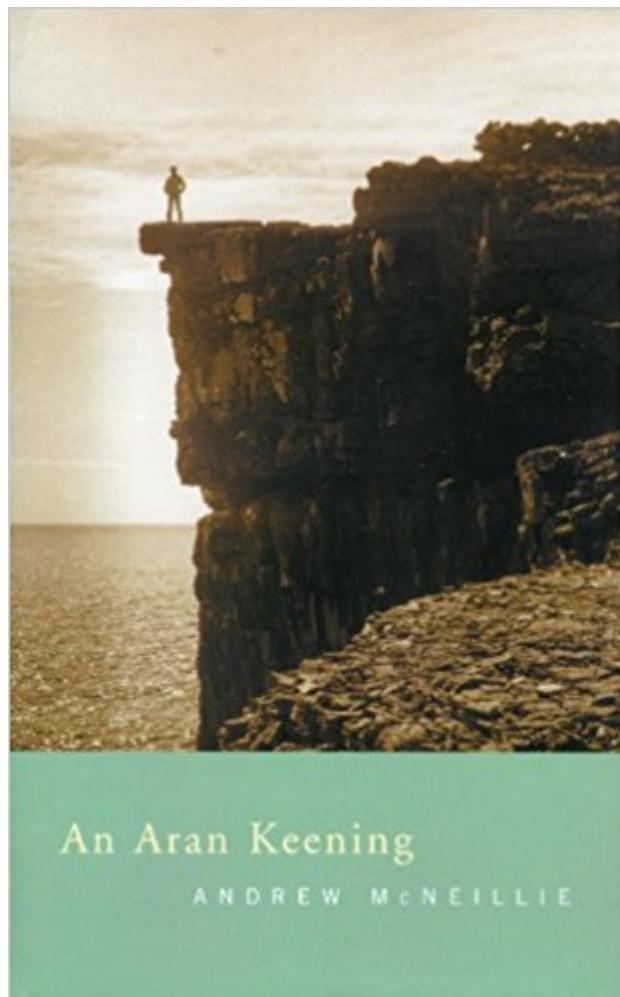


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An Aran Keening



Synopsis

In November 1968, at the age of twenty-two, Andrew McNeillie left his job and his girlfriend in Wales and traveled to Inishmore, one of the isolated Aran Islands off the Atlantic coast of Ireland. He was not a tourist; he stayed eleven months on Inishmore, living alone in a tiny house. An Aran Keening is a limpidly written memoir of that time, a celebration of the island and its people, a lament for a way of life that was infused with a deep sadness then and has vanished altogether now. An Aran Keening tells of a time before electricity and landing strips, a time of real poverty for many. Island life was, in both mind and body, more stark and more dramatic then; it stood much closer to the candle- and horse-powered nineteenth century than to the digital twenty-first. McNeillie fished and trapped for his food—his accounts of his methods are among the most dazzling passages in the book—and writes with great love, but without a trace of romanticism, about the natural world of Aran. With extraordinary sensitivity and subtlety, this gifted writer recounts the awkward but ultimately enriching interactions between his youthful self and the people of Inishmore. An Aran Keening commemorates both the immortality of youth, in all its courage, folly, and quick tenderness of heart, and the passing of a world. Copublished with the Lilliput Press, Dublin. The Wisconsin edition is for sale only in North America.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"An Aran Keening stands as a celebration of pungent wildness."—Patricia Craig, London Times Literary Supplement "An Aran Keening marks out and occupies its own territory—it

caught me in its spell."Ã¢â€”Tom Paulin, author of *The Wind Dog*"A commemoration of island life; of poverty and deprivation, but also the beauty and the unique spirit of the place."Ã¢â€”Sarah-Jane OÃ¢â€”Brian, *The Dubliner*

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This memoir has been painstakingly crafted and perhaps over-written. In smaller sections, it captivates you with a sense of what it was like, in 1968, just before this then-isolated island got an airport and electric hookups to the global village, to spend a wet and windy winter on the edge of the Atlantic. But, as a whole, the authorial smugness and arch prose drag down a book in which nearly nothing happens. Not that this itself is a downfall, for in parts you realize what it'd be like to face yourself, as a young person shy, awkward, and introspective, who has taken yourself out of urban life nearly entirely for long stints. The pleasure of this account, in fact, is in its lack of the picturesque, the quaint, or the predictable travelogue produced by so many Irish visitors, short or long-term. The writer's failure to come to terms with even a fair try at the Irish language prevents him from appreciating more than a superficial understanding into a very crucial element of the Aran mentality. This transience distances him from his place. Certainly, this short book lacks the overwhelming erudition of Tim Robinson's hefty and valuable academic investigations of the island, but its lightweight quality itself's too ephemeral. (By the way, consulting Robinson's island map and comparing it to McNeillie's whereabouts, he seems to have boggled his true location, perhaps to protect the identity of his host family.) It reminds me of another outsider who came to stay for a time in the West of Ireland, Lawrence Millman's *They'll Never See Our Like Again*, which also added little but likewise floundered when the writer tried to assume a bit too hubristic attitude when it came to one who thinks he knows better than the daytrippers once he's mistaken by them for a native. Not everyone who well-intendedly visits a foreign place can afford to live there for a year, and such condescension diminishes the authority of those who stay longer but still (as McNeillie to his credit admits) will never really "go native" at least in the eyes of the real inhabitants. Very few of Inis MÃƒÂ¡r's natives seem to establish any rapport with McNeillie. This ironically draws for me a truer picture than many tourists hoodwinked by pub chatter and conniving characters into thinking they've gained some profound insight into Ireland. So, while his intent can be admired, this product nevertheless fails to live up to its intent. Far too often the pages float by with little ballast. He writes well about nature, but this could have been an essay, since it has no reason to be so drawn out for so little substance. If McNeillie wrote it to warn off his children against their father's example, it's not

apparent here what harm this mundane sojourn one winter had on the author. He spends time in a drafty cabin, gets seasick, gets really sick, fishes, helps with farm chores, daydreams, drinks, and keeps a diary. Eventually he has to go back home come summer. Full stop.

Let me begin by saying that this is a great book! McNeillie brilliantly captures the whole island mentality of isolation, seclusion and to some degree violence and also the inhabitants own form of self-government. I had the pleasure of meeting McNeillie personally and I must honestly admit that he sent shivers down my spine as he described the Galway and the Claddagh area of 1968, the year I was born. It really is a world removed from what I know now not to mention the Aran Islands, which I visited in 1998. His bravery in sticking the whole episode through of life on the island, to its conclusion is reason enough to buy this book. I could go on but it's simple, buy the book.

The first chapter is very good. The last chapter is excellent. It's the 200 pages in between that are problematic. If you suffer from insomnia, rush out and buy this book. The only thing that kept me going is that I have been to the Aran Islands --- The story line skips around and seems to have no continuity or narrative flow... I still don't understand why the author, at college age, spent 3 years living on the island... What an odd glop of uninteresting stories, poetry, observations on corncrakes, and education on fishing lines and rabbit hunting. I did learn some new vocabulary words, though. Like "monody," which might be the kindest way to describe this book.

An Aran Keening is the personal and compelling memoir of Andrew McNeillie, a man who traveled to the Aran Islands off the Atlantic coast of Ireland and stayed there for eleven months. McNeillie is clearly filled with admiration for a land of profound natural beauty and an appreciative people who work hard to maintain their traditions and culture from one generation to the next. Unique, superbly written, highly recommended and rewarding reading, An Aran Keening is a book of considerable insight and justifiable reverence.

Sorry. I mistakenly said in my review just submitted that the author spent 3 yrs living in the Aran Islands. He actually spent under just one year. He had been there 3 years previously. Sorry for the mistake.

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