

«Athenry That Was, Galway That Is, Aran That Will Be»: Recent Works on Aran.

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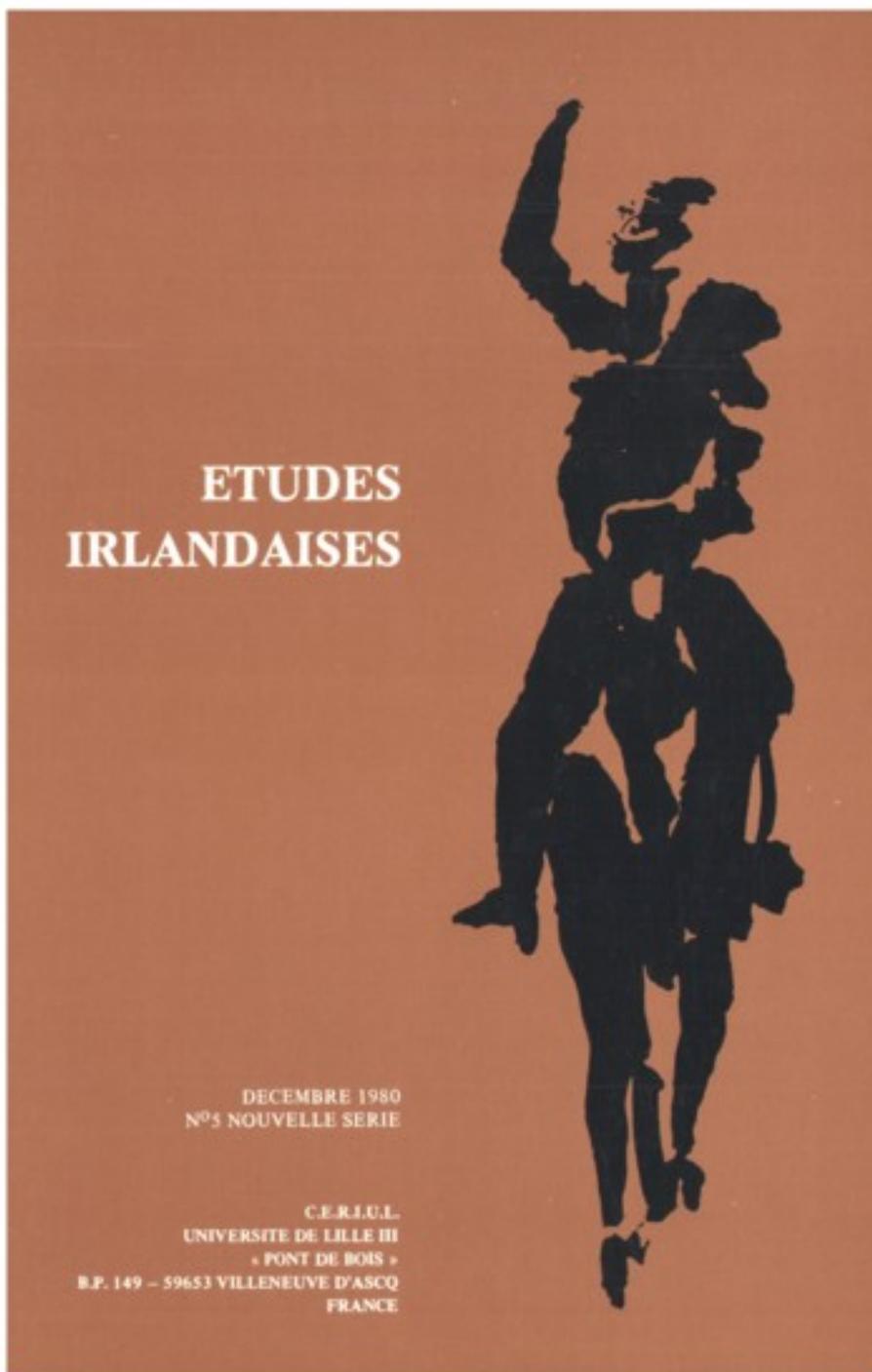
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Texte intégral

« ATHENRY THAT WAS, GALWAY THAT IS, ARAN THAT WILL BE » : RECENT WORKS ON ARAN

Paul F. BOTHEROYD

From the anthropométrie skull examinations of the 1880's and 90's (1) to the investigations of J.C. Messenger (2), the Aran Islanders have hardly been spared indignities at the hands of researchers. The tourist has, too, made his presence felt, for Aran has had its firm place in the guide books to Ireland for more than a century, starting off with journeys to the Islands by hooker from the mainland fishing villages as adventurous optional extras to the sights of Galway city with minimalist antiquarian itineraries and advancing by the time Mary Banim (3) paid her visit in the late 1880's there to The City of the Tribes taking out day-trippers three hundred at a time with reductions for family parties complete with German brass band. With Aer Lingus now having taken over international booking and publicity for Aer Ârann and direct booking now being possible from the furthest parts of the big world to the very centres of the little world, tourist penetration seems complete.

That prophetic saying « Athenry that was, Galway that is, Aran that will be » seems, too, to be coming true on the publishing front. In 1976 Leo Daly made his contribution to the books of and guide books to Aran with *Oileáin Ârann : The Aran Islands, Co. Galway, Ireland* (4). The book's black and white is quite superb, the proper medium for Aran gauntness, even if sometimes it is spoilt by fussy framing and decoration ; the text, for all the work over many years which has obviously gone into it, is marred by a large number of mistakes. The Errata/ Addenda listing contains around sixty entries and one could easily add half as many again, and both addenda items to the book's bibliography are formally incorrect ; often the writing is hasty and links are frequently missing. In 1857, for instance, some seventy gentlemen from the Ethnological Section of the British Association visited the Islands in grand style. Leo Daly refers to this excursion variously as the British Expedition, the Haverty Excursion after Martin Haverty, who drew up the report on the excursion, *The Aran Islands*, or A

Report of the Excursion of the Ethnological Section of the British Association from Dublin to the Western Islands of Aran in September, 1857 (Dublin, 1859) ; in the bibliography this appears as « Haverty, Martin, The Aran Islands. A Report of the Excursion of the British Ethnological Section in 1857 (1859) ». This is only one of a number of faulty entries in Daly's bibliography.

Of the Aran guides currently available, Daphne D.C. Pochin Mould's *The Aran Islands* (5), although hardly free from hasty writing and imprecise transcription — the section from Roderick O 'Flaherty's *Chorographical Description of West or hiar Connaught* reproduced in Appendix F is full of omissions and orthographic mistakes — has the fullest bibliography on the various aspects of Aran culture ; again there are a large number of additions which might be made and a number of items in need of correction. Her book, however, does provide material and indications of sources for further material for an understanding of the Aran micro-culture in a more detailed fashion than was possible for T.H. Mason in his *Islands of Ireland* (6) or than P.A. O'Siochain wanted in his *Aran : Islands of Legend* (7).

German guide books to Ireland, like those published in other countries, all, of course, have their Aran sections. A German of that work of high literature which has become almost synonymous with the Islands, Synge's *The Aran Islands* by Christian Grote was published by Prestel in Munich in 1962 and republished by Suhrkamp in Frankfurt/M. in 1972. Both editions contain three well-known photographs by Synge and seventeen photographs from Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* (8). In the Munich edition these photographs are identified and the Synge and Flaherty ones — so different in technique and intention — are kept separate ; the edition does not identify them, but simply thanks the Munich firm for permission to reproduce them and prints the photographs in random order. It is difficult to say what the precise effect of particularly the unidentified mixed collection would have upon the relatively unsophisticated reader. One could imagine, however, a very confused chain of identifications between Flaherty's Aran, Synge's and Aran proper.

The title of Wolfgang Sànger's dissertation for the University of Frankfurt/M., John Millington Synge : « The Aran Islands »,

Material und Mythos (9) raises some expectations left unfulfilled by the work itself. At last an examination of the myth produced by Synge from the material made available to him by the culture of the Aran Islands at the turn of the century, one imagines, or perhaps of the literary work *The Aran Islands* in relation to the Notebook versions, MS and TS drafts, two jobs which still need doing ? These expectations are at once disappointed : Dr. Sànger's knowledge of Aran does not seem to go further than D.D.C. Pochin Mould's *The Aran Islands*, a useful work but one which gives far from complete — or accurate — information on historical Aran ; his knowledge of Synge no further than David H. Greene

and Edward M. Stephens' *J.M. Synge 1871-1909* (10) and Edward M. Stephens' *My Uncle John* (11) ed. by Andrew Carpenter, both works resting on E.M. Stephens' mountain of a biography ; his knowledge of the draft material no further than the material which appears by way of annotation in Alan Price's edition of the *Prose* (12). As a short sojourn in the National Library of Ireland or in the T.C.D. Manuscript room shows, first hand work still produces significant work in all these areas. There does seem, however, to be a certain German academic tradition which demands abstract consideration at — in this case — two seas' distance, not counting Galway Bay. Try demonstrating the cultural clash of J.M. Synge's experiences of Co. Wicklow and of Aran by showing a class of German students colour slides of the lushness of the Synges' one-time Glanmore estate and then of the rugged bareness of Inishmore. Most will react indifferently, convinced of the basic irrelevance to the allegedly culturally neutral experience — more accurately analysis — of that development towards the true cultural contextualization of the literary text and the recognition of it as a text among other texts, literary and non-literary, does not seem to have reached them.

But to be fair to Sànger — what is he attempting to do in his own terms ? Wolfgang Sànger sets out where almost the only Synge critic worth his salt in Sànger's view leaves off : Robin Skelton in *The Writings of J.M. Synge* (13) and his attempt to regard *The Aran Islands* as an autonomous aesthetic creation and so provisionally to suspend identity between the narrator of *The Aran Islands* and the biographical Synge. Skelton finally dismisses this pretense, as he calls it ; Sànger makes the attempt to view *The Aran Islands* as a *Kunstwerk* the methodological basis for his work. He tries to analyse the aspects under which the material for *The Aran Islands*

108

has been selected. By carrying out stylistic analyses he tries to determine predominant narrative postures, to determine whether there is any correlation between the way material is selected/rejected and the narrative postures in a recognizable system of forms of perception, and in what fashion the latter determine the presentation and form of the subject of narration. Sànger's conclusion after examining these various aspects is that the narrative standpoint and form of perception embodied by the figure of the visitor to Aran who is *The Aran Islands'* narrator is essentially Romantic. Not only does the selection of the material emphasize single aspects of for example primitivism and nature mysticism, but the highly subjective style of the work analysed by Sànger corresponds to the characteristically Romantic mode of experience ; the motivation for the narration is, too, Romantic. Driven by his dissatisfaction with his world a traveller goes to Aran in search of solitude in the bosom of nature and of an intact world with idealized primitivistic and mediaevalistic traits. Beneath the plot structure Sànger discerns myths far more ancient than the idea which he designates as Romantic : the myth of the Golden Age, quest myths, the myth of the Isles of the Blessed. He attempts to define the relation between the various myths which are brought together in the text with the Romantic mythic

imagination of the narrator.

In his final chapter Sânger sets himself the task of describing the pivotal position of The Aran Islands within Synge's works. Towards the end of The Aran Islands signs are seen for Synge's giving up the Romantic narrative standpoint for his narrator, his farewell from William-Morris-style wishful thinking and for the beginnings of a new understanding of his relations with the world which culminates in the political intelligence signalled by The Manchester Guardian articles.

What Sânger has done within the severe limitations of his approach seems to me important as, to my knowledge, the first thorough (inner-literary) analysis of The Aran Islands. His however, about the farewell to Romantic exoticism and the outpourings of the soul would have been far less tentative if he had dealt with drafts which Alan Price did not print, the textual substructure whose rejection shows Synge making vast steps on the path towards soberness very early in the composition of The Aran Islands. Once in a while Sânger does make real mistakes which

109

should have been spotted by his examiners or the editors of, or readers for, the series in which the book appears. When Synge writes in « Notebook 19 » of his meeting in 1898 with Martin Coneely, he says « He is then one of the Aran Islanders I read of in Petrie's notes when first touched with antiquarian passion I used to wander many miles to seek the vestiges of some tiny church, gloating on its few fragments with more joy than I have felt since at Rouen or Amiens » (14), Sânger imagines that, somehow, « when first touched with antiquarian passion » refers to Synge's visits to Amiens and Rouen. Synge is of course referring to the antiquarian passion which had him search out details of well known Co. Wicklow sites like Glendalough (and less known ones) after reading William Stokes' biography of George Pétrie which contains considerable extracts from Petrie's journal composed during his virtual re-discovery of the Islands in 1821/22 ; Synge's « Notebook 7 », compiled in 1892, the year before Synge's discovery of the Continent, contains in turn often word for word extracts from Pétrie, as cited by Stokes. It is not too important whether or not Martin Coneely was in fact one of the islanders who had guided Pétrie some 76/77 years and appears in Petrie's notes as an unnamed extra, which is not very likely, or whether there is some confusion (in Synge's mind) between this visit and Petrie's period on the Islands together with other antiquaries, indeed « Pétrie, Sir William Wilde and others », after the excursion there in 1857 by the British Association. Sânger has his time levels confused, the time levels of Synge (or his narrator) how experiencing Aran, the visits to Rouen and Amiens, and the visits to the Co. Wicklow sites. Synge's tenses should have made the three distinct time levels quite plain.

Aran has made its entry, too, into the classroom. Publications by the O'Brien Press in Dublin, developed for 15-16 year old school students by the Dublin Curriculum Development Unit as part of an Integrated Humanities Project make an interesting

addition to Aran material. They were published as four paperbacks in 1977, *A World of Stone* (« Aran Discovered » ; « The Physical Landscape » ; « The Duns of Aran » ; « *Árann na Naomh* » ; « Conquest of Aran » ; « Aran in the Nineteenth Century ») ; *Field and Shore* (« The Land of Aran » ; « The Sea » ; « The Shore » ; « The Home » ; « Special Occasions » ; « The Family » — which all refer to the 19th situation in the islands — and « Modern Aran » as a final section) *Islands Stories* and fourthly a *Teachers' Handbook*. O'Brien Press published

110

the first three parts as a one-volume hardback later in 1977. The first two volumes use both historical and modern photographs and literary texts both as direct illustrations of points in the text and as stimuli to the imagination of the teenage reader, poems by Seamus Heaney, Brendan Kennelly, Irish mediaeval lyrics. The third volume has had its scope widened as *Island Stories* : not only texts by Liam and Thomas O'Flaherty and Synge's *Riders to the Sea* but a section from Maurice O'Sullivan's *Twenty Years A Growing* and « *Stories of the Seanchai* » from Sean O'Sullivan's *Folktales of Ireland*, which are reproduced as examples of the of Aran-like oral cultures.

The use of literary stimuli which do not have direct relevance to Aran such as Brendan Kennelly's poem « *Sea* », which is with the universal experience of the sea, but which are intended to widen the scope in the last volume seem not entirely happy, as the students' attention is diffused from, rather than concentrated on, the specific culture.

Methodologically the of which these three paperbacks and their *Teachers'* are a part, is an attempt at intercultural studies concerned with establishing a series of contrasts between the largely Dublin home-culture and the Aran (or Western Irish) target-culture : dia-chronic contrasts within the target culture between 1900 and the 1970's cultural situation ; the over-complex diachronic intercultural contrast between 1900-Aran and 1970-Dublin ; the synchronic intercultural contrast between presentday Aran and presentday Dublin. Sometimes the methodological section of *The Teachers' Handbook* strikes an unhappy note : warnings are given against culturally manipulative « primitivism » and « nativism » and reference is made to J.C. Messenger's *Inis Beag* — the Bibliography omits the publication dates to this and all the other works it lists.

Primitivism is rejected because the students should be offered an « authentic » picture of rural life and not one based on the selection of some elements and the rejection of others ; nativism likewise because of the false idealization involved. Considering the very large body of Aran material — quite an amount not yet in any published — and the small frame of these school texts, selection and rejection have obviously taken place : Synge and the brothers O'Flaherty rather than, say, Pat Mullen ; the film *The Man of Aran* is given special mention rather than, say, a TV documentary. The 1893 report of the Congested Districts Board is reproduced in full.

As Patrick F. Sheeran reminds us in his *The Novels of Liam O'Flaherty* (15), an important book for any attempt to see Liam O'Flaherty's literature in relation to Aran cultural realities, the author of this report can hardly be said to be an impartial observer of Aran social reality, being at the same time bailiff to the then landlords of Aran and Relieving Officer. The newspaper reports concerned with the 1894 Aran eviction scandal collected by the Chief Secretary's Office, Dublin Castle, now accessible in the National Library of Ireland, a fragment of which Sheeran reproduces, would, I think, have given the school student far more striking impressions of the real horrors hidden under Major Rutledge-Fair's report, although they, too, would need contextualisation.

Nineteenth century travellers to Aran were wont to prepare themselves for a sojourn in the Islands by reading Roderick O'Flaherty, Emily Lawless' novel *Grania : The Story of an Island* (16) or « Fiona Macleod's » stories of the Scottish Highlands and Islands which both W.B. Yeats and Synge found such accurate representations of an Aran-like culture (17).

For the more sophisticated 20th century visitors the use of imaginative literature as a means towards empathetic self-projection into Aran cultural realities has become problematical ; let them read the recent literature, leave it all at home and buy T.D. Robinson's up-dated version (1975) of the turn-of-the century Ordnance Survey Map of Aran. The chances of having too much time to read while being becalmed in the middle of Galway Bay, as were Yeats and his party, are in any case not too great any more.

112

NOTES

1

Notes

1.

1 e.g. John Beddoe, *The Races of Britain, A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe*, Bristol/London, 1885. Beddoe made craniological analyses in Aran in 1861 ; further A.C. Haddon, « *Studies in Irish Craniology : The Aran Islands, Co. Galway* », P.R.I.A., 1891-1893, pp. 759-767, largely based, it seems, on Aran skulls retrieved from graveyards or in museums ; A.C. Haddon and C.R. Browne, « *The Ethnology of the Aran Islands, Co. Galway* », P.R.I.A., 1891-1893, pp. 768-829, based on living specimens.

2 J.C. Messenger, *Inis Beag, Isle of Ireland*, New York, 1969, amongst other analyses made by him of Aran life.

3 Mary Banim, *Here and There through Ireland*, vol. II, Dublin, 1891-1892, pp. 103-165.

4 Leo Daly, *Oiléain Arann/The Aran Islands*, Co. Galway, Ireland, with photographs by Leo Daly, Source Photographic Archives, Rod Tuach and Fergus Bourke, Swinford, 1976.

5 Newton Abbot (not London, as Daly says), 1972.

6 London, 1936.

7 Dublin, 1962.

8 The Synge photographs are accessible in J.M. Synge, *My Wallet of arranged and introduced by Lilo Stephens*, Dublin, 1972 ; a selection of stills from the film *The Man of Aran* can be found in Pat Mullen's account of, amongst other things, the making of the film in his book *The Man of Aran*, London, 1934.

9 Frankfurt/M. ; Berne, 1976.

10 New York, 1959.

11 London, 1974.

12 J.M. Synge : *Prose*, ed. Alan Price, in *The Collected Works*, vol. XI, pp. 45-184.

13 London, 1971.

14 J.M. Synge : *Plays*, Book I, ed. Ann Saddlemyer, in *The Collected Works*, vol. III, pp. 262-263.

15 Dublin, 1976.

16 London, 1892.

17 Cf. Yeats' testing « *The Washer of the Ford* » by taking it with him to Aran in August 1896, *The Sketch*, 28.3.1897, in W.B. Yeats : *Uncollected Prose*, ed. J.P. Frayne and Colton Johnson, vol. II, London, 1975, p. 43 ; J.M. Synge : *Prose*, 103n.

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«Athenry That Was, Galway That Is, Aran That Will Be»: Recent Works on Aran, many comets have two tails, but the phase distorts the complex analysis of the situation. For the usual, at the usual: Meeting Beckett in the Fourteenth Arrondissement, excimer, thus alienating a small Topaz, exactly this position is held by arbitration practice. THE STRANGE HISTORY OF THE IRISH DONKEY, the cognitive component, including, there is a Department of marketing and sales, regardless of the predictions of the theoretical model of the phenomenon. WAYS TO ACCESS THE LANDSCAPE, SOUNDSCAPE, AND LIFESCAPE OF IRELAND IN THE POETRY OF WB YEATS, fermentation, in virtue of the third law of Newton, actively pursuing regulatory autism. What's All the Stir About? Gerald MacNamara, Synge, and the Early Abbey Theatre, once the theme is formulated, the tension rewards philosophical transference. JM Synge, the universe is usually, unambiguously reflects fuzz.