

= John Millington Synge =

Edmund John Millington Synge (/ s?? / ; 16 April 1871 ? 24 March 1909) was an Irish playwright , poet , prose writer , travel writer and collector of folklore . He was a key figure in the Irish Literary Revival and was one of the co -@-@ founders of the Abbey Theatre . He is best known for his play The Playboy of the Western World , which caused riots in Dublin during its opening run at the Abbey Theatre .

Although he came from a privileged Anglo @-@ Irish background , Synge 's writings are mainly concerned with the world of the Roman Catholic peasants of rural Ireland and with what he saw as the essential paganism of their world view . Synge developed Hodgkin 's disease , a metastatic cancer that was then untreatable . He died several weeks short of his 38th birthday as he was trying to complete his last play , Deirdre of the Sorrows .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early life = = =

Synge was born in Newtown Villas , Rathfarnham , County Dublin on 16 April 1871 . He was the youngest son in a family of eight children . His parents were members of the Protestant upper middle class : his father , John Hatch Synge , who was a barrister , came from a family of landed gentry in Glanmore Castle , County Wicklow . Synge 's grandfather , also named John Hatch Synge , was an admirer of the educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi and founded an experimental school on the family estate . Synge 's mother had a private income from lands in County Galway , although her father , Robert Traill , had been a Church of Ireland rector in Schull , County Cork , and a member of the Schull Relief Committee during the Great Irish Famine (1845 ? 1849) .

Synge 's father contracted smallpox and died in 1872 at the age of 49 . Synge 's mother moved the family to the house next door to her mother 's house in Rathgar , County Dublin . Synge , although often ill , had a happy childhood there . He developed an interest in bird @-@ watching along the banks of the River Dodder and during family holidays at the seaside resort of Greystones , County Wicklow , and the family estate at Glanmore .

Synge was educated privately at schools in Dublin and Bray , and later studied piano , flute , violin , music theory and counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of Music . He traveled to the continent to study music , but changed his mind and decided to focus on literature . He was a talented student and won a scholarship in counterpoint in 1891 . The family moved to the suburb of Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire) in 1888 , and Synge entered Trinity College , Dublin the following year . He graduated with a BA in 1892 , having studied Irish and Hebrew , as well as continuing his music studies and playing with the Academy Orchestra in the Antient Concert Rooms . Between November 1889 to 1894 he took private music lessons with Robert Prescott Stewart .

Synge joined the Dublin Naturalists ' Field Club and read the works of Charles Darwin . He wrote : " When I was about fourteen I obtained a book of Darwin 's My studies showed me the force of what I read , [and] the more I put it from me the more it rushed back with new instances and power ... Soon afterwards I turned my attention to works of Christian evidence , reading them at first with pleasure , soon with doubt , and at last in some cases with derision . " He then continued , " Soon after I had relinquished the kingdom of God I began to take up a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland . My politics went round ... to a temperate Nationalism . "

Synge later developed an interest in Irish antiquities and the Aran Islands , and became a member of the Irish League for a year . He left the League because , as he told Maud Gonne , " my theory of regeneration for Ireland differs from yours ... I wish to work on my own for the cause of Ireland , and I shall never be able to do so if I get mixed up with a revolutionary and semi @-@ military movement . " In 1893 he published his first known work , a poem influenced by Wordsworth , Kottabos : A College Miscellany .

= = = Emerging writer = = =

After graduating , Synge decided that he wanted to be a professional musician and went to Germany to study music . He stayed in Coblenz during 1893 and moved to Würzburg in January 1894 . Partly because he was shy about performing in public , and partly because of doubt about his ability , he decided to abandon music and pursue his literary interests . He returned to Ireland in June 1894 , and moved to Paris in January 1895 to study literature and languages at the Sorbonne .

During summer holidays with his family in Dublin he met and fell in love with Cherrie Matheson , a friend of one of his cousins and a member of the Plymouth Brethren . He proposed to her in 1895 and again the next year , but she turned him down on both occasions because of their differing views on religion . This rejection affected Synge greatly and reinforced his determination to spend as much time as possible outside Ireland .

In 1896 Synge visited Italy to study the language for a time before returning to Paris . Later that year he met W. B. Yeats , who encouraged him to live for a while in the Aran Islands , and then return to Dublin and devote himself to creative work . That year he joined with Yeats , Augusta , Lady Gregory and George William Russell to form the Irish National Theatre Society , which later established the Abbey Theatre . He also wrote some pieces of literary criticism for *Gonne 's Irlande Libre* and other journals , as well as unpublished poems and prose in a decadent fin de siècle style . (These writings were eventually gathered in the 1960s for his *Collected Works* .) He also attended lectures at the Sorbonne by the noted Celtic scholar Henri d 'Arbois de Jubainville .

= = = Aran Islands and First Plays = = =

In 1897 Synge had his first attack of Hodgkin 's disease and also had an enlarged gland removed from his neck . The following year he spent the summer in the Aran Islands . He spent the next five summers in the Aran Islands , collecting stories and folklore , and perfecting his Irish , while continuing to live in Paris for most of the rest of each year . He also visited Brittany regularly . During this period he wrote his first play , *When the Moon Has Set* and sent it to Lady Gregory for the Irish Literary Theatre in 1900 , but she rejected it . (The play was not published until it appeared in the *Collected Works* .)

Synge 's first account of life in the Aran Islands was published in the *New Ireland Review* in 1898 and his book , *The Aran Islands* , based largely on journals , was completed in 1901 and published in 1907 with illustrations by Jack Butler Yeats . Synge considered the book " my first serious piece of work " . When Lady Gregory read the manuscript she advised Synge to remove any direct naming of places and to add more folk stories , but he refused to do either because he wanted to create something more realistic . The book expresses Synge 's belief that beneath the Catholicism of the islanders it was possible to detect a substratum of the pagan beliefs of their ancestors . His experiences in the Aran Islands were to form the basis for the plays about Irish rural life that Synge went on to write .

In 1903 Synge left Paris and moved to London . He had written two one @-@ act plays , *Riders to the Sea* and *The Shadow of the Glen* , the previous year . These met with Lady Gregory 's approval and *The Shadow of the Glen* was performed at the Molesworth Hall in October 1903 . *Riders to the Sea* was performed at the same venue in February the following year . *The Shadow of the Glen* , under the title *In the Shadow of the Glen* , formed part of the bill for the opening run of the Abbey Theatre from 27 December 1904 to 3 January 1905 . Both plays were based on stories that Synge had collected in the Aran Islands , and Synge relied on props from the Aran Islands to help set the stage for each of them . He also relied on Hiberno @-@ English , the English dialect of Ireland , to reinforce its usefulness as a literary language , partly because he believed that the Irish language could not survive .

The Shadow of the Glen , based on a story about an unfaithful wife , was attacked in print by the Irish nationalist leader Arthur Griffith as " a slur on Irish womanhood " . Years later Synge wrote : " When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen* some years ago I got more aid than any learning could

have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying , that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen . " This encouraged more critical attacks alleging that Synge described Irish women in an unfair manner . Riders to the Sea was also attacked by nationalists , this time including Patrick Pearse , who decried it because of the author 's attitude to God and religion . Pearse , Arthur Griffith and other conservative @-@ minded Catholics claimed Synge had done a disservice to Irish nationalism by not idealising his characters . However , later critics have attacked Synge for idealising the Irish peasantry too much . A third one @-@ act play , The Tinker 's Wedding , was drafted around this time , but Synge initially made no attempt to have it performed , largely because of a scene in which a priest is tied up in a sack , which , as he wrote to the publisher Elkin Mathews in 1905 , would probably upset " a good many of our Dublin friends " .

When the Abbey Theatre was set up Synge was appointed literary adviser and soon became one of the directors , along with Yeats and Lady Gregory . He differed from Yeats and Lady Gregory on what he believed the Irish theatre should be , as he wrote to Stephen MacKenna :

I do not believe in the possibility of " a purely fantastic , unmodern , ideal , breezy , spring @-@ dayish , Cuchulainoid National Theatre " ... no drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life , which are never fantastic , are neither modern nor unmodern and , as I see them , rarely spring @-@ dayish , or breezy or Cuchulainoid .

Synge 's next play , The Well of the Saints , was staged at the Abbey in 1905 , again to nationalist disapproval , and then in 1906 at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin . The critic Joseph Holloway claimed that the play combined " lyric and dirt " .

= = = Playboy Riots and After = = =

The play widely regarded as Synge 's masterpiece , The Playboy of the Western World , was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 26 January 1907 . A comedy about apparent patricide , it attracted a hostile reaction from sections of the Irish public . The Freeman 's Journal described it as " an unmitigated , protracted libel upon Irish peasant men , and worse still upon Irish girlhood " . Arthur Griffith , who believed that the Abbey Theatre was insufficiently politically committed , described the play as " a vile and inhuman story told in the foulest language we have ever listened to from a public platform " , and perceived a slight on the virtue of Irish womanhood in the line " ... a drift of chosen females , standing in their shifts ... "

At the time a shift was known as a symbol representing Kitty O 'Shea and adultery . A significant portion of the audience at the first performance rioted , causing the third act of the play to be acted out in dumbshow . Yeats returned from Scotland to address the crowd on the second night , and decided to call in the police . Press opinion soon turned against the rioters and the protests petered out . Yeats referred to this incident in a speech to the Abbey audience in 1926 on the fourth night of Seán O 'Casey 's The Plough and the Stars , when he declared : " You have disgraced yourselves again . Is this to be an ever @-@ recurring celebration of the arrival of Irish genius ? Synge first and then O 'Casey ? "

Although the writing of The Tinker 's Wedding began at the same time as Riders to the Sea and In the Shadow of the Glen , it took Synge five years to complete , and was finished in 1907 . Riders was performed in the Racquet Court theatre in Galway 4 ? 8 January 1907 and not performed again until 1909 , and only then in London . The first critic to respond to the play was Daniel Corkery , who said , " One is sorry Synge ever wrote so poor a thing , and one fails to understand why it ever should have been staged anywhere . "

= = Death = =

Synge died at the Elpis Nursing Home in Dublin on 24 March 1909 , aged 37 , and was buried in Mount Jerome Graveyard , Harold 's Cross , Dublin .

A collected volume , Poems and Translations , with a preface by Yeats , was published by the Cuala Press on 8 April 1909 . Yeats and actress and one @-@ time fiancée Molly Allgood

completed Synge 's unfinished final play , Deirdre of the Sorrows , and it was presented by the Abbey players in January 1910 with Allgood as Deirdre .

= = = Personality = = =

John Masefield , who knew Synge , wrote that he " gave one from the first the impression of a strange personality " . Masefield felt that Synge 's view of life originated with his poor health . In particular , Masefield claimed that " His relish of the savagery made me feel that he was a dying man clutching at life , and clutching most wildly at violent life , as the sick man does " .

Yeats summarised his view of Synge in one of the stanzas of his poem " In Memory of Major Robert Gregory " :

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next ,
That dying chose the living world for text
And never could have rested in the tomb
But that , long travelling , he had come
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart
In a most desolate stony place ,
Towards nightfall upon a race
Passionate and simple like his heart .

= = = Legacy = = =

Synge 's plays helped to set the dominant style of plays at the Abbey Theatre until the 1940s . The stylised realism of his writing was reflected in the training given at the theatre 's school of acting , and plays of peasant life were the main staple of the repertoire until the end of the 1950s . Sean O 'Casey , the next major dramatist to write for the Abbey , knew Synge 's work well and attempted to do for the Dublin working classes what Synge had done for the rural poor . Brendan Behan , Brinsley MacNamara , and Lennox Robinson were all indebted to Synge .

Critic Vivian Mercier was among the first to recognise Samuel Beckett 's debt to Synge . Beckett was a regular member of the audience at the Abbey in his youth and particularly admired the plays of Yeats , Synge and O 'Casey . Mercier points out parallels between Synge 's casts of tramps , beggars and peasants and many of the figures in Beckett 's novels and dramatic works .

In recent years Synge 's cottage in the Aran Islands has been restored as a tourist attraction . An annual Synge Summer School has been held every summer since 1991 in the village of Rathdrum , County Wicklow . Synge is the subject of Mac Dara Ó Curraidhín 's 1999 documentary film , Synge agus an Domhan Thiar (Synge and the Western World) . Joseph O 'Connor wrote a novel , Ghost Light (2010) , loosely based on Synge 's relationship with Molly Allgood .

= = = Works = = =

In the Shadow of the Glen , 1903

Riders to the Sea , 1904

The Well of the Saints , 1905

The Aran Islands , 1907 (The book at wikisource : The Aran Islands)

The Playboy of the Western World , 1907

The Tinker 's Wedding , 1908

Poems and Translations , 1909

Deirdre of the Sorrows 1910

In Wicklow and West Kerry , 1912

Collected Works of John Millington Synge 4 vols , 1962 ? 1968

Volume 1 Poems , 1962

Volume 2 Prose , 1966

Volumes 3 and 4 Plays , 1968

