

FEBRUARY 12, 1968

WILLIAM S. CLARK

Long traveling, I came in joy
One summer upon certain folk set apart
In a most desolate lovely place--
Upon a race passionate and simple
With a wild beauty in the heart.

When in 1492 Christopher Columbus set off westward over the rim of the Old World to discover the new, he sailed, according to Irish tradition, from Galway Bay. Thirty miles out at sea he passed Northern Europe's furthest Atlantic outpost, three rock-bound islands known to even the earliest voyagers by the Celtic name of 'Aran', meaning 'the height above the waves'. From Aran Columbus reportedly procured one or more of his helmsmen. Some two thousand years earlier a tribe of prehistoric Celts, driven by enemy clans to the most westerly reaches of Ireland, made a last stand for survival along the continental shoreline beyond Galway. With the ocean as a rear defense they erected a series of large, circular stone forts and turned that coastal district into a permanent stronghold. Several centuries went by, and then Nature unexpectedly threatened their hard-won security. The earth beneath their very feet commenced to sink into the ocean. A violent subterranean upheaval caused the continental shelf to start crumbling. Slowly the Atlantic engulfed a vast area west of the Galway region, but left above water the three rocky elevations that came to be called the isles of Aran. a goodly number of beleaguered inhabitants preserved lives and property by fleeing to those hilltop fortifications which remained intact upon the newly formed islands. Confined now to this insular wilderness, they settled down to an austere pastoral existence.

Late in the fifth century A.D. a young Christian convert of noble Ulster lineage, Enda or Enna by name, journeyed to Aran by curragh, a native rowboat, in this instance fashioned, according to legend, out of stone. The remnant of Enda's mythical craft, in the form of a long, narrow slab known as 'the Curragh Stone', still reposes near an east-side Aran beach. Enda, a dynamic crusading priest, soon Christianized the islanders. He also quickly set about transforming their secluded domain into a great religious center. Aran's neat-layered slate made building easy; its barrenness shrived

men's souls. When Enda died in 549 A.D., at least ten monasteries, all with missionary training schools, had been established. During the subsequent millenium the islands became a much beloved sanctuary, crowded with apostles, hermits, pilgrims, and missioners who had returned there to die. Medieval Irish historians generally agreed that 'there were more saints buried in Aran than were know to any but God alone'.

As soon as Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of England expropriated Irish church properties in the sixteenth century, the independent ecclesiastical state founded by St. Enda disappeared. Almost all the clergy departed and the numerous religious edifices gradually disintegrated, their fabrics providing a wealth of building materials to pillagers from the mainland. For the next three hundred years the descendants of the original Aran settlers had Anglo-Irish absentee landlords imposed on them. At last in 1922 the new government of Ireland secured title to the islands and reinstated, as far as possible, the ancestral holdings.

Despite the many changes in Aran's proprietors the peasant folk have continued their ancient way of living into the mid-twentieth century with few major alterations. Their original beehive rock dwellings gave way during the middle ages to small square houses with tapered roofs of overlapping stones. These began to be replaced, in the age of Shakespeare, by one or two-roomed oblong cottages with thatched roofs and dressed-stone walls. By the time of the American Revolution the whitewashing of cottage interiors and exteriors had grown customary. For centuries turf fires, smoldering on an open hearth, have furnished the indoor heating. Long ago, however, peat fuel vanished from the face of Aran, and ever since has had to be supplied from the Connemara bogs by sturdy hookers operating cross-channel the year around. Since the island surface is largely bare limestone, the quaint white cottages are often situated at a distance from the arable tracts that countless generations have struggled to maintain against the persistent lashing of wind and storm. These scattered tracts are divided into tiny, irregular plots for pasturage or for crops of potatoes, hay, and grain--plots so diminutive that they defy even the use of a plow. All fresh earth must be grown by bringing up from the shore baskets of sand

and seaweed, and then mixing these natural ingredients with the vegetation already at hand. With infinite patience the island husbandmen await the birth of new topsoil by the slow decomposition of the kelp in the sand.

Gray stone fences, a yard high, do their best to protect the patches of cropland from erosion. Meandering across the landscape in all directions, the fences here and there encircle the ruins of a medieval church where lean cattle are cropping the vegetation above saintly bones. Here and there also the fences surround a prehistoric fort, into the precincts of which nibbling sheep roam in search of scarce feed. The Aran men, out for a stroll on a fair night, find convenient seating on the flat tops of the roadside walls whenever they have a mind to stop for a smoke and exchange a bit of talk. To each other they speak in their native Irish; with outsiders they converse in an English of mellow intonation and phrasing. The women too will go out of an evening in mild weather, attired in gray shawls and black or red petticoats, to do the night milking down a nearby lane and fetch from a rock-lined spring fresh water for the next day's tea. Sometimes they may gather by a cottage doorway to weave gay-striped woolen belts or to knit on sweaters designed according to age-old family patterns. Male members of a household engage in less picturesque handicraft. They cut out and sew together the indispensable cowskin moccasins or 'pampooties', construct cradles and coffins, and make fish nets. Fishing, of course, is as necessary a source of food as farming. Groups of men, often fathers and sons, put to sea daily except during the more violent storms. For the longer trips into deep water they sail in dun-colored smacks; for day or nighttime catches around the island coast they row out in curragh--frail, homemade boats of tarred canvas. The beaching of one of these unique craft is an odd and amusing sight if viewed from afar. Lifting their curragh out of the waves, the fishermen usually carry it upside down, heads hidden in its round belly and four to six pairs of legs moving in unison beneath, giving the appearance of a long, black beetle crawling landwards!

To this remote Aran setting, shaped by a resolute breed of men to sustain a primitive but satisfying pattern of life, there came just seventy years

ago a young Dublin writer, John Synge, in quest of a new world that might fire his imagination. During the autumn of 1896 the then leading figure in Irish literature, William Butler Yeats, had visited Paris and become acquainted with Synge, who was living by himself in a garret, reading the French Decadents and composing morbid verse. Yeats saw potential genius wasting away in an alien and sterile environment. The sight recalled, in contrast, the fresh, vigorous atmosphere of Aran, which had fascinated Yeats on a single day's visit a few months earlier. He therefore urged this solitary, expatriated Irish poet (in Yeatsian metaphor, this 'wild swan') to leave France and explore Aran. 'Live there as if you were one of its people; express a life that has never found expression.'

Synge followed his countryman's advice by crossing to Aran for the first time in the spring of 1898 and remaining there six weeks. In each of the following three years he went back for an extended sojourn. A swarthy man with thick black hair and moustache, firm chin and thoughtful dark eyes wide apart, he turned into a friendly wanderer on the island, one who could more than hold his own in the native Irish tongue with the cottage inmates or passers-by on the road. Many an evening and rainy day he sat on a hearthside stool, listening with care and delight to strange or extravagant stories, and to the sad chant of old Irish songs. Often he played his fiddle for impromptu folk dances; occasionally he entertained a neighborhood gathering with sleight-of-hand tricks. Even before the end of his first stay the Aran folk warmly accepted him as one of their own; at the same time he began to feel the spell of their colorful character and talk.

The naked magnificence of the island scenery likewise captivated Synge. On a black Atlantic cliff, towering and precipitous, he erected a dry stone shelter, with a stone seat facing the sea, later called by the islanders 'Synge's Chair'. From this lofty aerie he could hear the incessant thundering of the waves and watch the fling of the shawl-like spray as it shot up a hundred feet or more, and then swept down over the crags with a quick, possessive motion. Day after day countless gulls in their ocean-front amphitheatre put on entrancing performances--flying dancers wheeling

about and chasing one another in a white cirrus of wings. The lookout also afforded a superb panoramic view of Aran's Acropolis, the massive Dun Aengus, set in lonely grandeur on the brink of the Atlantic and guarded by an ascending series of three walls, twelve to twenty feet in height, that encompass the eleven acres of fortress.

This giant capstone of a bygone culture epitomized that strange primitive beauty which for Synge permeated the entire island and eventually re-directed his vision. Before the visits there he had viewed the world through the obscurity of a still unrealized personality, like a child looking through a window which it blurs with its own breath. Then, by degrees, the Aran experiences led him to turn his gaze away from self and to focus upon the splendid intensity of folk life. The display of its richness in language as well as emotion became the mission of Synge's art when he took up residence at Dublin in 1903 and commenced to write for the so-called 'National Theatre' that Yeats was on the point of opening. Synge, however, had no care at all for ideologies or politics. He believed that a play, like a symphony, should not teach or prove anything; that chiefly a play should excite the sensibilities of its audience. He therefore, approached dramatic composition as if he were a musician intent on creating tone poems. Aran furnished him the moods as well as the themes. There he had observed Nature and Man in close affinity, undergoing a continual alternation of condition. A miserable yesterday of fog and rain, of desolation and despondence, might be followed by a glorious today of sunshine and azure sky, of warmth and exhilaration; or, the succession might be reversed. Thus the microcosm of Aran vividly exemplified the basic counterpoint in human experience, the sorrow over against the gaiety. Both states of feeling assumed equal interest and significance in the universe of Synge's imagination. Within three years after his last stay on Aran he wrote for the Dublin stage a pair of masterpieces that represented the passionate response of the Irish folk to the tragedy and the comedy of existence.

Synge developed the first of these two plays out of tragic incidents that occurred in the valiant sea-going of the islanders during his sojourns among them.

One afternoon he came upon a mother looking out across the ocean and weeping over the recent drowning of a son. Before evening, news arrived that a body had been washed ashore far to the north on the coast of Donegal, and that the corpse was till clothed in stockings, one pampooty, and a striped shirt with a purse in one pocket and a little tobacco box in the other. This same evening Synge went to the cottage of the bereaved family and listened to their discussion of the details reported from Donegal about the dead man's clothes. At last the daughter of the house brought the talk to an end by exclaiming: 'Ach, it's Michael sure enough, and please God they'll give him a decent burial'. Then she began slowly chanting the native 'keen' or lament for the dead. That family scene and situation deeply affected Synge: 'I became indescribably mournful, for I felt that this little corner on the face of the world, and the people who live in it, have a peace and a dignity from which we are shut forever'.

Sometime later another young man lost his life a little way off the island after he had been helping to load horses into a hooker. The horses, driven in a body down to the slip, carried no riders. The mother of the young man who subsequently fell into the sea was watching from a distance. Like many of the Aran people, she suddenly experienced 'second sight' and 'saw' her son riding on one of the horses to the waterside. Within a half-hour he was drowned when a fierce squall swamped his curragh in tow behind the hooker. The mother's hallucination suggested to Synge the title of a tragic foreboding, Riders to the Sea.

The scene of this one-act play is a cottage kitchen with fish nets hanging from the rafters, a spinning wheel towards one corner, new boards standing against a side wall, and a turf fire at the rear center. Outside, a 'middling bad sea' is running. 'There's a great roaring in the west, and it's worse it'll be getting when the tide's turned to the wind'. A young girl, Nora, enters, and, taking a bundle from under her shawl, says to her older sister, Cathleen, who is spinning near the fire: 'The young priest is after bringing them. It's a shirt and a plain stocking were got off a drowned man in Donegal'. 'If it's Michael's they are', he says, "you can tell herself he's got a

clean burial by the grace of God, and if they're not his, let no one say a word about them, for she'll be getting her death," says he, "with crying and lamenting". Thus at the very outset an expectation of disaster invades the family circle. In an atmosphere of resistless doom the tension hereafter mounts almost speech by speech as in the famous last hour of Faustus. While Cathleen upon a ladder is hiding the bundle in the turf loft, the old mother, Maurya, comes in, and then, shortly, her only surviving son, Bartley. Because of Michael's recent death and of the growing storm outside Maurya tries to dissuade Bartley from setting out for the Galway fair where he thinks he would get a good price for his two horses: 'It's hard set we'll surely be the day you're drowned'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave?'

From this poignant moment the rich Anglo-Irish language of the play takes on a cadence as steady and natural as the slow breathing of the old mother herself. Bartley is not moved by Maurya's pleading; he tucks his purse and tobacco into another coat and starts to leave. Maurya, racked by premonition, forgets to return his blessing or to give him a wrapped loaf of bread. She can only cry out: 'He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when the black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.' Then the daughters persuade their mother to take Bartley's bread to him at the well. As soon as she has departed, the two girls bring down the bundle from the loft to examine its contents. In anxious excitement Nora takes up a stocking and quickly identifies it as one she knitted for Michael, with four stitches dropped. Cathleen cries out her grief in the sharp, weird imagery so characteristic of the primitive folk fancy: 'Ah, Nora, isn't it a bitter thing to think of him floating that way to the far north, and no one to keen him but the black hags that do be flying on the sea?'

Soon Maurya comes back, dazed and silent, with the loaf of bread still in her hand, but after a pause she says in a quavering voice: 'My heart's broken from this day. I seen the fearfulest thing. I went down to the spring well, and I stood there saying a prayer to myself. Then Bartley came along, and he

riding on the red mare with the gray pony behind him'. She puts up her hands as if to hide something from her eyes, and goes on: 'The Son of God spare us, Nora! I seen Michael himself!' Cathleen softly remonstrates: 'You did not, mother; it wasn't Michael you seen, for his body is after being found in the Far North, and he's got a clean burial by the grace of God.' Yet the old woman insists: 'I'm after seeing him this day, and he riding and galloping. Bartley came first on the red mare; and I tried to say, "God speed you", but something chocked the words in my throat. I looked up then, and I crying, at the gray pony, and there was Michael upon it--with fine clothes on him, and new shoes on his feet'. Nora thinks to reassure her mother: 'Didn't the young priest say the Almighty God wouldn't leave you destitute with no son living?' Maurya, however, comments bitterly: 'It's little the like of him knows of the sea. . . I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house, but they're gone now the lot of them. . . '

Long ago, when Bartley was a baby, she had had to face a shocking sight: '(Men) holding a thing in the half of a red sail, and water dripping out of it--it was a dry day, Nora--and leaving a track to the door.' Hardly has she spoken when Nora, who is looking out the door, exclaims: 'They're carrying a thing among them, and there's water dripping out of it and leaving a track by the big stones.' Now Maurya must suffer a reenactment of the former terrible scene. Some men 'carry in the body of Bartley, laid on a plank, with a bit of sail over it'. The gray pony had knocked Bartley over a sea cliff, and he had drowned in the surf. His body is placed on the kitchen table with Maurya kneeling at the head and the daughters at the foot. Neighbor women, covering their heads with red petticoats, keen and sway on their knees beside the door. The old mother stands up, 'calm of mind, all passion spent', and speaks as if alone in a life beyond grieving or pain: 'They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the winds breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. Give me the Holy Water, Nora, there's a small sup still on the dresser.'

She sprinkles the water over Bartley, spreads Michael's clothes out beside the body, and sprinkles over them the last of the Holy Water. Then, in priestly fashion, she puts the empty cup mouth downwards on the table, lays her hands together on Bartley's feet, and delivers a simple but profoundly moving requiem: 'They're all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley's soul, and on Michael's soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and on Stephen and Shawn'. She bends her head and continues: 'And may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of every one is left living in the world. Michael has a clean burial in the Far North, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely. What more can we want than that? No man at all can be living forever, and we must be satisfied.'

With this noble utterance Maurya brings the drama of her life to its close on a note of exultation befitting the tradition of high tragedy. Though a warring Nature of winds and seas has snatched from her a husband and six sons, she has transmuted the grief and the terror of her experience into a lasting peace, the Biblical peace that passeth understanding. Her response to fate and disaster, conditioned by a long folk ancestry, reveals a mixture of pagan stoicism with Christian acceptance of mortality and death. In the dignity as well as in the peace of Maurya's final commitment Synge's Riders to the Sea portrays the heroic stature to be found not only among the Aran people but also in humanity at large when tested by a desperate struggle for survival.

Synge's second masterpiece, The Playboy of the Western World, was founded, like his first, on an Aran incident that happened in the 1870's. A man on the nearby mainland killed his father with the blow of a spade in a fit of passion. He then fled to the island and threw himself on the mercy of the natives. They hid the refugee in a secret cellar of the ancient fort across the road from the cottage where years later Synge lodged. Galway police diligently searched the ruined fortifications, walking again and again over the stone covering of the hideout. For weeks, it is said, the murderer stayed underground. At last, after much trouble, he escaped by ship to America. The

islanders felt impelled to protect any criminal because they believed a man would not do wrong unless he was under the influence of a passion as irresponsible as a storm on the sea.

In writing The Playboy, Synge revised the circumstances of the original crime by having the father merely wounded, and by locating the attack, together with its consequences, on the wild coast of County Mayo. There, in a country 'pub', all three acts of Synge's drama take place. Christy Mahon, who has hit his bullying 'da' over the head in a potato field and then run off, comes to this 'pub' for shelter. When he tells the patrons that he has slain his father, they admire his daring. The keeper of the 'pub' makes him potboy, the local girls bring him presents, and the publican's daughter, Pegeen, vies with the Widow Quin for his special attention. Christy becomes a hero with the populace by gaining the major prizes in the village games; at the same time he wins the love of Pegeen, who breaks off her match with a doltish farmer. At the height of the hero-worshipping Christy's injured father rushes in, beats up his son, and exposes the great lie about the slaying. The crowd in outrage grows violent and ties Christy to a table. Thoroughly maddened by the abuse, he breaks loose from his tormentors. Pushing his father ahead of him, he goes boldly through the crowd and out the 'pub' door, 'master of all fights from now on'.

The Playboy's bizarre and high-spirited plot reflects Synge's apparent desire to offset the somber, austere reality depicted in Riders to the Sea by the opposite but equally truthful view of a genial and exuberant folk life. The shift in mood may be likened to the change of aspect which Aran repeatedly presented to Synge's imagination. He described the change as 'the passing from the misery of last night to the splendor of today'. The Playboy fully captures this splendor in comedy that is filled with gusto and rollicking poetry. Every scene contains an earthy richness of detail. No other play of national importance opens with a woman making out a shopping list, and what a list it is! The 'pub' keeper's daughter, Pegeen, a wild-looking girl of twenty, is laboriously writing on a bar counter: 'Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. A hat is suited for a wedding day. A pair of

lace boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes.' Those boots with brassy eyes characterize not only Pegeen, but also the entire dramatis personae. They all possess a folk imagination that Synge termed 'fiery and magnificent'. Their talk, as sharply flavored as the tastiest nut or apple, becomes the most individual and beautiful dialogue in modern English drama.

Christy's account of his mighty deed against his father illustrates the racy language through the play:

CHRIS: It's a long story; you'd be destroyed listening. We were digging spuds in his cold, sloping, stony, divil's patch of a field. There I was, digging and digging, and 'You squinting idiot', says he, 'let you walk down now and tell the priest you'll wed the Widow Casey in a score of days.'

WIDOW QUIN: And what kind was she?

CHRIS: A walking terror from beyond the hills, and she twoscore and five years, and two hundred weights and five pounds in the weighing scales, with a limping leg on her, and a blinded eye, and she a woman of noted misbehavior with the old and young. 'I won't wed her', says I, 'when all know she did suckle me for six weeks when I came into the world, and she a hag this day with a tongue on her has the crows and seabirds scattered, the way they wouldn't cast a shadow on her garden with the dread of her surse'. 'She's too good for the like of you', says he, 'and go on now or I'll flatten you out like a crawling beast has passed under a dray'. 'You will not if I can help it', says I. 'Go on', says he, 'or I'll have the divil making garters of your limbs tonight'. 'You will not if I can help it', says I. With that the sun came out between the cloud and the hill, and it shining green in my face. 'God have mercy on your soul', says he, lifting a scythe; 'or on your own', says I, raising the loy.

WIDOW QUIN: That's a grand story.

CHRIS: He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the

knob of his gullet.

WIDOW QUIN: Well, you're a marvel!

The love scene between Christy and Pegeen with its lilting cadences and its luxuriant figures of speech is extremely tender and enchanting:

CHRIS: It's little you'll think if my love's a poacher's, or an earl's itself, when you'll feel my two hands stretched around you, and I squeezing kisses on your puckered lips, till I'd feel a kind of pity for the Lord God is all ages sitting lonesome in his golden chair.

PEGEEN: That'll be right fun, Christy Mahon, and any girl would walk her heart out before she'd meet a young man was your like for eloquence, or talk, at all.

CHRIS: Let you wait, to hear me talking, till we're astray in Erris when Good Friday's by, drinking a sup from a well, and making mighty kisses with our wetted mouths, or gaming in a gap or sunshine, with yourself stretched back unto your necklace, in the flowers of the earth.

PEGEEN: I'd be nice so, is it?

CHRIS: If the mitered bishops seen you that time, they'd be the like of the holy prophets, I'm thinking, do be straining the bars of Paradise to lay eyes on the Lady Helen of Troy, and she abroad, pacing back and forward, with a nosegay in her golden shawl.

PEGEEN: And what is it I have, Christy Mahon, to make me fitting entertainment for the like of you, that has such poet's talking, and such bravery of heart?

CHRIS: Isn't there the light of seven heavens in your heart alone, the way you'll be an angel's lamp to me from this out, and I abroad in the darkness, spearing salmons in the Owen, or the Carrowmore?

PEGEEN: If that's the truth, I'll be burning candles from this out to the miracles of God that have brought you from the south today, and I, with my gowns

bought ready, the way that I can wed you, and not wait at all.

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But the unrestrained imagery in Christy's final affirmation of love caused the Dublin audience at The Playboy's premiere to break into an uproar that continued for a week. Christy, annoyed by the attentions of Widow Quin, exclaims: 'It's Pegeen I'm seeking only, and what'd I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the Eastern World?' Christy's outburst of ardor expressed an unforgiveable reflection upon the virtue of Irish womankind, so the shocked listeners asserted.

Yet the more enlightened Dublin theatregoers from the first admired The Playboy as a brilliant comic extravaganza about a peasant lad who develops 'such poet's talking and such bravery of heart' that he transforms himself from a weakling into an intrepid 'playboy' or champion. These same theatregoers also perceived that Synge's comedy contains a measure of symbolism and satire on the Irish folk--their fondness for blather and 'heroes'. The Playboy, however, pictures, as Bernard Shaw pointed out to his countrymen, 'the truth about the world'. People everywhere insist upon setting up a 'hero' from among themselves, and there is always at hand a man to act the part. It is this theme of humanity's preference for the dream rather than the actuality that gives the comedy universal significance.

A bright and hearty mood dominates The Playboy until the triumphal exit of Christy with his father. Then Pegeen closes the drama on an ironic note of sorrow with her heartbroken lament: 'Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World.' Christy's awakening brings him the joyful promise of 'a romping lifetime'. Pegeen awakes to the grievous loss of not just a lover, but an ideal. Here at the play's very end the sunny effect is deliberately darkened. Synge learned from living on Aran, where even on radiant mornings the clouds come stealing up from over the Atlantic horizon and cast shadows across the island, that both the tragedy and the comedy of existence are only transitory. An old islander once said to him: 'Ah, the rain is falling, but the air is

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kind; and certainly it'll be a grand morning by the
grace of God.' Nevertheless Synge knew that by
afternoon or evening the rain would be back again.

William S. Clark
