CHAPTER II.

THE MAN

I.

John Millington Synge was born on 16th April, 1871, at Newtown Little, near Rathfarnham, a village in the outer suburbs of Dublin.

His father, John Hatch Synge, was by profession a barrister-at-law, and is described as "a modest, thoughtful man who preferred the quiet of home life to any outside amusement." He was not altogether barristeric; he had inherited some landed property in Co. Galway, which brought him an annual rental; and in those years a barrister who had landed property behind him differed from one who was merely barrister.

John M. Synge's mother was the daughter of Rev. Robert Trall, Rector of Schull, in Co. Cork. The famine of 1847 fell more heavily on that district than on any other part of Ireland, and the Rector died of a fever contracted while relieving the poor. As for Synge's people on the father's side, it was customary with such of them as took a profession to be ordained in the Established Church. John M. Synge therefore came from Protestant Church of Ireland families on both sides. The Synges were an old Wicklow family which had given a long line of bishops and archbishops to the Ascendency party. They had been therefore several hundreds of years in Ireland if not of Ireland. The great-grandfather of the dramatist sat in the last "independent" Parliament of Ireland, and voted against the Union; it redounds to his credit but in no way proves that theSynges

1 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Bourgeois.

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were Irish, for the Parliament he would have saved was itself in no way Irish. It was only Ascendancy.

John Hatch Synge, the dramatist's father, died in 1872. John M. Synge, not yet two years old, can therefore never have known his father. The family then moved to Orwell Park, Rathgar, which is in the inner suburbs of Dublin. At Rathgar the boy grew up, living there until he was nineteen.

He received, we are told, "a somewhat delusory education, at which in after life he would sneer with a violent sardonic scorn." He attended private classes in Dublin and afterwards in Bray. At fourteen he was taken from school, his health not being good, and set to read at home with a private tutor till he was ready for college. He entered Trinity College, Dublin, in June, 1888, as a pensioner; his tutor there was his mother's first cousin, Dr. Anthony Trall. At Trinity, in 1892, he obtained prizes in Irish and Hebrew—the choice of subjects suggests that he too, following the family tradition, had thoughts of going into the ministry of the Church of Ireland; and in Michaelmas term of the same year he obtained his B.A. After June, 1893, his name is found no longer on the College books. At this time his chief interest was in music. He had taught himself the flute, and become expert on the violin and piano. But he had other interests as well, natural history being one of them. While still in his teens he became a member of the Dublin Naturalists' Field Club, and, even before that, loved to take long and lonely rambles in the country, observing wild life and collecting such heterogeneous treasures from ditch and branch as only a boy's eyes can spy out. In languages too he was already interested as also in literature; he had got even as far as relieving his feelings in plays and verse. Neither at this time however, nor for years afterwards, was literature the chief passion of his life; his art was music, he thought, and it was for the further study of it he set out for Germany as soon as he was free to do so.

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II.

He may not have known it, but his ‘new life’ began with his leaving of Ireland. He stayed first at Darmstadt and Coblenz and later on at Würzburg. It is not clear whether he aimed at becoming a composer or executant of music, or both. The violin chiefly occupied him, but he also studied composition and harmony. By 1894 he had made up his mind against becoming a professional musician. He told one of his nephews that he could not go near the Germans in composing, and that he was too nervous to perform in public. M. Maurice Bourgeois records in his very useful book that Dr. Michel Elmasian, who knew Synge in Paris, stated that he gave up music because he had been unsuccessful at a competition in original composition; he had failed to develop a given theme.

His sojourns in Europe were mostly in Germany and France, but he spent from February to May, 1896, in Italy, at Florence and Rome. His allegiance had been gradually shifting, it appears, from music to literature, and in Paris the desire to write revived in him. He thought of becoming in English an interpreter of French life and literature.

We know but little of those wanderings of his on the Continent. Even those who afterwards became very friendly with him, such as Mr. John Masefield and Mr. Jack B. Yeats, can recall that he communicated but little to them of these European years. “He was silent about all that,” says Mr. Masefield, but it is right for us to recollect that about everything else as well that had any bearing on his own life he was equally silent. He was a more than usually reticent man. During those years it was noticed at home that he had become unorthodox in religion. He once said to a friend: “It is very amusing to me coming back to Ireland to find myself looked upon as a Pariah because I don’t go to church and am not orthodox, while in Paris amongst the students I am looked upon as a saint, simply because I don’t do the things they do, and many come to me as a sort of

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Father Confessor and wish they could be like me.” At this time he was about twenty-six. In Paris he met a type of Irishman and Irishwoman he would probably never have met with had he stayed at home or in England—the Irish revolutionary, the extreme nationalist, of which type Paris had had, ever since the days of Wolfe Tone, its fair number.

It was in Paris, in March, 1898, that Mr. W. B. Yeats advised him to give up writing for English papers, and to take himself off to the Aran Islands in Galway Bay. Acting on this advice he left France in May, 1898, and came to Aranmore. From this on—he had still eleven years to live—he spent much of each year in Ireland, either in Dublin, when his plays were being rehearsed, or in the Aran Islands, or in Kerry, or Wicklow or Connemara, or the Blasket Islands, which are off the Kerry coast. In between, he went back to Paris, less and less often however as the years went on.

He gave up his lodgings in Paris towards the end of 1902, and on his way home spent some months in London. His first play, In the Shadow of the Glen, was produced in 1903, Riders to the Sea in 1904, The Well of the Saints in 1905, and The Playboy of the Western World in 1907. He suffered much from ill-health in 1908 and in March, 1909, he died in a Dublin hospital.

III.

We have now divided his life, short though it was, into a number of chapters—his youth in Dublin, his wanderings in Europe, his discovery of Ireland—for that is what it was—his activities as dramatist, his death; and by looking more closely at these chapters in turn we may find ourselves gradually winning to some intimacy of feeling with the spirit behind the plays.

He was the youngest of the family. It was a large family. Even when quite young, two brothers and one sister had died, he had still three brothers left him and one sister. It

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is accepted that the eldest or the youngest in a family is most likely to be endowed with genius. When it shows itself in the eldest, one thinks it has been induced in him by careful training; he has been petted into self-realisation. If it break out in the youngest the reason often is that left very much to himself he comes upon strange realms, rather within than without his own mind, which, he discovers for himself, he can people with creatures more vital than the casual beings he strikes against upon the earth. Who can guess how much of the genius of the world is due to that division that comes so naturally to be made between the eldest and the other child members of a large family? To those other members he is so often handed over, and they so often find him in the way: his young feet are neither swift nor strong enough for theirs, and his spirit is not daring. Of course there is no intertemporal neglect; if there is callousness it is unconscious; and in the case of John M. Synge one certainly finds no hint of division between himself and the others; while between himself and his mother—his father, as we have seen, died when the boy was not quite two years old—the most tender affection existed until her death, which predated his own only by a few months. Yet one fancies that that reticence, that silence in company which so marked him out in after years, may have had its origin in the almost unguessed at loneliness in which so often the youngest member of a family grows up.

He was not only the youngest, he was also delicate. "We have reason to believe," says M. Maurice Bourgeois, "that the influence of home never greatly told on him; indeed, as a lad, Synge was strangely reserved and even unhappy to a certain extent; he shunned rather than desired companionship; he would hardly take part in the games of his age, and much preferred open-air exercise and solitary rambles in his beloved Dublin mountains to indoor life." "He shunned rather than desired companionship." But is it not those very boys who most of all desire companionship that seem most of all unable to achieve it? Young Synge found companionship for himself in the wild; in plant life and animal life and in the formation of the rocks. He was fortunate in having so vast and varied a hinterland as lies within reach almost on every side of Dublin; while his holidays were spent in Wicklow, a garden of delights. He surely was such a boy as might easily come to be haunted by its catacombs and wooded glens.

His boyhood then was wayward, self-led, not put upon, inward, not alert, except to such phenomena as had stirred his affections. That solitude which in Goethe's thought fosters genius was his, and wisely Jacob Böhme said: "Whoso lives quietly in his own will, like a child in the womb, and lets himself be led and guided by that inner principle from which he is sprung, is the noblest and richest on earth."

Later on he found in music another world to which he could retreat. This study he fortunately kept up during his College days. His teachers were good, and his progress must have been marked since he thought of finding his career in it. If it were this idea that sent him to the Continent and not to England, we may hold that it was music which unwittingly hared his feet into his own especial realm.

One is surprised to find him, in the 'nineties, studying Irish in Trinity College. Our surprise might not be so great if we knew exactly why: College regulations, premiums, study courses, if only one were familiar with them, might explain it. In Trinity, Irish at that time was of course studied as a dead language; and indeed it was little better with it anywhere else. The great awakening that was to make later on such difference to Synge himself had not yet come. Yet dead and all as that study was in Trinity in those days, it may have had its share in first inclining his mind towards the European scheme of things, languages and all. It has done so with many others since.

About those University years of his we have not very much information; we know however that he came to dislike Trinity as soon as he became nationalist. While a student there he seems to have worked diligently.
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One gladly notes that he exhibited none of that devastating precocity which repels one in those who in their teens make up their minds to write masterpieces before they are five and twenty. And the child was father to the man: his whole life long he despised cleverness. Would that his mantle had fallen on a school of writers that since his death has arisen in Dublin!

IV.

Done with the University, he set out for Europe. M. Bourgeois hints at "an unfortunate and mysterious love affair" as one of the motives for his departure; he however adds: "In so doing Synge was also following the tradition of literary absenteeism which has set in with most of the modern Irish writers—Oscar Wilde, Mr. G. B. Shaw, Mr. George Moore, Mr. W. B. Yeats." But surely Synge's case was different. Most of those writers and all our other literary absentees were simply so many workmen making towards the labour mart; that mart was in London and thither they went and settled. The love affair apart, one thinks that it was music and not literature hastened Synge's feet from his native Dublin. It cannot have been literature. That would surely have landed him in London, and even if, landed there, he did unconventionally still hunger after Europe, he would have received such instruction as to what was right and proper in Continental literary circles, and who were and who were not to be compromised with there, and what salons and theatres and studios were significant, that the free spirit which did actually set out for Europe would have been bewitched and bewitched before it got to the Continent at all. His subsequent experience then would have been of European literary circles, and not of European life. That misfortune he escaped, and we may thank his love of music for it. In the years to come, nothing else was to befall him so significant as this skipping over London.

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There was at least one other Ascendancy Irishman who skipped over London in this way on his passage to Europe. That was Oliver Goldsmith. He, it is true, did not get to Europe without lingering for some time in Edinburgh, but Edinburgh is not London, and in those days was far more itself than it is now. The effect on Goldsmith's work of his coming on London only after long and haphazard wanderings in Europe, we have never seen treated with even ordinary insight. Has anyone suggested that it may account for his standing apart, as he does in his work, from the others of his day? He is not an Irish writer, he is not even an Anglo-Irish writer, but the recollections of his youth in Ireland succeeded in impressing the work of his ripe manhood with that element of loneliness which is the quality that distinguishes it from that of his contemporaries; and this functioning in his later days of his earliest perceptions would never have happened, we hold, only for his continental experiences; for it was this that sanctioned in his mind the homely phenomena of his youthful surroundings, sanctioned them as normal and sterling and neither unique nor freakish. In nature Goldsmith differed much from Synge yet he also had much in common with him. Both were emotional rather than intellectual; and to the fact that their emotional equipment, so to speak, was not put out of action may be attributed all that we have enduringly from their pens. If their emotional equipment had been destroyed, they would have had nothing left. When that fate overtook others of the Ascendancy Irish, from Sheridan to Shaw, they either fell back on intellectual brilliancy or persisted in the void. Their work therefore, and that of all their kind, as one may understand, lacking those emotional overtones which are so precious in literature, which are indeed the very touch of nature, have something of a dry brittleness in them. One reads them in a sort of fear, uncertain that inhuman laughter may not at any time assault our ears. It was contact with Europe kept open the channels through which both Synge and Goldsmith conveyed to us the beatings of their impulsive
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hearts. In Goldsmith’s case, as has been said, it permitted him to use up the memories of his youthful Irish days. In Synge’s case it acted differently, for he had not had the good fortune to be born and reared in rural Ireland—land of homesickness and freedom—and so could not draw, in the same way, on his boyish recollections. Yet that which contact with Europe did for him may have been greater: to a large degree it purged his eyes of Ascendancy prejudices; it taught him that rural Ireland, strange and unruly land as it was, derided, despised, impoverished, unenlightened, ignorant, was not, for all that, abnormal, was instead, a natural sort of place, with many features in it that compensated for the regulated comfortableness of English life, the ideal of all his class. There was then no reason for thinking that hearts that beat in the Irish way were not as sterling as those other hearts that beat in another way. It is not that there are not many differences between Irish life and European life, but these differences are not unexpected in places so far apart, places speaking different languages and living under different suns. What stultifies the Protestant Ascendancy man who for the first time leaves Ireland for England is that the two schemes of life should be at once so similar and dissimilar. He has been always taught that one was the norm; and on acquaintance he confesses that such indeed it is for him. What can he do with his youthful perceptions of life? He had better forget them! What wonder then if people like Mr. St. John Ervine become so much more British than the British themselves? 1

1 Mr. St. John Ervine, commenting in a letter to the “Times,” 8 Sept., 1909, on “The passing fact that any Briton who defends his country in the United States is stigmatized as a propagandist,” writes: “May I express my belief that the effort to avoid ‘irritating’ Americans by defeating our country when it is attacked is being overdone? Frankly, I do not care whether I irritate American or any other people by stating what I believe to be the truth about my country. Heaven forbid that we should ever always to be apologizing for ourselves, but heaven forbid, too, that we should stand tamely by while we are assailed or misrepresented, on the ground that if we dare to defend ourselves or to correct misstatements we shall upset people.”

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hinted, he expects it; and then if he travel off the beaten track in Europe he begins to discover, beneath the great differences, fundamental resemblances, which fact sets him thinking in a new way on Irish history. Not Ireland itself, under its alien Ascendancy, has been more war-ravaged than parts of Europe: indeed there is hardly a spot of European ground that has not in this regard more resemblance to Ireland than to England—England littering and refattening its haunts of ancient peace, century after century, while its soldiers campaigned abroad. We recollect that in the early stages of the Great War a writer in an English review mentioned how struck he was with the resemblance he noted between the small towns and villages of Poland and those of Ireland: he did not, however, betheke himself of the untoward circumstances that had brought the similarity about.

In Europe, then, the Ascendancy man may come on such instruction as enables him to read the map of Ireland anew. If that map show unenlightenment in the landscape, that unenlightenment is not without cause, nor does it prove the people freakish or inane; for those other countries whose stories are similar are not different. There is also, of course, the vast teaching he may come upon in the Catholic portions of Europe. He may note many differences between European and Irish Catholicism. The probability is, of course, that he has never been in an Irish Catholic church in his life, but however great the differences he must at least be led to question which of the two religions he knows of in Ireland is the more European. If he plunge, as Synge did, not only into the literature, the art, the music, but also into the life of the common people in such countries, his instruction will of course be bettered immensely. It is unthinkable therefore that an Ascendancy man after coming thus in liberal contact with European life would not come back to a reading of Irish life with clearer vision. Yet we find M. Bourgeois writing this extraordinary sentence: “His [Synge’s] European learning did not hamper his perceptions of Aran life, or of
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Irish life at large." But M. Bourgeois, though learned in Ireland and its ways, is for all that a foreigner, and so is to be forgiven. Of course it was Synge's European learning enabled him to look at Irish life without the prejudices of the Ascendancy class coming in the way. For Goldsmith his European learning did no more than make available for literary traffic, if one may say so, his memories of such intimations of immortality as fell upon him in Irish valleys and beneath Irish roof-trees. He never came back to those childhood scenes, nor did he ever dream of writing of them for an Irish public: for all that, these recollections of his youth are the native salt that keeps his work fresher and saner than that of any of his contemporaries—more modern too, for Europe in teaching him the value of the homely in literature had democratized him far beyond the uses of his day in England. But Europe in helping to remove the prejudices from the vision of John Synge did really more for him. These prejudices removed, he should be clear-sighted then? Yes, but from clear-sightedness to warm affection is a far cry. The scientist's eye is very different from the lover's. It was Europe cleared his eyes of the fog of prejudice, not entirely of course. It was Nationalism however that lit the flame of love within them; and the second change could never have taken place only for the first.

The ingrained prejudices of the Ascendancy mind are so hard, so self-centred, so alien to the genius of Ireland, that no Ascendancy writer has ever succeeded in handling in literature the raw material of Irish life as, say, a sculptor handles his clay. From old intimacy the sculptor's thumb assumes a quickened sensibility as the clay heats upon it: the clay seems to master him; it leads him on: this he is to do, and not that. But what if he despise the clay? If, taught of the centuries, he fear its contact, instinctively withdraw from it as one does from a stuff that is not only slimy but treacherous? No Ascendancy writer has ever succeeded in creating a living picture of Irish life: Castle Rackrent—

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which, to repeat, is the best thing they have done—is of course a picture of the English in Ireland. The life of Ireland, which is the life that counts, the national life, is not for them; it is as deeply hidden from them as the life of India is from the English Ascendancy there. An Ascendancy is an Ascendancy, and has to pay the price. We recall to vision an estate round which one of those Ascendancy families had erected a wall ten or twelve foot high and fully seven miles in length. As I read Ascendancy literature, such walls—and they are everywhere in the Irish landscape—throw their shadows across the pages. Many an Ascendancy writer must have wished to present, under the form of art, the teeming life he saw about him, many must have believed they had done so. But where now are their novels or plays? No one casts the failure in their face; it was not from any want of heart or goodness or intelligence or scholarship or craft they individually failed; it was that the system into which they were born made it impossible for them to succeed. Their hands were gloved with so thick a protective covering that the clay would not adhere to their thumbs; clay and thumb were disparate. An alien Ascendancy the artist cannot choose but loathe, it has, whether Asiatic or Roman or Spanish or British, always been so streaked with the vulgarity of insensibility. Such an Ascendancy is l'Élitisme—the coldest of all cold monsters—free of all the kindly influences of tradition, set loose to prey not on its own people, as it even will, but on its enemy—l'Élitisme therefore at its most callous, because at its most fearful and frowning. Its spiritual growth, one may say, is from insensibility to insensibility. In the end it produces extreme types like Sir Henry Wilson, at whom, when they unwisely declare themselves, the world wonders.

Again, wherever there is an alien Ascendancy there is topay-turveydom. To deny this is the lie agreed upon in the Ascendancy mind. When they create a literature, as in Ireland, that lie agreed upon is the foundation of that literature. Indeed when in spite of itself, Ascendancy literature begins to question its own traditional assumptions—
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as Standish O'Grady did in our case—the days of that Ascendancy are numbered. Yet of course the lie has been long abroad in the world, is so sanctioned by years, so adopted as sterling truth, that one almost despairs of undoing it. In that is the difficulty of presenting the Irish case! It cannot but be taken amiss, and for two reasons. The topsy-turvydom that obtains in an Ascendancy-ridden country cannot be conceived of in normal countries that live their own life. Secondly, in the literature which the Ascendancy has for years or centuries been creating, the topsy-turvydom is not adverted to. The outsider, therefore, unless he read between the lines of this literature, is without the clue that would help him to test the whole scheme of things. The reformer who begins by saying that mentally Ireland is topsy-turvy is not listened to; he is written down a crank, an odd-man-out, by outsiders who actually quote Ascendancy literature against him! By the Ascendancy at home, and all their hangers on, he is made to feel that he does not play the game; which of course is a quite correct description of him.

The moment one has the clue he will find at every turn evidence of the mental upset; he will find it in the Dubhla drawing room, in the Catholic college, in the press, in the theatre, everywhere. Take for instance the words so sane a critic as Mr. E. A. Boyd writes of John Todhunter: "He did not—he could not—wholly de-Irish himself, but at all events he succeeded for a time in seeing Ireland with the eyes of an Irishman." One can easily imagine the casual reader, passing on without adverting to the implication in these words that the whole working mentality of Ireland must be upset. Here is an account of a very decent, intelligent, Irish-born, Irish-reared, Irish-educated gentleman— if Trinity College, Dublin, be reckoned as in Ireland,—who, under

1 Ireland's Literary Renaissance, by Ernest A. Boyd.
2 Here is the History and Geography paper for the Entrance Examination in Art 1928 by Trinity College in April, 1928. (a) What was Domesday Book? What do you know about Simon de Montfort? (b) In what circumstances did Henry VII become King of Ireland? Give an account of Mounmouth's rebellion? Describe the movement which led to the Reform Bill of 1832. (c) What was the Sack Act? (d) What is the commercial importance of the

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the stress of a national movement, did for a time succeed in seeing his own country actually with his own eyes! Swift could not have thought of a more alluring theme for an extra chapter to Gulliver. Of course John Todhunter did not long remain at normal, the strain was too great; he went back, 'naturally,' to the abnormal and was, we are to presume, once more at peace.

Or take the same critic's telling of Standish O'Grady's awakening: "It so happened that, about the year 1872, a young student of Dublin University (i.e. Trinity College) was obliged to spend a wet day indoors at a country house where he was visiting. While exploring the book-shelves he came upon the three volumes of O'Halloran's History of Ireland, where he made the discovery that his country had a great past—an interesting, but awkward fact, which had been well hidden from him, in accordance with the current precepts of Irish Protestant education." Is it any wonder that such Irish Protestants as come over to the nationalist side, as discover that Ireland was and is a nation, feel as much bitterness towards their Alma Mater as Synge? Or take Mr. W. B. Yeats' statement, that a time comes to every Irish writer when he has to make up his mind either to express Ireland or to exploit it. It needs only to be pointed out that such a time never arrives for the English, the French or the German writer, or indeed the writers of any normal country.

Once our eyes are opened to this we cannot help but notice now with surprise, now with indignation, then with scorn or with mere helpless laughter, the topsy-turvy that is the ripe creation of centuries of Ascendancy rule and Ascendancy thinking. And all that should help us to right the wrong is so likely to be against us:

Et l'œil éveillé qui nous rouge le courant

1 Panama Canal? What are the characteristics of the Baltic Sea? What do you know about the great cattle-and-meat-exporting countries of the world? What country exports the largest number of live cattle? Where are Detroit, Minneapolis, Lexington, Oara, Nara, Amsterda, Lemberg, Strasburg? Mention places of transit in connection with any of them.
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What a curious study then must the literature of such a country always be!

All this is to be dwelt upon if Synge's significance in Anglo-Irish letters is to be understood. We do not say that Synge came to see the problem as it has here been stated. What we do say is that Europe, removing from him many of the Ascendancy prejudices born with him, left him open to the teachings of nationalism. How Europe might have done so has been indicated. His studies in languages gave him a feeling for the local as opposed to the cosmopolitan. This feeling is of all those he developed the most noticeable; it breaks out everywhere in his essays; and, after all, what is nationalism but the force that defends the local—the local custom, rich with tradition, as against the cosmopolitan, traditionless, and therefore vulgar? He may never have identified himself with the "wild Irishmen" of Paris; he cannot, however, have failed to see a reason in their madness far beyond what his own people in Ireland would ever have guessed at. He may never have come to the belief that the force, nationalism, must itself be fostered, if in turn that force is to foster the local custom; just as he may never have attained to the faith that Ireland can ever again become an Irish-speaking country. There are however many stages between one who blindly denies that there is or that there can be an Irish custom in Ireland and one who is ready to practise many inhibitions, and to risk many ostracisms in order that the over-borne native custom may more strongly challenge its oppressor. In nationalism there are many currents, and one may be conscious of one, and favourable towards its impulse, without giving much attention to the others; and so it was with Synge. One may behold the topsy-turvydom in local instances, without seeing it as the very ‘life’ of the whole Ascendancy building! One may gird at vulgarists without connecting them with old unhappy far-off things.

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But it may be well to establish, once for all, that Synge did become a nationalist, even if he never made himself familiar with all the tenets of that faith. Of the books written on him immediately after his death most took the matter for granted, while others made no mention of his nationalism at all. None of the books, whether mentioning it or not, stressed it as of any particular consequence, none of them took the view that it was his conversion to nationalism made the difference in what he wrote before and after his visits to the Aran Islands. If we hold that that great difference is due to his conversion it is necessary to show that he was converted. Besides, in recent years when, owing to many causes, nationalism has been under a cloud in Ireland, we find it hinted that he was never a nationalist at all, that he did not believe in the Gaelic League idea, that in fact there was no difference between him and other contemporary Ascendancy writers in this matter.

To show this Mr. John Masefield has been quoted: "He would have watched a political or religious riot with gravity, with pleasure in the spectacle and malice for the folly—he would have taken no side and felt no emotion." Mr. Masefield is an Englishman, and certainly one cannot imagine Synge looking on at any political riot that could have taken place in England when these words were written—before the Great War—with anything but amusement. When however he beheld the ‘forces of Law and Order’ coming to carry out some eviction in the Aran Islands—and all evictions in Ireland in these days were more or less bound up with politics—he looked on with anything but amusement: "When the anchor had been thrown if gave me a strange throb of pain to see the boats being lowered, and the sunshine gleaming on the rifles and helmets of the constabulary who crowded into them." But the description of the whole incident had better be read if one would know how far beyond mere humanitarianism his anger had almost carried him.

1 The Aran Islands.
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Colin Lynch, who was one of the Irish revolutionaries Synges met with in Paris, writes: "Synges was, I believe, only mildly Nationalist. I cannot speak with certainty on this point, for although he was a visitor at our house, I seem to have no recollection of having ever discussed politics with him, and it is from Mrs. Lynch that I have had the suggestion that Synges was critical rather in respect to our means of action than to our ultimate aim." This point—that Synges did not hold with extremism in politics—is stressed by various writers. A friend of Synges's writes of those Irish meetings he attended in Paris: "He spoke of having met Miss Maud Gonne at Irish meetings, and that she looked like a tragedy queen, and when he spoke of the wrongs of Ireland she was like one possessed. He was interested in those meetings, but when he found that they were prepared to go any length to gain their ends, he felt he must drop out. He was not an extremist, though he told me he was immensely proud that his grand-father was one of the Twelve Righteous Men," having refused a pension at the time of the Union. 2 Mr. W. B. Yeats too mentions that Synges drew aside when he found that the Irish in Paris were willing to create trouble between England and certain countries in Europe, and that he believed England would not release Ireland until she could do so with safety.

Now those passages prove no more than that Synges was not an extreme political nationalist. Our own idea of him is that one who seeks to find political nationalism in him is on the wrong scent: he was not given to politics; he was only as political as the ordinary citizen who is far more interested in other matters. What we are to understand by nationalism in his case is cultural nationalism—a holding by that inner core of custom of which political nationalism is the shield and defence. At this very time, as we shall show later on, Ireland was in one of her periodic reactions against politics and politicians; it was the period of the Parnell split; it was the period when the Gaelic League was capturing hold of the young vital mind of the country, was teaching it that politics and nationalism must not be confounded—with the result that practically all who hearkened to its appeal became not alone non-political but anti-political, for they held that the politicians, by neglecting such national mysteries as the Language, were simply killing the soul of the country. Anybody who lived in Gaelic League circles in those years needs no instruction as to what kind of nationalist Synges was, for the land was full of such as he became. They were all young, they were all Language men, and they were all quite certain that they had the right end of the stick in their grasp; the thing was to build up the Irish nation on its ancient Gaelic foundations. They called themselves nation-builders, not state-builders.

It may however help us if we glance at a few foreign opinions on Synges's nationalism. M. Anatole le Braz, the Breton folk-lorist and writer, met Synges in Dublin in April, 1905, and made some notes on him in his diary; among these we find: "L'homme n'a pas cette morgue enfantine qui m'a frappé chez beaucoup de ses compatriotes, aucune pitié non plus, mais un grand sérieux, une foi profonde dans la vitalité du mouvement irlandais, un enthousiasme contenu qui, parfois, illumine le regard, affermit la voix, le sentiment aussi, général chez ses confrères, que ce qui s'accomplit en ce moment en Irlande est un phénomène historique unique au monde et dont les fêtes des autres nations ne contiennent pas d'exemple." 3 In the Connaught papers, writes M. Bourgeois, "I (Synges) avowedly subscribes himself a Home Ruler,... Still he never was... politically inclined." 4 And further on M. Bourgeois tells us of an inscription written by Mr. J. B. Yeats in the margin of a copy of The Playboy: "an ardent Home Ruler and Nationalist... yet so little pugnacious that he

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1 Letter from Col. A. Lynch to Irish Statesman, Oct. 20th, 1908.
3 Papers written by Synge on a tour in Connaught.
4 Quoted in John Millington Synge by Maxence Bourgeois (p. 68).
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never declared his opinions unless under some sort of compulsion. A resolute peaceful man." But the statement that is most emphatic and indeed most authoritative is that of Mr. Stephen Mac Kenna—the translator of Flotmann—who was one of Synge's closest friends: "As regards political interest, I would say for the theory that Synge was most intensely Nationalist; he habitually spoke with rage and bitter baleful eyes of the English in Ireland, though he was proud of his own remote Englishness; I take it he wanted as dearly as he wanted anything, to see Ireland quite free: but one thing kept him quiet—he hated publicity, cooperation and lies. He refused to support the Gaelic League because one pamphlet it issued contained the statement (I indicate roughly) that to know modern Irish was to be in possession of the ancient Saga.”

This is conclusive; and the point about his breach with the Gaelic League is instructive also on his type of mind. Synge was too inward, too individualistic, to be of use to any movement; he would always have found points on which he could not agree; but from all the statements gathered here, it is clear that, although not a politically-minded man, he had become even more politically national than might have been expected. Is not this statement also significant: "Once, when in later years, anxious about the educational effect of our movement, I proposed adding to the Abbey Company a second Company to play international drama, Synge, who had not hitherto opposed me, thought the matter so important that he did so in a formal letter." And we also know that he indoctrinated his nephews with his own new faith.

But indeed to anyone who reads his book on the Aran Islands with understanding such gathering of opinions as has been here done is not necessary. For it is the book of not alone a Nationalist but a patriot. Does anyone think he could

1 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Healy.
2 Stephen Mac Kenna, in a letter to the Irish Statesman, 3rd Nov., 1924.
3 Essays, by W. H. Yves.

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possibly have written such a book about any other country in the world? Mr. Padraic Colum, who knew him personally, who at the same time has an intimate knowledge of all things Irish, such as Synge could never have attained to, writes very justly of him when he says: "It might be said of him that at the very start of the Irish Theatre he brought us a way of looking at life that belongs essentially to the Gaelic tradition. His plays were denounced as being alien to Irish life and to the Irish mind. Those who denounced them in these terms were wrong, and they were wrong because they knew nothing about the Gaelic tradition as it has been expressed in poetry." In the same book he further writes of him: "John Synge's work augments the spirit, and it augments it by discovering and revealing to us the national virtue. He was fortunate in that he found on these roads men and women, who, however disreputable, had in them something of the national virtue; who had something of the same outlook on life as he had, and who had a speech through which elemental humour and poetry could once more be expressed." Of what other Ascendancy writer could such words be written, if not of Dr. Douglas Hyde, who of course had become a convert to nationalism in his very boyhood. Perhaps one may think Mr. Colum's statement too comprehensive, that he might have contented himself with saying that in his work Synge discovers and reveals to us some share of the national virtue, but then no writer is ever privileged to do more than that. The national virtue is a kingdom of many mansions, and though some national writers may be freer of the kingdom than others, none of them can ever succeed in interpreting to us more than a few of the constituent mansions. With that we must be satisfied.

VI.

This individual and that other may have had something to do with Synge's conversion to nationalism; if so they

1 The Road Round Ireland, by Padraic Colum.
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were but so many gospellers of the new revelation that was in their native land. The only minds in the country that were not touched by the new learning were either those of the very aged or minds inveterately political, the Irish Parliamentary Party on the one hand, and the opposed minds of Ulster on the other. All others, except the utterly frivolous, it is safe to say, came to a greater or less degree under the spell of Irish Ireland in the years from 1888 any to 1914.

Ireland is a passionate country: like the face of a passionate man it is either dull and expressionless or else ablaze with vision. That in itself, of course, is the effect of long years of spasmodic revolt; it is part of the general topsy-turvydom. When Ireland is quiescent the custom that lies upon it, "heavy as frost and deep almost as life," is not its own custom; it is England's; so that Ireland has always been most provincial when most peaceful. To dissipate, even momentarily, that English custom, an extraordinary rise in temperament is necessary. In the years of revolution, from 1918 to 1923, more books were written and published, more pictures were painted, more schemes of all kinds started into growth, than in any previous or subsequent period of the same length. Life is life. But alas, in these moments of vision,—comparatively speaking, they are seldom more than moments,—the amount of actual art work created is only relatively large, and its quality only relatively good, for the necessary mental equipment is not at hand; the slow upbuilding of a native art tradition has not taken place; scholarship has not been fulfilling its duty during the long preceding hours of gloom, has neither been examining the national literary moulds, for instance, nor assessing whatever art work is natively our own; has failed therefore to play its part in clarifying, strengthening, and equipping the national mind. Ireland had no existence, for instance, for Professor Dowden, who, in the dull years before the Gaelic League arose to wrestle with the English custom, was so busy with his Shelley and his Shakespeare. If he had looked

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at either from an Irish point of view, as willy-nilly, a German would from a German point of view, or a Frenchman from a French point of view, then he might have made some little preparation towards Ireland's better self-expression when the stormy moment of vision was once again come round; for so working he would have been strengthening the Irish custom and keeping the moulds clean. Ireland was not helped by such scholars as he; nor was it much helped by its politicians. They, from O'Connell to Parnell, were not nation-builders in the sense that a nation is simply a multiple custom; though of course it is true that each partial victory they won did make it possible for what still remained of the national custom to defend itself with more confidence than before. The fact is we contented ourselves with politicians when our need was creative statesmen. They would not have lacked a sense of proportion: they would have seen that it was the entrenched English custom that all the time was more than anything else stabilizing and smothering the national virtues, not only making it impossible for it to express itself in national parties and works of art, but depriving it even of the very desire to express itself at all. What was wanted was a succession of such men as Thomas Davis who saw that many other agencies as well as politics should be brought to bear upon our case if the Irish custom was to be levelled up mentally and socially to the English custom as we know it in Ireland, was to challenge it, and to pluck from it its insolence and then its stability.

Now Synge's great good fortune was that with his mind opened up by contact with many peoples and many cultures, he happened on Ireland at a time when Davis's spirit was abroad in the land: the Irish custom was being brought in from the surrounding hills, where it had lain forgotten and submerged by neglect, was being newly assessed, interpreted, ministered to, effloresced. Its ministers, its chivalry, were the youth of the nation who had grown up while their elders were, consequent on the Parnell debacle, bitterly at one another's throats.
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The best-founded national movement that had overtaken Ireland since 1688 was in its first vigour when Synge, at the bidding of Mr. W. B. Yeats, came home from Paris. Already in 1892 the Irish National Literary Society had been established. Seven years afterwards this society gave birth to the Irish National Literary Theatre which in course of time became the institution we know as the Abbey Theatre. But the institution that most significantly manifested the pressure of the time was, of course, the Gaelic League. Once for all, that body made clear to every vital mind in the country the fact that we were engaged in a struggle between two customs—the Irish and the English. It instructed us as to what nationality really was; that it was a matter of culture rather than politics. Whether it believed it or not it taught us the modern doctrine that race is rather the effect of culture than the effect of race. It taught us that politics could and should provide and maintain those channels through which nationality utters its message—important task, yet meaningless unless there is a message to be uttered.

The Gaelic League was non-political, absurdly so in such a land. If we remember right, a branch of the Gaelic League in Cork that desired to call itself the Robert Emmet branch was not allowed by headquarters to do so! And the League officially was not more non-political than the individual members of it; they were not only non-political, they were anti-political, for they held that the politicians had lost the sense of direction and were leading the nation to perdition. Yet, as everybody knows, it was this same League that came out in Rebellion in 1916—this League of bookworms and students at whom the politicians were wont to jest.

National movements are a necessary evil in every land where an alien Ascendancy has driven the national virtue into the distant glens. They are impetuous towards the normal. In Ireland whenever such a movement once more undertakes the task of pitting the native custom against the foreign, we discover once more how rich and varied that native custom is, or was, while intact. If one of the Gaelic

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League's most gifted children spoke of it as the most august tradition in western Europe; his enthusiasm is not to be scorned, for who will name a greater? In those years the Gaelic hinterland was little by little being opened up to our astonished eyes; and now after more than thirty years we know that we are still engaged in only clearing the ground. If we were Irish and not Ascendancy were surprised by the vision of this Gaelic hinterland of ours, with its immemorial mythology and literature, so rare, so native, so intrinsically beautiful, the revelation cannot have been astounding to those few Ascendancy folk who had had the courage to turn their backs on the idols of their market-place and give heed to it.

The intensity of that revival may be tested in this way. We can take George Birkhaven's latest novels and compare them with such books as Northern Iron, or The Seething Pot which he wrote while he was a member of the Gaelic League. Or we may take some of Mr. Lennox Robinson's latest 'international' plays and set them against his early plays or his short novel, A Young Man from the South—which is indeed the story of a young Protestant who comes into contact with the national tradition; or we may compare Mr. St. John Ervine's latest plays with those he wrote when Ireland was the only country he knew; or such books as the late Darrell Figgis wrote in England before he had come under the spell of the Revival, with Children of Earth, which he wrote in Ireland under its influence. In the last-mentioned example there seems a positive access of genius; in all the previous examples we feel that the writers have now become mere craftsmen who are earning their living by writing. The light in their hearts is quenched. None of those mentioned was a Catholic; yet all their 'revival' books show a genuine desire to explore rather than exploit the life of their own country. Considering the way the life of their country had been scented by its writers, that of course was their duty, and that duty they have since turned their backs on in deserting their country for the whole English-speaking
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world their pens have assumed new powers of expression or
even retained the old, one is not at all certain. One fears
that a future critic will write of each of them as Mr.
E. A. Boyd has written of John Trench: "at all events
he succeeded for a time in seeing Ireland with the eyes of an
Irishman." He who will make such comparisons as are here
suggested will have some understanding of the nature of the
revival that was then in the land.

This was the period in which John M. Synge wrote his
works. Even had we no evidence from himself or from his
friends as to his conversion to nationalism, we could almost
with certainty deduce it from what we know of the condition
of the land to which, aged, say, twenty-seven, he returned.
If all or practically all the writers of his time were travelling
in a certain direction, it is not presumptuous to suppose that
he also came under the same influences. To know, as we know,
that he was the only one of them who took the trouble to
learn Irish so well that he could freely converse in it with
native speakers, to know also that he was the only one of
them who took the trouble to make himself familiar with
the details of the peasants' lives, is to know how much farther
he went in his nationalism than the others.

VII

Now conversion to nationalism in Ireland is a very different
thing from conversion to nationalism elsewhere. An Irishman
wonders what meaning that phrase can have for the natives
of normal countries. He suspects it cannot possibly have
the meaning for them that it has for him. In the first place
there is no such thing as nationalism qua nationalism: there
are, however, such things as Irish nationalism, English
nationalism, French nationalism, and so on. Each is a force
similar to the others, but each has its own peculiar sanctions:
its own native emotional content, its own historic momentum.
To form any idea of the momentum of such a force one must

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needs know the obstacles that have been opposed to it, the
blows struck against it, the fate it has engendered in others.
To feel its emotional content one must reckon its losses, and
the songs they made for it with dying lips. For its functions
we must search for its origins: does it take its rise in some
Agreement, Concordat, Treaty, of which we can name the
time and place? Or are we conscious that its origins will
never be known, that we come upon it as upon some natural
thing—a torrent flowing headlong from the hidden recesses
of crowded mountain ranges that never can be explored?
Such a force therefore is not to be reckoned according to the
extent of territory after which it is named: it is of course a
quasi-spiritual essence.

Now, the conversion of one of Synge's type to Irish
nationalism means really the winning over of one who would
in the natural way of things hate everything really Gaelic so
bitterly as to be ready and eager to dash the national
tradition, the very pulse of which is the desire for freedom,
wherever and whenever opportunity offered. For Synge
would certainly have had affinities with that class of which
Standish O'Grady—himself one of them—wrote such bitter
words: "At Ireland and all things Irish you glood till, like
the doomed suitors, you are forced to laugh with foreign Jews
at this beggar nation, ragged and mendicant, whose substance
you devoured and whose house dismembrued, springs like the
revealed demi-god of yore upon the threshold and twangs
the new-strung bow." 1

We do not know how Englishmen, Frenchmen, or Germans
can intimately understand such words: they lack the local
instance. No Englishman knows what it is to be so actively
anti-English as to be ready to debunk the national tradition
that others too may be brought to disrespect it. He may
deem himself a citizen of the world; even so, he is not more
set against English nationalism than against any other. He
can never understand how provincial, how passionate a creed

1 Ireland and the Hour: To the Landlords of Ireland, etc., by Standish
O'Grady.
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the Ascendancy folk in Ireland developed in themselves after
the Union.

Enough has perhaps been said to give the outsider to
understand that conversion to nationalism in the case of an
Ascendancy man in Ireland means far more than the giving
up of one set of opinions for another. It becomes a change
more of heart than of head. It is a rebirth. A nation with
its memories is a font of inspiration; to come to drink of
the waters of that fountain is an experience little less than
mystical. We do not say that any outsider, such as Synge
was, ever succeeds in coming into perfect communion with
the race mind: this he suspected himself; it was a trouble
to him. We do say, however, that Synge came at moments
into surprisingly intimate communion with it; of this his
play Riders to the Sea makes us certain.

VIII.

It may be thought that we are lingering too long on this
conversion. It was, however, the most significant event that
ever befell him; only for it his literary remains would not
only be quite different but would be quite without distinction.
And we have lingered on it also for the reason that our
thought in writing on him at all embraces those others who
went the same road a little way and then turned aside, as
also those others, now setting out on their labours, to whose
turn it will surely come, it cannot but come, to choose
between the same two roads.

In his conversion to nationalism, his own personality came
into play. That personality had much to do with deter-
mining into which of the mansions of Irish nationality his
feet should stray. In Mr. Lennox Robinson's sprightly story
A Young Man from the South, the young Protestant who
undergoes such conversion learns to write successful plays
for the Abbey Theatre, but also, and quite naturally, as
anyone who knows Ireland will admit, plunges into the

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storm winds of Irish politics. It might so have happened
with Synge if he had not been the man he was.

Picture him: the boy, one of a large family, left, one
thinks, much to himself, not robust enough to join in the
usual games—and how much that means in the development
of a boy's character!—driven in upon himself, finding solace
in nature and the wild,—companionship that does not betray.
He takes to music also, the most social of the arts, yet it
was for himself and not for others he was accustomed to
play; nor does his time in Trinity College help him to over-
come his shyness in company, his desire to sit silent and
unnoticed. One feels that no sooner was the long vacation
at hand than he resumed the lonely-wandering boy in the
Wicklow hills. He was emotional, instinctive; and sought
affection not from his intellectual equals but from others
like himself, hearts fundamentally simple.

The stranger, however much he scorcs or rails, cannot
wound such a one, but the friend, with but a questioning
glance, can pierce his heart as with a sword. Always there-
fore desiring affection yet always afraid of it, such a one
wanders with his dog and mumbles snatches of lyric poetry
to himself as he makes across the hills. All softness in a
certain sense, yet untameable also, and through his aloofness
and his power of seeing the comedy in men and things, gaining
the name of hardness; yet whoever knew a person really
hard in character to be susceptible to leniency? No, if
Synge was such as we imagine, it is not the polities, naturally
and part and parcel of Irish nationality, that would coax him
to its service; rather is it the folk, the Gaelic-speaking
peasantry, with their immemorial lore, their aloofness from
the modern world, their simple life; for going to them
would be for him a way of extending the passions that
warmed his breast in boyhood. In the country of the Irish-
speaking folk, apart from the modern world, out in the sea,
hidden like Moy Moll in an "incorparable mist," was a hinter-
land more strange than any he could remember having
dreamt of while young. It was a hinterland not only in
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Space but in time. And it would be his own: who else had interpreted this folk? He would do for them what Loti had done for the Bretons. In some such spirit, probably, he went to the Aran Islands. He remained long enough to be troubled with the thought that he could never become more to the islanders than a stranger. This trouble he openly cries out again and again. It is the 'cry over the abyss,' the forlorn wail of the tribeless. Because he raised it, he differed from his fellow Ascendancy men.

It was the living tradition in the possession of the Aran people that most impressed him. He was bookish by nature. He was a man of the open air and the roads, learning much from the vernacular woods. He knew literary Irish: we find him reviewing Keating's poems, not an easy book; he probably had some fair knowledge of Old Irish, could, with the help of a translation, read the ancient stories; but though from those old stories and from Keating's poems to the folk tradition is a far cry, yet it is to the living tradition he gives his whole heart. Dr. Douglas Hyde's Love Songs of Connacht, which is little more than the living tradition set down in print, was ever in his hands: it influenced him as much in one way as Loti in another. Of the older literature one finds traces, naturally, in his Deirdre of the Sorrows—its bleakness, its spirit of denudation, but then what is his version of Deirdre, taking it as a whole, but a transfiguration, so to speak, from literature to folk-lore? That is how it feels if one come to it fresh from a reading of the saga in the Irish. The fact is that even in literature he wished to have about him only such unsophisticated hearts as he would willingly make speech with on a country road.

His going to the islands in the spirit he did fell in with the deepest traits in his own personality; it also fell in with the spirit that was then in the land. That was a Gaelic spirit. It was, as we know, Mr. Yeats who sent him to the islands, yet, wonderful to tell, it is Mr. Yeats himself who has given us the crinkest interpretation of that pilgrimage.

"It was, as I believe, to seek that old Ireland which took

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its mould from the duellists and scholars of the eighteenth century and from generations older still, that Synge returned again and again to Aran, to Kerry, and to the wild Baskets. The interpretation is so characteristically wrong that one shrinks from adding a word. The Gaelic tradition moulded by the bards of the eighteenth century! One is sorry that Synge himself did not live to read the words.

IX.

But one may wish to look at the man as he appeared to other men. "He was then about twenty-six," says one who knew him before he had become a playwright, "a strongly-built man with a rather thick neck and large head, a wonderful face with great luminous sad eyes, and though he was tanned from being constantly out of doors, there was a sort of pallor on his face that gave it a look of delicacy belying his figure, which was that of a sturdy mountainier."

Commenting on this description Mr. Padraic Colum writes: "I first met him when he was seven years older. His face was grey; he had kindly hazel eyes, and he wore with his moustache a little chin tuft; his brow went up steeply, and he had strong hair that was neither black nor brown. In a way he was like Fritz Kreisler—less coath, less vivacious, wearing rougher clothes, but still as like as a brother might be who had gone, not on to the platform, but into the study." Further on Mr. Colum tells us "he kept neither aloof nor apart, but in a city of people who talked eagerly, he, with that modelled head of his held so well up, and with his air of a foreign student, was noticeably quiet and unassuming. He was not like any poet I have known."

Colonel Lynch, who, as we have said, knew him in his Paris surroundings, writes of him: "With his huge frame, and

1 C. H. H. in The Irish Statesman, July 8th, 1924.
2 The Road Round Ireland, by Padraic Colum.
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enormous head, he seemed hardly to belong to the somewhat decadent world of these latter days, and in recognition of this fact he had a modest and even gentle and pleading air. "

"The head was large and massive," writes another, "with long, dark—rather brown than black, almost auburn—tousled hair. Synge looked much older than his age. The swarthy complexion of his grave, deeply-lined face, with delicacy and pain written over its expression, and a force of iron will peeping out through the hazel-grey eyes, seemed to 'put up' years to his appearance. The cheeks were drawn and seemed, the jaws square-set. The bushy moustache partly concealed the wide mouth, on which there was a great play of humour. The chin was clean-shaven, but for a little tuft of hair smaller than a goose, and answering rather to the description of what is known as a "smac\' ("smaggin", "smaggin") in Anglo-Irish. The voice was hoarse and quick and often difficult to catch, with hardly any mellifluous Irish brogue in it." And M. Bourgeois further records that Mr. G. Bernard Shaw once said to him that 'Synge had a face like a blacking brush,' while Thomas Mac Donagh tells us he bore a strong resemblance to certain portraits of Oliver Cromwell.

Perhaps the most living portrait of him is found in the notes M. Anatole le Braz wrote in his diary: "La figure de Synge est typique: une tête longue, un peu carrée, aux traits tourmentés et, par moments, quasi charmeurs, mais nettement expressive. La moustache, châtain, voile à demi les lèvres épaisse; une manière de garder enfu le côté droit du coin. Il se montre d'une résolution charmante, pleine d'amabilité, de douceur, légèrement timide. L'intelligence est ouverte, accueillante." "He was," says Mr. Yeats, "a solitary, undemonstrative man, never asking pity, nor complaining, nor seeking sympathy but in this book's momentary cries: all folded up in brooding intellect, knowing nothing of new books and newspapers, reading the great masters alone."

"A silent, an aloof, a listening man! Listening to and watching all that which had never been completely his, and from which he should soon be parted. He would stand on a headland that jutted steeply on the sea, and he would look and look and look at the sparkling waters below. He would look at a meadow, a sunset, a man, as though he must satisfy his eyes with their wonder, and, if it could be, saturate his very being with all that he should not carry with him."

With this last description we caught all surely to be content: it is the man.

x.

Then one should like to see this silent, brooding, emotional creature in the surroundings through which he passed on his way to the grave.

Of his wanderings in the woods and on the hills of Wicklow as a boy intent on moths and beetles—insect on all things both great and small—"he knew the note and plumage of every bird and when and where they were to be found"—we must make our own picture. One thinks that it was only when he reached manhood that he began to look at the vagrants, so numerous according to his own statement in that county, with as alert an eye as he had previously given to the irrational beings of the same habitat.

"His true schooling," says Mr. James Stephens, "with complete understanding, was up in the mountains and out on the bog; it came from the shy but vital life that moves in solitude. His professors were the mountain men and women, themselves almost as humble in station, almost as wanderers from change, almost as bereft of ambition, but as

1 Letter to Irish Statesman, 20th October, 1924.
2 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Bourgeois.
3 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Bourgeois.
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...vital, persistent, self-centred as was the lovely animal life
that thrived about them."

Neither have we any definite account of him as a student
in college, from which circumstance we may take it that he
was not one to attract attention to himself, either by natural
brilliance, or natural or put-on freakishness. And of his
subsequent wanderings in Germany, before he made his home
in Paris, all that M. Bourgeois can say is: "He was the
guest of some ladies living on the banks of the Rhine, and is
said to have led a free, unconventional life in those days,
listening to stories in the Harz and the Bavarian woods,
making friends with servants and poor people, and more
than once sleeping out under a hedge or in a farm or hay
loft." One likes to know of his attraction towards servants
and poor people, it is so characteristic of the man who after-
wards lived gratefully in the huts of the poor in the Aran
Islands. C. H. H., in her recollection of him, says: "He
told me a good deal of his visit to Germany, and was, I
remember, collecting rocks of all kinds to send to some people
there who had been kind to him." Of that "good deal" one
wishes that C. H. H. had reported even a little. To her,
however, we must be thankful for her notes of him at this
time. Of Synge and his brother she writes: "As a rule
during the day we saw little of the two young men, who used
to go off early with a few sandwiches to fish in the little
mountain tarns or walk the hills which were then covered
with heather or gorse, but in the evenings John Synge used
to join us. ... That was the time for talk, and
John Synge used to expand and discuss Art and Poetry.
I remember him saying to me he preferred Wordsworth to
any other English poet; he said he was more at one with
Nature. ... He said there was a purity and simplicity
about Wordsworth’s poetry that appealed to him strongly.
Then he talked about Art and told me he loved Corot’s work.

1 I Remember J. M. Synge, a talk broadcast by James Stephens from
2 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Bourgeois
3 Irish Statesman, 5th July, 1924.

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and later one day in Dublin, he took me to see a little gem of
his, which was in a loan collection. ... Sometimes
while we were sketching out in the woods near Castle Kevin
we would hear him playing his violin like some fairy fiddler,
and one afternoon in the drawingroom he played for me a
lovely wild melody of his own. ... Sometimes we
went to the National Gallery or some picture exhibition:
sometimes to sit for an hour in St. Patrick’s Cathedral and
just drink in the beauty of the dear old place." Here surely
we have the picture of a young poet, and here perhaps is the
place to cry out our thanks that that young poet in some
strange way, while perfecting his craft, had not only skipped
over London but skipped over Dublin as well—that is, the
literary set in Dublin he would most likely have fallen in
with, with their crazy hunt after cleverness and cynicism,
and the aloofness from the profound and common interests
of life. When he did come on them later, he had his own
ideas to steer by. At this time Synge, one thinks, had not
yet become nationalist. Later on in the same notes the
writer speaks of hearing from him in later years of his contact
with the extremists of Paris. This passage we have quoted.
Still farther on we have: “At this time he was writing a
good deal, and shortly afterwards went to the Aran Islands.
After that I only saw him a few times. Once after his return
from Aran he said: ‘Oh, I wish you could go there, you
would love the Island people.’”

After Germany he settled down more or less in Paris; and
of his way of living in that city we have been given many
interesting glimpses. There he lived now at one address,
now at another, always very cheaply. “He lighted his own
fire and cooked his breakfast—two eggs, which he boiled in
a paper-bag long before paper-bag cookery had any official
existence. When he could not afford Duval or Folies for
lunch, he would buy York ham or venison and eat at a charcuterie
in the Rue Vavin. He went but rarely to taverns à prix fixe,
which he found utterly repugnant, and often warned his
friends against the practice of shilling meals. He drank thin

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teas in bowls and smoked caporal, rolling his own cigarettes and always using a cigarette-holder. In the evening, but never later than ten, he would discuss the whole universe with friends over a glass of hot punch; for, though he had but little conversational powers, he was an excellent debater; or (when he could afford to permit himself luxuries) he went fairly frequently to concerts, cafés and theatres." 1 We know that here also he visited Notre Dame, looking on at the ceremonies, was a frequent visitor to the picture galleries, sought out those quieter portions of the city not known to tourists, and generally laid himself out to absorb the life of the place as afterwards he was to do the island and the Aran Islands. Yet how great a difference in the result: the heart as a lantern is so different from the mind.

It was while living at the Hôtel Cornelle—a place much frequented by Irishmen—that Mr. Yeats said to him: "Give up Paris; you will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression." 2

Of Synge's stay on the islands as of his previous and subsequent wanderings in Kerry and Wicklow we have his own accounts. These are invaluable; one thinks his book on the Aran Islands has not been estimated at its proper value; since however we shall be examining it later on we need not delay here on any one of its many and very beautiful vignettes. What we regret is that we have no record of any worth from the islanders on the strange, silent fiddler who had come to their shores. "Of any worth," for records we have, none of them written, however, until the first performance of The Playboy had caused "riots" in Dublin and Synge had been proclaimed from the rooftops as the worst malcontent of the Irish people that had yet arisen. The

1 John Millington Synge, by Maurice Bourgeois.
2 Preface to the FIRST EDITION of The Well of the Saints (Essays, by W. B. Yeats).
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he had, in spite of his illness, got down to the third act. He began to tell me about this act: there would be an open grave on the stage: I spoke doubtfully of the impression that this would make—would it not be too obvious heightening of the tragic feeling? But he said that he had been close to death, and that the grave was a reality to him, and it was the reality in the tragedy he was writing.” Convalescent, as he thought, he went to Germany. While there his mother, to whom he was greatly attached, died at home in Glenageary. Soon he was back in hospital again. He was gentle and liked by all. He destroyed many letters and poems the day before he died. That same day he had himself shifted to another room, where from he hoped to catch a glimpse of the Dublin mountains of his boyhood rambles. He found this was not possible and was greatly distressed. He died next morning at 5 o’clock. It was March 24th, 1909. He was buried in Mount Jerome cemetery, Harold’s Cross, Dublin. "Hic iste in aeternam dormiet" Donnchadh Ruaidh cried out when he saw his friend Tadhg Gael Bealadhe lait in the grave.

CHAPTER III.

THE WRITER

All that Synge left us in the way of criticism—if we omit his stray articles and reviews—is contained in three short prefaces, six pages crammed so close with matter that they elucidate his entire creative work. Taken together those three prefaces make a clear exposition of his ideals in literature. Two of them we find in his book of plays, the third in his book of poems. Since, however, for him, drama was entirely a matter of literature—he would not have admitted that a playwright might lack the sense of literature yet write, or at least contrive, very effective dramatic works—the prefaces to the plays may be taken together with that to the poems, if we wish to learn from himself how he looked at the writer’s craft.

Each of these prefaces is a defence of the work which it opens. The Playboy preface is dated January 21st, 1907; The Tinker’s Wedding preface, December 2nd, 1907; and the preface to the Poems, December, 1908. Written all within two years they naturally do not contradict one another; and his whole literary life, including those two years, covering only about seven years, his practice on the whole agrees well with his preaching. Essays, plays, poems, and prefaces are all the outcome of one short period.

In the preface to The Playboy he defends chiefly the use of rich and copious language. In countries, he says, “where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which