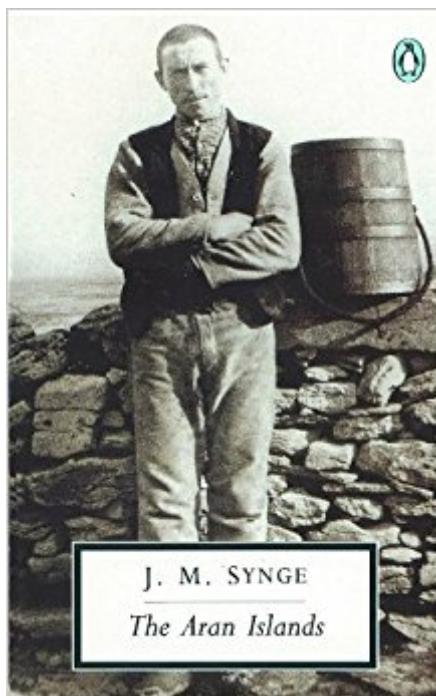


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The Aran Islands (Classic, 20th-Century, Penguin)



Synopsis

The foremost account of Ireland's cultural and spiritual heritageIn 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.

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Customer Reviews

Nothing much happens on the Aran Islands--at least, not much went on there in the late 19th century, when John Synge sailed out to these mist-shrouded, salt-sprayed, and wave-battered chunks of rocks south of Ireland. Therein lies the charm of the setting and of this lovely book, which captures the saltiness of both the marine air and the time-lost characters, who deeply believe in the magical "wee people." In cottages where nets and fishing tackle hang from beams, the women (who always wear red dresses and petticoats, as do some of the boys) sit at their spinning wheels or sew cow-skin sandals, while the fishermen spin yarns about fairies, sunken vessels, and bags of gold gained from adulterous wives. The big happening of the year is when roofs are rethatched--an event that blossoms into a festival with twisted rope stretching from kitchen table through lane to nearby field. Synge seems an ambassador from a different world: addressed as "noble person," he brings tokens of modernity--be they clocks or simple magic tricks that beguile the locals. First published in 1907, this re-released travelogue gives a poignant peek into another time and begs a visit to the Aran Islands to see how, or if, they have changed. --Melissa Rossi --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Scotland has always done things its own way, and that is what makes the country's history so interesting. More than four thousand years ago, its Stone Age inhabitants were among the most advanced builders of Europe. About two thousand years ago, the Romans decided it was wiser to build a wall than attempt conquest. A thousand years ago, Scotland was one of the first medieval European kingdoms to emerge as a political unity from the Dark Ages. The descendants of those first Scots still inhabit the country. This original and immensely readable history charts the long, painful, sometimes tragic, often inspiring process that has formed the Scottish people of today. It reveals how the Scots' sense of nationhood has always been under test and how that pressure has shaped the ways in which they see themselves and are seen by others. A special and unique feature are the 'fact windows' in the text. They light up many fascinating aspects of the national story not normally covered in history books and present a range of outstanding people who at different times have played a part in Scotland's life and still-evolving history. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

People have often said to me that they find Synge's account of his time spent honing his Irish and

collecting folklore on the Aran Islands to be one of the slowest and most boring reads they've ever encountered. I must heartily disagree. While the work doesn't exactly "swing like the pendulum do", the rhythms of his narration are very much like that of the changing tide and the rolling of the waves to which the islanders have grown accustomed. Synge's narration-- like time on Inishmaan-- moves slowly and steadily, washing over the reader if one will let it. Remember above all that this work is essentially a series of journal entries, meant to document the people Synge met, the conversations he had, the stories he heard, etc. Perhaps the book's greatest contribution to the world is as a document of a way of life no longer in existence. This book is also a document of the the Irish Literary Renaissance, and-- for its occassional pretensions-- should be ! considered as such. This text might also help to give greater understanding to any reading of Synge's plays, as he alleged that the story for such works as "Playboy of the Western World" were derived from tales he heard in the Arans.

Despite Synge's nostalgia filtered look at the islands for the saving place of all things Irish, his interactions with the local people are interesting enough to keep reading.

All good!

IT'S BEAUTIFULLY PRODUCED

This was bought for my nephew and he liked it! I was so glad he was happy with the book.

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.

...at least the far western end, if you exclude Iceland, as is generally done. The Aran Islands are a chain of islands, composed of three principal ones, which are just off the western Irish coast, from Galway bay. I learned of this book from Tim Robinson's excellent accounts of the totality of life on these islands, in his *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* and *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*. Robinson published his accounts in 1986, based on his life on the islands, commencing in 1972. In both of Robinson's books, he references Synge's account of life on Aran around the turn of the century (nowadays, we need to specify that is the beginning of the 20th century). I made that proverbial mental note to read Synge, which I was finally able to fulfill, stumbling on this 1993 version in a used book store in nearby Santa Fe. Synge was enjoying "La Belle Epoque" in Paris, determined to be an authority on contemporary French literature when he met William Butler Yeats, who was from Ireland's west coast, near Sligo. Yeats urged him, essentially, to "get back to your roots," with the ultimate Gallic experience being available as far away from Britain as possible. And these islands fit that specification. At the time, Britain was directly ruling Ireland. Robinson lived on the largest island in the chain, Aranmor. Synge sought out life on the middle island, Inishmann, under the idea that life there would be less "corrupted" by modern influences. There was no "steamer" service to this lesser island; transport was by a small rowboat, called a curagh. Picturesque in calm seas, but often perilous, as Synge recounts, in the stormy Atlantic. Synge states that life on Inishmann was the most primitive in Europe, and underscores that with a startling fact: there were no wheeled vehicles on any of the islands. Synge has an ethnographer's ear for native folk tales which he faithfully records, but does not particularly analyze. One of the longest concerns the killing of giants in order to win the hand of the daughter of the King. He also relates the

story about a person who promises a "pound of flesh" as a debt, but does not mention that Shakespeare incorporated this into one of his most famous plays, *The Merchant of Venice*. Synge also carefully describes the clothing of these "natives." He is less strong on the economic basis of the society, but does describe the process whereby kelp is collected, and iodine extracted. He also has a memorable section concerning when the landlords, via the police, evict various residents from their hovels for non-payment of the rents. He says: "The land is so poor that a field hardly produces more grain than is needed for seed the following year, so the rye-growing is carried on merely for the straw, which is used for thatching." Synge anticipates Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* by 60 years: "It is likely that much of the intelligence and charm of these people is due to the absence of any division of labour, and to the correspondingly wide development of each individual, whose varied knowledge and skill necessitates a considerable activity of mind." He also focuses on the language abilities of the residents, and even on these remote islands, English has largely penetrated. The descriptions of the natural world are sparser, but he can wax lyrical at times: "Looking back there was a golden haze behind the sharp edges of the rock, and a long wake from the sun, which was making jewels of the bubbling left by the oars." Robinson is, by far, the polymath; his account is much longer and more comprehensive. If I was going to Aran (as I hope to do), and could read only one author, I'd choose Robinson. But Synge's account rings authentic; he also is a keen observer of the islands, more than 70 years before Robinson's arrival. Fortunately I've now been able to read both accounts; would recommend them both. Now all I have to do is get to Aran. 5-stars.

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