

AGENCY AND IDENTITY IN THE CONTACT ZONE:  
THE TRAVEL WRITER AND THE NATIVE IN J.M.  
SYNGE'S *THE ARAN ISLANDS*

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## INTRODUCTION

The point of interaction, the place at which tourist meets native, provides a rich, complex social and cultural convergence that can shed light on ways that ethnographer influences the identity and agency of the native, and also how the native, through their own cultural lens, influences the identity and agency of the ethnographer. Added to a tradition in which wealthy sons traveled Europe to become cultured, the emerging science of anthropology in the late nineteenth century resulted in a plethora of texts describing the meeting of the upper class and the native. This essay will seek to answer questions concerning the ways in which Irish ethnographers like J.M. Synge interacted with the subjects of their scrutiny and particularly how that interaction resulted in formation of identity for both the traveler and the native. These questions are important because they reveal the agency of those societies traditionally labeled as subaltern and lacking in power over the dominating class and help to expose some of the forces which may have a more significant influence on travel writers than previously thought. Further, it is important to understand two dynamics: firstly, the ways the dominant class from which these travelers come forces the native into specific roles and creates for them an identity based on the norms of the travelers' society. It is equally important, secondly, to understand that evidence suggests natives are just as active in forming and manipulating

the travelers' conception of self in accordance with the lens through which the native view the world.

Syngue was by no means the first to travel the world and write of his encounters with the native peoples of other lands, and neither was he the first—English or Irish—to do so about Ireland. Martin Ryle notes that early eighteenth-century English travelers may have gone there to record the amusements one might find as a tourist but ended up “forced into a painful ‘knowledge’ of Irish poverty, hunger, and discontent” (14).

Thomas Newenham's *Views of the Natural, Political, and Commercial Circumstances of Ireland* (1809), the result of a journey to Cork with a number of friends, attempts to redirect the attention of those who would travel to Ireland in search of amusement and scenery to more substantial matters. His text focuses on the economic and suggests the potential inherent in Ireland should certain political roadblocks be removed (Ryle 14-16). Other English texts ignore Newenham's challenge, focusing instead on continuing the tradition of producing epicurean guide books. Examples of such can be seen in William Thackeray's *Irish Sketch Book* published in 1843, the Scot Henry Inglis' *Ireland in 1834: A Journey throughout Ireland in the Spring, Summer, and Autumn of 1834*, and John Barrow's *A Tour Round Ireland through the Sea-Coast Counties, in the Autumn of 1835*. In addition to descriptions of beautiful scenery and the enchanting local color their primarily English readers wanted, these texts were snapshots of an Ireland in political turmoil and in the grips of starvation, poverty, and despair (Ryle 18-21).

Lest one think only the English traveled and wrote about the west of Ireland, a number of Irish were going west and writing of their experiences too. Norman Vance applauds the accomplishment of Arthur Stringer through the latter's willingness to travel

and contribution to natural history in publishing *The Experience'd Huntsman* (1714), a study of animal life in the north of Ireland (30). In some cases, these travelers, like the English, journeyed their own homelands as tourists. James Hall's *Tour through Ireland, Particularly in the Interior and Least Known Parts* (1813) reveals an infatuation with all things Catholic and is driven by the author's firm belief that a sojourn through Ireland is, in itself, an act of bravery. Anglo-Irish couple Mr. and Mrs. S.C. Hall published *A Week at Killarney* in 1843. James Macauley's *Ireland in 1872: A Tour of Observation with Remarks on Irish Public Questions* provides both details of his experiences and serves as the backdrop for analyses of what he sees as important issues of the time—like the difference between Catholics and Protestants. Edith Oenone Sommerville and Violet Florence Martin Ross, cousins who together wrote some thirty books, embarked on a journey through the rural west of Ireland and recorded their experiences in their second book, *Through Connemara in a Governess Cart*. Published in 1893 (five years before Synge would travel to the isles of Aran), it reads like a journal and details their sometimes comedic encounters with both the native peoples and livestock of the region. As such, it can be seen prefiguring a number of themes and authorial devices that show up in *The Aran Islands* a decade and a half later.

George Moore's *Parnell and His Island* (1887) may not be a strict travel text, but it deals with a number of the complications and demonstrates themes that will show up again in Synge's *The Aran Islands*. In this text Moore can be seen issuing a “repudiative discourse, initiated by a narrative voice that addresses the reader, comments upon, condemns—and, on rare occasions, praises—what it displays” (Grubgeld 3) through a combination of irony, self-satire, and mockery. At least as or perhaps more than Synge,

Moore feels conflicted about his Irish identity and everything that that means, and it shows in his depiction of the autobiographical character Landlord M. The Synge line itself was not a stranger to Aran when John Millington stepped off the ship and onto its shores—his uncle, the Reverend Alexander Synge, had traveled there as a Protestant minister in the early 1850s, some four decades before he himself would arrive (Arrowsmith 313). All of these travelers to Ireland record to some extent their interaction with the natives who live there, and in the last years of the nineteenth century Synge continues this long, rich, and complicated tradition as he heads west himself to sate his fascination with the west.

J.M. Synge wrote a number of travel texts treating the various peoples of western and rural Ireland, and *The Aran Islands* presents a context loaded with the convergences mentioned above, providing an excellent grounding from which to launch an inquisition into such questions. The youngest of eight, Synge came from a relatively well-to-do family from County Dublin. Although his father died when he was only a year old, the family subsisted on rents gained from property his mother held, and Synge spent the majority of his youth in Dublin. Once old enough, he pursued an education at various music academies in both Ireland and Germany. However, not long after, he gave up on music due to fear of public performance and a doubt of his own ability as a musician, and turned to a literary career (Greene and Stephens). The years spent during his youth walking through the countryside of County Wicklow and his interest in the peasant culture matured during his time in Paris at the Sorbonne studying and going to lectures by famed anthropologist Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville. Like Yeats, Lady Gregory, and others, he was one among a number of intellectuals who sought what Gregory Castle

calls a “meaningful and unambiguous Irish identity” (Castle 101) through communication with and a recording of the peasant and his or her life. Synge at times throughout *The Aran Islands* and his other ethnographic work types himself—he notes the arrival of “another ‘traveling man’” (Synge 298) staying at the same inn as he, though the former does not prove talkative. Synge again provides for the reader a portrait of his type in a digression upon his arrival in Wicklow, describing the proliferation and character of the vagrant:

[F]airly often they seem to have merely drifted out from the ordinary people of the villages, and do not differ greatly from the class they come from. Their abundance has often been regretted; yet in one sense it is an interesting sign, for wherever the labourer of a country has preserved his vitality, and begets an occasional temperament of distinction, a certain number of vagrants are to be looked for. In the middle classes the gifted son of a family is always the poorest—usually a writer or artist with no sense of speculation—and in a family of peasants, where the average comfort is just over penury, the gifted son sinks also, and is soon a tramp on the roadside (236).

Thus Synge portrays himself as something of the vagrant. In light of his place as the youngest son, his almost offhand remark about the one with “no sense of speculation” becoming the tramp is characteristic of the occasional humble remark or self-deprecating jab that Synge takes at himself throughout the texts. In relation to his contemporaries, he is perhaps best characterized by Gregory Castle, who notes that he was “part of a European artistic milieu that was being electrified by new anthropological knowledge”



(Castle 99). Synge, then, is in many ways the prototypical landed European intellectual; he is highly educated, has traveled extensively, and is cognizant of both the conflicts going on among the Irish elite concerning their identity as a nation and also the emerging science of anthropology with its potential to answer many of the questions he holds.

The travel writing of Synge emerges from the changes that took place among wealthy English travelers in the middle of the eighteenth century. It is not necessary to outline in full detail the characteristics of that change. However, a brief discussion of why “young Britons of the certain class” who “regarded continental travel as a way of completing their education” (Hooper 11) suddenly began eschewing the well-traveled paths between Paris, Versailles, Rome, and Florence for those closer to home is necessary to put the work of Synge into context. Glen Hooper argues, among other things, it was perhaps because those tours on the continent were so well-traveled while Scotland, Wales, and Ireland remained something of an enigma to the empire (12). He also suggests that the Napoleonic wars made the prospect of travel more dangerous, while the increasing dominance of the British Empire provoked “a reaction against the more classical standards associated with the Grand Tour<sup>1</sup>” (12). Linda Doyle sees a similar reaction:

It may seem odd that at the moment when England became an empire following the Seven Year’s War and the defeat of France in various corners of the globe, the English literati apparently turned inward and became preoccupied with local races; but in fact this coincidence of events

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these shifts in behavior, belief, and tradition, see Glen Hooper’s *Travel Writing and Ireland, 1760-1860: Culture, History, Politics and Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834* edited by Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh

indicates that the mythology of locally-rooted races was crucial to the imagining of an imperial Englishness (Doyle 16).

This shift, however, did not necessarily mean that the “native” would necessarily figure prominently in the narratives to come. Even through the period of the Great Famine much of the travel writing focused on the natural resources that Ireland had to offer. When early travelers like John Bush, Sir Richard Colt Hoare, Arthur Young, and others did include the natives in their writing, they did so, as Hooper points out, in the spirit of “introducing local color” (21) or else in the aim of understanding the Irish because the current lack of knowledge was seen by the British as posing some sort of threat to the empire. They were more interested in the health benefits of traveling the countryside or the historical and aesthetic opportunities such travel afforded than in chronicling lives of the natives (20). At the same time, Martin Ryle notes how the “writings of the Irish literary revivalists can be characterized as the products of “the notion that the West offered an antidote or alternative to urban-industrial modernity” (4). While the entrance of Synge into the ethnographic picture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and his focus on the folk will ultimately be traced to motivations sometimes different from the ones above, it is important to understand the foundations on which they strode as they traveled the paths of western Ireland in search of the story of the folk.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATIVE

In his search, Synge's travels brought him principally to the Aran Islands. Synge's energy and philosophy are best articulated by Edward Said when speaking on the study of ethnography in general: "geographical dislocation, secular discovery, and the painstaking recovery of implicit or internalized histories: these stamp the ethnographic quest with the mark of a secular energy that is unmistakably frank" (213). This characterizes not only Synge's desire to collect the stories of the folk but the manner in which he sets about doing it. Through the narration of his three visits, the Dublin-born, youngest son of a moderately wealthy family reveals to the reader what Gregory Castle terms a complex and conflicting view of the Aran Islanders—"a wild and primitive, inherently noble people cut off from modern Europe" (101). Synge's own words bear out this interpretation: "the absence of the heavy boot of Europe has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal, while the general simplicity of their lives has given them many other points of physical perfection" (Synge 325). *The Aran Islands* is the result of those visits—an ethnographic text that deals with anthropological minutiae but also at times serves as a forum for Synge to expound upon his ideas about the state of modern civilization. All of this occurs in what Mary Louise Pratt defines as the contact zone, or

“social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly symmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (4).

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge constructs the identities of the natives in a number of ways. These constructions are important because underneath they signal an ethnographic lens heavily influenced by the modes of the dominant culture, flavoring the narrative in subtle ways from the adjectives chosen to describe behavior, dress, and cultural dynamic to what the ethnographer chooses to narrate and what he leaves out. It may be helpful to think of the relationship between the Aran Islanders and Synge as one akin to that of colonized and colonizer—though their place in British imperial history is much more complicated<sup>2</sup>. Said argues that “the status of the colonized people has been fixed in zone of dependency and peripherality, stigmatized in the designation of underdeveloped[,] . . . ruled by a superior . . . or metropolitan colonizer (207). Thus, even though during the time of Synge the islanders may not have been exploited in the traditional imperial sense, the relationship they shared with the mainland and the British Empire in a larger sense is similar in that the one is defined by the other largely in terms of its geographic marginality.

It has already been suggested that Synge sees the Aran Islanders as primitive, but noble for that primitiveness, because in their archaic ways they are free from the dirty hand of modern civilization. In this respect, Synge is not much different from the other modernists who saw around them a world entering decline and marked by degeneration. In one recounting of a story told to him by a native with a subsequent admonition to wear a needle under his lapel to ward the power of the magic of the faerie, Synge inserts his

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<sup>2</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the history of the Aran Islands within the larger imperial context of Ireland and the British Empire, see R. B. McDowell’s *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution, 1760-1801*.

own assertion to the reader that “iron is a common talisman with barbarians” (Synge 337). At the same time, however, it is clear from the text that the natives are not the insular, backward folk Synge often portrays them to be. The narrative reveals that in addition to being hungry for recent news on the war between America and Spain, the natives fully understand the consequences of the conflict as it relates directly to the ease with which they can receive goods from America (318). And yet *The Aran Islands* is riddled with asides during which Synge both blatantly and subtly exposes the cultural prejudices from which he views the natives. In one moment he favorably compares their elegance to that of “the finer types of our aristocracies—who are bred artificially to a natural ideal” (324) because the Islanders achieve that ideal naturally, while in the next he speaks inquisitively about their inability to devise a method of keeping the time, and so ask him constantly what the hour is (324). In responding to a story Synge was told about a man who killed his own father and was hidden from the police by the townsfolk, Synge asserts that “the impulse to protect the criminal is universal in the west,” and can be attributed “directly to the primitive feelings of these people, who are never criminals yet always capable of crime” (350). This anecdote featured so prominently in Synge’s mind that it became the basis for his *Playboy of the Western World*. Most generally, this use of language is representative of how “both ethnographic studies and the comments of literary travelers show . . . this propensity to see ‘the West’ as the valued other of urban modernity” (Ryle 46). And too, time and again the preponderance of data demonstrate that, for Synge, “it is perhaps another index of his position as an outsider that . . . what is ‘primitive’ is also what is good” (81). All are based in what Ryle identifies as a division between a perception of what the East of Ireland represents in direct opposition to that of

West Ireland: “the west is emotional authenticity: the east (London-Dublin) is decadent self-consciousness. The West is Irishness: the east is ‘west British’ cultural dependence on England” (66). The Aran Islanders, then, epitomize a disappearing world whose loss Synge recognizes and laments. His actions in recording their folk tales and ways of life signify a desire to preserve that which will soon be gone.

There is evidence that just as Synge’s formation of the Aran Islanders’ identities through language and action gives them an authentic and noble existence, it takes away a measure of their agency—a norm of the way the colonizer represents the colonized. Mary Louise Pratt, in discussing the earlier travel writing of William Paterson and Anders Sparrman in Africa, demonstrates how the two, through language, turn the Khoikhoi into fungible beings not possessive of individuated identities: “‘referred to as a/the/my Hottentot(s)’ (or not at all, as in the eternal ‘our baggage arrived the next day’), all are interchangeable; none is distinguished from another by name or any other feature; and their presence, their *disponibilitate*, and subaltern status, are now taken for granted” (52). Synge, to an equal degree, also types the Aran Islanders, stealing those characteristics that make them individuals. He describes the inhabitants of the south-most island, Inishheer, as “strange men with receding foreheads, high cheekbones, and ungovernable eyes” who “represent some old type found on these few acres at the extreme border of Europe” (Synge 389)—in effect codifying them as one looking out on the periphery of the empire. In describing the motivations and temperament of the Aran Islanders, Synge again hearkens to the mode of the primitive:

These men of Inishmaan seemed to be moved by strange archaic sympathies with the world. Their mood accorded itself with wonderful

fineness to the suggestions of the day, and their ancient Gaelic seemed to full of divine simplicity that I would have liked to turn the prow to the west and row with them forever (390-91).

And:

The lightness of the pampooties seems to make the dancing on this island lighter and swifter than anything I have seen on the mainland, and the simplicity of the men enables them to throw a naïve extravagance into their steps that is impossible in places where the people are self-conscious (401).

It is significant that in Synge's imaginary world movement is towards the west, for it is the west of Ireland that for him contains the enticing purity that is absent from the modern world. Equally important is the manner in which he continually removes from the Aran Islanders through his characterizations of them the self-awareness that would also afford them agency. The level of their primitiveness directly corresponds to the uninhibited nature that makes their way of life so desirable but also removes from their hands any manner of collective agency. Such delineations by Synge are perfect examples of the lens through which he figures the Aran Islanders. But by no means is he the only agent of identity formation. The Aran Islanders play a critical role in figuring the identity of Synge as well, and in doing so they wield an agency that scholarship on the ethnographer neglect to discuss in terms of Synge's relationship with these natives.

## CHAPTER III

### THE NEGOTIATED AND COMPROMISED SYNGE

On the other side of Said's argument that "the status of the colonized people has been fixed in zone of dependency and peripherality . . . by a superior . . . or metropolitan colonizer" (207) is Mary Louise Pratt, who rightly points out that "just as the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery...it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis" (6). This articulation of agency by the Aran Islanders against Synge happens in a number of ways and ultimately challenges his class authority while subtly exerting influence over his identity. Simply put, just as he figures them according to the norms of the society from which he comes, so too do the Aran Islanders figure Synge according to their own cultural conceptions. This is one of the markers that reveals the difference between the Aran Islander-Synge relationship and that of the traditional colonized-colonizer relationship. The natives do not make use of the tools of the dominant culture to end their oppression (Fanon 35-38), partly because they are not subjugated in the traditionally imperial sense. While it appears they are well aware of the interest their home holds for the outside world—an old man tells Synge during his first day about how he "had known Petrie and Sir William Wilde, and many living antiquarians, and had taught Irish to Dr



Finck and Dr Pedersen, and given stories to Mr Curtin of America” (Synge 310)—the Aran Islanders are not actively fighting against some imperial mode but rather through the adherence to their beliefs implicitly resisting any characterizations of marginality that might change their way of life. In doing so, they end up characterizing Synge instead.

One of the ways they do this is through a challenging of Synge’s status as a member of the noble class. In one section, Synge tells us how his companion Michael<sup>3</sup> was very eager to see how he shot and that it was lucky that by the end of the day Synge had managed to bag a respectable number of rabbits, for had he not he would have risked ridicule in the eyes of the islanders: “We shot seven or eight more in the next hour, and Michael was immensely pleased. If I had done badly I think I should have had to leave the islands. The people would have despised me. A ‘duine uasal’ who cannot shoot seems to these descendants of hunters a fallen type who is worse than an apostate” (Synge 391). A nobleman who cannot shoot, says Synge, is looked down upon. To the Aran Islanders, being able to shoot is seen as the birthright of the upper classes. It is unclear, since Synge does not say, exactly how his status would have changed on the island had he turned out to be a poor shot. However, his uncharacteristic concern with how he was viewed by the Aran Islanders should tell us that it was no small thing. Synge’s conclusion that the islanders “would have despised” him seems an extreme reaction to those outside of the cultural framework of the Aran Islanders—one uniquely created and informed by the norms of the early twentieth-century on the Aran Islands and which includes a heavy importance placed on such cultural beliefs. That one skill to the islanders, then, becomes representative of Synge’s station and an affirmation of his “nobility” and the subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> Michael and Synge became close friends, exchanging letters and spending a great deal of time wandering about during the latter’s visits.

respect he is given. Were he not able to perform adequately it is likely he would have been viewed as something of an imposter, a pretender, and much of the social power he enjoyed stripped away at the hands of those who respected him. This example is clearly one of the most telling examples of how “the native point of view . . . is in large measure a continuing, protracted, and sustained adversarial resistance to the discipline and the praxis of anthropology” (Said 220)—in this case the accepted power of the wealthy man of the noble class visiting the natives. By the very act of questioning his ability to fulfill what they see as the requirements of his station, they undermine the foundations of that identity and demonstrate an agency to reform it according not to any standards of the dominant culture, but rather their own.

The Aran Islanders also challenge Synge’s identity as a technologically and educationally fluent member of the dominant culture. Synge tells the reader that during his walks with Michael around the island, it becomes clear that the shoes he has brought with him are unsuitable for the terrain of the islands. What follows is an interesting example of the ways in which Synge’s assumptive technological authority is challenged: “the family held a consultation on them [his shoes] last night, and in the end it was decided to make me a pair of pampooties,<sup>4</sup> which I have been wearing today among the rocks” (323). Synge gives no indication that he was a part of the family meeting, but rather when “it was decided” to make him some pampooties his acquiescence was a nonissue. Further, once he learns how to walk in his new shoes, he immediately accedes to their superiority and learns “the natural walk of man” (324). This signals something akin to the interaction Mary Louise Pratt notes in her seminal text *Imperial Eyes: Travel*

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<sup>4</sup> According to the narrative, pampooties are a form of footwear in which a “cowskin, with the hair outside, [is] laced over the toe and round the heel with two ends of fishing line that work round and are tied above the instep” (Synge 323).

*Writing and Transculturation* between the Khoikhoi and Peter Kolb's fellow Europeans: the Africans were producing butter and, rather than consuming it themselves, sold it to the colonial settlers. This, Pratt demonstrates, exemplifies a reversal of the "usual directions of Eurocolonial exchange and cultural value" because "the Europeans are buying a manufactured product from the Africans, not selling one to them" (43). In the same way, rather than Synge's footwear being accepted as a concrete, unassailable model of upper class and imperial technological know-how, the natives simply provide Synge with a better substitute. And he, just as the Europeans buying the butter from the Khoikhoi, accepts it.

Perhaps the most surprising manner in which the cultural norms of the dominant culture—of which Synge, as a wealthy member of the educated class and having widely traveled Europe, is an excellent representative—are challenged and result in a figuring of identity is through Synge's education. Four events call into question the completeness and practicality of Synge's schooling. The first comes when he observes the natives burning kelp, which is one of the principle industries of profit on the barren island of Inishmaan. As the islanders crowd around and Synge watches on, he is asked by one of the men if he has ever seen kelp-making before, to which he replies that he has not. The islander replies that it is a "great wonder that you've seen France and Germany, and the Holy Father, and never seen a man making kelp till you come to Inishmaan" (Synge 335). Synge, in his normal manner, does not record for the reader his reaction or response to the observation, and we are left wondering how he felt about it. The second instance in which Synge's education is called into question can be extracted from his assertion to the reader that "iron is a common talisman with barbarians" (Synge 337) and used to ward

off faeries, discussed above in the ways it reflects Synge typing of the islanders. However, this internal soliloquy in response to Old Pat Durane's advice can also be read as a challenge to Synge's authority as an educated man and also his identity as a member of the Irish upper class. The very fact that the native would presume to take Synge aside and tell him "a secret he had never told to any person in the world" (337) suggests that Synge was different from everybody else—i.e., not an Aran Islander with the attendant knowledge that comes from growing up in that culture. That faeries were both dangerous and gluttonous, as Synge himself points out on any number of occasions, leads the reader to believe that perhaps Durane told Synge about the talisman to protect him from their charms. The implicit assumption in Durane's offering of a ward suggests, if not done solely for flattery, that he believes Synge has no other protection against the faeries, or at least not one as effective, despite his worldliness and learning.

During a fishing trip with his seemingly ever-present companion Michael, Synge discovers the difficulty of rowing one of the native curaghs.<sup>5</sup> He notes how "in the first half-hour I found myself more than once moving towards the point I had come from, to Michael's satisfaction" (353). While perhaps not as dramatic as the first two, this event is notable because it unearths the ultimate impracticality of Synge's education for life on the island. While he may be able to read and speak in a multiplicity of languages, play myriad instruments, and speak of his extensive travels on the continent, his clumsiness in maneuvering the small craft is suggestive of a deficiency that in many cultures borders on deformity. Even if Michael's "satisfaction" is not malicious, it indicates a moment in which Synge's agency is reduced to that of a child's in comparison to the "dexterity" (353) with which Michael handles the boat. The fourth instance comes not in *The Aran*

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<sup>5</sup> A curagh is a small boat made by stretching animal hide over a wooden frame, powered by oars.

*Islands*, but in Synge's essay *In Wicklow*.<sup>6</sup> During a conversation with an old man Synge had overtaken while on the road, he tells the stranger of his travels around Europe and to Rome to see the Pope. When his companion asks Synge if he can name who the first Pope was, Synge admits that he cannot, to which the old man replies, "I'm only a poor, ignorant man, but I can tell you that myself if you don't know it, with all your travels. Saint Peter was the first Pope" (247).

Whether offhand comments or deliberate underminings of the epistemological authority instilled in Synge by his extensive education, these exclamations by the natives are demonstrative of how the peoples of the Aran Islands act in a way that removes agency from the dominant traveler that is contrary to the norm in similar relationships. Pratt points out that, in the early eighteenth century, newly "decolonized writers" (175) like Andres Bello often appropriated the colonizing classes' norms and then used them as an avenue by which they could increase their voice, a process she calls transculturation. Frantz Fanon, too, gives myriad examples of how the "colonized intellectual" is "implanted" with a set of "essential qualities [which] remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men may make" (37)—qualities which the native intellectual then reapplies to the colonizer. The inhabitants of the Aran Islands, however, are not wholly the same as the native intellectual as defined by either author, making their native agency different in ways. True, they appear to be aware of the wider world<sup>7</sup>. It could even be argued that Michael, in leaving the island like so many others, is demonstrative of the colonized

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<sup>6</sup> *In Wicklow* was a combination of six articles written by Synge for the newspapers *Manchester Guardian* and *The Shanachie*, between 1905 and 1908.

<sup>7</sup> Synge records that, among the Aran Islander's topics of conversation, "war seems their favourite, and the conflict between America and Spain is causing a great deal of excitement. Nearly all the families have relations who have had to cross the Atlantic, and all eat of the flour and bacon that is brought from the United States, so they have a vague fear that 'if anything happened to America', their own island would cease to be hospitable" (318). This demonstrates a surprising cognizance not only of what is news outside of their world, but of the influences that have control over their economic well-being as well.

intellectual who has “begun a dialogue with the bourgeoisie of the colonialist country” (35). He has, after all, been in mainland Ireland working at a mill and “getting good wages from the first of this year” (Synge 375), with friends in Dublin whom he wants Synge to meet. However, the relationship is not marked by the same tensions that come with imperialism in a capitalistic world economy. The Aran Islanders do not possess land that yields raw materials valuable to the colonizing country. If anything, they, along with their peasant brethren in the rural west of Ireland, have a sort of cultural resource (which they are well aware of) that visiting priests and scholars seek out. Synge relates a conversation with one man he met in West Kerry who complained about all of the “busybodies coming around and telling us for the love of God to speak nothing but Irish” (Synge 267). Similar motivations can be inferred from the visiting of the Aran Islands by the “antiquarians” and story collectors of whom the first old man Synge meets on the Aran Islands tells him (310). It seems reasonable to assume that both the natives’ possessing of this resource as well as the knowledge that it is valued by the dominant class imparts a certain native agency of its own that permeates their interactions with the traveler. Perhaps this is the reason they refuse the universal acceptance of that “planetary consciousness<sup>8</sup>” Pratt sees as so important (15), and in its place successfully substitute their own normative lens to refigure the value of Synge’s education, and by extension, his identity as well.

There are, in addition to those outlines above, myriad ways the Aran Islanders challenge Synge’s cultural superiority and identity that are more direct. Synge relates one

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<sup>8</sup> Pratt defines “planetary consciousness” as a Eurocentric, global consciousness that defines at the same time it interacts with perceptions about the rest of the world by those both within and without that geographic locale (5).

incident that is particularly representative of this, in which he is set upon by the women of Aran:

The women were over-excited, and when I tried to talk to them they crowded around me and began jeering and shrieking at me because I was not married. A dozen screamed at a time, and so rapidly that I could not understand all that they were saying, yet I was able to make out that they were taking advantage of the absence of their husbands to give me the full volume of their contempt. Some little boys who were listening threw themselves down, writhing with laughter among the seaweed, and the young girls grew red with embarrassment and stared down into the surf (387).

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. First, because it demonstrates the obvious dissatisfaction of the women of the Aran Islands with Synge's bachelorhood. In order to determine a more accurate reading of such an incident, however, one must first determine the exact nature of that relationship. If the women feel free enough in their interactions with Synge to descend upon him in jest, then the challenge to his identity is somewhat mollified by the nature of their association. Perhaps they merely took the opportunity to poke fun at him in the spirit of a running joke or cheeky observation. And yet the "shrieking and jeering" from "a dozen . . . at a time" seems too strong a reaction to be jest. Add this to the fact that neither before nor after does Synge mention that he knew any of the women—certainly none in the passage or before or after are referred to by name.<sup>9</sup> So, too, does reaction of the natives around Synge suggest this is a serious

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<sup>9</sup> This absence of naming can also be construed in the same way that Pratt demonstrates Sparrman and Paterson de-individuating the Khoikhoi, never referring to them by name but rather using indefinite articles

affair. The children either threw “themselves down, writhing with laughter” or went “red with embarrassment and stared down into the surf.” Time and again, Synge’s conversations with natives reveal their views of a man who is not married, as more than one old man asks Synge that a man who isn’t married is akin to a donkey (236). Given all of this, it seems much more likely that Synge was in fact the object of a serious questioning of his value as a man. We get no latent reaction from Synge in the narrative, and so are only able to assume that the women are challenging him from a cultural perspective different from his own<sup>10</sup>.

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(52). On a related note, for an interesting parallel to the manner in which Synge “types” the Aran women by their customary red dress, see Pratt’s analysis of John Barrow and the !Kung (63-64).

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Castle in Chapter 3 of *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* elucidates the complex obsession Synge had concerning the women of Aran.



## CONCLUSIONS

All of these interactions, whether they challenge Synge's techno-cultural superiority, his education, or the norms concurrent to the established place he represents of European society are indicative of the ability of the natives of the Aran Islands to impose their own normative lens and refigure the Synge that visits their land from time to time. That this happens not through the appropriation of the moral or cultural standards of the dominant class, which Synge represents, is important. Like Pratt, Frantz Fanon demonstrates in *The Wretched of the Earth* the ways in which the decolonized are often forced to take on the "idols" of the colonizer, led by the native intellectual, to succeed in a world artificially rendered by the power of the colonizer. Perhaps because the relationship between the Aran Islanders and Synge is different from the prototypical imperial model, this is not the case. Significantly, the natives *eschew* those idols (subconsciously, Synge's narrative suggests) and instead impress upon Synge, or press Synge onto, their own mold. He is by no means, however, the only ethnographer to experience this. Any number of experienced and novice anthropologists and ethnographers had to face challenges to their identity and attempts to diminish their agency in the world of the native. Pratt explores the ways in which Anders Sparrman's attempts to "possess the mother-widow through words is . . . interrupted . . . by other people" (56)—the natives on the African continent, in this case, thwart his previously

unquestioned agency. She, too, notes the discursive authority of writers like Sarmiento, whose *Travels* exemplifies the ways that the colonized represents the colonizer and in doing so calls into question their cultural superiority and dominance (190).

Why does Synge allow himself to be re-figured by the natives? Perhaps the ambition to collect the folk stories of the islanders at any cost is an acceptable trade-off to being deprived of the agency imparted by his social, economic, and cultural status. Perhaps he is singularly unaware that his identity is being altered. Neither of these sound like the J.M. Synge of the Irish Revival. His interaction and relationship with the natives of the Aran Islands, which many scholars have noted, is perhaps best described by Martin Ryle: “Synge sees them . . . as participants in a community of which he too would like to have been a member, and to which he often returned<sup>11</sup>” (84). In writing about the natives of the Aran Islands, Synge, as Castle points out, is writing an autoethnographic text. He gives them agency in instances where he relinquishes authorial voice to the natives; one example among many comes when Pat Durane tells Synge “here is my story”—a form that Synge preserves and in doing so confers some of his own authority as ethnographer upon the storyteller (Castle 115). In these cases words, “the racial identity of the Aran Islanders becomes one with Synge’s ‘inner consciousness’” (121). Pratt, too, notes the autoethnographic nature of Synge’s texts, and its implications for the agency of the natives: “autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” which Europeans have constructed to “represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others” (7). This interpretation, in which he knowingly relinquishes agency because he desires to be a part of that

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<sup>11</sup> For more on Synge’s unique desire to be a part of the native community on the Aran Islands while attempting to maintain proper scientific distance from the subjects of his scrutiny, see Chapter 3 of Gregory Castle’s *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*.

community he observes, sounds more like the Synge we know. The Introduction of *The Aran Islands* supports such a reading:

As far as possible, however, I have disguised the identity of the people I speak of, by making changes in their names, and in the letter I quote, and by altering some local and family relationships. I have had nothing to say about them that was not wholly in their favour, but I have made this disguise to keep them from ever feeling that too direct use has been made of their kindness, and friendship, for which I am more grateful than it is easy to say (307).

Thus Synge acknowledges the debt he owes to the subjects of his ethnographic study, and in part the reasons they are able to influence the re-formation of his own identity just as he does theirs.

Glenn Hooper argues that the identity of the dominant traveler “seems to be at once ‘there’—unquestioned, fixed and indisputable—yet in a continual state of flux. It is a place to which the narrator can relate on a practical level, yet is being continually transgressed<sup>12</sup>” (88). That transgression, then, is like a fulcrum, a frictional zone of contact at the point of clashing perceptions between the native and the traveler that continuously shifts back and forth as each creates the other. For Synge, this transgression results in a vulnerability that the natives both implicitly and explicitly use to re-form his identity. To the Aran Islanders, Synge is not so much the upper-class ethnographer—

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<sup>12</sup> Hooper seems to suggest that Reverend James Hall, the focus of this discussion, disguises himself as a priest to get close to the natives. In reality it appears much closer to the truth that Hall is in actuality figured by the expectations he unknowingly fulfills for the natives, of which he subsequently takes advantage. For more on the interaction between dominant ethnographic observer and native, see Talal Asad’s “The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology,” in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

though of course they are not oblivious to this fact. Instead, he becomes what the islanders use him for, which effectively narrows his identity and contains his agency in that relationship to more specific realms. To the natives, Synge means news of the outside world (especially war), and a chance for entertainment. He shows them photographs and plays them the fiddle, and as far as they are concerned the other facets of his identity—his education, nominal wealth or land holdings, station in life, his writing—are not nearly as important as they would be to a member of Synge's same class. Nor anyone, I would argue, not specifically like the Aran Islanders in that the latter refuse to acknowledge the dominance of the culture that Synge represents and by which he is represented.

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Pages in Study: 27

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Arts

Major Field: English Literature

Scope and Method of Study:

This study focuses its attention on *The Aran Islands*, a prose travel text written by John Millington Synge and first published in 1907. It seeks to examine the text inside a postcolonial framework and uses textual analysis in conjunction with the theory of Mary Louise Pratt, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and others to uncover a more complicated interaction between the author and the natives he encountered.

Findings and Conclusions:

Recent investigations by Gregory Castle and Sinead Garrigan Mattar have more closely examined the travel writing of J.M. Synge as anticipatory of the science of anthropology. This study suggests ways in which the ethnography in J.M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* can be read through the lens of the natives about whom he writes. Just as the travel writer forces the native into specific roles and creates for them an identity, evidence shows that natives are active in forming and manipulating the former's concept of self based on their own cultural traditions. This suggests that instead of a dominant-subaltern dichotomy it would be more appropriate to look at the point of interaction as a complicated and often ambiguous space in which the tourist meets native, resulting in a rich, complex social and cultural convergence where, in the words of Irish scholar Glen Hooper, the identity of the dominant traveler "seems to be at once 'there' . . . yet in a continual state of flux. It is a place to which the narrator can relate on a practical level, yet is being continually transgressed." Such an exploration illuminates influence and agency in a manner not yet discussed in studies of the revival period, and proposes new questions concerning why Synge would include those scenes showing the native actively re-forming his identity in the manner they do.

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