

John Millington Synge

The Well of the Saints

Summary

A three-act comedy, Synge worked on *The Well of the Saints* from the winter of 1903 to its opening in May 1905. He reworked it for a revival at the Abbey in May 1908.

He drew on the reputation of a well to cure blindness found on Arainn, the largest of the Aran islands, the story of which he heard from an old blind storyteller, Martin Conneely. He also drew on a mediaeval french farce in which a blind man and a cripple are cured by an unsought blessing from a saint. Finally, Synge set the play in his beloved lower glens of Wicklow.

Martin and Mary Doul, a blind old couple of the roads, believe themselves beautiful above all others, until a saint restores their sight with water drawn from a well in a 'place across a bit of the sea, where there is an island'. They are now able-bodied, and must hire themselves out for manual labour to survive. Blindness descends on them once more, and they settle themselves to await a beautiful old age. The saint goes to restore their sight a second time and they refuse. Meeting fierce objections they bow to the second blessing, only that Martin at the final moment upends the can of holy water with a strike of his stick. They embrace a life on the roads, having 'seen' the ill-will of those around them.

Synge wrote of his play in 1905: 'I have written this play like a monochrome painting, all in shades of one colour' and it remained always a favourite of Samuel Beckett's.

The Well of the Saints was first published in Dublin and London in editions to coincide with the production in 1905.¹

¹ "The Well of the Saints", **DruidSynge**, www.druid.ie/druidsynge/theplays/the-well-of-the-saints