

Drew University  
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The Aran Islander in the Late Irish Literary Renaissance:  
An Ecocritical Reading

A Thesis in English and in Environmental Studies & Sustainability

by

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## ABSTRACT

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The Aran Islands have been the object of special attention for centuries, famous as a place of “authentic” Irish character in art, language, music, archaeology, and even in the landscape itself. In the critical moment of the Irish Literary Renaissance, when members of the elite invested in the task of “recovering” ancient, autonomous Ireland, nowhere could the past be made more readily present than among the “primitive” Aran Islanders. This is clear enough among present-day tourist literatures that promise your trip to the Islands will be “a step back in time”—borrowed heavily from the insights and imagery of J.M. Synge’s famous travel logs, *The Aran Islands*. In my paper, entitled “The Aran Islander in the Late Irish Literary Renaissance: An Ecocritical Reading,” I examine Synge’s *The Aran Islands* and his one-act drama *Riders to the Sea*, Robert Flaherty’s film documentary *Man of Aran*, and selected short stories by Liam O’Flaherty and his *Tourist’s Guide to Ireland*. The authors of these texts affirm a connection not just to the distant Irish past, but to the Irish land itself, as an ecocritical perspective reveals. This shared experience of the environment, as I argue, allows for these seemingly dissimilar writers and artists to negotiate freely between the otherwise rigid binary of “insider” and “outsider,” or, in turn, the “native/oral” vs. “colonial/picturesque.” Each writer or artist has a common interest in extolling the island peasant through his comparison or conceived “closeness” to nature, but for very different rhetorical purposes: in Synge’s case, towards the creation of a living museum; in Robert Flaherty’s case, to glorify—for an imperial commercial audience--the hardiness of spirit that comes with a life of manual labor and repeated sufferings; and in Liam O’Flaherty’s case, to self-consciously embrace the animalistic and “brutish” associations from colonial discourse as a vehicle for political dissidence and imminent jacquerie. I combine ecocriticism, postcolonial theory, space and place theory, and insights from Irish studies and island studies in my approach to the primary texts.

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## Introduction

About thirty miles off from the west coast of Ireland is the archipelago of the three Aran Islands: Inishmore (*Inis Mór*, ‘big island’), Inishmaan (*Inis Meáin*, ‘middle island’) and Inisheer (*Inis Oírr*, ‘east island’). Think of massive, craggy shelves of limestone cliffs, high above the cold Atlantic; of white thatched cottages nestled beside dirt roads, stone walls, and rocky shores. There is only one town on the main island Inishmore, Kilronan, “more like a village” (Steves paragraph 4), and there are just over one thousand native residents in total. These are considered the most iconic of all the Irish islands, and the exemplar of the rural Irish west.

The Aran Islands have long been associated with the past, primitivism, and old-fashioned ways more generally. They are considered a special repository for indigenous Irish culture, and as such, have drawn plenty of outsiders since medieval times: writers, naturalists, linguists, anthropologists, and romantics alike (O hEithir location 1234-1235 in eBook). Some allege that the Islands have been inhabited for the past four thousand years without interruption (O hEithir location 128), and they are well known as one of the few remaining places in the world where Irish is still the predominant language spoken at home. The chief industries here are tourism, fishing, and agriculture, though these latter two have been on the decline as tourism has become the new mainstay (Gennon paragraph 22). In 2007, *National Geographic* ranked the Aran Islands as the seventh-best island holiday destination in the world, praised particularly for its “strong sense of cultural heritage and identity” (Tourtellot 110). These ideas are further echoed in the Aran Islands’ present-day tourist literatures: “A Step Back in Time!” they promise your

journey will be, to “Authentic Ireland,” with shots of the towering stone forts left intact here since the Bronze Age, like Dún Aonghasa (Anglicized as Dun Aengus). The community allows no more than 100 vehicles to operate on the main island, and the majority of these are minibuses—“offering convenient 2.5-hour island tours with stops at all the major sights for about \$20” (Steves paragraph 5).

This sort of “timeless,” easily accessible cultural experience is underscored by the Islands’ long-time association with saints, fairies, and other ethereal elements from Irish folklore. Mairéad Conneely recalls the Islands’ contemporary association with a distant past of Celtic heroism, valor in warfare, and magic:

In almost each foreword or introduction to literature or tourist-oriented material on Aran, one will find descriptions which make reference to their geographical position at the mouth of the Galway Bay. Though this cartographical feature is salient in that it points to the natural defensive function of the Islands, it also plays neatly into the hands of writers and artists who took the Islands to represent places outside of the larger island of Ireland and *as places just beyond the eye’s reach, though often just within the imagination’s grasp* (88, emphasis mine).

Rick Steves, a famous American travel writer and television personality, is certainly one such writer; he describes his encounter with an “elfish, black-clad farmer” whose face is “weathered,” just as the Islands themselves are “weather- and wave-beaten” (paragraphs 1, 2)—a simple, “poor” man who, like his brethren, will “happily speak English for [his] visitors” (paragraph 10)—as if he has found a fairy tale character in disguise.

By far, however, the most famous Aran Islands writer is John Millington (“J.M”) Synge, renowned poet and playwright of the Irish Literary Renaissance. According to the popular legend, he traveled to these islands in search of inspiration and “found himself and his genius among them” (Henn 34), which lent him the material to write his most celebrated plays. *Teach Synge* and *Cathaoir Synge*, the cottage of Synge and the chair of Synge respectively, are popular tourist landmarks on Inishmaan, the island considered the most rural of the three and almost entirely Irish-speaking. Synge wrote repeatedly of the Aran Islands as a land “forgotten in these worlds of mist,” as a special point of access for a more ancient, primitive way of life—so long as one is willing to endure the “desolate,” inhabitable, and ultimately trying landscape of the rocky limestone Arans (CW 73).

Preceding my own work with Synge is a plethora of scholarship on the Irish Literary Renaissance, but only in recent years has that scholarship incorporated perspectives on the environment and nature.<sup>1</sup> Several contemporary literary critics before me have argued that Synge’s project serves as much to substantiate and justify the values of a colonial Anglo-Irish worldview as it does to seemingly extol the virtues of a humble and primitive folk that live close to the land. His vision of the islanders’ daily struggles informed the later work of the acclaimed American documentary filmmaker, Robert Flaherty: his “historical masterpiece,” *Man of Aran* (1934). The documentary, an early work of ethnofiction in a similar vein as *Nanook of the North*, celebrates Man’s “heroic, glorious struggle against the forces of nature”—a problematic dichotomy. Meanwhile,

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, too, scholarship on this literature has only recently integrated with postcolonial theory and perspectives.

however, critics like James H. O'Brien and Amy Scher uphold Liam O'Flaherty, another prominent figure of the Irish Revival and a native to Aran Island, as a refreshing counterpoint to the "picturesque" nature that the likes of Synge and W.B. Yeats envision, and indeed as the first Irish writer in the twentieth century to express a true "ecological sensitivity" (McElroy 57, citing O'Brien 1973: 110 and Scher 1994: 113). His is the *true* account of the islands that celebrates the interdependence of humans and other species, as they say, whose writing is marked by "an abiding respect for the courage and persistence of the Irish people" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

What's the real story of the Aran Islands, then, since the earlier part of the twentieth century? Who has written it?

### Research Questions and Central Thesis

My entry into this project was my general interest in the representation of nature and the environment in Irish literature—my overarching "topic." Not until I encountered J.M. Synge through secondary scholarly literature had I ever even heard of the Aran Islands, but I was intrigued by his descriptions of this "primitive," seemingly mystical place. Surely, I thought, Synge's account would be oppressively hegemonic and essentializing; it would be the clear point of view of an outsider, not of someone who truly *lives* and knows the land as a native. I was pleased to find the contrast of Liam O'Flaherty, a native Aran Islander who was also a major player in the Irish Literary Renaissance—whose works, I was certain, would undermine the content of Synge's in an instant. (Robert Flaherty—an American filmmaker whose subject is the Aran Islands?

“I’ll have to discuss that as well,” I thought, without more contemplation on his relation to the other writers.)

Admittedly, then, I approached the work of this honors thesis with *assumptions* far more so than questions—and, as it turned out, my experience with the primary texts undermined my assumptions completely. Only through the recurrent, discursive processes of reading, researching, and writing (and rewriting) did my *real* questions actually emerge. If the Aran Islands are, in fact, a place made to constitute “authentic” Ireland, then who lays claim to it? (The outsider? The insider?) Is a binary framework of the “outsider” (*stranséir*, Aran word for tourist) vs. the “insider” (native)—or the competing narratives of the “colonial/picturesque” ideology vs. the “native/oral” one, as James McElroy put it (54)—actually *useful* in considering the “making” of the Aran Islands? What would it look like if we read two seemingly contrasting figures of the Irish Literary Renaissance, like O’Flaherty and Synge, in the context of a “shared environment”—not merely as political actors of their “movement” or moment in time, bound essentially to their statuses as natives or nonnatives?

For Synge and O’Flaherty at the turn of the twentieth century, what they “share” is their integration in a charged political context, the question of Irish nationhood. What they “share” is a vested interest in this question of the authentic Irishman, and where to find him. What they “share” is the actual difficulty of life on the Aran Islands, more so than that found on the “mainland”—in farming with borrowed practices, in fishing on dangerous seas, in getting by on a physically isolated, rural place that seems stagnant in the face of oncoming modernity, even in the late 1800s and early 1900s. What they



“share,” too, surprisingly, is a common interest in extolling the island peasant through his perceived “closeness” to nature, but for very different rhetorical purposes—in Synge’s case, towards the creation of a living museum (a complicated phenomenon that I will delineate in Chapter One); in Robert Flaherty’s case, to glorify the hardiness of spirit that comes with a life of manual labor and repeated sufferings for commercial purposes (as explained in Chapter Two); and in O’Flaherty’s case, to self-consciously embrace these animalistic and “brutish” associations as a kind of vehicle for political dissidence and imminent jacquerie (as I explore in the third and final chapter of this thesis).

My central argument, then, is this: J.M. Synge, Robert Flaherty, and Liam O’Flaherty *all* negotiate freely between the seemingly rigid dichotomy of “insider” and “outsider” as they culturally construct the Aran Islands—and all equally contend with the specific, irreplaceable environment of the Arans. Though their motives, ideas, and purposes are certainly disparate, it is no accident that the specific *nature* of these islands, perhaps “islands” more generally, produces a cultural association with those very ideals for which Irish nationalists deeply strove: exceptionalism, shared strength in community, pride in *indigeneity*, and ultimately, the critical parameters of a unique, local *place* defined by folklore, customs, and other forms of distinguishing culture—a phenomenon described by Timothy Wenzell as *oileánachas*, or “island-ism” (117). This “shared experience” of the Aran Islands environment doesn’t completely dissolve or erase the well-known political and ethnic differences at the turn of the twentieth century, Ireland—but it *does* subjugate those traditional categories to a more complicated reading. The Revivalists of the late Irish literary renaissance, then, are seeking out an authentic,

“primitive” Irish people not just to establish a connection to the distant past, but—critically—to establish a connection with the land itself.

### Methodology and Terms

Although history, politics, and biography are important to consider in most modes of literary criticism, as outlined above, I advance my interpretations through an ecocritical and spatial reading of the primary texts. Environmental criticism, or “ecocriticism” as it is more commonly known, links literature to environmental experience, spurred by cross-disciplinary thinking that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s (Buell 5-6). Analogous to feminist or Marxist modes of criticism that bring a certain kind of awareness *to* the interpretation of texts, ecocritics take an earth-centered approach to literary studies and, at times, even consider the effects of environment *on* literature (and not only environment as a thing that people “write about” or represent) (Dobrin and Weisser 569). William Rueckert coined the term in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism” in 1978, though Cheryl Glotfelty introduced this critical approach to most American scholars and it then came into broader usage in the 1990s (ibid). Whereas the “first wave” of ecocriticism has focused mainly on traditional environmental issues like conservation, “wilderness,” and the preservation of species, the current/in transit “second wave” has broadened to focus on human communities and social, cultural issues (Buell 21-22). Ecocriticism is certainly not apolitical or ahistorical, then, especially wherein it concerns itself with environmental justice and questions of race, class and privilege, but it does reorient the focus to consider human/nature

relationships and not simply to situate human drama in landscapes that serve as backdrops or pathetic fallacy. (How is the construct of “environment” created, reinforced, or questioned in this text? What values are attached, or meaning ascribed? How do humans work within and among the environment? From a material perspective, even, how does environment shape the production of texts?)

In a related theoretical strand, literary critics have turned to *space* as a more insightful basis for the description and interpretation of an aesthetic object than time or history, and sought to understand the ways in which humans engage in place-making—that is, the making of general *space* into particular *place* that is invested with meaning. This approach lends itself not just to an ecocritical interpretation, but to a postcolonial one; increasingly, scholars have turned to postcolonial theory in yielding critical new insights on Irish culture and history (see Flannery 2007). It further recognizes that experience is inevitably informed by place; cultural phenomena, like human understanding of nature, are dependent on the specific circumstances of “place,” given that ecology itself is a place-conscious mode of research (Tuur 178). From this body of scholarship I draw my approach of considering the “insider” and the “outsider” in the knowledge-keeping of places (see Cresswell 2004 and Soja 2010)—a contrast focusing on the salient implications in Irish politics, culture, and history.

Declan Kiberd is perhaps the most prominent literary scholar to bring Irish studies and postcolonial theory together. From him, I borrow the definitions of some critical terms in this paper. Imperialism is “the seizure of land from its owners and their consequent subjugation by military force and cultural programming: the latter involves

the description, mapping and ecological transformation of occupied territory;” colonialism “more specifically involves the planting of settlers in the land thus seized, for the purpose of expropriating its wealth and for the promotion of the occupiers’ trade and culture” (1995: 5). Upon the decline of imperial rule in 1921, however, the material and psychosocial consequences of subjugation remained—“for it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory” (6). This gives rise to postcolonial theory, which analyzes that legacy and gives room for indigenous voices to emerge in the Anglophone literary canon. Quoting Deleuze and Guattari, Kiberd also incorporates the terms of “major literature”—the imperial and established literature—and “minor literature,” or revolutionary, produced by a minority group; it “begins by expressing itself and doesn’t conceptualize until afterward” (117). This distinction between major and minor literature is a dichotomy that is important to consider but, in my argument, is actually often intermingled. Although it was James McElroy’s overview of Irish ecocriticism that inspired me to look into the Aran Islands, as I explained earlier in this introduction, Mairéad Conneely and Joy Kennedy were the two most critical scholars to aid the formation of my own argument. Conneely, in particular, affords the particular kind of attention to the Aran Islands’ status *as* island that lends itself well to my perspective.

With this combined theoretical approach, a unique genre of the Irish “island writer” emerges—one that is fraught with many voices and vested interests, a powerful microcosm for the tensions of a colonized nation in political strife. This study will include Synge’s *The Aran Islands*, *Riders to the Sea*, Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, and

selected short stories by Liam O'Flaherty and his satirical work *Tourist's Guide to Ireland*.

Although I have worked within the discipline of English as my mode of research, a part of my conclusion will touch on the cultural, economic, and environmental implications of these ideas for contemporary people on the islands. Certainly, Synge's influence can be seen in Aran Island tourist industry aesthetically, as I observed at the beginning of this introduction; but what about the much broader legacy of colonialism, forced migration of populations, and the erosion of subsistence ways of living among indigenous Irish? How do external factors like remote island geography, transplanted agricultural and land-use practices, and massive waves of Irish emigration to the United States influence relationship to place?

Further, in my conclusion, I will try to come to terms with the implications of my research in the realm of discourse. Inspired by the bigger questions of "Why does literature matter?" and "What does literature do?" I ask: Is it useful to return to Liam O'Flaherty's "cattle-prodding" rhetoric to combat injustice and claim autonomy over land and resources, for example? Can we exonerate Synge from his legacy of colonialism, or did this effect of "museumification" in his works lend itself too well to commercial exploitation under the façade of tourism? Does a deconstruction of colonial myths help in any way to diminish the "mystique" or romance of poverty that seems to have Aran Islanders in a stranglehold? Further, what lessons are to be had in Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* about the ethics of ethnography and documentary filmmaking of a place?

## Chapter One

### **The Museumification of the Aran Islands in J.M. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) and *Riders to the Sea* (1904)**

Synge is often construed in modern literary criticism as a one-dimensional romantic writer, whose construction of the island and its natives is nothing more than a polemical narrative that justifies Anglo-Irish values and projects his own feelings of thrill and adventure onto the lives of a foreign, forgotten “race.” He does, after all, rely on dehumanizing tropes of the simple peasant made resilient by his labor on the land, and he is as prone to exoticize the islanders (and their land) as he is to fall back on homogenizing reveries about them. Consider this excerpt from the opening passage of *The Aran Islands*, the four-part travel journal penned by twenty-eight-year-old J.M.

Synge:

In about three hours Aran came in sight. A dreary rock appeared at first sloping up from the sea into the fog; then as we drew nearer, a coastguard station and the village. A little later I was wandering out along the one good roadway of the island, looking over low walls on either side into small flat fields of naked rock. I have seen nothing so desolate. Grey floods of water were sweeping everywhere upon the limestone, making at times a wild torrent of the road, which twined continually over low hills and cavities in the rock or passed between a few small fields of potatoes or grass hidden away in corners that had shelter. [...] (CW 49)

This “desolate” view of a chaotic, primordial island, as told by our “wandering” figure, recalls many of the associations I identified in the introduction of this thesis. (Think of the German artist Caspar David Friedrich’s famous oil painting, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*.)

If Synge is just another Romantic artist who has come to poeticize the Islands, what makes his literary legacy so powerful more than a century after the date of *The Aran Islands*’ publication? Was it the mere timeliness of his writing and its utility for the agenda of Irish nationalists? Was it the pure eloquence of his prose, and his ability to empathetically transport his readers to a unique locale? Was it a matter of power, in that Synge’s privileged Anglo-Irish background gave him the leverage and opportunity to speak broadly on the circumstances of a colonized, marginalized and non-English speaking people?

In this chapter, I provide critical analysis of J.M. Synge’s nonfiction and fiction prose set on the Aran Islands: his journals of the same name, *The Aran Islands* (1907), and the one-act drama *Riders to the Sea* (1904). I argue that Synge’s own “Irish ambiguities towards place” (Kennedy 1) regardless of his own privileged background, has an effect of complicating and even subverting conventional binaries, such as the rural laborer *versus* the aristocrat, the native *versus* the nonnative, and, by turn, the “insider” *versus* the “outsider.”<sup>2</sup> Synge’s approach is a *both/and*, not an *either/or*, and often universalizing; a unique fusion of secular spiritualism, scientism, and a brand of

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<sup>2</sup> This “Irish ambiguity,” as Kennedy argues, is unique; it is shaped by specific, shared circumstances in Irish history of “[f]amines, forced removes, and struggles against the rocky turf for farming [which] have created....an often uneasy sense of place for Irish writers” (1).

romanticism that celebrates the communal, the primitive, and the sublime. Part-ethnographer, part-journalist, part-naturalist, part-poet and moody dramatist, Synge not only synthesizes across art forms and disciplines, but across even ethnic and religious divides. Much like his other intellectual cohorts in the Irish Literary Revival, Synge succeeds in making the past “present” on the Aran Islands, a place of authentic, essentialist Irish culture (Kiberd 173)—but, as I will further argue, his interest is not just an ideological past fixed in time, but in a living, endemic group of rural islanders and the timeless land they live on. In doing so, the legacy and the consequence of Synge’s cultural work is, more than a century later, the creation of a *living museum*—(1) aesthetically arranged, (2) guided through language and writing, (3) scientifically principled, and (4) publicly accessible, even for its strange and exhilarating qualities of being “beyond the dwelling place of man.”<sup>3</sup> This is achieved by a reorienting view towards the environment, and the capacity of living, changing, encompassing *environment* to subsume and often destabilize human division—perceptible to the student, not to the mere exploiter with his own agenda.

### *The Aran Islands (1907)*

To begin, I will provide some biographical and historical information on Synge, to shed light on his intellectual formation and the diverse influences on his

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<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon of museumification still has an association with a *colonial legacy*, as I will explain later in the chapter—one that I can’t deny is ethically problematic. Critically, though, I am more willing to remove Synge from the legacy of exploitation—since colonialism, after all, depends on “expropriati[on of] wealth and...promotion of the occupiers’ trade and culture” (see Kiberd); a motive that I don’t identify with Synge at all.



consciousness—relevant to the syncretic, *both/and* approach that emerges in the primary texts, and to emphasize his disposition as a student. John Millington (“J.M.”) Synge was born in 1871 near Dublin, Ireland to an upper-class Protestant family. Certainly, he was not the Islands’ first visitor or its last. He had been preceded over the centuries by cartographers, surveyors, antiquarians, anthropologists, and linguists who sought to prove that Ireland had had a pre-conquest Celtic civilization (Foster 1987: 94-95). His uncle, the Reverend Alexander Synge, had already traveled to the Aran Islands about fifty years earlier as a missionary to its Catholic peasants, associated with paganism (Foster 1987: 111; Herzlin 2011).<sup>4</sup> The Islands were already an active hotspot for the cultural reclamation of pagan Ireland, as popularized in the fictional works of Emily Lawless and Charles James Lever (*O hEithir* location 220). During the Celtic Revival, Yeats and his contemporaries were already well aware of the cultural goldmine they’d hoped to excavate on the Aran Islands—though it was Synge’s whose accounts are remembered today as the most definitive, celebrated picture of the Islands and its inhabitants, “desolate” and “grey” though this picture is. For five years after his arrival to the “dreary rock” of Inishmore in the summer of 1898, Synge stayed on the Islands for weeks at a time and then published, in 1907, what he considered his “first serious piece of work” (*CW* 47, footnote)—a work that remains in the canon of Irish national literature.

As a child, Synge engaged the hobbies of bird-watching and collecting insects near his home by the River Dodder and on vacations to his family estates near the shore (*CW* 7-8). Though he retained his early interest in natural history and ornithology later in

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<sup>4</sup> The older Synge didn’t stay for very long. Apparently, he got into a violent confrontation with some of the fishermen and left shortly thereafter.

life, he was privately educated in music and literature and earned college degrees in those fields, having studied abroad in Germany and Paris (*CW* 13). He composed poetry on his own afterwards, integrating both early and modern material (Gillen 131). Here, notably, is Synge's early flair for drama—

I took to the violin and the study of literature with wild excitement and lost completely my interest in natural science although the beauty of nature influenced me more than ever. [...] I began taking very long walks among the Dublin mountains [...] To wander as I did for years through the dawn of night with every nerve stiff and strained with expectation gives one a singular acquaintance with the essences of the world. The obscure noises of the owls and rabbits, the heavy scent of the hemlock and the flowers of the elder, the silent flight of the moths I was in search of gave me a passionate and receptive mood like that of early [man]. The hunter, poacher, and painter are the only men who know nature. [...] The forces which rid me of theological mysticism reinforced my innate feeling for the profound mysteries of life. I had even psychical adventures which throw perhaps an interesting light on some of the data of folklore (*CW* 9-10).

Here, we see resonances of Frederic Paulhan's *Le nouveau mysticisme*, a French philosophical treatise that Synge read as a college student (Foster 1987: 99). According to Paulhan's philosophy, the "intention of the New Mystic is evidently to withdraw [into an Absolute] [...] whence he returns invigorated, refreshed, 'illuminated,' and, somehow or

other, enabled to remould the world to his heart's desire [...] until he has realised that God, the Soul and the World are one" (Curtis 449). The kind of spirituality that Synge seeks, then, is that which is found in sublime material nature, in the extreme moods and visceral forces known by the "hunter, poacher, and painter"—certainly not in the "theological" ponderings of a Christian removed from nature, as he notes.

Also critical in Synge's earlier education was the degree to which he was affected by the works of the naturalist Charles Darwin. In the autobiography he wrote in his twenties, Synge describes reading Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* as a 14-year-old and seeing the similarities of a bat's limbs and a human's, an experience that prompted his renunciation of Christianity in favor of "a scientific attitude"—

I flung the book aside and rushed out into the open air [...] I lay down and writhed in an agony of doubt. 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. [...] In a few weeks or days I regained my composure, but this was the beginning. (CW 10-11)

Finally, of course, there is the historical movement with which Synge is most obviously associated and remembered: the Irish Literary Renaissance. Otherwise known as the Irish Revival or the Celtic Twilight, these disparate terms all point to the cultural, nationalist movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that precipitated Irish independence.<sup>5</sup> In this movement, which coincided with the rise of the Gaelic

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<sup>5</sup> As Kathleen Heininge explains, embedded in these terms are very different interpretations of what this movement was and what it meant (172). The term "Irish Revival" tends to perpetuate a nationalist belief that the greatness of the people was being resurrected through thought and language after having previously been lost; W.B. Yeats' expression for it, the "Celtic Twilight," aligns itself with the belief that there was a

League, the Home Rule movement, and other organizations that affirmed the essential virtue of “Irishness,” there was a renewed interest in Ireland’s Celtic Gaelic heritage and in both the oral and written (bardic) transmission of culture in Irish language. As for Synge, then, most cultural historians or literary critics will cite W.B. Yeats’s autobiography, in which Yeats describes himself as a mentor to the struggling young artist in search of literary inspiration. In keeping with the nationalist task of “recovering” a lost and antiquated Irish culture, the legend goes that it was Yeats who famously told his younger charge, “Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.” (He might not have been impressed with the young man’s poetry, but saw promise!) Yeats reckoned, after all, that Synge was suited for this project for his “quiet nature, unobtrusive manner, and linguistic ability [in Irish Gaelic]”—traits that would make him a friend among the people, as other more militant Revivalists could not have been (Conneely 27; Henn 33-34). He was, in fact, unpretentious and even cosmopolitan in his thinking, made so perhaps by his world travels and college education, and he had even refused to be a part of the semi-military movement of the Irish League (Conneely 24-25, citing Foster 2000: 44). John Wilson Foster situates Synge firmly in this political agenda; he sees him as a romantic, an artist yearning for solitude who finds it among the glorified “primitivism” of the Arans. Synge, disillusioned with his own aristocratic Anglo-Irish ancestry, might have complied very willingly with this romantic task to find something “real” for himself in nature, like a

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“twilight,” or end, to the romantic Irish past and modernity has now come to Ireland; finally, the term “Irish Literary Renaissance,” the one that is currently used the most often, implies a postcolonial view of a *new beginning*, not just a resuscitation, and a reclaimed, politically autonomous glory—also nationalist, but inclusive of more aspects of Irish life than literature alone.

kind of pilgrimage, in this remote place of the Arans: to find “an archaic community in isolation” (Foster 1982: 250).

Though Synge’s language often suggests a deep preoccupation with the past and past ways, he otherwise, in my opinion, conveys values and ideas that are more akin to that era’s progressivism, modernism, and political ideology of “temperate Nationalism,” in Synge’s own words (*CW* 13), also evidenced by the secular influences of Frederic Paulhan and Charles Darwin. He was a radical and a Marxist by his own self-description (Kiberd 175), and a determined agnostic (Gillen 130)—he had, in his own words, “relinquished the Kingdom of God [...] for a real interest in the kingdom of Ireland. [...] Everything Irish became sacred...and had a charm that was neither quite human or divine” (*CW* 13). Certainly, then, there is a compliance with the Irish nationalist movement at large—there is a prioritization of Irishness, like the other literary figures had. But I argue that Synge’s ambivalent, pacifist, and otherwise more “cosmopolitan” disposition *leaves him open to come as a “student,” not merely as another political actor with his own agenda; it leaves him open to traverse, back and forth, and to balance, between a devotion to the local experience of the Aran Islands environment on the one hand, and, on the other, a willingness to associate the Islands with other places globally that undercuts Irish uniqueness. I can only attribute his evolution as a writer from the “wandering” romantic to the devoted friend of particular Aran residents, as a change that comes from environment and environmental experience; he does not come away from the Islands the same as when he arrived.*

Synge lived on the Aran Islands almost as a prototypical ethnographer, and a quasi-journalist—demonstrative of his emphasis on the local and particular. He stayed there over the course of five summers in the years 1898-1902, though for only a few weeks at each time. He devoted himself to the study of Irish Gaelic language and conversed with the rural residents in it in speech and in writing. Like W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory before him, he was an avid collector of folk tales and included them frequently in the narrative of his famous travel journals, *The Aran Islands*, published in 1907, with illustrations by Jack B. Yeats.<sup>6</sup> Synge's writerly formula has set the precedent for much of Irish travel writing and even nature writing/ creative nonfiction in general; "[w]e recognize the pattern: an ostensible travel account in an 'exotic' location, narrated by an apparently alienated writer, in search of what he does not explain or yet fully understand" (Gillen 130).

Initially, though, it seems as if Synge has simply come to be the romantic wanderer in the foggy, wind-swept, chaotic place of the Islands—the craggy cliffs of the Arans that could just as well be the peaks of German mountains, like in Friedrich's painting. He left Inishmore, the main island which he found to be too modern and English-speaking, for the remote and smaller island of Inishmaan. He writes of the people of Inishmaan, particularly, as those who are the most "primitive" of all the islands, as ones "who live forgotten in these worlds of mist," as the wild inhabitants of a bleak and inhospitable land... "A week of sweeping fogs has passed over and given me a strange

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<sup>6</sup> While he was there in 1898, Synge managed very carefully to avoid contact with Lady Gregory—who was also there at the time (Roche 80). This hints at a more deliberate attempt on Synge's part to distinguish himself from the other literary revivalists.

sense of exile and desolation. I walk round the island nearly every day, yet I sense nothing anywhere but a mass of wet rock, a strip of surf, and then a tumult of waves” (*CW* 73, 72). Synge sees the locals of the islands as people who are deeply embedded in landscape, and who have developed a natural resilience to the elements by virtue of their indigeneity; consider, for example, the almost inseparable meditation of human language, movement, and artifacts in the “desolate” place, in a passage continued from the arrival scene I mentioned earlier:

Occasionally I passed a lonely chapel or schoolhouse, or a line of stone pillars with crosses above them and inscriptions asking a prayer for the soul of the person they commemorated. I met few people; but here and there a band of tall girls passed me on their way to Kilronan, and called out to me with humorous wonder, speaking English with a slight foreign intonation that differed a good deal from the brogue of Galway. The rain and cold seemed to have no influence on their vitality, and as they hurried past me with eager laughter and great talking in Gaelic, they left the wet masses of rock more desolate than before (*CW* 49-50).

Their vitality even affects his view of the physical environment, then; once the chattering girls have gone away, the land is “more desolate than before.” They are a people and a place far different than him, and he is hopelessly lost.

At first, too, Synge’s interest in language and storytelling seems to confirm his own notions of Aran primitivism. He emphasizes the “strangeness” of their ways and their close alignment to animal life frequently. He describes the noises of men and boys

laboring as “howl[ing] and scream[ing] with agitation, cursing and exhorting, without knowing, most of the time, what they are saying,” as “primitive babble,” and repeatedly as a “drone” (79, 57). As a “clumsy” chair of wicker-work is “bumping on the floor with extraordinary violence” in the cottage where Synge is staying, he notes: “When the baby is awake it sprawls on the floor, and the old woman sings it a variety of inarticulate lullabies that have much musical charm” (69). Similarly, when Synge is talking to a teenaged girl, he describes her voice “going backwards and forwards in the same sentence from the gaiety of a child to the plaintive intonation of an old race that is worn with sorrow. At one moment she is a simple peasant, at another she seems to be looking out at the world with a sense of prehistoric disillusion and to sum up in the expression of her grey-blue eyes the whole external despondency of the clouds and sea” (CW 114). The sublime aesthetic of a “prehistoric” setting is repeated here, when he’d been rudely awakened from a daydream he was having about his time in Germany:

A cry from the baby, and I wake to a winter’s night upon this bare rock in the Atlantic. Have I not reason to join my wailing with the winds[...]? I have wandered only some few thousand miles yet I am already beyond the dwelling place of man (CW Notebook 17, 1889)

*But*, like any good student, Synge doesn’t seem to content to let the things he doesn’t understand remain a mystery. He is determined to associate what he doesn’t know with what he does; in doing so, he enters a process of balancing the role of the insider with that of the outsider. He situates the Aran Islands then, ultimately, as a place accessible to more than the Irish person; it is a place with significance beyond the nationalist agenda



alone, and thus free of its static position as a monument or an ode to general Irishness. It is a place to interact with and to learn from.

When Old Pat tells the folktale of the young man O’Conor and his wife, named lady O’Conor, Synge reacts almost with a sense of surprised delight: “It gave me a strange feeling of wonder to hear this illiterate native of a wet rock in the Atlantic telling a story that is so full of European associations,” he writes, and he names cultural allusions as diverse as Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, Florentine love tales, the German story ‘Two Merchants and the Faithful Wife of Ruprecht von Wurzburg,’ and Persian and Egyptian fairytales (64-65). This episode originally appeared as ‘A Story from Inishmaan,’ published in *The New Ireland Review* in November 1898. Synge had added the following commentary in this original version:

It is hard to assert at what date such stories as these reached the west.

There is little doubt that our heroic tales which show so often their kinship with Grecian myths, date from the pre-ethnic period of the Aryans, and it is easy to believe that some purely secular narratives share their antiquity. Further, a comparison of all the versions will show that we have here one of the rudest and therefore, it may be, most ancient settings of the material (CW 65, footnote).

This all sounds very condescending to the modern reader, and that was certainly the way in which these passages initially struck me. At the same time, however, he is keen on *sharing* these linguistic attributes and he searches for similarities, not differences, among a people who are “primitive Europeans” to him—*Europeans*, tellingly, and not just

primitive Irishmen. The Aran Islands suddenly become important not just for the foundation of *one nation*, but to Western culture at large—and high culture at that.

In fact, Synge compares the native islander not to the average Dublin commoner, but rather to the *aristocratic* Dubliner—putting him in equal standing to the other global major players in the increasingly modern world, and at clear odds with English nobility and imperialism. The Aran Islander won't arrive to the political conference wearing Western suits and conversing in English language to please his cohorts, however. The Dublin aristocrats, under the heavy control of London, have achieved their elegance through “artificial” English breeding, but the islanders have their unique advantage because their “power” comes to them naturally—affirmed by *natural* language and *natural* landscape:

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. Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem in a certain sense to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies—who are bred artificially to a natural ideal—than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart-horse (CW 66).

Although Synge often made a point of his devotion to the “local” and “particular” experience of the Aran Islands and its people—for example, he notes when there is an

“intense insular clearness one sees only in Ireland” (*CW* 53)—again, there are moments in the narrative when the islands become, to Synge, a timeless and ahistorical place that could as well be ancient Rome or Greece than anywhere, betrayed by his use of the word “setting” in the footnote on *CW* 65. In fact, much like the poet’s reaction to what he saw as a “Shakespearian” Irish folk tale, he contemplates the islands in relation to a generalized, abstract countryside of by-gone times: “As I lay there on the grass on the clouds [near Killeany, the “poorest village” in Inishmore] lifted from the Connemara mountains and, for a moment, the green undulating foreground, backed in the distance by a mass of hills, reminded me of the country near Rome” (51). Similarly, the Aran Islands’ wildlife and residents are often reduced to aesthetic objects and abstractions:

Many of the birds display themselves before me with the vanity of barbarians, forming in strange evolutions as long as I am in sight, and returning to their ledge of rock when I am gone.... Their language is easier than Gaelic, and I seem to understand the greater part of their cries, though I am not able to answer.... On the low sheets of rock to the east I can see a number of red and grey figures hurrying about their work. The continual passing in this island between the misery of last night and splendor of to-day, seems to create an affinity between the moods of these people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists, and in certain forms of alienation. Yet it is only in the intonation of a few sentences or some old fragment of melody that I catch the real spirit of the

island, for in general the men sit together and talk with endless iteration of the tides and fish, and of the price of kelp in Connemara (73-74).

Is he conjuring the familiar idea of the “noble savage” with these overt class connotations? Certainly, it might be difficult to ignore the political implications of Synge’s narrative, wherein “[t]ribes of the same natural development are, perhaps, frequent in half-civilised countries, but here a touch of the refinement of old societies is blended, with singular effect, among the qualities of the wild animal” (CW 66). He emphasizes the quaintness of their fascination with him as an outsider with foreign things like clocks and newspapers (60), the “Eastern glow” and mythological beauty about the women (58), and an almost superhuman refinement to the fisherman’s character and ability, for “[t]he danger of his life on the sea gives him the alertness of a primitive hunter” (132-133). As Declan Kiberd notes, his proficiency at Irish language increased tremendously over the years, and yet in a later part of the journal, he describes his feelings as a “waif among the people”: “In some ways these men and women seem strangely far away from me. They have the same emotions that I have, and the animals have, yet I cannot talk to them when there is much to say, more than to the dog that whines beside me in a mountain fog” (CW 65).

So is Synge, after all, a mere outsider or “interloper” with no claim to understand the “true” Aran Islands? Certainly, I would argue that there *is* a romanticism to these depictions: specifically, though, a special celebration of the “primitive,” the “wild,” and the “communal” experience, in contrast to the “pastoral,” the “walled garden,” and the “individual” experience (in other words, the more “orderly” nature rendered in Anglo

contexts). “It gave me a moment of exquisite satisfaction to find myself moving away from civilization in this rude canvas canoe of a model that has served primitive races since men first went on the sea,” he writes, after all (*CW* 57). Interestingly, though, Synge would not have reckoned himself a romantic at all. In fact, he criticized an earlier novel of life on the Aran Islands, Emily Lawless’s *Grania: The Story of an Island* (1892) as exactly that, and contrasts Lawless’s mere “visit” to his own more deliberate “immersion”:

I read *Grania* before I came here, and enjoyed it, but the real Aran spirit is not there. [...] To write a novel of the island life one would require to pass several years among the people, but Miss Lawless does not appear to have lived here (Conneely 16, quoting *J.M. Synge, 1871-1909*, 1959: 95-96).

His knowledge of everything that the islanders wore and ate—their labor—their lifestyle, the way in which they considered time—Synge situates himself, in fact, like a protector and preservationist of *true* Aran life. I draw a parallel here between Darwin’s Galapagos Islands and Synge’s Aran Islands on purpose, here, though Synge’s approach borrows in turns or, perhaps, equally, from progressive social science, natural science, arts and the humanities. Although Kiberd argues that Synge would have profited from the death of this culture because it would have made his works all the more rare and collectible, it seems more plausible that Synge would have wanted to keep the native culture alive to propose it as *a viable alternative to fake Dublin aristocratic life*—not as a laughable spectacle of old-fashioned ways. As if to draw his aristocratic, educated, or otherwise distant audience, he notes:

Every article on these islands has an almost personal character, which gives this simple life, where all art is unknown, something of the artistic beauty of mediaeval life. The curaghs and spinning-wheels, the tiny wooden barrels that are still much used in the place of earthenware, the home-made cradles, churns, and baskets, are *all full of individuality*, and being made from materials that are common here, *yet to some extent peculiar to the island, they seem to exist as a natural link between the people and the world that is about them* (CW 59, emphasis mine).

As if to emphasize the individuality of the people themselves, as well, Synge includes dialogue among the “characters” and himself that is rendered in standard Anglicized English. Although dialogue is rare in the journal, save for the fourth book, earlier Revivalists had used a more demeaning type of “stage” Irish, or stage dialect.

Some critics compare Synge’s *Aran Islands* to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (see Frawley, Wenzel, and Kiberd), but I would argue that the analogy is not perfect. Several scholars, like Timothy Wenzel, Declan Kiberd, and Eamonn Wall draw parallels between the American romantic notion of the West and westward expansion to Ireland’s view of its own West, and its implications for nationhood in both respects. Kiberd, however, notes that the cultural movement in the U.S. came *after* declaration of autonomous nationhood, while Ireland’s actually came before it (1995: 117). Though I see the similarities between a walking Synge and a walking Thoreau, certainly, who take interest in natural history and write in search of the more real and authentic things in life, I would identify the really stark difference as being Synge’s preoccupation with a natural,

semi-mystical community and Thoreau's seeming desire to get away from humans and reflect individualistically and introspectively. (This American propensity for individualism shall make a recurrence in my chapter on Flaherty.)

Over the course of the journal, Synge seems to break slowly away from his isolated position as “wanderer” and becomes, at last, integrated in the community—strengthened by it, better for it, in touch with his friends from the Islands by exchanging letters, and bid farewell by a warm, vibrant party. —“No two journeys to these islands are alike,” by his own admission at the beginning of Part IV. By the end, Synge is no longer content to stand by and simply observe; he plays fiddle for large crowds, a surprising break from his introverted personality. Tellingly, too, as if he has foreseen Seamus Heaney, Synge amplifies the liminal position of Aran as between Europe and the Americas; he observes that the Aran Islanders see themselves as being bound up in the fate of the United States, even:

[...] Of all the subjects we can talk of 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 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 habitable (CW 60).

This is potentially very disturbing to the Irish Revivalist agenda; no longer are the islanders neatly “contained” and stationary. Like nature itself, this “thing” he is trying to preserve is moving, alive, and ironically, subject to natural change *because* it is alive. If

Synge is able to perceive the uncertain fate of the island, then, and recognizes the imminence of “modernity” and “change” for an island under imperial rule, where does he position himself?

Interestingly, Declan Kiberd remarks on Synge’s advocacy of modern technology (seeming antithetical to his “romanticism” and preference for the ways of the past)—railway lines across the land to permit workers to live in rural cottages and commute by that network into industrial centers and factories, thus increasing accessibility and anticipating, by centuries, the “electronic cottage” that was promoted by ecologically-minded socialists (Kiberd 2005: 292-293 and 1995: 117). (England’s solution to the same problem of urban decline in the early twentieth century, in fact, was the sprawl of suburbia—which does not honor or preserve rural life, but in fact just allows urban values and conveniences to dominate and win in the end.) I see Synge’s idea not just as a way for “primitive” Aran people to bring their (essentialist) virtues and cultures with them into the world at large, but, in fact, for others to come *to* the island, too—to see and learn as he did, like a student or an observer at a living, publicly accessible museum.

In many cases, and as Ashworth *et al* have described, museums contain and marginalize; they serve the effect of *removing* the viewer from the viewed (objectified) things, “interesting for their antiquity, ingenuity, beauty or strangeness, but they possess no intrinsic ideological message of any significance to the present or the future” (Barnes 73, citing Ashworth). However, I have a very different interpretation of what kind of place Synge is constructing here. Museums teach; they synthesize; they favor realism and beauty alike. The Aran Islands *draw in* and exchange. They memorialize and they



preserve. They defamiliarize the familiar; only in Synge's work, after all, up until that time, had any account ever been given on the Islands "of the frequent assaults, maiming of horses and cattle, boycotts, victimizations, evictions and allegations of forced conversions that arose constantly in the history of the period" (O hEithir location 1264 in eBook). Museums and other educational ventures *intervene in culture*, and this is the evolution I see in Synge's writing. Synge's preservationist mission is certainly more *complicated* by his more fluid, liminal view of the Islands.

*Riders to the Sea* (1904)

No discussion of Synge and the Aran Islands would be complete without *Riders to the Sea*, arguably his best dramatic work (but lesser known than the riot-provoking *Playboy of the Western World*.) The Aran Islands journals were complete in 1902, but they were not published until 1907. Before then, Synge drew on the material of *The Aran Islands* to inform his new plays: one of which was *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903), its plot based on a folktale that Pat Dirane had told him, and the other, *Riders to the Sea*—the only one to be based on the Aran landscape. *Riders to the Sea* demonstrates clearly the effects I see in Synge's work at large: the destabilization of familiar binaries and tensions, as achieved by a reorientation of interpretation towards the environment.

This one-act drama was first performed at the Molesworth Hall in Dublin in February 1904. A tragedy (perhaps overwhelmingly so), the story is the only fictional work of Synge's to actually take place on an island setting, albeit nameless—"Scene: An

*Island off the West of Ireland*' (Henn 95). Maurya's home is surrounded by many of the same quaint, fisherfolk artifacts that Synge observes in his journals as "unique" and imbued with unique human character and meaning: nets, oilskins, the spinning-wheel, boards standing by the wall.

The tragedy depicts a rural Catholic family at the coast of the island. Maurya, the familial matriarch, loses her husband, her husband's father, and eventually all of her sons as victims of drowning at sea in fishing accidents. Her frequent vocal prayers are unanswered; the priest's consolation to her is useless; her daughters Cathleen and Nora, who have survived, simply play the chorus to their mother's keening and wailing. Much like the beginning of *The Aran Islands*, the drama begins in chaos. "Where is she?" asks Nora; "She's lying down, God help her, and may be sleeping, if she's able," replies her sister Kathleen; Cathleen is spinning the wheel rapidly, and Nora bears the tattered clothes of "a drowned man in Donegal." The women are one and the same with their "wind-swept, torrential" world; even the spoken rhythm of Maurya's famous speech has the lilt and vastness of the ocean, lamenting the death of Bartley, whose body is laid on the table before her—

MAURYA *raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her*: 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 wind 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. I'll have no call now to be going down

and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening (105).

She ends her speech at last with a despondent conclusion: "Michael has a clean burial in the fair 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 for ever, and we must be satisfied" (106). We end, then, on a note of inevitability—mourning—loss—and human frailty.

The source of the material for these scenes doesn't come as a surprise. Synge depicts an actual funeral scene in *The Aran Islands* with the same air of tragedy and hopeless inevitability:

In Inishmaan one is forced to believe in a sympathy between man and nature, and at this moment when the thunder sounded a death-peal of extraordinary grandeur above the voices of the women, I could see the faces near me stiff and drawn with emotion.

When the coffin was in the grave, and the thunder had rolled away across the hills of Clare, the keen broke out again more passionately than before. This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island....Before the covered the coffin an old man kneeled down by the grave and repeated a simple prayer for the dead. There was an irony in these words of atonement and Catholic

belief spoken by voices that were still hoarse with the cries of pagan desperation (*CW* 75).

The more traditional critical debate on *Riders to the Sea* is whether or not it is ultimately a Christian story or a pagan story. Joy Kennedy argues that it is neither and both; it is, in keeping with Irish thinking more generally, an embodiment of duality, much like the character Maurya herself as both nurturer of her children and inadvertent destroyer of one (by her failure to bless Bartley before he left); much like the ocean itself, as depicted in the drama, both the giver of livelihood and the taker of lives (Kennedy 15, 17, 22). Kennedy reads the tragedy not as a religious tale at all, in fact, in spite of the devout culture it depicts; rather, Synge is actually subscribing here to a materialist, Darwinian view of nature that actually puts it *at odds* with the anti-materialist sentiment of the Irish Revivalists (Kennedy 26).<sup>7</sup>

Joy Kennedy claims that Synge's study of Darwin and his proclivity for scientific pursuits, like collecting insects, studying weather patterns, and finding a bird's nest, as I described at the beginning of my section on *The Aran Islands*—made him “ripe” for his experience on the Aran Islands. Synge's view of Aran Islanders probably had as much to do with ideas emergent from the social sciences as they were from the natural, of course. He often sounds strikingly similar to Adolf Bastian or Pierre Tiellhard de Chardin in his progressive belief on the “psychic unity of mankind” and evolutionary consciousness. For

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<sup>7</sup> By “anti-materialist,” I use Kenney's own term and refer to the trend among Irish Revivalists to spiritualize. See “The Literary Revival: space & representation,” which describes the more prominent trend of taking negative Irish stereotypes and simply spinning them in a more positive light (instead of revising, challenging, and subverting them, as Synge often does): “If the stereotype portrayed the Irish as dreamy and feckless and tied to the land, this was reversed so that they were presented as spiritual and anti-materialistic, close to the soil and thus nature. These were characteristics, therefore, to be celebrated rather than derided” (paragraph 3).

example, Synge's musings at the beginning of the journal betray "evolutionary consciousness"—

I think the consciousness of beauty is awakened in persons as in peoples by a prolonged unsatisfied desire....Perhaps the modern feeling for the beauty of nature as a particular quality [...] arose when men began to look on everything about them with the unsatisfied longing which *has its proper analogue in puberty*....The feeling of primitive people is still everywhere the feeling of the child; an adoration that has never learned or wished to admire its divinity (*CW 13*, emphasis mine).

Consider, too, the resonances of Paulhan's "new mysticism" in this passage:

The morning had none of the supernatural beauty that comes over the island so often in rainy weather, so we basked in the vague enjoyment of the sunshine, looking down at the wild luxuriance of the vegetation beneath the sea, which contrasts strangely with the nakedness above it.

Some dreams I have had in this cottage seem to give strength to the opinion that there is a psychic memory attached to certain neighbourhoods. Last night, after walking in a dream among buildings with strangely intense light on them, I heard a faint rhythm of music beginning far away on some stringed instrument. It came closer to me, gradually increasing in quickness and volume with an irresistibly definite progression. When it was quite near the sound began

to move in my nerves and blood, and to urge me to dance with them (*CW* 99, emphasis mine).

Finally, then, comes the dissolution of the self through solitude: not only are the native inhabitants of the Island one with their environment, people who “make no distinction between the natural and the supernatural,” according to Synge (*CW* 128), but he himself achieve this too—as if he has become one among them, a member of this ecological community, *through* solitude:

The sense of solitude was immense. I could not see or realise my own body, and I seemed to exist merely in my perception of the waves and of the crying birds, and of the smell of seaweed.

When I tried to come home I lost myself among the sandhills, and the night seemed to grow unutterably cold and dejected, as I groped among slimy masses of seaweed and wet crumbling walls.

After a while I heard a movement in the sand, and two grey shadows appeared beside me. They were two men who were going home from fishing. I spoke to them and knew their voices, and we went home together (*CW* 148).

To the modern reader, perhaps, none of this sounds very scientific or anthropological at all; much has changed in what constitutes a “scientific” paradigm since the 1900s. It does, however, broaden the scope of interpretation that can be brought to Synge’s work;

this is not merely a representation of the traditional pagan vs. Christian tension, like the tension between the past and the modern; it is, ultimately, a *reorientation* of our view to environment, science, and realism that subverts the more usual charge of “romanticism” to Synge’s work. Some literary critics, like Joy Kennedy, actually remove Synge altogether from the canon of British pastoral romantics (Kennedy 1). “[*Riders to the Sea*] is not pastoral, romantic, or sublime but is, rather, a blend of uniquely Irish ambiguities towards place—ambiguities which ecocritics have mostly failed to attend to” she argues, rejecting the traditional Burkian aesthetic categories to describe his one-act drama *Riders to the Sea* (ibid).

When I visit Ireland this summer, I plan on making a visit to *Teach Synge* and *Cathoir Synge* like any other tourist to the Aran Islands in the twenty-first century. So what would make my visit there different, in light of what I have researched and argued here? What are the implications of Synge’s “museum,” then, complicated as it is—celebrated rightfully for its beauty and elegance, but re-examined critically in a postcolonial era?

What I hope to have shown here is the stark contrast between what Synge describes firsthand in his works, and what I have seen take place on the Islands since then. Unlike every other small island off the coast of Ireland—notably, the Blasket Islands—the Aran Islands have *not* depopulated as they naturally would have, given the economic changes to Ireland and the prosperity brought on by the Celtic Tiger. The tourism that sprung up since Synge was there made the islanders into “a kind of captive

indigenous spectacle since the turn of the century” (Solnit 157); “[t]he islands have been described as vast outdoor museums, with the inhabitants going about their daily work amid the exhibits” (O hEithir location 152)—exactly the effect I have detailed in this chapter, particularly the syncretic, *both/and* approach that Synge was the most prominent artist and writer to take. But as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, I attribute this “tourist” phenomenon far more to Robert Flaherty’s commercial legacy than to Synge’s academic one, though they are certainly—and problematically—interrelated.

Though Kiberd speculates that Synge would have profited on the death on Irish Gaelic culture (by rendering *his* stories all the more rare and special, like a collector’s item, 173), it seems that Synge would have welcomed the onset of change; he would have advocated for the *life* and movement of a culture, not for its imprisonment—again, for an interactive and living type of learning experience. The shared sentiment of Irish Revivalists is that there was an emphasis on taking the perceived “dreaminess” or flightiness of stereotypical Irish people and transforming it, through refined culture, into a more spiritual, ascetic antimaterialism—and while Synge, for sure, has a proclivity for zooming out, universalizing, and grandly speculating on the cosmic, aesthetic implications of what he sees and observes on the island, his is a unique inclusion for realism that is often overlooked by those critics who tend to focus on his romanticism: his attention to hardship and conflict (O hEithir location 225), his anthropological approach to religion, and his respect for Irish language and folklore as a thing he cannot dominate, master, and appropriate as his own, sincere as his intent is to learn it.



## Chapter Two

### **Commercial and Documentarian Interests in Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934)**

Three decades later, in 1931, there was another famous arrival to the Aran Islands—that of the American-Canadian filmmaker Robert Flaherty. Famous for his production of the first successful feature length documentary, *Nanook of the North* in 1922, Flaherty sought to make another commercial blockbuster—a film he deemed *Man of Aran*, and which later found its place in film history among the classics. This monolithic, semi-fictional Man is our ordinary hero in a valorized struggle against “Nature” for basic survival. The title cards read:

The Aran Islands lie off Western Ireland. All three are small... wastes of rock... without trees... without soil... In winter storms they are almost smothered by the sea... which, because of the peculiar shelving of the coastline, piles up into one of the most gigantic seas in the world. In this desperate environment the Man of Aran, *because his independence is the most precious privilege he can win from life, fights for his existence*, bare though it may be. It is a fight from which he will have no respite until the end of his indomitable days or until he meets his master—the sea (emphasis mine).

What follows is a plot-less film that depicts the actual labor of actual island residents, but as a fictionalized family and, in fact, in a fictionalized social context—“a picture of grinding, if picturesque, poverty on a rocky Atlantic outcrop where even the

fields had to be laboriously hand-made out of seaweed and thin soil and fishing was a desperate, dangerous business” (Winston 72). It was written and filmed with world audiences in mind, and an incredible \$10,000 investment to “break in” to the American market (a substantial sum at the time). *Man of Aran*, though, achieved canonical status and popularity in Ireland for its ability to serve as a “semiotic foundation myth”—a nationalist celebration of self-determination, a virtue applauded in the nascent Irish Free State and “true to the spiritual values of insular Irish identity” (Carney 3).

How, then, does Robert Flaherty’s film contribute to this present study? The antagonist of this tale is relentless Nature, unambiguously so—but to what end? Does Flaherty’s film serve to unite and confirm a unique human community of Islanders, or does it serve instead to ascribe those people to the status of allegorized animals or angelic hermits? Though the medium of documentary film promises an “authentic” look at its subject matter, does Flaherty’s approach actually obscure, edit, or exploit Aran people for commercial purposes—exaggerating them into caricatures? What ethical dimensions are involved? Is this a film for the Irish? A film for Americans?

Breandán O hEithir summarizes the more traditional interpretative relationship between Synge, Flaherty, and O’Flaherty, and the ways in which they write back or “speak” to one another—

The strength of Synge’s portrayal has been particularly enduring and still shapes the expectations of today’s visitors. It was, of course, reinforced by that other great depiction of island life, the documentary film *Man of Aran*, whose director, Robert Flaherty, said that Synge had taught him

what to see. Against this, the frank, often scathing realism of the novels of Liam O’Flaherty could have little effect (location 1264).

I will revisit the point of Liam O’Flaherty in the third chapter of this thesis, but here, I will address the effects of Robert Flaherty’s film—which does not, in my view, “reinforce” Synge’s work, only appropriates it.

In this chapter, I will provide a close “reading” of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran*, particularly in light of George C. Stoney’s 1977 “reaction” documentary, *How the Myth was Made: A Study of Robert Flaherty’s Man of Aran*. Although popular tourist landmarks on the Islands today make reference to Synge, I argue that Flaherty—far more so than Synge, though it was Synge who taught him “what to see” (O hEithir location 4498)—set the true precursor for commercial dominance over the Islands and the “tourist trap” it later became. Flaherty, in effect, has taken Synge’s inspired “museum” and privatized it; he made a business out of what Synge was there to study, not to exploit; he brought on the commodification of people, experiences, and even land on the Aran Islands. This effect is achieved not just by the contrived content of the film (with its peculiar emphasis on the individual, the nuclear family, and the merit of transforming ‘raw nature’ into meaningful, domestic artifacts—not at all on the shared, communal experience that Synge celebrated) but also, in fact, by his modes of film production using “native” people and places and appropriating them for his own purposes. In other words: where Synge sees land and people as entirely integrated, one and the same, for better or worse, Flaherty’s agenda is the inverse: he seeks the divorce of the “Man” from nature—

that “independence” he wants desperately to achieve—through a process that can only be difficult, full of suffering, and laborious.

The filming began on the Aran Islands in 1931, and continued intermittently over the course of two years. Originally, Flaherty went to Achill Island in Mayo, where sharks were still hunted, but didn't find the scenes to be moving enough. Norris Davidson, an Irish filmmaker who had been in Aran before, convinced Flaherty to try that location instead (O hEithir location 286).

The film does not follow a linear story, but shows instead a series of sequential images of a native Irish family working, forging a meager existence from barren land and uncontrollable ocean. Human speech in this movie is barely discernible as English; for the entire duration, the characters simply make noises, grunts, exclamations, chattering, and the occasional clear-sounding English dubbed over—phrases like “by God, we're okay.”

Robert Flaherty's temperament during the production process was far different than mild-mannered, introverted Synge's; Flaherty was hot-tempered, a perfectionist, and ambitious. Henry Watt, a production assistant on the film, later disclosed that they lived like “kings” in an area marked otherwise by total poverty; the crew lived in a house bigger than any of the other ones on the island, and were attended to by residents of the island, as revealed in *How the Myth Was Made*. Pat Mullen, Flaherty's native informant, describes him this way in his memoir, (also, interestingly titled) *Man of Aran* (1935):

He [Bob] would see a spot in the distance where he would figure he should put up his camera. Well, nothing could stop him getting there. He made a direct line, and he'd bolt through a field of briars, you know, that would hold a bull—that sort of way. He had that fire in him, you see—saying nothing, but do it if it costs you your life. (*From Frances Hubbard Flaherty's The Odyssey of a Film-Maker: Robert Flaherty's Story*; pamphlet accompanying the DVD)

This kind of attitude had very real dangers for the “actors” who worked on this film. The scene towards the beginning when Maggie runs out to help the men retrieve their curragh from the violent, oncoming tide is described as “not rehearsed”—she literally falls into the water, “screaming her goddamn head off,” and Tiger grabs her by the hair, spontaneously, to save her. None of the “actors” knew how to swim.

The film begins with a little boy, Michael Dillane, extracting a crab from the water. He joins his “mother,” Maggie Dirrane, who is busy tending the home fires and who steps out of her cottage momentarily for the wind to toss about her hair, and to wrap her black shawl around her tightly. They are waiting for the husband and father, Colman ‘Tiger’ King, to return home from a treacherous voyage at sea—one in which his curragh is nearly broken by the sea. It's clear that Robert Flaherty's purpose is drama, not realism.

[...] After the intense excitement of a day with the men and the great seas [on Inismore], at night in the projection room we would see it all again on the screen and our spirits would sag. As Pat put it, “it didn't look half as

thrilling to me as it was when I was in the curragh doing the work. [...]

We even tried the other islands (there were three of them), and couldn't get anything done that was worthwhile—anything, that is, with this elusive dramatic quality, which seems so necessary for the making of a good film, that finishing touch, the touch that goes between a good piece of work and the work of a master... (*From Frances Hubbard Flaherty's The Odyssey of a Film-Maker: Robert Flaherty's Story*; pamphlet accompanying the DVD).

This very last thought on the “finishing touch” is what strikes me as the most peculiar. Almost as an inverse of Synge, it seems—Synge, who was so interested in universals, absolutes, impressions, feelings—Flaherty (at least, from the perspective of his wife) seems obsessed with details and precision. Further, the merit of his film—much like the merit of the native islanders themselves—is only measured by the input of his labor and effort. And yet what's fascinating about this is that Flaherty claims this is “their” film, not his—

There was a great opening of the film in London. The cast were there. They got a great ovation. There they were in the theatre and there they were on the screen, and they themselves had done it. *It was their film, they had made it*; it was a film to tell the world what kind of people they were (*From Frances Hubbard Flaherty's The Odyssey of a Film-Maker: Robert Flaherty's Story*; pamphlet accompanying the DVD—emphasis mine).

Could it really be “their” film, however? As I have cited extensively in this chapter, Robert Flaherty is clearly executing and directing a vision, not journalistically recording what he sees. But the decision to cast regular people in a documentary was, at the time, a radical one; it was normal convention to hire professional actors in works of documentary. The soundtrack, too, was based on Aran folk songs and instrumentals—but they are rendered not with traditional instruments or voices, but in the theatricals of an orchestra. As described earlier, the dangers that were depicted in the movie were, in fact, real... including the real shark hunting sequence, which was painstakingly produced and one of the most celebrated parts of the film. John Monck (Goldman), editor of the original film, appears in Stoney’s film to talk about it:

Flaherty always realized that the making of the film was only thirty percent of the whole job. Selling it was the other seventy percent. Of all the salesmen I have come across in my life, Bob was the finest and of course the sharpest. Now, the shark fishing industry on the Aran Islands had been dead for some fifty years or more. But Flaherty had a very strong eye on the box office. He knew that fighting a shark would be exciting for the audience.

Arthur Calder-Marshall, a Flaherty biographer who also appeared in *How the Myth*, even claimed that Flaherty had a colonial mission, even, in choosing to include this: “he might bring the trade back to the poverty-stricken island, and establish them as prosperous.”

Flaherty’s crew spent two years on the island; “I fancy that ours was the first ‘foreign location’ to do its own printing, developing and even cutting, on the spot” he

wrote in a later artist's statement (Flaherty location 4255-4256 in eBook). As Goldman put it, of course, Flaherty had "a very strong eye on the box office" and was deliberate in his attempts to depict "the thrill of the islanders' age-long battle with the rock, the sea, and the storm" (Flaherty location 4278 on eBook). "These are terrible seas," he wrote. "They have snatched men from the very cliff-tops and dashed them to death on the rocks below. They have pounded the cottages themselves and laid them in ruins" (Flaherty location 4271 on eBook). Disappointed, as mentioned earlier, with the way in which the look of the ocean became flattened out on a screen, Flaherty resorted to using a long-focused lens to pile the seas up and make them look more terrifying or formidable—more akin to what Synge describes: "the waves were so enormous that when I saw one more than usually large coming towards me, I turned instinctively to hide myself, as one blinks when struck upon the eyes" (*CW* 108).

The islanders may have been taught how to harpoon the basking shark, the dubbed-in dialogue may indeed sound ridiculous, the camera may have avoided more of island life than it selected as a re-creation of that life, but nobody taught the crew of the currach how to row ashore through the ferocious breakers, in what is the film's outstanding scene (*O hEithir* location 286).

But the land, too, not just the sea, had to look exactly the way Flaherty envisioned. As Stoney observes, he deliberately limited the camera's view so that, when it panned across the landscape, it would stop right before showing human landmarks



besides the thatched cottage<sup>8</sup> and would hide large open meadows owned by a single landlord—“the good land that belonged to the rich,” as people resentfully commented in *How the Myth*. Instead, Flaherty shows the “actors” making a farm from seaweed and manure, or making oil from a shark’s liver—all of which were antiquated practices on the Islands in the 1930s. (Fields hadn’t been made with the method of seaweed for centuries.)

Flaherty’s methods of acquiring actors and actresses raises some significant ethical questions about the lengths he would go to achieve that “authenticity.” For example, he was determined to have someone play the role of the little boy, the child in this starring family. He had his eye set on an “ideal” one, named Michael Dillane. His mother, however, simply refused to allow her son to have anything to do with it. “We’d offered her more money than she’d ever dreamed of owning. She was poor, in fact, she was the poorest of the poor,” comments Flaherty. He had appeared in special footage to discuss the conditions he encountered in creating the film over the course of two years, puffing away at his cigar and gazing moodily around the room of the interview. In his own words, Flaherty bribed a priest to convince this woman that she should allow her son to be in the movie, and eventually she did. The problem had been that the woman (mistakenly) believed Flaherty to be a Protestant missionary.<sup>9</sup>

Four decades later, George C. Stoney’s *How the Myth Was Made: A Study of Robert Flaherty’s Man of Aran* was released in 1977. Much like the Irish Revivalists who preceded him in the early twentieth century, Stoney arrives to the island on a restorative

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<sup>8</sup> Religion, in this film, is curiously absent. Churches or stone forts are not mentioned.

<sup>9</sup> On the Aran Islands, there is a long-standing tradition of Protestant missions to the peasants, as mentioned earlier. The missionaries offered soup to the children in order to gather them in and persuade them to renounce Catholicism, as Michael Dillane’s mother was probably recalling.

quest: he is there “looking for [his] roots,” a self-referred “romantic who prefers the older ways.” Stoney’s father was the island’s first physician, and he was inspired to investigate the subject matter of Robert Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* documentary, which he watched as a little boy in North Carolina. He begins the commentary of his film poetically:

The cliffs and skies and faces one sees on the Aran Islands these days haven’t changed very much since Robert Flaherty came here back in 1931[...]. Flaherty, America’s most famous documentary filmmaker, had been attracted to these tiny islands off Ireland’s west coast by stories he’d been told about the hard life of the people, people whose very faces had been chiseled by the storms that lashed their rocky shores.

At its beginning, it seems as if this documentary will affirm, or merely echo, the sentiments created by the original. He agrees that the conflict of the film is “Man’s heroic struggle against the forces of nature.” It was Stoney’s intent to debunk the emergent school of *cinema vérité*, or “direct cinema,” which valued a journalistic objectivity and the absence of any modification on part of the filmmaker. He sought to prove that Flaherty, considered one of the classics and the greatest, was a “film-poet—even today, our best”—not as a documentarian in the strict, factually accurate and journalistic sense. In a sense, then, Stoney was actually *lauding* the virtues of “film poetry.”

Most critics, however, have interpreted Stoney’s documentary as an exposé on Flaherty’s “malpractice” as a documentarian—the same way that I view the implications of Stoney’s work (Winston 75). My charge against Flaherty comes not because he simply made editorial decisions about what to show and what not to show; after all, Synge, too,

is clear that *he* was selective, in which conversations to include and which ones to simply paraphrase—that he “disguised the identity of the people I speak of, by making changes in their names, and in the letters I quote, and by altering some local and family relationships”—though nothing, according to him, that was not “wholly in their favour” (*CW* 47). The major difference I identify in Flaherty, and what *he* constitutes as an “editorial” vision, is that he allows no room for growth, change, and life. He divorces the singular, virtuous Man from his place and community—much, perhaps, like the Aran Islands themselves, for their remote island geography, had been “divorced” in the popular imagination, made singular, and lauded as outstanding for its own merits. This individualistic paradigm paves the way for American neoliberal capitalism—the undermining of a people to self-determine, the exploitation of people, labor, and environment, and the increase in corporate power to override and *overwrite* the vision of what people are supposed to see when they come to the Arans.

The film becomes more complicated in allowing the perspectives of native islanders to *comment back* on the film. Interestingly, the film wasn’t even shown on the Islands until 1947 (O hEithir location 286). It was already preceded by a worldwide reputation when an enterprising showman brought in an oil-powered generator and showed the movie in a community hall! In Ireland, the film had been almost universally praised (O hEithir location 4199). Today, the film is shown twice weekly in that same community hall during the tourist season, between June and September, with a 16 millimeter projected owned by the harbor master. When the Island residents attended a

showing of the film, as Stoney recorded it, a telling conversation broke out. <sup>10</sup>One man said definitively to his interviewer, “I don’t think it was real at all. It was about what was staged, because I don’t’ think they would’ve gone out there, not in that weather, especially the curragh scene.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say, too, that the film is “not real” because it depicts women laboring—“We never made women to carry seaweed on their backs like that,” he declared, but a woman in the crowd refuted him vehemently and an argument ensued.<sup>12</sup>

To a twenty-first century viewer, Flaherty’s film is easy to dismiss as a fake, edited, inauthentic account that should not be regarded with much seriousness. It’s no secret, perhaps, that the ethics of that film and its production are questionable, however much of a “film-poet” he may be. The consequences of that film, though, are lasting—the persistent stage Irishman is not just relegated to the theater, as a result of the film’s popularity and associated tourism (for there is “even an air strip,” now, as the residents note):

It was inevitable that the islanders should begin to dramatize and distance themselves, to see themselves the way outsiders saw them. Pat Mullen [...] recounted how during the making of the film—which in any case fictionalized life on the islands for cinematic purposes—some of the

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<sup>10</sup> The recording was unusual because the islanders rarely watched TV, so although they were already familiar with the popular movie, the purpose of the showing was merely “to refresh their memories” and to elicit their responses to Flaherty, looking back at his work from the year 1977.

<sup>11</sup> This is an extremely practical analysis.

<sup>12</sup> The woman explained that the women *did* carry seaweed on their backs, and the clay, and that they “made” the land. This promises much for an ecofeminist reading, a point that I will address in my conclusion as a need for further research in this topic.

islanders saw themselves as characters (which is no doubt how Flaherty saw them), and began to act as Flaherty islanders off-camera. Amusingly, one woman said of another, “Well, Pat, did you ever hear the likes that—Noreen Shawn thinking that she knows as much about film work as I do. ...] I noticed for the past week that she was walking very heavy in herself. Yes, I’d say she has a touch of that drama thing.” In this way, Flaherty’s “screen-islander,” a filmic version of the stage Irishman, began to walk the real earth (Foster 1987: 337).

“If it weren’t for *Man of Aran*, I wouldn’t be on this island,” one woman said in *How the Myth*, tellingly. “I’d be where my sisters are, in England.”

Foster retains, in the above quote, the strict binary that I have been complicating in the present study (i.e., the strict divide between the “native” and the “nonnative”). It is not so much that the native islanders were passively, helplessly subject to the cultural influence that Flaherty brought with him, skewed and unrealistic as it is—I believe that islanders often appropriate those fictional, colonial images consciously and purposefully, as I will discuss in my next chapter on Liam O’Flaherty. This argument is not to say, of course, that the islanders are somehow categorically conniving, or that they are “responsible” for allowing the industrialization of the Aran Islands; it is to grant, however, that native writers, workers, and everyday people have more agency to comment back and respond to culture-makers than is often afforded to them. In other

words, the people depicted—not just the writers and artists who depict them—can negotiate, too, between the metaphoric locations of insider and outsider.

Like Declan Kiberd says, after all, there are advantages in racial politics to embracing the stereotypes; “the stereotypical Paddy could be charming or threatening by turns” (1995: 25)—acting the buffoon, maintaining a lovable and harmless disposition (influenced by drink); “servile when you must, insolent when you may” (Cahalan 10). Much of this masks the pain and exploitation that has marked this history; as George Stoney walks with his friend Peter Gil, who lives on the island, Gil remarks that Flaherty “made a real dish off of cheap labor here”—and the statement seems to carry a sentiment that goes even beyond the result of just one film.

What, then, are the consequences of seeing Robert Flaherty’s film this way? By deconstructing the actual origins of Solnit’s “captive indigenous spectacle,” more troublesome ethical dimensions of Aran Island tourism certainly come to light. Although it would be radical to suggest that this industry should be dismantled, I see the most promising point of Aran Islands representation, and representational authority, to be put into the hands of the people in a collaborative manner. Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* lauds the “Man” and his singular accomplishments, but Stoney’s reaction documentary sets the groundwork for a new type of postcolonial storytelling to emerge: a collectively woven tale, not one that has been falsely imposed by appropriating “local” customs and lore for commercial purposes.

### Chapter Three

#### **Hybridity in Liam O’Flaherty’s Short Fiction and Satire, and the Peasant’s Work of Cattle Prodding**

An Irish nationalist who fought for the British Army. A socialist who fought for the British Forces. A novelist who wrote the darker side of life. A short story writer who was mild and poetic. An anti-cleric who was under obligation to the Church. A Gaelic speaker who earned his living writing in English. [...] This was the conflict that was embedded in his writing. Nature’s combat with man. Man’s combat with nature. Man’s combat with man...

--*Islandman Abroad* (a 2002 documentary film on Liam O’Flaherty)

Most literary critics praise Liam O’Flaherty, described as “a nihilist and an antihumanist,” as the first Irish author to embrace a genuine “ecological sensitivity” (Hidebidle 13). His writings convey a stark naturalistic realism, akin to Jack London or Rudyard Kipling.<sup>13</sup> For all their “oversimplification” and “exaggeration,” says the critic James McElroy, the consensus on O’Flaherty’s works is that they “nevertheless permit certain facets of *native* island discourse, and this includes islandic perspectives on how to designate ‘nature,’ to figure in their eco-based narratives”—narratives which celebrate the “interdependence” of humans (the Irish) and other species of the earth (57, citing Thompson 1983: 80-97 and Scher 1994: 121-122; emphasis mine).

In fact, this accurately describes *my own* assumptions of what I would find when I read Liam O’Flaherty. I admit I was sure that, as an indigenous Irish person writing in his

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<sup>13</sup> This, however, excludes the substantial amount of ecocritical work that has been done with James Joyce.

own language, his would be the account that is the most “true,” and diametrically opposed to the artificial visions that Synge or Robert Flaherty would offer as mere “outsiders.” However, my own experience with Liam O’Flaherty proved very different. Although there is still an ecological wisdom to be had in the works of O’Flaherty, designations like McElroy’s and others’ are, in my opinion, too reductionist. As the opening quote of this chapter suggests, O’Flaherty’s message—like Synge’s—is complicated, like that of any bilingual writer in an Anglophone nation. This is a reading of O’Flaherty which has gone surprisingly neglected among the scholars (Cahalan xii).

In this chapter, then, I will illustrate the “hybridity” or *mestiza* consciousness in the writings and letters of Liam O’Flaherty, to borrow a term from Chicana cultural theory.<sup>14</sup> Displaced, mobile, and less provincial in his outlook than one would initially expect, O’Flaherty ties multiple influences together in his outlook, not just an inherent “native” perspective. Although he is frequently contrasted with Synge, whose cosmopolitanism came from his own experiences at university, I find an equally *syncretic* perspective in Liam O’Flaherty that is reinforced even in language. James M. Cahalan describes O’Flaherty’s hybrid consciousness succinctly—especially as it manifests in the Irish cultural psyche as “embodying dualities,” exactly as Joy Kennedy described Synge.

With his many cantankerous contradictions, O’Flaherty embodies a series of dualities still found today among the natives of the Aran Islands: Irish

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<sup>14</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa first proposed this term in the 1987 semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In the Modern period, DuBois’ “double consciousness” referred to the psychological effect of being at odds with two disparate racial identities; a lamentation of the division, a lonely isolation. In keeping with a Postmodern ideology, however, that fragmentation is celebrated as a source of empowerment; contradictions are not a source of agony and frustration; it is ambiguous, fluid, and liminal.



and English, politics versus antipolitics, artlessness yet artfulness, sexism coexisting with strong women,<sup>15</sup> tragedy and comedy—indeed, life and death every day among the animals and people of the islands and the ocean in which they are perched (11).

What would an awareness of hybridity bring to one's reading of Liam O'Flaherty?<sup>16</sup> How would it change a reader's perspective? I argue that it reveals a more subtle but incredibly powerful rhetorical strategy that underlies the work: political mobilization—which I have termed “cattle-prodding,” to acknowledge O'Flaherty's satirical, blunt, self-conscious embrace of animalistic and “brutish” associations (peasant life, animals, environment all melded into one). This kind of provocation is not without purpose: it is a kind of vehicle for political dissidence and imminent jacquerie—ready for the “wild tumult” that was coming upon Ireland during the late Irish Literary Renaissance—“the unchained storm, the tumult of the army on the march, clashing its cymbals, rioting with excess of energy” (letter, 17 June 1927). It is not a harmless pronouncement of Irish affinity with the land and the environment, after all; it is a work to *rewrite* the Aran Islander as an autonomous force to be reckoned with.

Similar to the explicative strategy I took in describing J.M. Synge, I will begin by drawing on relevant biographical information. Liam O'Flaherty, another major figure of

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<sup>15</sup> I do wonder about the dichotomy Cahalan poses in this particular phrase. It is, perhaps, a discussion outside the scope of this present study.

<sup>16</sup> James Cahalan describes O'Flaherty as having “peasant consciousness,” but I think that the phrase runs the risk of becoming an essentialist, monolithic thing itself (10); that is why I prefer Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness, which is more fluid and acknowledges the encounter of disparate cultures into one through colonial venture.

the Irish Literary Renaissance, was born on Inishmore in 1896; he would have been a toddler when Synge first arrived. O’Flaherty was born into the heroic Ó Flaithearta clan, but into destitute poverty at the turn of the twentieth century. At this time, only about half of the Irish people in the Gaeltacht still spoke Irish, since most native speakers had been killed in the Great Famine, displaced to the United States, or actively discouraged from the use of their language. In fact, O’Flaherty’s father forbade the speaking of Irish in his own household (Calahan 12-13).

To put his biography a bit more lyrically, in an autobiographical note on himself in *Joseph Conrad: An Appreciation*, a work he wrote on his views on Conrad, O’Flaherty writes: “I was born on a storm-swept rock[...] Swift thought and the flight of ravenous birds, and the squeal of hunted animals are to me reality.” Indeed, O’Flaherty bore the title of “peasant” very proudly, even when it was used as an insult to him by the mother of the woman he, at one point, intended to marry (Cahalan 3). Although he had a scholarship to attend college in Dublin, he abandoned this in favor of the military—more interested in politics than in studies (Conneely 35). He was a revolutionary who embraced violent opposition as a means.<sup>17</sup> Like Synge, O’Flaherty also became disillusioned with his own upbringing; though the former was a pacifist, the latter, a militant, changed his views many times throughout his life, swinging between extreme attitudes on either end (Calahan 14). He had showed promise for the Catholic priesthood and even went to seminary, but became an atheist later and expressed strong anti-clerical feelings. Coming from a nationalist family, too, he initially joined the Irish Volunteers—

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<sup>17</sup> Hence, I am not sure where *Islandman Abroad*’s assertion of a “mild, poetic” figure comes from.

and then he disappointed his family tremendously when he joined the British Army. “[It] was a far greater blow to my relatives than my refusal to become a priest....and it was the event in my life most responsible for my outcast position in which I now found myself” (Conneely 36, citing O’Flaherty 1934: 17).

Audience, too, is another important factor to consider in Liam O’Flaherty’s writings. In an interesting parallel to the alleged Synge/W.B. Yeats dynamic, Cahalan insists that it is “difficult to overestimate the importance of Edward Garnett (the London writer, editor, and publisher’s reader) to O’Flaherty’s work...” (5). The editor was instrumental in getting O’Flaherty published for English-speaking readers in Dublin and London. In a fascinating *opposite* to what Yeats told Synge, though—to write about the mysterious and the unknown in the far-off Irish West, essentially—Garnett sent O’Flaherty *back* to the Aran Islands to write about the things he probably knew: “seagulls and congers, a peasant’s cow and the flight of a blackbird....sketches of the most delicate feeling and visual brilliance that few, even among the Irish, have [sic] equalled” (O’Brien 24). This was the life of rural poverty that fascinated people in London and Dublin (Cahalan 35). The ability to write in English secured his commercial success as a writer, but he did use both Irish and English. Most of his stories are self-translated from Irish Gaelic to English (with a few stories left in the original), though his English versions are not so much literal translations as they are “rewritings”—sometimes with striking differences in diction and meaning (Cahalan 20).

Though the Anglo-Irish actors in the Literary Revival might have preferred higher forms of art like drama and poetry, the short story is actually the most popular of all

literary forms with Irish readers and is more frequently chosen by native writers, perhaps for its relation to oral culture (Kiberd 43). O’Flaherty even refers to his short stories as “sketches,” and though he preferred his novels to them, his short stories are the works that have been his celebrated legacy—“sketches,” perhaps, in the same way that an artist might regard the “mood” or affect of impressionistic landscape, like Synge. Drawing on the ethos of the bardic tradition, perhaps (*dinnscheanchas*, knowledge of the lore of places, Kiberd 107)—or maybe out of his sheer arrogance as a person, as Cahalan thinks—O’Flaherty posits himself in a unique position to speak on behalf of the Island population as the revered poet and keeper of the knowledge and authority. “I don’t think I exert any judgment whatsoever in my writing at the moment of writing but *seem to be impelled by the Aran Islanders themselves who cry out dumbly to me to give expression to them*, and of course that has the drawback of all instinctive writing, that it appears to be unfinished, just like a natural landscape” O’Flaherty asserts of himself (Cahalan 99, quoting O’Flaherty in April 1923; emphasis mine).

James McElroy chooses an “ecological” story like “The Wounded Cormorant,” however, to contrast with Syngian teleological narratives (57). It demonstrates the one “conflict,” perhaps, that the writers of *Islandman Abroad* forgot to include in their assessment of O’Flaherty: not just “man’s combat with nature,” but moreover, “nature’s combat with nature.”<sup>18</sup> “Silence. It was noon. The sea was calm,” begins the short story

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<sup>18</sup> Instances of “man’s combat with nature” can be seen in a short story like “The Wren’s Nest,” for example, wherein two boys, Little Jimmy and Little Michael, aggressively destroy a wren’s nest and the eggs that lay there, just for fun. It is a dark and violent “coming of age,” in a sense, since the boys immediately regret the impulsive action. This ambivalence about the authoritative position of “man” over nature has prevented me from drawing the analogue between Robert Flaherty’s rendering of “Man vs Nature” and O’Flaherty’s.

of (1925: 95). “A goat dislodges a stone from the top of a cliff, which falls and injures one of the cormorants in a flock resting on the sea far below. “Cast out from the flock, death was certain. Sea-gulls would devour it,” O’Flaherty writes, and the gruesome tale continues:

They had no mercy. They fell upon it fiercely, tearing at its body with their beaks, plucking out its black feathers and rooting it about with their feet. It struggled madly to creep in farther on the ledge, trying to get into a dark crevice in the cliff to hide, but they dragged it back again and pushed it towards the brink of the ledge. One bird prodded its right eye with its beak. Another gripped the broken leg firmly in its beak and tore at it.

At last the wounded bird lay on its side and began to tremble, offering no resistance to their attacks. Then they cackled loudly, and, dragging it to the brink of the ledge, they hurled it down. [...]

Then it fluttered its wings twice and lay still. An advancing wave dashed it against the side of the black rock and then it disappeared, sucked down among the seaweed strands (98).

Like “The Wounded Cormorant,” Liam O’Flaherty wrote dozens of short stories that depict the harsh, naturalistic world of animals (and sometimes of abiotic natural features, like “The Wave” and “An Charraig Dhubh,” the black rock). His frequent subject matter was life on the Aran Islands, often without human protagonists but with animals and natural elements that are nonetheless highly anthropomorphized. The stories

are vivid and detailed, remarkable in their ability to capture the power and destruction of natural forces in simple, terse sentences.

How different is O’Flaherty’s description of the cormorant “dashed against the side of the rock and then[...] disappeared” from Synge’s equally ominous feeling about the fate of men succumbing to the tides?: “I could not help feeling that I was talking with men who were under a judgment of death. I knew that every one of them would be drowned in the sea in a few years and battered naked on the rocks [...]” (CW 162). To O’Flaherty and Synge equally, nature is blind and indifferent; it is a deterministic and inevitable force that has as much of a chance at destroying life as it does in granting it. Although Synge and Flaherty might imbue this idea with a little more tragedy and place man (or Man) at the forefront of this struggle, O’Flaherty’s ecological paradigm suddenly doesn’t seem too dissimilar from theirs. Though Synge may have come to the Irish language through study (and not of his own upbringing) while O’Flaherty was a native speaker with a changing political relation to that language, *each one* has a stake in having some sort of “insider’s” perspective on life on the Aran Islands, though that knowledge is then rendered accessible to an English-speaking normative public. Mairead Conneely understands O’Flaherty as “mirroring his own divided images of the exiled islander, caught up in the margins of his old island home and the margins of his lived existence in the city of Dublin” (36). I perceived the “divided,” unsettled tension as well, but I also affirm O’Flaherty’s freedom to leverage or emphasize these disparate influences with purpose.

First, consider this passage from Synge's journal, which bluntly depicts the tying up and throwing of twenty pigs into a steamer to be shipped off to an English market for slaughter:

[E]ach beast was caught in its turn and thrown on its side, while its legs were hitched together in a single knot[...]. Probably the pain inflicted was not great, yet the animals shut their eyes and shrieked with almost human intonations, till the suggestion of the noise became so intense that the men and women who were merely looking on grew wild with excitement, and the pigs waiting their turn foamed at the mouth and tore each other with their teeth. [...] They seemed to know where they were going, and looked up at me over the gunnel with an ignoble desperation[...] (CW 137-138).

I read this passage and find resonances to O'Flaherty's work; the action is described in a forthright manner, not diluted with unnecessary adverbs or descriptors; the nouns and verbs are strong enough to convey the violence. There is an anthropomorphized view imbued to the animals, who look at Synge with "ignoble desperation." Robert Flaherty, in *Man of Aran*, does not include any scenes of animal transportation at all; Stoney's only explanation is that it "did not fit in with his romantic vision," and Stoney opted himself to depict cattle thrashing, braying, violently resisting the men who press them, bind them up, drag them through the sea, and lift them onto ships to be taken away to market.

Conversely, consider these two “Syngian” moments from O’Flaherty in his letters to Edmond Garnett, his literary mentor and key to getting published in the Dublin and London circles:

It was splendid in Aran. The island has the character and personality of a mute God. One is awed in its presence, breathing its air. Over it broods an overwhelming sense of great, noble tragedy. The Greeks would have liked it. The people are sadly inferior to the island itself. But the sea birds are almost worthy of it. The great cormorant thrilled me. And while fishing...a great bull seal rose from the sea in front of me. He looked at me with brutal drunken eyes and then dived. Father says they have nests there in caves. (17 June 1927)

Synge would have been more polite than to say that the people are “sadly inferior to the island itself”—in fact, he often sees them as one in the same. O’Flaherty’s use of the vague, abstract association of “an overwhelming sense of great, noble tragedy” that the “Greeks would have liked” still recalls Synge’s more bucolic moments pondering the landscape. Like Synge, O’Flaherty projects human emotions and expressions on to the bull seal; his are “drunken eyes.” A similar moment of picturesque contemplation occurs here:

I sat for two hours in a field yesterday watching young heifers. It’s peculiar the way they lie down. Invariably they raise snouts in the air and blow out their breath. I think it’s to clear their nostrils... I never noticed this before... I love the country. The wind sighing in the trees is music to



me. Say, sometime when I make a lot of money you must come down to the Aran Islands with me. [...] I was thinking yesterday of the...piers at Kilronan in summer, lying with hands beneath the head listening to the boatman curse and talk about the coarse side...in a poetic manner, then watch some maiden bathe on the sandy beach. (April 1923)

It's easy to forget that this is the same mind that produced stories like "The Wounded Cormorant" or "The Cow's Death, a short story where a cow throws herself off of a cliff and plunges to her death, overcome by madness and depression at her separation from her stillborn calf, whose carcass had been tossed over that same cliff.

So far in this chapter, I hope to have well established the case that O'Flaherty is syncretic and complicated in his approach to environmental writing, not a mere poster child for the special proximity of an Aran Islander to his native soil. Again, though, I ask the question: what does hybridity lend to the reading experience? Is that hybridity a product of environment and culture? For what purpose have I explicated the "embodied dualities," ambiguities, or hybridity of both O'Flaherty—and, for that matter, Synge?

As I stated at the beginning of the chapter, I do suggest that there is an incendiary purpose in O'Flaherty's visceral, anthropomorphized approach to nature and animal life. Even for its status as satire, these words from the chapter on peasants from *A Tourist's Guide to Ireland* (1929) are inflammatory and, it seems, intended to provoke an action.

The peasant has also another quality which makes him very charming, and that is his uniformity with nature. Seeing him with a cow, his slow gait and his downcast

head, strike no jarring note. Even his jaws moving slowly as they chew a wisp of straw move in unison with those of the cow that is chewing her cud. He responds to the seasons like a bird or beast, clothing himself heavily or lightly, ploughing, reaping, sowing, or hiding in his hut, according as the cold or heat of nature bids him (115-116).

In that same book, he describes the peasant as “shiftless, dirty, hungry...subservient, fawning, groveling, terrified of life and death, eager for revenge, envious of success, fickle in their allegiance, unstable in their resolutions, excitable in temperament...The cunning type of peasant...rises out of this hellish life, using his cunning and rapacity and his shameless indifference to honour and decency” in order to succeed (Cahalan 14, quoting O’Flaherty 1929: 109, 132, 133).

Hybridity gives us the answer to this complicated interplay: O’Flaherty is not just writing for the “tourist” (although this is obviously suggested in the title of the book, and important); he is writing *as* an islander.<sup>19</sup> So, is O’Flaherty expressing a kind of repressed colonized violence that is finding its manifestation in animal violence? The answer to that question might require a kind of psychoanalytic reading that is beyond the scope of this text. He has, certainly, inherited a painful social history—one which he resisted at some points in his life and at other times seems to ignore. These descriptions may as much signal a *re-appropriation* of those images to a kind of political leverage, and not just a mere reflection of the fact that these descriptions were *put on* him by his unequal social

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<sup>19</sup> He is not writing *to* the islander, it seems, since I cannot find an Irish language version of *A Tourist’s Guide*. I will address this in the conclusion.

standing. If the peasant is “uniform with nature,” a cow—*made* that way, of course, in a colonial paradigm of submission—and yet the “peasant” association is one that O’Flaherty bore proudly apart from satire, it is reasonable to think that the writer is addressing both local and global audiences.

After all, not even the seemingly powerful, well-positioned “tourist” is exempt from the same unflattering humor. Visitors do not have the authority to arrange and meditate on what they see in a highly cerebral manner, like Synge; the helpless visitor is “a low fellow, an inquisitive, vulgar beggar, a loud-mouthed trot-about, a coarse eater...” (5) This unrefined intruder can be enlightened by the wise, knowledgeable native, who will nicely help him out of his ignorance...

I have come to the conclusion that it all results from the tourist being ignorant of the countries into which he goes for a visit. True enough, he is provided by the railways and by the tourist agencies with a great deal of information, but very little of it is credible except by a gullible and excitable person like a tourist (6)

... but, in the final paragraph, the satire is broken and a stirring call of action is articulated; a warning to the “tourist” to beware the fire that is being kindled in the wake of newly independent Ireland, as if he has the entire nation behind him in his words...

The tourist will also see, here and there, a sign and portent of salvation, some brave soul standing up and crying out the gospel of revolt and salvation. These visions are still rare, as rare as the happy old peasants we have seen dying in peace. But they exist and like a white star in the sky at

dawn, they are a sign of the morning sun. And it is through the fiery eyes of these rebels that the Irish peasant must really be seen and not through his dirt, his hunger, his apathy and the helpless hands that he waves despairingly at the sky in which he sees no heaven of the blest. These voices crying from the depths of hell shall bring up great forces of revolt, armed with the great wisdom of the damned, and they shall spread over the land and inhabit it with free men and women, free from usurpers and soothsayers (133-134).

Like the ideology of Robert Flaherty, then, Liam O’Flaherty—also imbued with “individualism” for his perception of himself as unique, an outcast, displaced from his community—implies that the work of spreading this “gospel” comes from individual, outstanding effort. In keeping the Irish Revivalist theory and zeitgeist, then, O’Flaherty does draw on islandic exceptionalism and removal to let this tale emerge, for it is the *land* that they inhabit... it is an autonomy from “usurpers and soothsayers,” from those universalizing, distant forces, perhaps, that intend to govern the “earthy” people. Yet this seemingly “earthy” writer from an “earthy” place, as we know, borrows as much from Dostoevsky (O’Brien 24), from London, from imaginings of ancient Greece—and here, then, is the puzzle of what Irish mestiza consciousness is all about it. It is embodying dualities—dualities which remain in rigid positions, as with the stark juxtaposition of English and Irish (never intertwined), both with free negotiation between the two.

### Conclusion

The Aran Islands are trapped. By positioning the native islander as a wise, exceptional fellow with a “weathered” face, bound up in the same wild energy as the craggy cliffs and ocean tides, the islander is yoked unjustly not to “land” in the truest sense—because environments are living, changing, and interdependent. If the Aran Islander, truly, were made to be so close to *land*, then the nature of the islands and the migratory movement they require would have, ironically, prompted their depopulation years ago. Instead, a falsely construed tourist business has confined the Aran Islander in time, and thus tied him to the *island* with false permanence; he is bound to the past, to primitivism, not even the kind of “primitivism” that is shaped by movement in the environment and the retention of local, shared skills and knowledge (as Synge imagines). It is a primitivism that is forged and maintained with singular human effort, like Flaherty imagines. It is a removal of the human person from community and ecology. Consider the cultural consequences of the perpetuation of the “screen islander”:

[...] Aran islanders now take that interest [in their home and culture] for granted and find their own interest stimulated by the attention of others. To be an Aran islander is to be someone special, part of a long and many-faceted tradition, growing up in bilingual community with an intense interest in its own history, just that trifle removed from mainland life and, perhaps, as one recent writer on island life commented acidly, imagining oneself to be just a shade better than most (O hEithir locations 164-175).

I will reiterate the initial questions I posed in the introduction to this thesis. If the Aran Islands are, in fact, a place made to constitute “authentic” Ireland, then who lays claim to it? (The outsider? The insider?) Is a binary framework of the “outsider” (*stranséir*, Aran word for tourist) vs. the “insider” (native)—or the competing narratives of the “colonial/picturesque” ideology vs. the “native/oral” one, as James McElroy put it (54)—actually *useful* in considering the “making” of the Aran Islands? What would it look like if we read two seemingly contrasting figures of the Irish Literary Renaissance, like O’Flaherty and Synge, in the context of a “shared environment”—not merely as political actors of their “movement” or moment in time, bound essentially to their statuses as natives or nonnatives?

I will summarize my findings for each of the authors and artists I have chosen to examine in this study. Regarding J.M. Synge, I argued that *The Aran Islands* and *Riders to the Sea* show an ambivalence that is extremely telling about his academic, liminal position to synthesize across cultures, disciplines, theories—in effect, taking a “page” from the holistic environment he sees to create an interactive museum; i.e., storing-place of preserved local knowledge to be learned from, compared with, and made known to the world. Regarding Robert Flaherty, I argued that this filmmaker *commodifies* the “local” to sell a vision of a unique, hard-working rural people who do everything they can to emerge with a voice from their otherwise overwhelming environment, through a deliberate selection and idealization of those islanders—in effect, setting the *stage* for the “drama” of Aran Island tourism. On Liam O’Flaherty, I discovered that there is no such thing as an unadulterated, “native” experience of environment that will serve as a kind of

litmus test for colonialism, and that this equally ambivalent position can be (and is) used purposefully in re-appropriating an otherwise (seemingly stagnant) human/nature comparison. In every case, then, I have acknowledged the enormous influence of place and environment—not just as an interesting thing to discuss, or a source from which to derive beautiful, rallying language—but as a factor which bears on *writers* and the productions of texts themselves. After all, every writer lives in “environment” not just as a local or a visitor, but importantly, as a human—a unifying thing, for sure, among Synge, O’Flaherty, and Flaherty... but not without the implication that humans are, and bring with them, an incredible diversity of cultural ideas *embedded* in environmental experience.

Literary criticism is valuable as an approach to environmental and economic circumstances on the Aran Islands because of its effective ability to critique, demystify, and “talk back” to the colonial narratives that overwrite them. Literary texts themselves of many genres and media—creative nonfiction prose, drama, documentary film, short story, and satire, to name a few—provide a critical point of intervention in human culture. This point lends itself well to the areas I perceive as in need of attention for future, interdisciplinary research.

- (1) Agency—A more complicated analysis of power relations would certainly improve the scope and depth of this paper. Although I have tried to keep a strict adherence to historicity in my research, I was certainly not comprehensive in my delineation of Irish conflict, politics, and history. If I had, perhaps, then the question of native islanders’ *agency* could have made a

prominent appearance in this kind of study. For instance, although I have identified the moments where native islanders provide their own opinions on what's been said of them, or act on outsiders' expectations purposefully, there is a more complicated problem in the fact that Synge's and Flaherty's works are privileged—put in the popular canon, established in the major literature—while Liam O'Flaherty's works are pigeon-holed as a “native” and “ecological” voice.

- (2) Ecofeminism—Notably, autonomous women writers are very absent from the canon of voices on and about the Aran Islands, or at least in what I could find of the literature. My discussion would be vastly more comprehensive by its attention to gendered experience, and the privileging of male writers (both in environmental writing and in Irish studies, generally). Ecofeminism coincides all too well, perhaps, with the “ecofeminine” for the conspicuous ways in which Irish women, especially, are framed in stereotypes of the mythic Celtic nature goddess, the giver and taker (like Maurya), or the Madonna figure with baskets of seaweed on her back (like Maggie). And yet, one of my earliest inspirations for this research project was the poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill—one of the most famous Irish Gaelic poets today, and certainly just one point of proof that autonomous women's voices are equally as compelling and worthy of scholarly attention not just for its attribute as “women's.” Avenues for future research in this field, then, would review the primary texts with special attention to constructs of gender. It may be more difficult to find earlier Irish



texts written by female authors, but it would be noteworthy to analyze the ways in which women in more recent times may have “written back” to these earlier narratives.

- (3) Environmental justice—*Nature knows no borders*. This is the motto of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies in the Middle East. Its purpose is to call upon a shared experience of the environment— and a common calling to study, promote, and defend an ethic of sustainability—as a means of peace building among ethnic groups in conflict. Is such a model possible for Ireland?

As I have established over the course of this paper, the shared experience of “environment”—certainly, one as unique and liminal as the space of the Aran Islands—complicates the traditional categories. (It does not entirely erase or neutralize religious, national, and ethnic/racial difference; it does, however, render those differences more permeable and fluid, and call upon a more universalizing “humanity.”) I hope to call for the re-appropriation of economic circumstances, industry, and use of resources away from corporate control and back into the hands of islanders themselves, though this would be a far more expansive academic effort than I was able to accomplish for this project. The ramifications are global, after all, with the erasure of subsistence living in favor of a capitalist service economy; as Rebecca Solnit says in *A Book of Migrations* (2011): “Thus an Aran Isles sweater knitted for an international market is not the same as an Aran Isles sweater knitted for the family. It looks the same, but it’s part of a market economy, not a subsistence economy; subsistence and handicraft have become an

aesthetic of authenticity. The vast and ever-expanding industry of tourism threatens to turn the whole world into a series of theaters whose companies perform palatable versions of their culture and history” (19). Indeed, the correlation of Anglicization and industrial pollution in Ireland is an area of interest for humanists, scientists, activists, and everyday citizens all alike, one that I did not have the means to explore at length here (Kiberd 143).

Would the rhetorical style of J.M. Synge (harmonizing) or Liam O’Flaherty (provocative) be most effective for that task? It might be too easy of an answer to suggest “both,” but I do see promising opportunities in Synge’s openness to accessibility, and O’Flaherty’s integrity on the merits of decentralized power and political participation among the people. It is important that Aran Islanders *themselves* are invited into this discourse. Although O’Flaherty, for instance, would frequently include special meanings and “messages” in the Irish stories in his *Diuil* collection (see Cahalan’s discussion on bilingualism), as if they were intended for the audience of the native speaker, not all of his works are balanced in this way. He presumes to speak on behalf of the people, but perhaps a Syngian attitude of privileging the community would be beneficial; though I am sure, of course, that those communal voices amount to far much more than “babbles” or “drones.”

- (4) Ecotourism—Today, the Islands maintain their reputation as a place to see Irish culture in harmony with the land, epitomizing the Irish west and romanticizing a rural life. It is a popular destination for eco-spirituality

retreats and weddings officiated by modern Celtic druids in nature-based pagan ceremonies. Development on the island has brought on some concerns, whether or not these are ethically justified; diesel generators for electricity, televisions, and deep-freezers; storage tanks built, plumbing in the houses, roads widened to accommodate mini-buses and cars, and “even an air strip,” like Stoney exclaims in *How the Myth was Made*. For instance, Mairead Conneely recounts a story of one tourist’s indignation at the presence of a Supermac’s fast food restaurant opened on Inishmore, a terrible deterrent to the authentic, locally flavored experience she wanted to have (2). Sustainable development should certainly be taken into consideration on the Aran Islands, (a) to provide a more equitable means for Islanders to make a living and (b) to honor the reverent place of nature, forests, and greenery in Irish culture, a value that has been compromised in Ireland’s current economic turbulence (see Wenzell 2009). See Stephen Royle’s study published in *Irish Geography*, “Exploitation and celebration of the heritage of the Irish islands” (Jan 2010).

Apart from these additional points of interest I have outlined, I realize that my own analysis could be improved, or expanded upon, with the addition of another question. For example, how do external factors like remote island geography, transplanted agricultural and land-use practices, and massive waves of Irish emigration to the United States influence relationship to place? (I have talked about the cultural *resonances* of islands as “remote” and farming as difficult, but I have not taken any kind of *materialist* ecocritical approach. For example, what challenges did Robert Flaherty

face in producing a film *on* the island? Did he really experience the kind of tough labor in doing that which colored his own view of what his “actors” were doing? Conversely, what do we make of Liam O’Flaherty’s writing of short stories about the Aran Islands *away* from that location, like in New York and Dublin? What more can be said of the Aran Islands’ geographic position *between* Europe and the Americas, alluded to by Synge and, perhaps, subtly underscored in Robert Flaherty, as an American himself?) Approaches from other disciplines may also round out the findings I have presented here. For instance, what would a modern anthropological survey reveal? Or an assessment of the ways in which fisheries and farms are managed for their sustainability?

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Thank you for your attention to my research. I hope that the thesis has provided at least some original entry into the conversation on Ireland, environment, literature, and the Aran Islands—a place I almost feel I have already known, but look forward to seeing myself in person someday soon.

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