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In 1907 J. M. Synge achieved both notoriety and lasting fame with **The Playboy of the Western World**. **The Aran Islands**, published in the same year, records his visits to the islands in 1898-1901, when he was gathering the folklore and anecdotes out of which he forged **The Playboy** and his other major dramas.

Yet this book is much more than a stage in the evolution of Synge the dramatist. As Tim Robinson explains in his introduction, "If Ireland is intriguing as being an island off the west of Europe, then Aran, as an island off the west of Ireland, is still more so; it is Ireland raised to the power of two." Towards the end of the last century Irish nationalists came to identify the area as the country's uncorrupted heart, the repository of its ancient language, culture and spiritual values. It was for these reasons that Yeats suggested Synge visit the islands to record their way of life. The result is a passionate exploration of a triangle of contradictory relationships – between an island community still embedded in its ancestral ways but solicited by modernism, a physical environment of ascetic loveliness and savagely unpredictable moods, and Synge himself, formed by modern European thought but in love with the primitive.

## The Aran Islands Details

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# From Reader Review The Aran Islands for online ebook

## Laurel Hicks says

A delightful account of Synge's stay on the islands as he endeavored to learn Gaelic and the ways of the people. No wonder his plays are so real!

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## Jay McNair says

It was pretty universally fascinating to go armchair traveling with Mr. Synge, who shares my curiosity toward the (presumably superior) traditional practices of living, to these remote backwater islands where the wind and sea are felt daily.

"Whisper, noble person," he began, "do you never be thinking on the young girls? The time I was a young man, the divil a one of them could I look on without wishing to marry her."

"Ah, Mourteen," I answered, "it's great wonder you'd be asking me. What at all do you think of me yourself?"

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## Lucy says

A perfect gem of a little book. In 1897 John Synge returns to the Aran Islands over several months for three or four years. He has written of these primitive people with great love and understanding. A book for the lover of Irish culture.

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## Jennifer Hughes says

I have enjoyed listening to this book on cd and the wonderful lilt and cadence of the man reading it, but it seems that there is a visual element to the book that I've missed, since many stories seem to be small snippets and I can't see the visual breaks between when one story ends and another begins.

What I have enjoyed most about this book is the way it captures a picture, a moment in time, of the Aran Islands at the end of the 19th century. Some of the stories are fascinating to me and some are boring, but overall, the effect of capturing the moment is wonderful. It reminds me of the way the Little House books so perfectly capture the time and customs and flavor of frontier American life, as lived by the author.

Synge is a product of his times, of course, and comes to the subject with what seem to me kind of bizarre biases--just because someone lives on a remote island off the coast of your country it doesn't make them "savages"--yet I would argue that his perceptions, although certainly flawed at times, are valid expressions through his perspective.

As I listen to this book, I picture the abandoned island in the delightful movie "The Secret of Roan Inish." It's lovely and magical in my mind. I like having that mental image I can bring up as I imagine the people and the stories of long ago. I have the same kinds of feelings as I consider these islands, abandoned and the people and culture erased, as I've had when I have visited real ghost towns--kind of filled with poignancy.

I'm glad that Synge took the time to write of his experiences on the Aran Islands to preserve that now-obsolete way of life for us to catch a glimpse of today.

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### **Jennifer says**

I read this while spend a blissful week on the Aran Islands in Ireland - with no cars, no people, just me and a book and an occasional cow and Bailey. If I'd read the book in the Milwaukee it probably wouldn't mean as much to me.

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### **Mira says**

Synge wrote this in pieces, but I think it works that way...very beautiful snapshots of the everyday and the sublime. Which is what life must constantly be like on these islands. Not sure if it is still the same there, there was a storm when I was supposed to go, so maybe I wont ever find out!

He goes back a few times, never mentions his own appearance or disruption/lack of to the people's lives, and observes things the way a ghost might...very strange! But I have read he was a strangely closed man...so that might be why he loved this place so much and the fact that not much besides the weirdness of the fairies shock the Aran folk...and even then they are both matter of fact and humorous about their beliefs. Good book about a way of life that is so much more basic than ours today, but somehow more emotionally sophisticated.

The descriptions of normal people on the islands and how they behave when "away" with the little folk are chilling.

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### **Matt says**

If you go to the Aran Islands today, you find that a few thousand people live there, mostly tending B&Bs or tourist shops. The only remnant of the old Ireland is the hundreds of miles of stone walls that still divide the land into tiny plots.

Synge's diary is hardly a masterwork of ethnography. ("The complete absence of shyness or self-consciousness in most of these people gives them a particular charm, and when this young and beautiful woman leaned across my knees to look nearer at some photograph that pleased her, I felt more than ever the strange simplicity of the island life." ) He's an anachronism writing about greater anachronisms.

But it's a good read. I found two general benefits. First, you do get a sense of what life was like there in the late 19th century – the fishing, the poverty, the migration. And second, you get some really odd anecdotes, which undoubtedly reflect traditional Irish culture.

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## Andrew says

Synge's travelogue of the Aran Islands is a mostly a curiosity. Drawn from multiple visits, the scenes and stories recounted are fascinating, patronizing, and boring by turns. Synge's prose is always clear and precise, but the book is weighted down by his often condescending attitude toward his subjects so typical of the author's day and age. Here we have Noble Savages of the Irish sort, a view we can't help but feel uncomfortable with. But if you're willing to cut through this cultural screen, the places and the people Synge encounters are truly remarkable. Most firmly etched into my mind are scenes of an island funeral, full of bluster and pain, culminating in the mother of the deceased beating on the coffin before it was lowered into the grave, the skull of her own dead mother in her other hand, and a great keening rising from all the women of the island. A strange and amazingly human moment.

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## Kellyk says

Synge is primarily an observer - he comments on everything around him, including nature, scenery and people with sharp detail. The few moments of deeper, intuitive reflection in the book are wonderful and show Synge's vulnerability and gentle spirit. I enjoyed all the anecdotes Synge heard from Aran locals that he then included in his writings, especially when the stories had themes that were identifiable in other literary works (like Shakespeare).

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## Brian says

I first read *The Aran Islands* when I spent the first semester of my senior year of university in Ireland. I went over in August but the Irish term doesn't begin until September, so for the first month we were there, University College Cork organized a special program for the foreign students. The literature students all read the same books and took the same classes, and in the midst of reading *The Aran Islands*, we packed up for a trip. After lunch at Ballymaloe and a visit to Coole Park, we stopped in Galway and took a ferry over to Inis Meáin where we would spend four days. We had class in Dún Chonchúir, sitting on the terraces inside as our professor lectured as we discussed the book, and then spent hours wandering around the low stone walls and paths of the island. Finding Leaba Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne, the bed of Diarmuid and Gráinne as they fled across Ireland, suddenly after talking to a friend who had been looking for hours and never found it. Visiting the knitwear shop and buying a sweater made from the wool of the sheep we had seen wandering in the island's fields. Staying in a bed and breakfast and listening to the owners speak English to us and Irish to each other. And standing next to Cathaoir Synge, "Synge's Chair," hundreds of feet above the sea, and watching the sun sink down into the ocean in the West. I could well understand what it was that Synge saw in the island and why he wrote so approvingly about it.

When I opened the book, a business card fell out for the gentleman at the Bank of Ireland who got me my bank account.

Now when I read *The Aran Islands*, though, I can't help me feel how condescending it seems. Synge views the people of Inis Meáin as living a pure pastoral life, unspoiled by modernity, with a kind of innate arcadian nobility. Not even the other Aran Islands get as much praise as Inis Meáin does. But I can't help but notice

that the lives of the islanders sound terrible, full of death and grinding poverty. There's one incident where some police from the mainland come over in the service of absentee landlords to perform evictions, and while Synge watches and writes in his notebook about it, the police turn old women out of their homes and the villages laugh as the police try to round up pigs. I couldn't help but imagine Synge, a man who had studied in France and been to Germany, sitting and writing impassively while the people of Inis Meáin suffered after having been dispossessed of the island that they had lived for generations on.

He keeps delivering backhanded insults even while he's trying to complement the people. After one description of a man who knew both Irish and English and took issue with a translation of Moore's Irish Melodies, and was able to quote both the Irish original and the English translation in order to explain his argument, Synge writes:

In spite of his singular intelligence and minute observation, his reasoning was medieval.

in reference to the man's belief that Irish wouldn't die out on the Aran Islands because of its use in daily industry. Well, the man was right. I've been to Inis Meáin and passed groups of teenagers speaking Irish amongst themselves, so shows what Synge knows about his reasoning.

Later, Synge writes:

Although these people are kindly towards each other and to their children, they have no feeling for the sufferings of animals, and little sympathy for pain when the person who feels it is not in danger. I have sometimes seen a girl writhing and howling with toothache while her mother sat at the other side of the fireplace pointing at her and laughing at her as if amused by the sight.

Ah, humanity unspoiled by European civilization. It's not that I think Synge is lying here, it's that I think he wants the people of Inis Meáin to exist as some kind of museum monument to what was. The ancient practices of rural Ireland, still alive on the shores of Atlantic, no matter the cost in men lost at sea, women turned out of their homes, and endless stories about people that Synge doesn't even deign to give a name to in his writings.

I'm glad I read this while I was on Inis Meáin and have those memories to carry me through this reading. I think I would have found it pretty dire otherwise.

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## **Dem says**

The Aran Islands by J.M Synge is a remarkable and insightful read of life on the Aran Islands From 1898 to 1903.

Having just returned from an amazing 2 day trip to the Islands I was eager to read this remarkable little book that had been recommended to me by one of the Islanders. .

Synge, in his relatively short life helped revolutionize Irish Theater, was a poet, prose writer, musician, playwright and collector of folklore. He spent part of his summers for 5 years on the Aran Islands collecting and documenting stories and customs and traditions of the Islanders and the end product ( this little book) is a remarkable and important collection of information and folklore.

This is not a story but rather a series of journal accounts as the author says in his introduction

*" In the pages that follow I have given a direct account of my life on the Islands and of what I met with among them, Inventing nothing , and changing nothing this is essential"*

There is so much that I found intriguing and insightful in this account, the way of life and the hardship of the Islanders, the bleak and harsh and yet stunning landscape, the tradition, stories, food, clothing and the religion and beliefs are so interesting and I came away with a better understanding of their life and struggles at this time.

While everything has changed on the Islands with modernization , nothing has changed like, landscape, remoteness, beauty, quiet and those rugged and stunning stone walls and ruins. I loved the fact that after stepping foot on the island you can hire a bike and within 5 minutes be utterly by yourself and step back in time.

I loved this book and can't stop thinking about it, I would recommend it to those who have an interest in folklore and history of Ireland. It's not for everyone but I can see many enjoying this and at 208 pages is not very taxing.

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### **Gunnar says**

I was fortunate to travel to Inis Mór shortly before reading this book. Synge spectacularly captures the strange beauty of the Islands' misty eeriness.

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### **Joseph says**

I'm reading a 1911 edition of this that I got from the UW library. The pages are soft and delicate and the prose is simple and beautiful. Anyone who thinks fairies are pretty little women with tinkerbell wings will think twice before inviting one into their home!

I picked this up as part of my research for the probable Akropolis Performance Lab production of Synge's Riders to the Sea.

It's an indispensable resource to the life and customs of the Aran Island inhabitants. Full of impeccable details, striking anecdotes, and rich folk tales.

Slainte!

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### **Slávek Rydval says**

Aranské ostrovy je velmi p?kný obrázek ze života lidí na po?átku 20. století na Aranských ostrovech psaný dokumentárn?-deníkovým stylem. Synge popisuje nejen vlastní pozorování, ale zachycuje i p?íb?hy, báje a pov?sti na ostrovech tradovaných. Snad jediným nedostatkem (a nelze jej p?i?ítat autorovi) je absence vnit?ního sv?ta Ara?an?. Sám Synge si posteskl, že sice s lidmi strávil mnoho ?asu (léto ?i podzim b?hem p?ti let), ale nikdy jej nep?ijali jako sob? vlastního.

Autor své postřehy použil i v jiných dílech, jmenujme alespoň Jezdce k moři či Stín doliny.

Chcete-li se dozvědět, jak se žilo víceméně v izolaci (častá otázka lidí z ostrovů, když tam dorazil cizinec, byla, zda je ve světě nějaká nová válka) na počátku minulého století, nebo se zajímáte o irskou literaturu jako takovou, přetěním této knihy budete zase o kousek znalejší.

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### **Chrissie says**

Delightful. I highly recommend this audiobook narrated by Donal Donnelly if you want immersion into the most Irish of Ireland, the Aran Islands. The three islands (Inis Mór, Inis Meáin and Inis Óirr) are located in Galway Bay. This is a book relating the author's experiences, a famed playwright, who visited the island several times 1898-1901 on the suggestion of Yeats. These visits are the bedrock for his plays. The narrator's brogue is fantastic and further enhances one's experience. Listen to it, don't read it.

You get fables, depiction of the food, clothing, occupations and the islanders' simple "manner of being". You learn about kelp burning, thatching, rope making, farming, fishing, the festivals and the fairies.

What makes this book is HOW it is written - the language used, the brogue, and the simple, straight-forward speech of the islanders. The stories are simple and many you will recognize (Three Billy Goats Gruff and The Goose that Lays Golden Eggs and more), although clothed in the islands' mantle. There is subtle humor. You will feel as though you are yourself sitting in front of a hearth hearing the stories, engulfed by fog and tangy salt smells. A delightful reading experience.

I never felt the author looked down on these islanders, as some other readers have noted.

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### **Dan says**

This book is a very dark glimpse into a dying world that once existed through all of human civilization. Fairies and giants and ghost ships are as much a part of these people's real world as is God and the police who come onto the islands to kick people out of their homes.

I do wonder, however, what Synge's intention was to portray these people as being so simple. He does admire their skill with the boats but he spends so much time with old men who tell tales that have no point that it's easy to think the whole island lives and thinks as these old men do. Yet the young men, Michael in particular, leaves the islands to find work elsewhere because he knows there is no future on those grey, wet rocks. And the other danger is that we get pulled into a nostalgic portrait of the islands that never really existed outside of the imaginations of these old men.

Still, there are moments that are quite beautiful and telling as to how things really are on the Aran Islands. First is the priest, whom we never meet but are always told about braving the rough seas day after day and risking his life as he tends to his flock. Though we never meet this man, I couldn't get the image out of my head of a man dressed in priest's black, standing upright on a small boat tumbling upon the waves in a fierce gale. I would love to have heard his story. The other telling moment was for the funeral of the young man.



This was a beautiful and very sad scene where they bury him in the same spot where his grandmother had been buried and they find her skull among the black planks on her coffin. This image, coupled with the young man having lost his head at sea, is a wonderfully confusing image where the nostalgic sensibility of the old is placed on the dead body of the young that can't carry it to any future other than the grave.

Perhaps this is why all the stories end with absolutely no point because life is, to them, pointless. Life is hard, the women wear out in childbirth before they're even 20, the men drink and fight and die at sea for a pittance of a catch, or the lucky ones move to America and never come back, their story unfinished.

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### **Padraic says**

We weren't from there, I've been there twice, and where do they get all those stones?

In 1975 I took a course in Irish literature from the late, lamented (at least by me) Dr. Stephen Patrick Ryan at the University of Scranton. He introduced me to so much -- he opened my eyes to the brilliance of James Joyce by pointing out that *Ulysses* was, if nothing else, hilariously funny.

About this he said, merely, "You should read it." I've read it many times since then. It made walking the islands a much richer experience.

This edition features a wonderful introduction by Tim Robinson - the essay is worth the price of admission all by itself.

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### **Gloria says**

It must be the 80% Irish in me rising to the top, for I've never had a book make me homesick for a place I've never been...

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### **Andrea says**

A lovely book that is incredibly evocative of a way of life that has long since passed away through its stories and reflections of the fishermen and women who lived on the Aran islands. Synge went there to learn Irish and return to his gaelic roots. He seems to have been one of a long parade of anthropologists, artists and writers in fact, a reflection of the huge upsurge of a certain kind of nationalism at the time. There is a lyrical beauty in many of his descriptions, and an honest attempt to enter into and understand the daily lives of the islanders with a great deal of respect, though he spends a lot of time lying around in the sunshine, while also pondering the unbridgeable distance between them. As a man he cannot seem to enter the women's world really at all, but his wanderings with the old men and his recountings of their tales and poems are quite wonderful. I loved his description of how islanders told time...or failed to tell it when the wind was in the

right direction (an excerpt of which is to be found in E.P. Thompson which I had forgotten). His description of the evictions was particularly poignant, even when the pigs the landowner was having rounded up as rent bowled over three policemen. It was something I couldn't quite forgive him for, the absence of any kind of political economy in his understanding, the fact that the villagers were so poor because they lived on land that barely provided subsistence -- their ingenious ways of extracting every last possible use from it are incredible -- yet still was land owned by someone else, for which they had to pay rent in coin. Who was it? How did some one person come to own an island on which these people had lived for generations? And Synge with his privilege just sat and watched it being taken away. Women keening after losing everything. There isn't even an attempt to come to terms with it. He just soaks in the local colour and moves on, though the letters he exchanges with the island residents (most of whom of a certain age seem to move to America) are lovely and show some human connection was made.

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## **Frank says**

William Butler Yeats encourage Synge to go to the Aran Islands, to listen to the voices, hear the stories, live among the people. And so he did. That there is a patronising tone to his recollection is perhaps understandable given the rigid social stratification in the British Isles at the time: as a member of the Anglo-Irish "Protestant Ascendancy", it was remarkable that Synge was so willing to follow Yeats advise in the first place. But despite Synge's sometimes condescending tone, one gets a sense of a genuine affection for his subjects; there had to be something that kept drawing him back to the islands year after year between 1896 and 1903.

Neither anthropology nor travelogue, *The Aran Islands* is a peculiar, personal portrait of a place and time. His experiences on the islands, the people he met, the stories he heard, provided a framework for his more widely recognised literary efforts: the plays, *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and perhaps his masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907).

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