

The Wild West Show: Ireland in the 1930s

David Pierce*

Abstract: *The West of Ireland has played a dignified if supporting role in modern Irish culture. Writers and painters such as Synge, Jack B. Yeats, Sean Keating, Paul Henry, and the Blasket Islanders helped define the (French-inspired) perception of the West as if not sacred then special. In the 1930s, the West was given another make-over under the impetus partly of documentary realism and partly of an interest in a disappearing lifestyle. There was still an appetite for doing something with that western alternative lifestyle, of recuperating its folds for posterity (as with the foundation of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935), of memorialising its passing (as with the accounts by the last generation of Blasket Islanders), or of using it to make a comment about modernity (as with the Canadian director Robert Flaherty's documentary film *Man of Aran*). *Man of Aran* (1934) is at the centre of several overlapping discourses – visual anthropology, ethnology, documentary film making, Grierson and the 1930s, the ethics of documentarists, and Flaherty's career as a film maker. Surprisingly, analysis of the film's place in modern Irish culture has been attended to less frequently, and the critical probing has tended to come from elsewhere. In the Irish context, *Man of Aran* belongs not so much with Wordsworthian Synge but to a body of work that includes most notably Darrell Figgis's novel *Children of Earth* (1918) where there is a combination of the forceful naturalism of Zola with Hardy's sense of place. Synge's work lives in its language, a language which has a life of its own, conscious of its beauty as well as its fascination for others. In *Man of Aran* there is almost no dialogue and only occasionally do we hear snatches of conversation. In many ways the most telling Irish critique of *Man of Aran* remains Denis Johnston's little-known, satiric play *Storm Song* (1935). Equally, in terms of visual culture, the contemporary cartoons which appeared in *Dublin Opinion* should not be overlooked. These provide not only a running satire on the popularisation of the West but also another filter for viewing this body of work, a filter which, given the demise of the West, now seems in many respects closer to the emerging truth.*

* York St John College, Lord Mayor's Walk. This article appears by courtesy of Polity Press, publishers of *A Cultural History of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, from which this extract is taken.]



Sean Keating's painting *Men of the West* (1915).

My title derives in part from a comment made by Robert Ballagh about Keating's painting *Men of the West* (1915). The painting shows three gunmen posing desultorily against an Irish tricolour. The year is 1915, a year before the Easter Rising and four years before the War of Independence. But as Ballagh rightly concedes, the pose and attitude have more in common with the Wild West than the West of Ireland.¹

In the 1930s, when Irish writers and artists engaged with the West, their minds were drawn not to the deprivation but more to the charmed lifestyle of the people. 'It is only in such places [as the island of Achill] that one gets a glimpse of what Ireland may become again,' Michael Collins had unnervingly observed in *The Path to Freedom* (Collins 1922, 119). Few betrayed the compromised nature of the pastoral vision.² Thus it was possible in the 1950s for an English outsider such as John Hinde not only to produce the famously garish postcards of Ireland, full of nostalgia, cottages, donkeys, bogs, and red-heads – 'symbols of a backward country' as the Irish Tourist Board Bord Fáilte had complained – but also to make the outrageous claim that 'most landscapes in Ireland have no colour' and in need of 'colour corrections'.³ In many respects the nearest equivalent in Ireland to the potentially radical idea of Mass Observation in Britain was the Irish Folklore Commission, a non-political body established in 1935 to record for posterity a disappearing oral culture. Those who sought to depict the West at this time tended to be either film-makers such as Robert Flaherty (see *Man of Aran* 1934), ethnologists such as Conrad Arensberg (see *The Irish Countryman* 1937), natural historians such as Robert Lloyd Praeger (see *The Way That I Went* 1937), or travel writers such as H.V. Morton (see *In Search of Ireland* 1930), Stephen Gwynn (see *The Charm of Ireland* 1934) or Michael Floyd (see *The Face of Ireland* 1937). Only occasionally,



Keating's Slán Leat, a Athair (Goodbye Father) (1935).

as in the fiction of Peadar O'Donnell or in a painting such as Sean Keating's tender *Slán Leat, a Athair* (Goodbye Father) (1935), do we hear – or rather overhear – the West speaking for itself. Otherwise, what we have portrayed is a collection of rural types (the countryman, man of Aran), or the embodiment of a search, a face, charm, all of them aspects of a culture seen from outside, written for outsiders.

The Wild West Show

The West of Ireland has played a supporting, but nonetheless dignified, role in modern Irish culture. Writers and painters such as Synge, Jack B. Yeats, Keating, and Paul Henry helped define the (French-inspired) perception of the West as if not sacred then special.



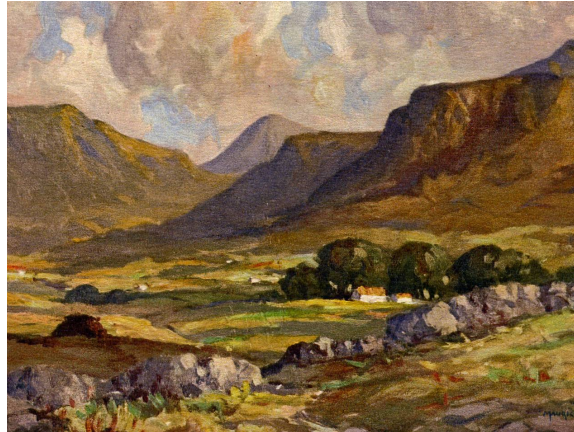
Paul Henry, The Little Thatched Cottages, Connemara (from Paul Henry, An Irish Portrait (London: B.T. Batsford, 1951).

Ulsterman Henry was attracted to the ‘wild beauty of the landscape, of the colour and variety of the cloud formations, one of the especial glories of the West of Ireland.’ (Henry 1951, 51) The interplay of light and objects which absorb and reflect light, of towering clouds and black mountains, of muted colours and white-washed gable ends, give to his paintings not only a distinctive look but also a pervading and attractive serenity, what Heaney calls ‘the unspectacular excitement of his engagement with the subject’.⁴ This is not the wide-angle panoramic left-to-right dramatic vision of the West, nor the ‘dramatic death’ that Jennifer Johnston speaks of in one her novels about evenings in the West (Johnston 1989, 87), but the controlled upright shot where movement is captured and stilled at the same time. Like Synge, Henry has become part of the culture, ‘the father,’ according to one art historian, ‘of the school of landscape painting which evolved in Ireland during the inter-war years,’ (Kennedy 1991, 71), ‘the most popular artist this country has ever produced’, according to another.⁵



Paul Henry cartoon in Dublin Opinion, March 1937, 15.

The wry humorous monthly observer of the social scene *Dublin Opinion* carried an amusing cartoon in March 1937 of a landscape artist in the field looking for a view. In front of him are a winding road, the gable-end of a cottage peeping up, piles of turf standing about, and then, centre-stage, a huge conical-shape hill topped by billowing clouds. The caption reads: ‘Darn it! Paul Henry has been here already!’



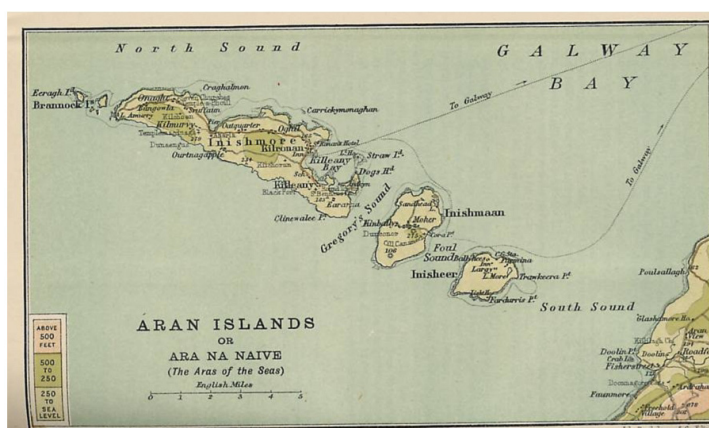
*Maurice Wilkes Postcard.*⁶

In the cloud-filled canvases of Paul Henry, in the tawny-coloured reassuring postcards of, in the quiet autobiographical reflections in Mary Carbery's *The Farm By Lough Gur* (1937), in the even quieter sketches of life in the Glens of Antrim in Hubert Quinn's *Dear Were The Days* (1934), what we witness is a deep resistance to, or a reluctance to engage with, the forces of history. It is life away from the centres of power, where an attempt is made at stilling or distilling the moment. Occasionally, we encounter a stress on continuity between past and present by those who had been in fact displaced in post-Independence Ireland. Thus, in *The Charm of Ireland* (1934), Stephen Gwynn, who had served with the Connaught Rangers in France, still sought to maintain that 'Ireland since the Great War has passed through a revolution, which has not yet finished working itself out; yet it remains the same Ireland.' (Gwynn 1934, 271) Sameness was a quality which could with a little adjustment be turned into a commodity by the burgeoning tourist board and into satire by a humorist such as W.H. Conn. In the May 1937 issue of *Dublin Opinion* under the heading 'The Influence of the Cinema', Conn depicts an old man, his shirt sleeves rolled up, digging beside a waterfall. He is being addressed by two fashionably dressed young women, one of them holding a handbag, the other, with a fur draped round her neck, sitting on a boulder her umbrella beside her: 'You must find it peaceful here in this lovely Gaelic Gleann na-mBláth' [Glen of the flowers]. 'It's okay with me, lady,' is his nicely judged reply, where the use of 'lady' is at once a marker of respect, a conversation-stopper, and a counter to her patronising attitude.⁷

In the 1930s, the West was given another make-over under the impetus partly of documentary realism and partly of an interest in a disappearing lifestyle. The age of depicting traditional culture on the stage in Dublin was past, but there was still an appetite for doing something with that western alternative lifestyle, of recuperating its folds for posterity (as with the foundation of the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935), of memorialising its passing (as with the accounts by the last generation of Blasket Islanders), or of using it to make a comment about modernity (as with the Canadian director Robert Flaherty's documentary film *Man of Aran*).⁸

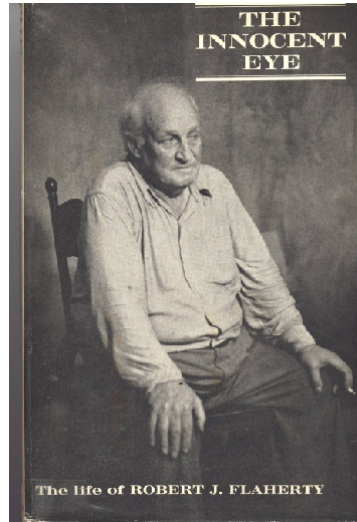


Map at end of Robert Lloyd Praeger, *The Way that I Went* (1937).



Map of Aran Islands taken from Baddeley's *Thorough Guide Ireland: Part II* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1911).

Man of Aran (1934) is at the centre of several overlapping discourses – visual anthropology, ethnology, documentary film-making, Grierson and the 1930s, the ethics of documentarists, and Flaherty's career as a film-maker.⁹ Surprisingly, analysis of the film's place in modern Irish culture has been less forthcoming, and the critical probing has tended to come from elsewhere. In the 1939 edition of the Irish Tourist Association guide to Ireland, the language used in praise of the film (sensational, epic, natives) betrays the kind of prejudice associated with an outside colonial power: 'Interest in the Aran Islands has recently been enormously stimulated by Mr Robert Flaherty's sensational picture – 'Man of Aran'. All the stories from this epic island story were 'shot' on the islands, the actors being natives playing on Nature's own stage, with the Atlantic Ocean as a background.'¹⁰



Robert Flaherty.



Maggie Kerrane set against waves. Still from Man of Aran.



Maggie Kerrane and basket of seaweed. Still from Man of Aran.

More properly, George Stoney's film *Man of Aran: How the Myth Was Made* (1978) calls into question the accuracy of the portrait on life on the Aran Isles and raises the ethical issue of the effect of the film on the islanders (neither 'Tiger' King the father nor Micilín Dillane the boy could continue living on Aran as former film stars).



Micilín Dillane casting a line. Still from Man of Aran.

According to Stoney the film is 'the historic benchmark by which most older Islanders measure their existence.'¹¹ Islanders became 'island-conscious' and began wearing white woollen caps again.¹² Equally,



Shark hunting. Still from Man of Aran.

there is an issue with the storm scene when islanders risked their lives putting out to sea in order for Flaherty to obtain some dramatic footage.¹³ More recently, Tim Robinson has drawn attention to the reception the film received in Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany, and refers in passing to 'the politically ambiguous storms of *Man of Aran*'.¹⁴

In the Irish context, *Man of Aran* belongs not so much with Wordsworthian Synge but to a body of work that includes most notably Darrell Figgis's novel *Children of Earth* (1918) where the forceful naturalism of Zola teams up with Hardy's sense of place. Synge's work lives in its language, a language which has a life of its own, conscious of its beauty as well as its fascination for others. In *Man of Aran* there is almost no dialogue and only occasionally do we hear snatches of conversation, as when Micilín asks the old man about the soil in the crevice: 'Much more down there, Pat?' To which the reply is: 'A couple of baskets more anyway.' The addition of 'anyway' is the one sparkle to delight the ear, the one unforced genuine word in the exchange. But it is in his attitude to the material that distinguishes Flaherty from Synge, and we can observe this in the first starkly worded caption thrown up onto the screen: 'The land upon which Man of Aran depends for his subsistence – potatoes – has not even soil!' The use of the exclamation mark is wholly foreign to Synge, the writer who when leaving Inishmaan confessed: 'Am I not leaving [there] spiritual treasure unexplored whose presence is a great magnet to my soul? In this ocean alone is [there] not every symbol of the cosmos.' (Greene; Stephens 1959, 96) While related to the psychological disposition of a writer or a film-maker, at root the issue concerns the hierarchical relations of power and the need to abandon the link between (superior) author and (superior) audience and to establish a relationship with the material that is free from condescension.



Aran family group with children smiling. National Geographic 51, 3, March 1927.



Colour photo of Connemara women from *National Geographic* 51, 3, March 1927.

Man of Aran resembles the opening scene-setting chapter in *Children of Earth* – the dramatic landscape with the Atlantic waves, the ‘torn and tangles rocks’, ‘the howling wind’, the headland, ‘the grey ruining clouds’, ‘the waves pounding on the strand’, the ‘infinity of music in the roaring’, ‘the throbbing rhythms from the heart of Earth itself’. (Figgis 1918, 1-5) The scene is set, the discourse established by Figgis: against the power of climate and landscape are pitted the struggling poor. There is a narrative of sorts in *Man of Aran* – constructing a vegetable patch, catching fish by line or shark-fishing with harpoon, and surviving a storm in a currach – and a gesture towards characterisation, especially in the delightful movements of Micilín around his mother and in her facial expressions of concern towards her husband at sea. Frank Delaney is convinced that ‘every picture told a story’, but I think he is confusing ‘story’ with ‘dramatic’: every picture is dramatic, but not every picture told a story.¹⁵ Flaherty is prevented as it were by the exclamation mark from getting close to his material.

Figgis moves beyond the first chapter to produce, according to Ernie O’Malley, one of the best books about the West of Ireland.¹⁶ Figgis has a story to tell. He shares a setting with Flaherty, but he constructs a story which while invoking the ‘naked friendship of earth and sky’ also shows individuals responding to disappointment in love and to the ‘unseen tides’ of history, ‘of action and reaction of souls and conditions of souls, of psychological tension and interplay, of conflict of wills and intentions, of emotions and desires, fates and characters and determinations that met and contended ceaselessly, weaving a criss-cross pattern of life – unseen tides all of them, only to be discovered, yet to the attentive eye very clearly to be discovered, in the bodily erosions that they caused’ (158; 167). Figgis possesses an attentive eye and with it comes an important discovery – that, away from the glare of the camera, people in the West are more than figures battling against a hostile environment but have passions that arise from

relationships with each other not with their environment. Thus at the crucial moment in the novel, Eoghan tackles his former lover Nancy over her decision to marry another man, a man whose death Eoghan feels responsible for:

‘Will you tell me why did you ever do it? Haven’t you it all scattered now, though it was set to be evermore, and we that could have gone on that time with the hearts in us like the stars and the great times all before us [...]. Did you ever think of that now; and the two of us that are astray now, with the kisses like beautiful flowers between us?’ (250)

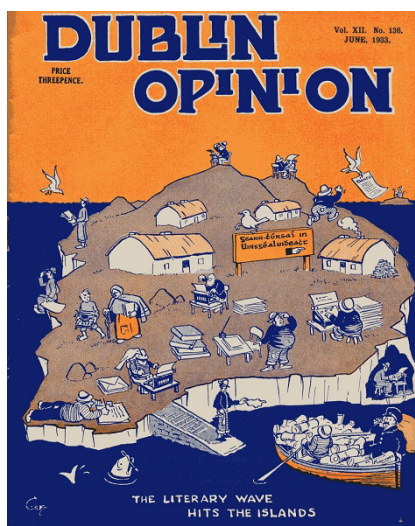
In many ways the most telling Irish critique of *Man of Aran* remains Denis Johnston’s little-known, satirical play *Storm Song* (1935), which was first staged at the Gate Theatre in January 1934, four months before the film’s release, with Hilton Edwards as the Hungarian-born cameraman Szilard, and Cyril Cusack in a cameo role as the Cockney Alf Quilt.¹⁷ Szilard has come to the West to make a film for his studio boss Solberg about the ‘struggle and real meaning’ of island life, ‘a memorial to your fathers and your fathers’ fathers’, but has been delayed from shooting a storm sequence by an anti-cyclone: ‘Pah – call this the Atlantic! Bathwater – that’s all it is.’ (Johnston 1935, 42; 100; 78-9) He has shot a huge amount of film and has been ordered to finish the project and return to London to edit it. But Szilard thinks Moving Pictures should be filmed as they happen and not falsified with a pair of scissors. Over the wireless the crew hear the weather forecast from London, promising a gale, and at 3 a.m. they begin shooting, photographing indoors the reflection in a large mirror of a gramophone resting on a stool.

Some of the dialogue is deliberately over the top, as if Johnston has Flaherty’s film in mind: ‘Don’t you love the Atlantic? It’s the only sea in the world [...] People who live in towns never really understand that there is such a thing as weather, do they?’ (105) The word that resonates in this play is fake. After complaining of making ‘fake pictures for fake firms for morons to gape at’ (116), Szilard heads off to the shoreline to shoot at sea. The final scene of the play takes place in the Majestic Cinema in London with a first-night showing of the film. This is a brilliant self-conscious touch on Johnston’s part, for even if such films as *Man of Aran* studiously avoid this kind of contamination, they are in fact made with the metropolitan box office in mind (the first screening of the film was in London in April 1934). If we hadn’t already guessed it, we learn that Szilard died that night at sea, his camera lashed to the mast of a hooker. Above the voices at the reception is heard ‘Such a pity he was drowned!’ (127) And the play ends with the triumph of the studio over the filmmaker with the Commissionaire calling out: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen – Mr. Absalom Solberg!’



New York opening of film *Man of Aran*, 1934.

The April 1934 issue of *Dublin Opinion* featured an amusing cartoon by Seán Coughlan of the fan mail arriving at the Island of Aran.



Fan mail arriving. *Dublin Opinion* April 1934.

Sacks of letters in dozens of currachs are coming ashore watched over by amused and interested groups of islanders dressed in traditional costume. In another cartoon the previous year, under a heading ‘The Literary Wave Hits the Islands’, there is an island scene surrounded by cliffs and blue sea and dotted with thatched cottages and heightened activity. The islanders, in Aran clothes with hats tilted or pulled down, are hard at work typing or looking for inspiration. A signpost in the centre of the island reads in Gaelic *garr-cúrsaí in uirsgéaluidheacht* (short stories in great storytelling). A gull has just plucked a *Danta* (poem) from the hands of a frantic author and flies off. Meanwhile, Captain Publisher is being rowed off the island weighed down with manuscripts. The sketch is a delightful tongue-in-cheek comment on the popularisation of the West in the

work on the Blasket Island writers such as Peig Sayers, Muiris Ó Súilleabháin (Maurice O'Sullivan), and Tomás Ó Criomhthain (Thomas O'Crohan). What all this self-consciousness suggests is that there was another filter for viewing the work not only of these writers but also that of Synge and Flaherty (and Jack B. Yeats), and it remains an important debunking mode for, given the demise of the West, it now seems in many respects closer to the emerging truth.

Words: 3,450 including footnotes.

Notes

- 1 Robert Ballagh, 'The Irishness of Irish Art' (1980) [unpublished lecture]. Cited in Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture*. Notre Dame/ IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, 23.
- 2 I am indebted at this point to Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995, 32ff. Buell doesn't refer to Ireland but many of his comments are highly suggestive in the context of modern Irish culture.
- 3 See *Hindesight* (Exhibition Catalogue) (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 34; 40. The first six postcards appeared in 1957. The Liffey, which resembled the colour of Guinness, was given a blue makeover by Hinde.
- 4 See Heaney's Introduction to the exhibition *Seamus Heaney: A Personal Selection*, Ulster Museum Belfast, 1982. Cited in Reviews, *Circa* 7 November/December 1982, 20.
- 5 See Brian Lynch review of Paul Henry exhibition at the Oriel Gallery in *Hibernia* 6 April 1978, 14.
- 6 *Dublin Opinion* 16: 181, March 1937, 15. Reproduced in Brian P. Kennedy and Raymond Gillespie, *Ireland: Art Into History* (Dublin: Town House; Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart, 1994), 140. See Kennedy's essay 'The Irish Free State 1922-49: A Visual Perspective' for a useful accompaniment to my remarks in this chapter.
- 7 *Dublin Opinion* 12: 135, May 1933, 73. For comparison, see the July 1937 issue, where Conn satirises the making of an all-Irish talking film.
- 8 I am reminded of a comment made by Chris Curtin, Hastings Donnan, and Thomas M. Wilson, the editors of *Irish Urban Cultures*. Queen's University Belfast: Institute for Irish Studies, 1993, lamenting the dominance of two myths about Ireland in twentieth-century anthropological studies, one of the dying peasant community of the west, north west and south (where anomic rural change has been the order of the day), and the other of the two tribes in the North, 11-2.
- 9 See for example, Brian Winston. *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited*. London: British Film Institute, 1999; Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy (Eds.). *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1997; Arthur Calder-Marshall. *The Innocent Eye: A Life of Robert Flaherty*. London: W.H. Allen, 1963; Paul Rotha. *Robert J. Flaherty: A Biography* (Ed. J. Ruby). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.
- 10 *Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Tourist Association, 1939, 195. This entry can be contrasted with Baddeley's *Thorough Guide to Ireland: Part II*. London: Thomas Nelson, 1911, which notes that 'As scenery the Arans have few attractions' and suggests that 'It is for their ancient forts, cromlechs, and cloghauns (stone-roofed houses), and very early Christian ruins that the Arans are interesting.' 187-8
- 11 Cited in Brian Winston. *Claiming the Real*, 219. To the islanders, *Man of Aran* was/is known simply as 'the Film'. See Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* (1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 162.

- 12 J. Norris Davidson in note to author, July 1959. See Paul Rotha, *Robert J. Flaherty: a Biography*, 139.
- 13 John Goldman, who helped edit the film, does not mention this; instead, he concentrates on the 'extraordinary sequence' and how it gave expression to 'the whole pent-up fury of Flaherty's genius'. See Paul Rotha. *Robert J. Flaherty: A Biography*, 133. Rotha's account corroborates the accuracy of Johnston's play although the play itself is not discussed (see 119-39).
- 14 Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*, 138. For further discussion, see Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: the Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2000, 42-4.
- 15 See Frank Delaney, 'Endpiece'. *The Listener* 31 May 1984, 39. Delaney first saw *Man of Aran* at school in 1956. On seeing it again on Channel 4 in 1984, he connects the film with the Irish tradition of storytelling, which was 'safety itself' for 'young Catholics mustn't be allowed to think'.
- 16 Ernie O'Malley. *Army Without Banners*. London: New English Library, 1967, 66. First published in 1936 under the title *On Another Man's Wounds*.
- 17 Johnston had been present while *Man of Aran* was being made. See Paul Rotha. *Robert J. Flaherty*, 123.

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