J. M. SYNGE: A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CRITICISM

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J. M. SYNGE

A Bibliography of Criticism

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Foreword by

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To my Wife

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Foreword by Robin Skelton

The amount of information given in this volume is a clear indication of the interest that the work of J. M. Synge has aroused over the years. Even a brief scrutiny of the titles of the various articles and critical works reveals the way in which Synge's work has aroused an extraordinary variety of reactions. Synge, indeed, is a Shakespearean figure in that he, like Shakespeare, had been used in the service of a wide variety of causes. We can find critics who use him to maintain the importance of Irish Nationalism; we can find others who use him as an exemplar of the European Sensibility. He has been viewed as primarily a satirist, as essentially a romantic, as a thoroughgoing realist, and as the most subtle of symbolists. *The Aran Islands* has been lauded as an exact portrayal of an important aspect of Irish life and tradition, and as a deeply personal piece of myth-making. *The Playboy of the Western World* has aroused almost as much controversy as *Hamlet*, and a good deal more political disturbance.

It is not only the work but also the personality of Synge which present problems of this kind. Here again we find differing views. How can we reconcile the tough-minded, harsh-tongued Synge of some of the more 'brutal' poems with the anxious, jealous, neurotic writer of the letters to Molly? How can we reconcile the author of the *Letter to a Hedge Schoolmaster* with the man who adored the Irish language? How can we, even, reconcile the anarchist (or at least socialist) opinions implied by many essays, with those of others which reveal a nostalgia for the days of the 'Big House' and how bring together the anarchism and the elitism?

The problem of seeing Synge clear and of seeing him whole has been intensified by the accidents of history. Until the nineteen-sixties, when the Oxford University Press edition of

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his work began to come off the presses, we had no texts of half his poems, and only a hint or two about many of his early essays into drama. The Greene and Stevens biography emerged fifty years after the writer's death, and this has been followed by a number of books in which additional biographical information has been given, as well as several collections of letters many of which were unknown to the biographers. As a consequence of this, much relating to Synge remains to be discussed. His political views have only been touched upon gingerly, possibly because it is difficult to fit him into any acceptable party or category. His lifelong (almost) obsession with the Muse-like figure of the inspiring and shaping woman has not yet received due attention. (One should recall here that Petrarch first saw Laura in a green gown, that Synge called one of his earliest lady friends in Paris, *La Robe Verte*, and translated Petrarch towards the end of his life, and that green is the colour of Ireland.) Much, indeed, remains to ponder over and to comment upon, but no fresh investigation can be begun without a close examination of all that has been said so far.

It is here that this book is of such enormous value. It directs us, with clarity and precision, to all the most significant and symptomatic reactions to the work of Synge. It enables us to begin to see how the criticism of Synge has been distorted by political enthusiasms, by personal prejudice, and by the changing perspectives of history. It does not, of course, give us everything we could possibly need. We are not provided with a check-list of the translations of Synge's work, and are thus deprived of an accurate insight into Synge's significance as a world figure. It does not give us the detailed information that could only be provided by a full-dress bibliography of of Synge's works. These are two matters which fall outside its province, and rightly so. This book is not intended to do our work for us, but to direct us to work that is yet to be done. It is less a conclusive summary than a compulsive summons, and it is to be hoped that when the time for a second edition comes around there will be many more entries reflecting the way in which the first one has directed and assisted us towards the further exploration of an author whose works and personality remain significant, not only to

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the history of Anglo-Irish literature and drama but also to the continuing exploration of the human condition.

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Preface

In 1971, the J. M. Synge Centennial celebrations showed the wide attention this playwright continues to command. As this bibliography itself demonstrates, studies on Synge are assuming greater proportions with each passing year. The result is an unusually large output of material, which has never been recorded in one full-length authoritative reference work. Most of the existing bibliographies are either incomplete or inaccurate. Some of these inaccuracies, whether in standard bibliographical aids or appended to such works as Maurice Bourgeois' *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre*, have been repeated unchecked in subsequent studies of the dramatist.

The present bibliography, which comprises some 2500 items, has been compiled on the lines shown in the Table of Contents. With articles in periodicals and similar short pieces, I have given page-references whenever possible; in the case of books (those, for example dealing with drama in general, where references to Synge are scattered) I have given only the name of the book. Some reviews of books or play productions were worth including in the articles section. The bibliography is intended to be complete up to the end of 1971, although some later studies have been listed.

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