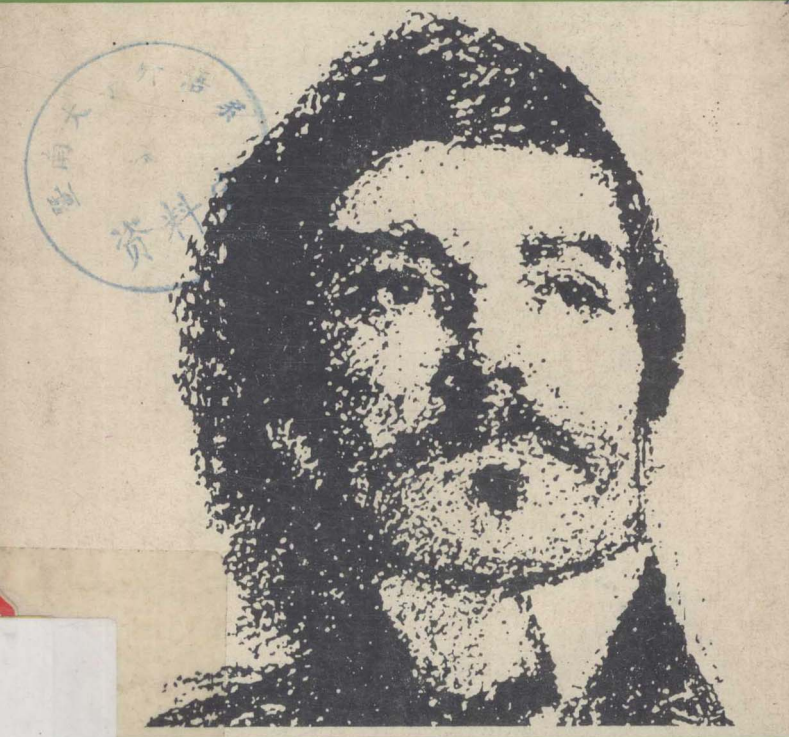
The Playboy of the Western World

Riders to the Sea



J. M. SYNGE

UNIFORM WITH THIS PAPERBACK

Deirdre of the Sorrows:
The Tinker's Wedding and
The Shadow of the Glen
by J. M. Synge

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

AND

RIDERS TO THE SEA

In the stormy years before Ireland at last gained her independence a brilliant revival of Irish drama took place and culminated in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904. Of those who helped to create it—W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, the Fay brothers, and Miss Horniman—it was J. M. Synge as much as anyone who made the new Irish drama the force it quickly became in the theatres of the world. In his plays, as in his rich, tumbling comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World*, or in the tragedy of classic simplicity, *Riders to the Sea*, he succeeds more than any other dramatist in miraculously distilling the Irish spirit.

BY J. M. SYNGE

The Aran Islands
Poems and Translations
In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara

Plays

In the Shadow of the Glen
Riders to the Sea
The Well of the Saints
The Playboy of the Western World
The Tinker's Wedding
Deirdre of the Sorrows

J. M. SYNGE

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

AND

RIDERS TO THE SEA

J. M. Synge

London
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John Millington Synge (1871-1909) *was probably the greatest of the dramatists associated with the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, during its heyday in the early years of this century. He was born near Dublin, the son of a barrister, and educated at Trinity College, Dublin. He first studied music, in Ireland and in Germany, and then turned to literary criticism in Paris. There he was discovered by W. B. Yeats, who persuaded him to write about Ireland and take part in the 'Celtic renaissance' movement. By living amongst the fishermen of the Aran Islands, and in other parts of Ireland, he absorbed Irish folklore, and gave it dramatic form and a rich verbal expression.* The Playboy *of* the Western World *and* Riders to the Sea *are his best-known plays, the first a three-act comedy of Irish character, the second a tragedy in one act. When the* Playboy *was first produced in Dublin it caused an uproar and the police had to be called in more than once. Patriots considered it 'a slander on the fair name of Ireland'. But Synge was too truthful a dramatist to care about national feelings. His plays were drawn from life, and his own poetic imagination.*

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THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

CHRISTOPHER MAHON

OLD MAHON, *his father, a squatter*

MICHAEL JAMES FLAHERTY (called MICHAEL JAMES), *a publican*

MARGARET FLAHERTY (called PEGEEN MIKE), *his daughter*

WIDOW QUIN, *a woman of about thirty*

SHAWN KEOGH, *her cousin, a young farmer*

PHILLY CULLEN and JIMMY FARRELL, *small farmers*

SARA TANSEY, SUSAN BRADY and HONOR BLAKE, *village girls*

A BELLMAN

SOME PEASANTS

The action takes place near a village, on a wild coast of Mayo. The first Act passes on an evening of autumn, the other two Acts on the following day.

PREFACE

In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people. Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. All art is a collaboration; and there is little doubt that in the happy ages of literature, striking and beautiful phrases were as ready to the story-teller's or the playwright's hand, as the rich cloaks and dresses of his time. It is probable that when the Elizabethan dramatist took his ink-horn and sat down to his work he used many phrases that he had just heard, as he sat at dinner, from his mother or his children. In Ireland, those of us who know the people have the same privilege. When I was writing *The Shadow of the Glen*, some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries 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 is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found

only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality. In a good play every speech should be as fully flavoured as a nut or apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry. In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery, and magnificent, and tender; so that those of us who wish to write start with a chance that is not given to writers in places where the springtime of the local life has been forgotten, and the harvest is a memory only, and the straw has been turned into bricks.

J.M.S.

January 21, 1907

The following letter was written to a young man at the time of the first production of The Playboy of the Western World *and gives a further idea of Synge's views on the play.*

February 19, 1907

DEAR SIR,

I must ask you to excuse me for delaying so long before returning your interesting essay and thanking you for it. During the week of the play I had influenza rather severely, and as soon as it was over, I had to take to my bed where I have been ever since, otherwise you should have heard from me long ago.

With a great deal of what you say I am most heartily in agreement—as where you see that I wrote the *Playboy* directly, as a piece of life, without thinking, or caring to think, whether it was a comedy, tragedy, or extravaganza, or whether it would be held to have, or not to have a purpose—also where you speak very accurately and rightly about Shakespeare's 'mirror'. In the same way, you see, what it seems so impossible to get our Dublin people to see, obvious as it is—that the wildness, and if you will, vices of the Irish peasantry are due, like their extraordinary good points of all kinds, to the *richness* of their nature—a thing that is priceless beyond words.

I fancy when you read the play—or see it performed in more possible conditions—you will find Christy Mahon more interesting than you are inclined to do now. Remember on the first production of a play the most subtle characters always tend to come out less strongly than the simple characters, because those who act the more subtle parts can do no more than feel their way until they have acted the whole play a number of times.

Whether or not I agree with your final interpretation of the whole play is my secret. I follow Goethe's rule, to tell no one what one means in one's writings. I am sure you will agree that the rule is a good one.

J. M. SYNGE

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

ACT I

Country public-house or shebeen, very rough and untidy. There is a sort of counter on the right with shelves, holding many bottles and jugs, just seen above it. Empty barrels stand near the counter. At back, a little to left of counter, there is a door into the open air, then, more to the left, there is a settle with shelves above it, with more jugs, and a table beneath a window. At the left there is a large open fireplace, with turf fire, and a small door into inner room. PEGEEN, *a wild-looking but fine girl, of about twenty, is writing at table. She is dressed in the usual peasant dress.*

PEGEEN (*slowly as she writes*). Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown. A pair of lace boots with lengthy heels on them and brassy eyes. A hat is suited for a wedding-day. A fine-tooth comb. To be sent with three barrels of porter in Jimmy Farrell's creel cart on the evening of the coming Fair to Mister Michael James Flaherty. With the best compliments of this season. Margaret Flaherty.

SHAWN KEOGH (*a fat and fair young man comes in as she signs, looks round awkwardly, when he sees she is alone*). Where's himself?

PEGEEN (*without looking at him*). He's coming. (*She directs letter.*) To Mister Sheamus Mulroy, Wine and Spirit Dealer, Castlebar.

SHAWN (*uneasily*). I didn't see him on the road.

PEGEEN. How would you see him (*licks stamp and puts it on letter*) and it dark night this half-hour gone by?