsis Hibernis Hiberniores*—can probably be described as a natural hazard which must be accepted by any writer who belongs to a literary movement founded paradoxically upon nationalist principles and a contempt for the mob. But the creator of *Riders to the Sea* and the incomparable *Playboy of the Western World* was bewildered when half the Irish world called him a genius and the

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other half rioted at the performances of his plays in Ireland, England and America.

The simple fact was that he did not foresee that the Ascendancy writer—the Irishman of English ancestry—would fall a casual but inevitable victim of the new nationalism with which Ireland was aflame. He was actually taking his life into his hands when he wrote the way he did about Irish peasants. The years of growing nationalist feeling when Ireland was whipping herself into a fury of self-pity which would culminate in the rising of 1916 was no time for a dramatist of English ancestry to make merry with her from the stage of the Abbey Theater to which she had been accustomed to look to for vindication and encouragement. A character in Sean O'Casey describing the *Playboy* riots says,

A terrible play, terrible! There was ructions in the theater when th' poor people staggered into the knowledge of what was bein' said! What was th' play about? Amn't I afther tellin' you it was a terrible thing; a woeful, wanton play; bittherin' th' bittherest thing th' bittherest enemy of Ireland could say agin her!

So Irishmen hooted at the play which was to be generally acclaimed the most perfect product of their national theater.

The repudiation of Ascendancy culture was a comparatively new thing in Ireland. Irish nationalism, which during the nineteenth century seems to have resisted exclusionist tendencies, gave way at the end of the century to the pressure of the extremists, probably as an aftermath of the Parnell scandal when Ireland's uncrowned king, who had held together Irish dissidents of the left, the middle and the right in his efforts to wrest home rule from a reluctant Parliament at Westminster, had to retire from public life in disgrace. Thenceforward, cultured Irishmen who had always been proud of their countrymen, the great Anglo-Irish writers from Congreve to Oscar Wilde, began to take the position that no representative of Saxon culture, how-

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ever remote his English ancestry or sincere his intentions, could be considered an Irish writer. Such a writer, they decided, could only be a hostile interpreter whose observations would be made for the purpose of discrediting Ireland or exploiting her.

In one of the most formidable of the attacks on the Anglo-Irish literary tradition—Daniel Corkery's *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature*—Ascendancy writers were characterized as having never shown anything but "an ignorance of Ireland, of all things really native, that is not only appalling but incredible." More than that, Ascendancy culture, according to Corkery, while blind to the real, or what he called the *hidden*, Ireland had even befouled the well-spring of native inspiration. It was Corkery's contention that the overwhelming prestige of English culture in the schools and in Irish life generally had the effect upon the writer who had sprung from the people of putting his own emotional nature out of action or at least drugging it with a sense of its own impotence. Whatever truth there may have been in his charge, and there was considerable, his remedy was drastic to say the least. He urged his countrymen to repudiate the English language—an extreme to which very few Irish writers seemed willing to follow him and for obvious reasons. If Corkery had been merely an apologist for what has become known as "compulsory Irish," his thesis could be dismissed as a political statement. But he was, ironically, Professor of English at University College, Cork, and an artist of integrity and talent whose personal influence upon such writers as Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain has been acknowledged.

Professor Corkery's book was published in 1931, but it reflected an attitude which had set in with the turn of the century. It should also be pointed out that that attitude coincided with the emergence of writers from the Roman Catholic proletariat. And one of the glories of the new nationalism was the democratization of a literature which despite its vitality had become the exclusive possession of

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those whose religion did not disqualify them from receiving the only university education which the nation was allowed under English rule. It was not until 1908—Sir Robert Peel's attempt in 1845 to establish colleges for Catholics having been condemned by the hierarchy—that Ireland was allowed to have a university which the Catholic might attend.

J. M. Synge was merely the first to feel the sting of the attack upon Ascendancy culture. And it is significant that his first assailant was the man who founded Sinn Fein and was to become the first President of the Irish Free State. Arthur Griffith was the editor of *The United Irishman*, a Dublin newspaper identified with the Home Rule movement. Believing neither in violence nor the establishment of a republic, Griffith founded Sinn Fein as a pacifist party espousing abstention from Westminster and preaching the establishment of a dual monarchy after the pattern of Hungary. In one of the neatest ironies of modern Irish history Sinn Fein was taken over by Griffith's less squeamish compatriots and converted into a revolutionary political party, advocating expulsion of English rule by force and the establishment of an independent Irish republic. Griffith, whose moderation and sanity were to prove a bulwark during the bitter days of arbitration after the Anglo-Irish war of 1918-1921 and the setting up of the Free State, when he became its president, is one of that triumvirate of controversial figures in Ireland's later history, along with Michael Collins and Eamon DeValera. Conservatives like Oliver St. John Gogarty have never tired of extolling him as the real strong man of Irish politics, the sensitive theorist whose death from heart attack during the Civil War was due to the Republicans.

Republicans, on the other hand, have never tired of tempering their grudging praise of Griffith with charges that his timidity was responsible for the betrayal of the ideals of Pearse and the heroes who died fighting for the Republic which Griffith had bargained away under a

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threat from Lloyd George of renewed hostilities in case he refused the offer of partition and the establishment of a modified form of self-government called Free State. Whatever may be the true estimate of Griffith's achievement, his hostility to Synge and to the work of the Irish National Theater Society was not that of a moderate intellectual but a blatant journalist. In the editorial columns of his newspaper he attacked Synge as a slanderer of Ireland and a purveyor of corruption. "It remained for a member of the Society who spends most of his time away from Ireland, and under the operation of foreign influences, to represent, in good faith no doubt, adultery as a feature of Irish rural life, and exhibit his utter ignorance of the Irish character by treating woman's frailty as a subject for laughter."

The attack, thus begun in 1903 with the performance of Synge's first play *In the Shadow of the Glen*, was later stepped up to riot proportions at the performances of the *Playboy* in 1907. When the Irish players came to America in 1911 with a repertoire of plays that all Europe was talking about, the agitation over Synge continued and the *Playboy* was greeted by riots and demonstrations in Boston, New Haven, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Peter Kavanagh, a historian of the Abbey Theater, writes, "When it was announced that the Abbey Theater Company was to tour America with the *Playboy*, protests came once more from the noisy nationalist press. This, they said, was an act of treachery. The production of the *Playboy* in England was bad enough, but it did no essential damage to Irish prestige there; it only confirmed the English in their belief that the Irish native was a half savage who would be expected to kill his father and be praised for his heroism. Performing the *Playboy* in America was a much more serious matter. National Ireland was looking to the Irish in America for help in the struggle for independence. The Irish-American was trying hard to become 'respectable,' to live down the idea that he was an uneducated, drunken, irresponsible person, fit only to be a servant."

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The demonstrations began in Boston where Synge's only supporters seemed to be Harvard students. In New Haven the opposition was so strong that the chief of police, after seeing a matinee performance, ordered cuts made, only to learn later that the play he had seen and censored was not the *Playboy* but Shaw's *Blanco Posnet*. In Chicago the city council passed a resolution against the *Playboy*. In Washington the Aloysius Truth Society distributed a pamphlet at church doors which read, "Nothing but hell-inspired ingenuity and a satanic hatred of the Irish people and their religion could suggest, construct, and influence the production of such plays. On God's earth the beastly creatures of the plays never existed." In an interview with a New York paper on the occasion of the American demonstrations, that other controversial Irishman George Bernard Shaw said, "the American pseudo-Irish are still exploiting the old stage Ireland for all it is worth, and defiantly singing 'Who Fears to Speak of '98?' under the very nose of the police—that is the New York police, who are mostly Fenians. They think that the tour of the Irish company is an Orange conspiracy financed by Mr. Balfour."

The accusations that Synge was laughing at Ireland through foreign jaws was based on the fact that Synge was a member of one of the most distinguished of Anglo-Irish families. His ancestors, who came originally to Ireland in the seventeenth century, included five bishops (Anglican) whose careers as benevolent representatives of English culture during the era of the infamous penal codes are recorded in Lecky's *History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*. After taking a pass degree at Trinity College, Dublin, the fountainhead of Anglo-Irish culture, Synge went to Europe, not in the tradition of the Irish *vagantes*, those wandering scholars of an earlier age, nor even like his countryman Oliver Goldsmith in the rôle of itinerant fiddler, but to prepare himself for a career as a professional musician. By 1894 he had had enough music. The next year he went

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to Paris and began thinking about writing as a career. When the famous meeting with Yeats took place in Paris a year later, Synge was about to leave the Hotel Corneille, hangout of Irish exiles political and literary, for a room in a private home on the Rue Leopold. "Give up Paris," Yeats told him. "You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression."

However imaginative Yeats' account of his recruitment of Synge may be, his advice was taken. In 1898 Synge was in Aran "sitting over a turf fire, listening to a murmur of Gaelic that is rising from a little public-house under my room." This and the successive visits Synge made to Aran in the four following summers were the making of him. As a boy in the County Wicklow he had known English-speaking Irish countrymen. But here, among limestone wastes and towering cliffs, the islanders spoke Irish and lived a life which more scientific observers than Synge had described as primitive. When Synge went there in 1898 the only other visitors the islanders had seen—apart from the police who came to evict them for not paying the rents on their miserable holdings—were an occasional antiquarian or linguist. Today, Aran and the life of the islanders is no longer unknown to the world at large, because of what Synge wrote about them and because of the great documentary film *Man of Aran* which Robert Flaherty made on the spot thirty years after Synge's first visit.

Synge's first book, *The Aran Islands*—not published till 1907—is a moving account of the life he saw and lived on Aran on each of his visits. He described the way they grew their potatoes in heaps of kelp thrown up on the rocks, old women keening at an open grave, and the epic struggle of a simple people wresting a living from rock and sea. Above all, he listened to the native story tellers, noting that the stories they told, despite the local coloring, were

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from the universal storehouse of folktales. Two of the stories he heard on his first visit—about the old man who makes believe he is dead to see what his young wife will do and about the young man whose deed of killing his father had made him a hero among the people—gave him the plots for two of his plays. An incident from his third visit in 1900 inspired him to write his great one-act play *Riders to the Sea*, which has probably been reprinted in more anthologies than any other one-act play in the English language.

When he brought his first play to Yeats and Lady Gregory and it was read aloud to a group that included John Masefield, it was apparent that he had genius. But it was not so apparent that his plays would create such a furor. The fact that he had turned his back on what his family represented and had identified himself with a nationalist movement was ignored by the rabid Celts, who refused to take kindly to his realism. Meanwhile his family, shocked at his betrayal of his own class—the most potent of influences in Ireland—not only refused to see a single performance of his plays but acted as though the man who had written the *Playboy* was merely somebody else with the same name.

Synge's ill-starred engagement to Maire O'Neill, an actress in the Abbey Theater and a sister of Sara Allgood, was clouded by the malignant disease which was already destroying him. When he went to a Dublin nursing home for the last time in 1909, he was only thirty-eight; and his career as a writer, dating from that first visit to Aran in 1898, had been short, tempestuous and brilliant. He had served with Yeats and Lady Gregory as co-director of one of the most famous theaters in Europe. Two of his six plays had placed him in the annals of literature. And yet he had never really understood the crucial position he occupied between the two forces which were fighting what turned out to be the last battle for Ireland. The account of his burial in Mount Jerome cemetery which his nephew

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Edward M. Stephens wrote is not without its irony. "There at the gate of the cemetery a group of those who had known John as a writer and as a Director of the National Theater Society joined the procession that followed the coffin up the main avenue to the chapel. As the words of commitment were said I noticed there the people John had known divided, as they had always been in his life time, into separate groups. His relations were together in black carrying bowler hats and, a little apart, the people among whom he had worked. I knew few of them even by appearance, but I can remember seeing Sara Allgood and watching Padraic Colum's hair blowing in the wind."



THE JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE COLLECTION AT COLBY COLLEGE

A Check List Compiled by ROBERT E. DYSINGER

THIS check list of Synge material is divided into three parts. The first and last are arranged alphabetically, the brief second part chronologically. Parentheses following the entries give, in each case, information concerning publication, inscriptions, or other matter.

- I. Single works of Synge.
- II. Autograph letters.
- III. Biographical and critical material.

I. SINGLE WORKS OF SYNGE

The Aran Islands; with drawings by Jack B. Yeats. Dublin, Maunsel; London, E. Mathews, 1906. (First edition. Before 1907 trade edition. Quinn 9969.)