

March 1974

## The Bird Girls of Ireland

Albert J. Solomon

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 10, no.5, March 1974, p.269-274

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact [mfkelly@colby.edu](mailto:mfkelly@colby.edu).

Colby Library Quarterly 269

I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right (p. 337).

The hoofbeats return and the Old Man realizes that he never got the answers right.



THE BIRD GIRLS OF IRELAND

By ALBERT J. SOLOMON

THE INISHMAAN GIRLS in J. M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) are frequently suggested as the direct literary prototype for James Joyce's wading-girl in *A Portrait of the Artist* (1916).<sup>1</sup> George Moore's use of a similar situation in *Hail and Farewell: Salve* (1912) suggests that he too should be considered in the progression of the image.

Synge was the first to commit his experiences to print. The girl-watching episode occurs, almost as an aside, in the midst of a discussion about the scarcity of water on the island.

The water for washing is also coming short, and as I walk round the edges of the sea, I often come on a girl with her petticoats tucked up round her, standing in a pool left by the tide and washing her flannels among the sea-anemones and crabs. Their red bodices and white tapering legs make them as beautiful as tropical sea-birds, as they stand in a frame of seaweeds against the brink of the Atlantic. Michael, however, is a little uneasy when they are in sight, and I cannot pause to watch them.<sup>2</sup>

There is a distant, yet clear, note of regret in that final statement.

It is not presumptuous to assume that Moore read *The Aran Islands*. The book was published in April 1907, in the still-broiling wake of the *Playboy* riots; Lady Gregory and Yeats,

1 Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers: Literature and Nationalism, 1880-1940* (New York, 1959), 243; Caroline G. Mercer, "Stephen Dedalus's Vision and Synge's Peasant Girls," *Notes & Queries*, VII (December 1960), 473-474; Donna Gerstenberger, *John Millington Synge* (New York, 1964), 25.

2 *The Works of John M. Synge* (Boston, 1912), III, 67.

## 270 Colby Library Quarterly

Moore's associates in the Irish Literary Theatre, had read the manuscript as early as 1901; Moore knew and praised other of Synge's nondramatic and dramatic work of the period; he was not averse to borrowing a little of the *Playboy* idiom when he rewrote *The Untilled Field*; and in 1914 Moore specifically alluded to it in a portion of *Vale* serialized in the *English Review*.<sup>3</sup> Moore was not one to forget quotable or adaptable material, and I feel that when he wrote *Salve*, he may have remembered the Inishmaan girls.

Moore's description appears in a passage as discursive as Synge's. He has journeyed to Galway to meet Edward Martyn, Yeats, and Lady Gregory who are attending a folk festival. Moore walks along the beach thinking of his family's instinctive aversion to adventure.

By Edward one is always safe from adventures, and it would have been well for me not to have stirred from his side. I only strayed fifty yards, but that short distance was enough, for while looking down into the summer sea, thinking how it moved up against the land's side like a soft, feline animal, the voices of some women engaged my attention and turning I saw that three girls had come down to a pool sequestered out of observation, in a hollow of the headland. Sitting on the bank, they drew off their shoes and stockings and advanced to the water, kilting their petticoats above their knees as it deepened. On seeing me they laughed invitingly; and, as if desiring my appreciation, one girl walked across the pool, lifting her red petticoat to her waist, and forgetting to drop it when the water shallowed, she showed me thighs whiter and rounder than any I have ever seen, their country coarseness heightening the temptation. And she continued to come toward me. A few steps would have taken me behind a hillock. They might have bathed naked before me, and it would have been the boldest I should have chosen, if fortune had favored me. But Yeats and Edward began calling, and, dropping her petticoats, she waded away from me.

"What are you doing down there, George? Hurry up! Here's the hooker being rowed into the bay bringing the piper and the story-tellers from Aran."<sup>4</sup>

To the reader knowing Moore's history, the girls would at first suggest any of Renoir's famous "Bathers" paintings. But the Synge influence is suggested in several ways. The most obvious

3 Maurice Bourgeois, *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (London, 1913), 252; David H. Greene and Edward Stephens, *J. M. Synge* (New York, 1959), 120-121; Greene, 179, 220, 255-256; Joseph Hone, *The Life of George Moore* (London, 1936), 319; *English Review*, XVI (February 1914), 361.

4 George Moore, *Salve* (New York, 1924), 150-151.

is the place — Galway, across the Bay from the Arans, and the circumstances — a pretty girl with red underclothes and lovely white legs. Moore's emphasis, typically, is sexual, with himself as the hero. The latent, perhaps dormant, sexuality of Synge's image would have quickly attracted Moore, for he was the type to trade on the *succès de scandale* of the *Playboy* "shift" controversy. The second similarity is allied to the first: both men express a desire to stay and watch, a desire thwarted by their companions. The natures of the thwarts present the third similarity: Michael is a boy who instructs Synge in Irish and the local customs, and his discomfort at the sight of scantily clad girls is apparently that of the nervous, adolescent, pious celibate; Martyn, Moore's Irish guide in parts of *Hail and Farewell*, is portrayed as a nervous, senescent, pious celibate. Moore's account seems a symbolic castigation of the Irish literary imagination which finds more pleasure in the fantasy of the Aran story-tellers than in the reality and joy of life.

Joyce, like Moore, had a number of opportunities to know of *The Aran Islands*. The unpublished manuscript, with the help of Yeats and Lady Gregory, was the subject of some discussion in literary circles.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in March 1903, Synge and Joyce met in Paris and discussed careers and publishing. Synge at this time was complaining to others of the particular difficulty in publishing *The Aran Islands*; there is no reason to assume that he would not have told Joyce.<sup>6</sup> In 1907, Synge's work was thrust violently into Joyce's life by the *Playboy* riots. Joyce, always conscious of Synge as a rival, was thoroughly upset over the publicity; his own work came to a momentary standstill.<sup>7</sup> The April publication of *The Aran Islands* came at a sensitive time in Joyce's relationship with Synge; he would not have ignored it. Finally, five years later, in 1912, Joyce's own journey to Galway and the Arans may have prompted a rereading of the book, for as Ellmann suggests he "depicted Aran with the affection of a tourist who has read Synge."<sup>8</sup>

Joyce's literary relationship with Moore was far more complicated than his relationship with Synge and is too extensive to

5 Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York, 1965), 125ff.

6 *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York, 1966), II, 35; Lady Gregory, 126-127.

7 *Letters*, II, 212.

8 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York, 1959), 336.

## 272 Colby Library Quarterly

summarize here. But Joyce learned quite early that Moore was a good man to imitate and improve upon, and there is ample evidence that he closely followed the career of the older writer.<sup>9</sup> Joyce probably read *Salve* sometime after his visit to Galway and the Arans, and this may explain the association of Synge, Moore, and himself.

Joyce did not immediately use the material he had gathered. Evidence suggests that the wading-girl episode was written sometime between July and November, 1914.<sup>10</sup> To reconstruct his method of composition would be impossible, but an examination of his use of sources might illuminate the intricacies of that method.

The seed of the image was a real vision of beauty. Joyce, wanderer that he was, had certainly seen many girls wading along the shores of Dublin Bay. The girl in *A Portrait* could be an idealization of them all. But it is generally accepted that there was a particular girl. In 1918, when Joyce began a brief, one-sided, Platonic love affair with Marthe Fleischmann (one of his models for Nausicaa in *Ulysses*), he told her he was struck by her beauty because, "she very strongly reminded him of a girl he had once seen standing on the beach in his home country ('*Sie erinnern mich an ein Mädchen, das ich einmal in meinem Heimatland am Strand stehen sah*')."<sup>11</sup> Ellmann, using this evidence for both, gives two different dates for the occurrence of the secular ecstasy — c. 1898 and 1902.<sup>12</sup> But universal or particular, adolescent or mature, the vision was firmly planted in Joyce's mind, and explains the attraction of Synge's and Moore's analogous experiences.

In composing the episode, Joyce had to be highly selective. Certainly, he had had his experience, the glimpse of a beautiful girl, but I doubt that it was the single event which jolted him into Art. Stephen Dedalus needs such an event. He has just been offered Religion, which he rejects. The void in his soul must now be filled. And it is filled with the mystical poetry of the wading-girl. Dedalus, "the hawklike man," must be given his

9 Albert J. Solomon, "James Joyce and George Moore: A Study of a Literary Relationship," Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1969.

10 Ellmann, 365; *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1966), I, 75.

11 *Letters*, II, 428. Essay by Professor Heinrich Straumann, owner of the letters.

12 Ellmann, 56, 462.

first impetus into the air by a creature of the air. Synge supplied that creature in the image of the Inishmaan girls as "tropical sea-birds." Joyce magnified her importance by making her magical.

But Synge's description is antiseptic and sterile. The girls, perhaps reflections of the pious Michael, are one-dimensional, unresponsive, unalive. Joyce's portrait needed a living creature; Moore's description provided it. His girls are alive: they are aware of his presence and his adoration; one even flirts with him. Moore, unlike Synge, responds to the animal vitality and it sets his erotic fancy working: "thighs whiter and rounder than any I have ever seen," "they might have bathed naked before me," "the boldest I should have chosen." Joyce had noted and satirized Moore's eroticism in *Gas from a Burner*, written at the end of his 1912 visit to Ireland: "And a play on the Word and Holy Paul/And some woman's legs that I can't recall/Written by Moore, a genuine gent/That lives on his property's ten per cent."<sup>13</sup> The play was *The Apostle* (1911) and in the preface, published also in the *English Review* as "A Prefatory Letter on Reading the Bible for the First Time," Moore describes how he discovered the pleasure principle in the Bible, in *Samuel*, for example, where "we read how David was captured by the sweetness of Bathsheba's legs while bathing."<sup>14</sup>

Moore's description was, if anything, too erotic. Stephen's wading-girl was to be alive and responsive, but "without shame or wantonness."<sup>15</sup> Mere sensuality was not sufficient; a love of life, a drive for living, was needed. Joyce knew it was a favorite theme of Moore, for he had turned to him when he wrote "Eveline."<sup>16</sup> To put the final touches to the portrait of the wading-girl Joyce turned to Moore's *The Lake* from which he borrowed "the secular baptism," and the "water and bird imagery."<sup>17</sup>

The use of sources does not diminish the artistry of any of the men involved. Each had a particular vision which demanded

13 *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, eds. Ellsworth Mason and Richard Ellmann (New York, 1959), 243.

14 *English Review*, VII (February 1911), 455.

15 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Chester G. Anderson (New York, 1968), 171.

16 Albert J. Solomon, "The Backgrounds of 'Eveline,'" *Eire-Ireland*, VI (Fall 1971), 23-38.

17 Ellmann, 243.

## 274 Colby Library Quarterly

so much of the image he used to express it. As the vision grew in complexity from Synge to Moore to Joyce, the respective images had to take on shadings and perspectives. Joyce, who demanded more from art, put more into his art than did his compatriots. What is remarkable is that three artists, regardless of the varied results, underwent such similar experiences. Does this suggest something more than mere literary borrowing? Perhaps the primal urgings of an island people? The suggestion is worth further investigation, especially in light of the closing lines of W. B. Yeats's "On a Political Prisoner" (1921):

She seemed to have grown clean and sweet  
Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird:

Sea-borne, or balanced on the air  
When first it sprang out of the nest  
Upon some lofty rock to stare  
Upon the cloudy canopy,  
While under its storm-beaten breast  
Cried out the hollows of the sea.



### HARDY AND ST. PAUL: PATTERNS OF CONFLICT IN *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

By BARBARA FASS

**D**ISCUSSIONS OF Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* have come a long way since that time when aesthetic judgments were based on what was contended to be the book's squalid subject matter and an outraged public discouraged the author from writing more novels. Today numerous essays provide insight into the patterns of conflict in the book and the central dichotomy between Christian beliefs and pagan impulses. Nonetheless, *Jude* remains controversial. Many who have recognized in it the Victorian quarrel between Hebraism and Hellenism still argue about whether the wind blows more strongly from Cyprus