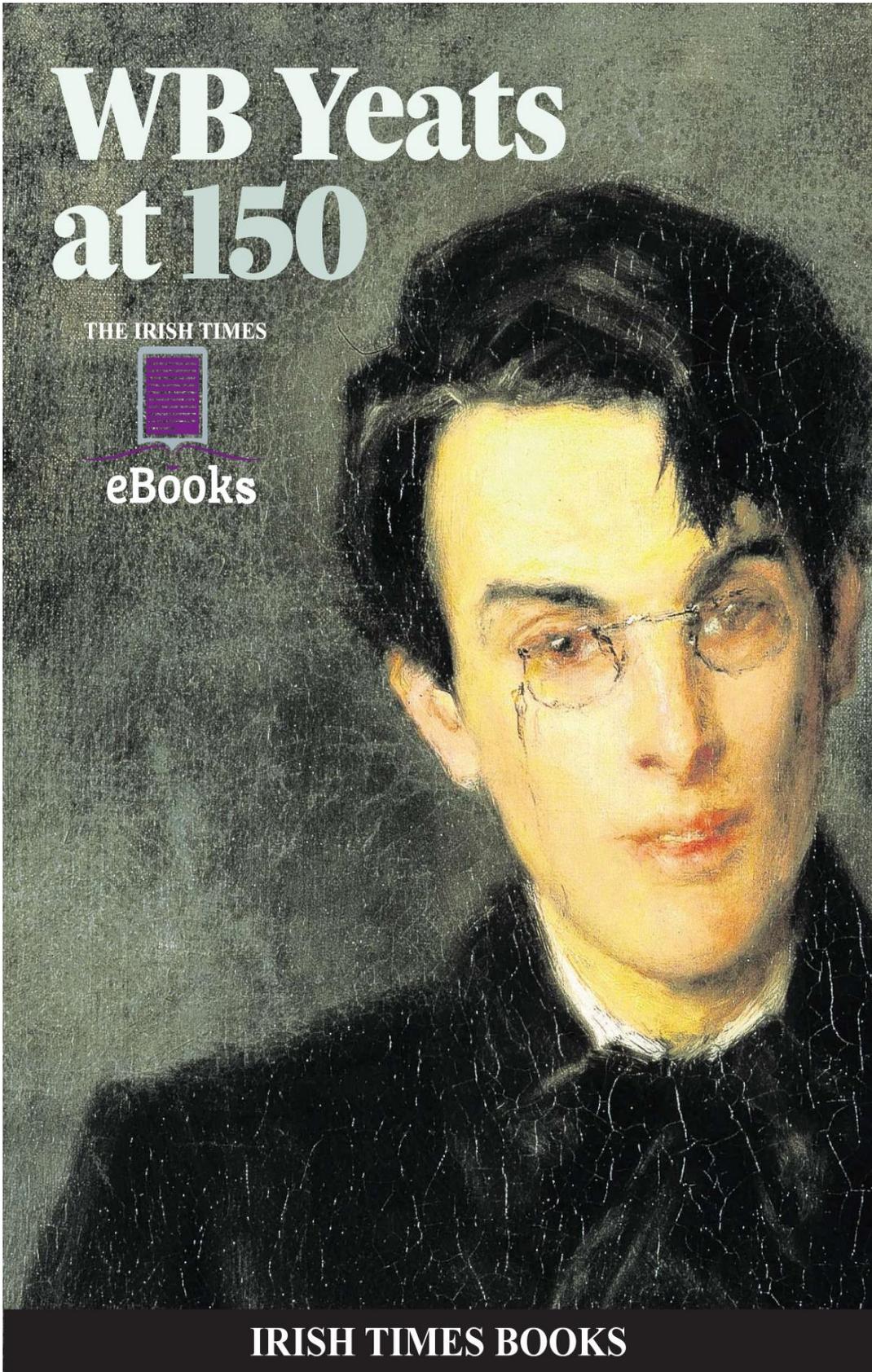


WB Yeats at 150

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On the cover: WB Yeats painted by his father, John Butler Yeats

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Introduction

William Butler Yeats, whose birth, a century and a half ago, on June 13th, 1865, we are marking with this supplement, would probably be deeply unhappy with 21st-century Ireland. He dreamed of a place that was not urban or industrial or materialistic, that retained a deep connection to the world of its pre-modern ancestors. He shuddered at the sight of neon advertising signs. He wanted Ireland to be exceptional in ways that, it turned out, Irish people didn't. Yet Yeats, as much as anyone else, imagined contemporary Ireland into existence. He was born into a country that did not exist as a political entity and grew up in a culture whose most important writers generally took for granted that they would set their work in England. London, even for Yeats's own father - who painted the portrait on the cover - was the obvious place for an Irish artist to be. Yeats changed that. He gave both an urgency and a dignity to the idea of Ireland as its own imaginative space. Yeats was a dreamer, and dreams are sometimes daft. But it was also Yeats who wrote that "in dreams begin responsibility". Yeats accepted the responsibility of making of Irish life and Ireland's political conflicts a poetic art that is among the greatest the world has known. He made much of us. This eBook marks the depth of his engagement with Ireland and with his art, both as a historic legacy and as a living, changing force in the life of a country he might scarcely have recognised.

Fintan O'Toole

Literary Editor

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Philosophy and a little passion: Yeats and politics

Roy Foster

More than any other great poet except Milton, WB Yeats was deeply involved in politics, writes his official biographer.

“What if the Church and the State are the mob that howls at the door!”

With that ominous reflection, in 1934, WB Yeats signed off from one of his more controversial political involvements. This was his interest in the fascistic Blueshirt movement and his misbegotten attempt (pressurised by Ernest Blythe) to write “marching songs” for it. Although the poem *Church and State* suggests that he was declaring a plague on politics in general he could never quite divorce himself from the subject, especially as it concerned Ireland. Yeats’ s close connection to politics comes into sharp focus as we celebrate both the 150th anniversary of his birth and the approaching centenary of the Easter Rising. He himself described his engagement with the public life of his native country as “a continual quarrel and a continual apology”. Not that his political interest stopped at Ireland. Perhaps more than any other great poet except John Milton, William Butler Yeats was deeply involved and interested in the political movements of his day. Living from the 1860s until the 1930s, these were seismic, especially in Ireland. He grew up against the background of Home Rule and of the dizzying ascent and fall of Parnell, a figure who would preoccupy Yeats all his life and whom he described as a “dark star” presiding over the political consciousness of his generation. The Irish cultural revival, which Yeats did so much to inspire, involved a powerful impetus towards political renewal, too, as he would later remember in his autobiographies. “I had seen Ireland in my own time turn from the bragging rhetoric and gregarious humour of O’Connell’s generation and school, and offer herself to the solitary and proud Parnell as to her anti-self . . . and I had begun to hope, or to half-hope that we might be the first in Europe to seek unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect from the 11th to the 13th century . . . could we first find philosophy and a little passion.” He did not stop hoping. Yeats recalled this youthful dream in 1920, when Ireland was convulsed by guerilla war and Europe had been turned upside down in the aftermath of the first World War and the Bolshevik revolution; a year earlier he had published *The Second Coming*, a poem whose ominous invocation of a rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem entered the world’ s imagination and has stayed there. By then his own politics had moved through stages of violent engagement, intense disillusionment and another change with the seismic impact of 1916. In the 1890s he had been a Fenian fellow traveller, magnetised by Maud Gonne, and much involved in the 1798 centenary commemorations, which helped revive radical republicanism; this political phase is marked by visionary paeans of national dedication such as *Red Hanrahan’s Song About Ireland* (which remained Gonne’s favourite of his poems).

The old brown thorn-trees break in two high over Cummen Strand,
Under a bitter black wind that blows from the left hand;
Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies,
But we have hidden in our hearts the flame out of the eyes
Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea,

And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.
Angers that are like noisy clouds have set our hearts abeat;
But we have all bent low and low and kissed the quiet feet
Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

The yellow pool has overflowed high up on Clooth-na-Bare,
For the wet winds are blowing out of the clinging air;
Like heavy flooded waters our bodies and our blood;
But purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood
Is Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

In the early 1900s Yeats's politics moved away from advanced nationalism, impelled by a number of developments; these included Gonne's marriage to John MacBride, her subsequent treatment by republican circles after their separation, and his own quarrels with Sinn Féin over the direction of the Abbey Theatre. The denunciation of *September 1913* summed up the mood unforgettably if untactfully.

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone;
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,

You'd cry, "Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son":
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
But let them be, they're dead and gone,
They're with O'Leary in the grave.

He was now a supporter of Redmondite Home Rule and by 1914 accepted that the unheroic mood had returned. As he told an American audience, the sacrificial politics of his play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* were no longer in fashion. "The boy who used to want to die for Ireland now goes into a rage because the dispensary doctor in County Clare has been elected by a fraud. Ireland is no longer a sweetheart but a house to be set in order." Two years later, Easter Monday 1916 forced him to think again. The poem that recorded this event and its shattering aftermath, with an enduring and quizzical ambiguity, remains one of Yeats' s great political statements. By analysing idealism, fanaticism and the politics of sacrifice in terms of the biographies of key revolutionaries *Easter 1916*, shows Yeats's uncanny sense of history as it happened around him as well as what his wife described as his astonishing ability to know how things would look to people afterwards.

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our wingèd horse.
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,

So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride

And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats's own political course between 1916 and 1922 was cautious but amounted to a mounting endorsement of the rebel cause – although the ambivalence remained. While slowly releasing (often in samizdat fashion) poems such as *Easter 1916* and writing more unequivocal testaments, such as *The Rose Tree* and *Sixteen Dead Men*, he was also reflecting bitterly on Constance Markiewicz's path to socialism in *A Political Prisoner*.

In this, as in other poems of the time (not least *The Second Coming*), his political sense was connecting the Irish upheavals with the postwar collapse of empires and the rise of totalitarian politics in Russia and Italy. Here his preoccupation with “the mob that howls at the door” began to take root, along with his fascination with themes of violence and bitterness, which found expression in the great sequences *Meditations in Time of Civil War* and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*.

Around this time, too, recalling his early political hopes, he reflected that he had not foreseen “the growing murderousness of the world”. These apocalyptic expectations found ominous expression in a 1919 essay called *If I Were Four and Twenty*, essentially a response to the Bolshevik revolution and the postwar world; it also anticipates ideas about movements in world history that he would later build into his philosophical reflection *A Vision*.

Viewing history as driven by struggles between individuals and families rather than between classes, Yeats reviewed the economics of egalitarianism versus traditional hierarchies. He also invoked the “magical bond” that primitive societies invested in a priest or king, relating it to the history of Christianity – and what now threatened to follow it. “Perhaps we are restless because we approach a realisation that our general will must surrender itself to another will within it, interpreted by certain men, at once economists, patriots and inquisitors?”

The anticipation of Mussolini as well as Lenin is striking; so is the way that these ideas would find expression in *Parnell's Funeral*, his 1932 poem about Irish politics, returning to his idea that Parnell's spirit of tragedy replaced the comedy of O'Connell, invoking a return to the savage rites of ancient kingship.

Under the Great Comedian's tomb the crowd.

A bundle of tempestuous cloud is blown
About the sky; where that is clear of cloud
Brightness remains; a brighter star shoots down;
What shudders run through all that animal blood?
What is this sacrifice? Can someone there
Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star?

Rich foliage that the starlight glittered through,

A frenzied crowd, and where the branches sprang
A beautiful seated boy; a sacred bow;
A woman, and an arrow on a string;
A pierced boy, image of a star laid low.
That woman, the Great Mother imaging,
Cut out his heart. Some master of design
Stamped boy and tree upon Sicilian coin.

An age is the reversal of an age:
When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone,
We lived like men that watch a painted stage.
What matter for the scene, the scene once gone:
It had not touched our lives. But popular rage,
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.
None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part
Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.

Come, fix upon me that accusing eye.
I thirst for accusation. All that was sung.
All that was said in Ireland is a lie
Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.
Leave nothing but the nothings that belong
To this bare soul, let all men judge that can
Whether it be an animal or a man.

Yeats himself felt deep disquiet at the way that European civilisation was turning to “a myth which now but gropes its way out of the mind’s dark but will shortly pursue and terrify”. Although he felt doubtful about the ability of democratic government to deal with anarchic violence, his commitment to the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the Irish Free State was unequivocal, and he involved himself in the political and cultural affairs of Dáil Éireann, including taking an aggressive stand on the issues of freedom of expression for artists, and the imposition of Catholic social mores on to the Constitution.

At the same time he was acutely conscious that the State had been born in violence and inherited bitterness (the theme of *Meditations in Time of Civil War*). His idealisation of the Irish ascendancy class before the Union of 1800, revolving around a highly partial reading of Swift, Berkeley and Burke and his belief that a leisured and cultured class should be enabled by a social ethos that accepted inherited authority, was certainly conservative, not to say reactionary, although it did not sit easily with fascism (which he usually spelt “fashism”). But it did lead him into talks with the leaders of the nascent Blueshirt movement in 1933, which ended, by all accounts, in mutual incomprehension.

As the 1930s lurched to their apocalyptic close Yeats expected and dreaded a coming war, and his poetry continued to interrogate themes of the rise and fall of civilisations, the decay of democracy, and the politics of hatred, which, he told an English friend, was a phenomenon particularly relevant to Ireland, where “it finds a more complicated & determined conscience to prey upon”.

Although he has been accused of Nazi sympathies, because he accepted a Goethe Medal from the Nazi-controlled city of Frankfurt, in 1934, this said more about Yeats's admiration for Goethe than his interest in Germany, which was slight – unlike Maud Gonne and her family, who were both pro-Nazi and anti-Semitic.

Yeats's beliefs that Mussolini represented “the rise of the individual man against the anti-human part machine” and that German legislation in 1934 was intended to allow old families to continue living in their ancestral places (rather than to expropriate Jews) suggest that his contact with the reality of fascism was shaky in the extreme. And although his ominous interest in eugenics grew throughout the 1930s, and is reflected in many of his writings, he used these arguments to argue against the social policies of fascist countries.

In fact, as one Blueshirt recalled later, “Yeats was not fascist but he was authoritarian”, and his late ideas turned more and more to a preoccupation with his peculiar vision of ascendancy Ireland before the Union and to his belief that, in order for culture and tradition to be preserved, creative individuals and their families deserved priority.

He had always turned to oligarchic and aristocratic ideas, as well as the occult patterns of authority that he inferred from Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and that are reflected in the coda he added to *Parnell's Funeral* in 1934.

The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay.
Had de Valèra eaten Parnell's heart
No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day,
No civil rancour torn the land apart.

Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's
Imagination had been satisfied,
Or lacking that, government in such hands,
O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died.

Had even O'Duffy – but I name no more –
Their school a crowd, his master solitude;
Through Jonathan Swift's dark grove he passed, and there
Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched his blood.

Themes of disillusionment with public life persist in his late work, along with the occasional note of hope for deliverance (as, perhaps, in his very last poem, *The Black Tower*, which his wife pertinently described as a political poem). But in the end he turned for inspiration to the crucible of individual experience, and love rather than war. This thought ends one of his great last poems, *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, which was on his desk when he died.

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

And for all his preoccupation with hatred and bitterness and their prominent place in Irish life, it is worth remembering a comment by his friend Edith Lyttelton, after a visit to post-revolutionary Ireland, where she was struck by the intensity of antagonism expressed in political life. "I have often thought of a thing WB Yeats said to me many years ago," she reflected. "I was asking how it was that he no longer went in for Revolution, nor drove about in crepe when any big moment came to England, as he did in the streets of Dublin at Queen Victoria's Jubilee. (This last was a silent question.) He said, 'I have learned to know that nothing great comes out of hatred and bitterness.' "

This contradicts the implications in some of his most powerful political poems, such as *Ancestral Houses* and *Blood and the Moon*. But it is affirmed by others, and it may stand as a fairer judgment than the bombastic epitaph he left behind in *Under Ben Bulbin*.

Our Favourite Yeats poems

We've asked some well-known people which WB Yeats poems they like most, and why.

September 1913

Chosen by Fiach Mac Chonghaill and Diarmaid Ferriter

What need you, being come to sense,

 But fumble in a greasy till
 And add the halfpence to the pence
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone;
 For men were born to pray and save:
 Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

 Yet they were of a different kind,
 The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
 But little time had they to pray
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
 Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
 The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
 For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
 All that delirium of the brave?
 Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
 It's with O'Leary in the grave.

 Yet could we turn the years again,
 And call those exiles as they were
 In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
 Has maddened every mother's son':
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
 But let them be, they're dead and gone,
 They're with O'Leary in the grave.

Why Diarmaid Ferriter chose this poem:

Yeats's love for Maud Gonne and his introduction to the veteran Fenian John O'Leary in the early 20th century led to him moving in republican circles, but he grew tired of what he

regarded as the pieties, hypocrisies and snobberies of the Catholic middle class, most memorably in this poem, written to commemorate the date when Dublin Corporation rejected the proposed Hugh Lane art gallery. This was also Yeats as public commentator, and as a poet keen to fan the flames of controversy. The poem was published in *The Irish Times* in 1913 (as *Romance in Ireland*). It is not a sophisticated poem, but the simple structure, strong rhyme and repetition powerfully conveyed his sarcasm, anger and political message. The words “fumble in a greasy till” and “add the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer, until / You have dried the marrow from the bone” continued to resonate long afterwards for those preoccupied with the themes of class, religion, societal values and the status of the arts in Ireland.

Why Fiach Mac Conghail chose this poem:

I admire Yeats’s courage as an artist to engage with the politics of the day. He didn’t pull his punches in his criticism of materialism taking over from a sense of community in Ireland. This poem could have been written about the Celtic Tiger era. It was the reason why we included this poem as a part of our production of *The Risen People* at the Abbey Theatre recently. It is a reminder to us all about how we should constantly strive for our vision of a more equal society and not to succumb to the “greasy till”.

He reproves the Curlew

Chosen by John Kelly

O curlew, cry no more in the air,
Or only to the water in the West;
Because your crying brings to my mind
passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair
That was shaken out over my breast:
There is enough evil in the crying of wind

Why John Kelly Chose this poem:

Why a third-person complaint directed at a bird most of us hear with gratitude and affection? The answer, of course, is to be found in the pain of lost love – or, more accurately, the memory of good sex. The curlew reminds Yeats of “passion-dimmed eyes”, and not for the first time his lover’s hair becomes the star turn. Perhaps the final line is just a rather grand way of saying what we all say when things go wrong in love and happiness, when we petulantly want to shoot whatever happens to pass as the messenger – even a curlew. But in the folklore familiar to Yeats the curlew foretold a death, so we forgive him for what might seem, at first, a cranky attack on a blameless bird. Yeats is thinking about love and sex and death. And, in the absence of anything else of consequence, aren’t we all?

He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Chosen by Dearbhla Walsh

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Why Dearbhla chose this poem:

Growing up in Co Sligo, we were particularly exposed to all things Yeats. I loved, learned and recited many of his poems in competition at the annual Sligo Easter feiseanna. I even won a few medals and certificates. Ironically, He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven was the poem I performed the most as a child – but in private. It expressed for me the fear and the vulnerability of growing up feeling different from those around me. It still makes me feel my heart beat loudly – but now with courage and with hope. When it comes to love we are all equal. Equally afraid. Equally hopeful. Yes to Yeats. Yes to equality.

WB Yeats was a towering figure in Irish life

Eileen Battersby

It all begins with the birth of a first child, a baby son, born in Sandymount, Dublin, 150 years ago today. And whether or not a squadron of enchanted beings actually did flutter about his head, there was little chance that William Butler Yeats would be other than an artist. Small matter how many stories were to fill the imagination of the boy who delighted in the magical Co Sligo countryside of his Pollexfen mother's family, little Yeats, the eldest of six children, must have grown up aware of his unhappy lawyer father's determination to paint.

The family shuttled back and forth between Ireland and England. John B Yeats did become a portrait painter although history remembers him as the father of a gifted brood including a Nobel Laureate poet, a world-class painter and two indomitable daughters who were pioneers of the arts and crafts movement.

Possibly the finest English-language poet of the 20th century, William Butler Yeats was also a national poet, an eccentric seer, whose genuine love of his country never deflected his rise as an international artist. His vision is romantic, heroic, epic; his art told his story while also shaping the identity of the nation he wanted Ireland to be. His legacy is so immense, even overpowering, some Irish poets simply looked elsewhere, inwards. Austin Clarke and Patrick Kavanagh had their own voice, leaving the young Thomas Kinsella to battle Yeats's ghost. Louis MacNeice was influenced by Yeats as is Derek Mahon and Michael Longley.

Seamus Heaney never felt obliged to deal with the Yeatsian tone as he recalled never having read him until he was in his 30s. No, Heaney was never either guided or burdened by Yeats. It is fascinating, though, to consider that while Heaney did confront the political and tribal unrest in Northern Ireland his work draws on a powerful, zoom-in sense of personal memory, Yeats with a keen eye on posterity used a broader lens. He emulated Jonathan Swift's sense of being driven by a responsibility to his country.

The first Irish writer since Yeats to share this cohesively responsible approach is playwright Brian Friel who openly addressed the conflict in Northern Ireland while exploring the competing national cultures within Ireland. Yeats, quoted by school children and statesmen, casts a huge shadow and continues to do so. Only Shakespeare and possibly Dickens are more frequently quoted. Yeats hovers and now, 76 years since his death, continues to do so. As Stravinsky is to 20th-century classical music, or Picasso is to 20th-century art, so too stands Yeats to international poetry.

He was culturally engaged – he championed a national literature; Yeats was a Modernist, albeit one influenced by an earlier visionary, William Blake. He was also a symbolist and was initially drawn to French symbolism, while also deferring to the traditional forms. As an artist he mastered the core techniques, he was inspired if deliberate and calculating. The self-absorbed young romantic became the passionate seer. He was an original; magisterial yet daring. His lyric, rhythmic verse exudes sophisticated, rhetorical power. Radical in ways, he did not, however, dismiss the voices that preceded him. Instead he embraced forebears such as James Clarence Mangan, Thomas Davis and most particularly, Samuel Ferguson as “a company/That sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong/Ballad and story, rann and song.” (From *To Ireland in the Coming Times*.) It was Yeats who supplanted Thomas Moore as the national poet. Whereas Moore's romantic celebration of the folk memory lulled and seduced, Yeats,

who also knew the folklore and through his Co Sligo connections was shaped by it, perfected eloquently controlled rage.

In a career spanning more than half a century – and Yeats during his final days was still writing, still planning, still dreaming – he evolved dramatically as an artist, from the floppy-haired Victorian aesthete penning the beautiful lyric verse collections of *Crossways* (1889), featuring works such as *Down by the Salley Gardens*, or *The Rose* (1893) with *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, to the stern visionary observing the developing state with the intensity of an exasperated parent evident throughout his seminal quest volume, *The Tower* collection (1928) and *Last Poems* (1939), including masterpieces such as *The Statues*, *Long-legged Fly* and *The Circus Animals' Desertion*.

James Joyce glowered magnificently in exile; Yeats, a mystic by nature, remained in Ireland, aside from lengthy sojourns in England, Italy and France, and was to reveal ever increasing layers of political consciousness – and pragmatism.

Never mind living in exciting times, which included the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, domestic rebellion and world war – Yeats lived in an exciting household, full of talk, anecdote, frustration and hysteria; his father's hopes, his ailing mother's despair. Childhood summers spent in Co Sligo with his mother's family introduced him to myth and legend, the notion of stories, faeries and ghosts lurking in every stone. An imagination could not help but soar. His London years helped shape his awareness of being caught between cultures. He certainly saw the artist as an outcast. As a schoolboy at the Godolphin school in Hammersmith he did poorly. Back in Ireland he went to High School. Purists criticised his lack of Irish but concession should be made for his disrupted schooling.

Change, always change. Yeats was born into a world in which Queen Victoria sat resplendent on the throne of an empire, 28 years into a reign which would last a further 35. He was not quite the Anglo-Irish patrician he is frequently classified as; his family resided on the margins of the discreet waning of Irish Protestant ascendancy life. Yeats was a middle-class, and undeniably, lofty Dublin Protestant who, though rejecting violence, wanted the English out of Ireland and sought the dawning of a revival celebrating the Gaelic past. Nor did he go to university; he attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, now the National College of Art and Design. While there he met George Russell, AE, who shared his interest in mystical religion, the occult and things supernatural. Art became life for Yeats.

Artistic torment he realised was vital in achieving artistic greatness. He needed urgently an unattainable muse, he decided, and at 21 he found her in the volatile radical Maud Gonne, who would play the title role in his subversive play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, in 1902; inspire his finest poetry; and, having spent some 14 years rejecting his offers of marriage, remain a presence until his death. While Gonne, who survived him, again by 14 years, living on until 1953, is considered the possible cause for his turning to politics, the young Yeats had already been touched by the fire of the old Fenian John O'Leary. By the late 1890s onwards Yeats's involvement with the cultural ambitions of the Irish Literary Theatre, soon to become the Abbey Theatre, had placed him within the context of cultural politics. National politics beckoned ever closer.

Public reaction to *The Playboy of the Western World* famously offered Yeats a master class in how culture and society interact. It also positioned Yeats firmly within the nationalist

political lobby. The Literary Revival had in itself given Yeats a political role. Through it he was actively participating in shaping a national consciousness. The detached artist was, by drawing on aspects of Celtic myth, legend and story, devising a plan for what the “new” idealised Ireland was to become. Little wonder that the supreme isolationist Joyce disapproved as Yeats’s “theatre business, management of men” acquired a national purpose. It is interesting that whereas Parnell was so valid a presence for Joyce the Catholic, Yeats the Protestant only became drawn to him much later. It took the abrupt fall and early death of Parnell to alert Yeats to the dead leader’s tragic, and therefore, romantic potential: “He might have brought the imagination of Ireland nearer the Image and the honeycomb” (From Autobiographies). For Yeats, O’Leary was a far more immediately inspirational, quasi-paternal presence.

Intended as a grand gesture rather than a serious bid for independence, the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 took all but the participants by surprise. Most commentators, Yeats included, who was at the time living in England, disapproved of the rebellion. His friend and fellow modernist poet Ezra Pound greeted it as merely something “to give that country another set of anecdotes to keep it going another hundred years”. Yeats had publicly disassociated himself from Pearse’s politics and had also attacked Eoin Mac Neill. This attitude would change as the leaders were executed and suddenly became martyrs, and therefore more appealing. When Yeats presented Easter, 1916, it was Gonne who correctly detected the ambivalence at its heart.

Early in life while an art student Yeats had discovered the supernatural. Spirituality and symbols were to preoccupy him and he was drawn to the occult. His excursions into this as a member of The Order of the Golden Dawn has helped consolidate theories that Yeats was at best eccentric and at worst, mildly crazy. It is far more complex than this; Yeats was a magician confident of an existence beyond death that bypassed conventional religion.

Time and again when exploring the life and work of Yeats, the reader is struck by the depth of his thought. He was a profound thinker and for a man who lived and loved so much in the real world, he was fascinated by death and the spirit world. It is as if Yeats, no matter how engaged in life around him – and he was an organiser and an embracer of causes, many of them lost – always lived at a remove. Admittedly, he did things differently, even to finally getting married at the relatively late age of 52 to the heroically supportive George Hyde Lees – of whom he wrote “comely & joyous & aged but 24. She is a great student of my subjects & has enough money to put us above anxiety” – and fathering his two children, Michael and Anne, at an age at which most people are welcoming their grandchildren.

In 1919, looking back on the 1890s, Yeats, as Shirley Neuman records, describes himself as having “three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality.” By 1904 Yeats, when writing to AE, George Russell, is condemning the “exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty” of his own early poems. Yeats’s reasons are obvious: he has discovered politics – a new deliberation is about to enter his work. The autobiographical as used by Yeats is informative, never confessional. He places his experience within the context of history and approaches his idea of a unity of being as symbolised by a tree, his image of Ireland. It was Yeats who grasped Ireland’s political and cultural hatreds and balanced this awareness against his nationalist aspirations and his vision for the Abbey Theatre.

Considering the weight of his poetic achievement – even his elegist, the great WH Auden, in fairness approaches rather than challenges Yeats as the finest English-language poet of the 20th century – it is easy to see why the range of Yeats's prose writing is so often missed. This is partly explained by the divided reactions to his plays.

Yeats was an obsessive writer. He not only wrote more than 7,000 letters, he published volumes of prose on a range of subjects including philosophy. There is also Yeats the speech maker. On entering the Senate in 1922 he proved an active member during his six-year term which would be dominated by his spirited speech on divorce in 1925, defending the Protestant right to a civil freedom which was being threatened by the new State's ban. "We are no petty people," Yeats argued, summoning Swift, Henry Grattan, George Berkeley and Parnell in a powerful defence of his own culture. But there was more to it than this. Having spent years supporting the establishment of an Irish State and having articulated a heroic conception of the role of the Anglo-Irish, Yeats, the canny politician, was capable of magnificently turning this against the pieties of the new State. A convert to nationalism, Yeats then discovered, ironically, that once this culture was consolidated, he had to defend his own.

The poems of *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910) and increasingly, *Responsibilities* (1914) and *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), reveal the singular clarity that marks the best of his work. They are also poems in which Yeats is not only serving art, he is responding to his changing country by chronicling those changes. Yeats always conceded that he was a mystic but he liked to remind people he was also practical. For all the dreaminess and the theatricality – throughout his life he favoured touches of flamboyance in his dress – he had impressive presence of mind.

On route to thunder abuse at the dissenting opening-night Abbey audience attending O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* in 1926: "You have disgraced yourselves, again", Yeats was sufficiently prepared to deliver a copy of his speech to the Irish Times office before arriving at the theatre. Conor Cruise O'Brien identified the poet's singular opportunistic blend of "passion and cunning" – from the famous, often discussed essay of the same title which was published in 1965 – that sustained Yeats throughout a remarkable public career. Here was a dreamer who became a political player possessed of astute political consciousness.

Yeats was egocentric, obsessive, and certainly a bit odd, yet he was also aware of everything, aware even of Fascism which briefly attracted him. This, of course, has been gleefully pounced upon by his detractors who saw him as a supporter of Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts. Others would never forgive him for not learning Irish.

Yet the wonderful difficulty about Yeats is that even those who deplore his elitism and alleged snobbery – he appears to have been terrific company even if he did have a somewhat unsettling habit of declaiming his poetry in bizarrely surreal tones that contrast with his Edwardian Irish accent – is that it is impossible not to admire him. Yeats in old age battled against time with a desperate creative urgency akin to that of Picasso in his final paintings.

There are many faces to Yeats the poet; the young romantic, the frustrated lover pursuing a wilful woman and later her daughter, Iseult, by then already a former mistress of Pound. Yeats the lyric poet, the public poet; the speech maker, the commentator, the visionary, the large man in the wide hat complete with monocle, the openly unfaithful but indulged

husband, the legend, the international literary giant. He was all these things as well as a prevailing influence in the making of modern Ireland. He would seem to be not only Ireland's enduring great poet, but the major Irish public man of the 20th century.

Footage of the return of his body to Ireland in September 1948, nine years after his death in France, evokes images of a warrior restored to his people. It is a theatrical pilgrimage of which Yeats would have approved. Above all he believed in Ireland. What an incredible life's journey which began on a June day in 1865 for a little baby born 150 years ago today.

Saving grace: how WB Yeats helped me to become a poet

Eavan Boland

I read WB Yeats first when I was a teenager. In boarding school, after dark, I took out the sturdy book with its burgundy covers and turned over page after page. In winter I used a torch. In summer I read by the late light. I got to know lines, then stanzas, then whole poems.

Later I would look back at those times not with wonder but with something more like puzzlement. I wasn't particularly bookish in school. I wasn't even studious. But I turned to that book, and then to some others he wrote, with a sense of adventure and intensity that I would rarely replicate later in my life.

But why? If poets have tribes, and many do, I had nothing at all to do with his. By the time I was reading him he had gathered the sort of adherents for whom I felt little sympathy. Ardent modernists, canonical close readers, high-caste theorists. Why was I adding myself to this readership?

There is a mystery and poignance to the way poets find one another. The process can never be mutual. It is always the younger poet in a later generation who does the finding. It is always left to the younger poet to work out a process built on artifice and illusion: to make a connection across time and distance that is part scrutiny and all invention. At the end of the process, after all the memorising and inscribing, the older poet remains intact in both meaning and achievement. It is the younger one who is revealed.

What was revealed to me was how willing I was in this initial encounter to enter a Yeatsian world of lakes, of spirits hidden inside mountain winds and heroic legends. How easily I passed into all this, like an unchallenged ghost. Now I look back, I know the key to my first response was not the truth of his representation but the depth of my own displacement.

I had returned to Ireland at the age of 14 having lived for years outside the country. I knew instinctively that I lacked a secret language of location that turns a child into an adult who fits in. I missed the sense of belonging that both reveals and restricts the meaning of place. Without those signals of self I was able to accept without questioning Yeats's artifice and invention: his landscapes filled with improbable spirits and perfect language needed no standard of proof for me. There was no other place waiting for me. I adopted his and made it my own.

So began my late teenage years and the beginning of my 20s, when I knew many of his poems by heart. Stanzas, epigrams, exclamations guided some inner space whenever I summoned them. His words entered my mind the way melody enters the mind of someone who loves songs: a framing device well beyond the subject matter of what's remembered. It seemed back then that I had acquired not just a possession but also a comfort zone. And I might have remained there. I might have stayed grateful for the Virgilian companionship of a poet whose well-phrased dramas and dramatic phrases brought more dignity to my everyday life than I could have provided.

But my life changed. I married. I went to live in a suburb. I had small daughters and daily tasks. I began to lose track of the city I once allowed him to imagine for me. I now lived among school runs and suburban expansion. And yet I could still remember how I had once

thrilled to his bitter, eloquent tract *The Death of Synge*. How his inventory of Synge's qualities had once seemed a small autobiographical snapshot of his own: "He loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy."

Yet something had shifted. And this, I'm sure, is always the turning point between poets of different generations: the perpetual pivot. When the younger one can no longer allow the older one to imagine his or her life. I was still reading Yeats. But I no longer turned to his poems to map a location I couldn't map for myself. I had my own city now. My own life. I had started out on my own struggle to write a poem in which I could hear my own voice.

And this could have been the moment I lost my connection with William Butler Yeats. Just the realisation that I lived in a different country, at a different time, with different values and a sense of the poet's life at odds with his might have been done it. Often enough that is how one poet stops reading another. How early influence becomes grateful forgetfulness. It could have been that for me except for one thing: my point of contact with Yeats was no longer reading his poems. It was trying to write my own.

It was through this that I began to see that the issue for me with Yeats was not a horizon or a suburb. Not a century's distance or a type of landscape. It was a slip of linguistic real estate that he owned and I longed for. It was the lyric poem. A poem that had languished at the end of the 19th century, adorned with too many words and safe sentiments. A poem he had found and restored.

The promise of that restoration comes in a passage from his early memoirs: "Someone at the Young Ireland Society gave me a newspaper that I might read some article or letter. I began idly reading verses describing the shore of Ireland as seen by a returning, dying emigrant. My eyes filled with tears and yet I knew the verses were badly written – vague, abstract words such as one finds in a newspaper. I looked at the end and saw the name of some political exile who had died but a few days after his return to Ireland. They had moved me because they contained the actual thoughts of a man at a passionate moment of life."

I began to see Yeats's faith in personal utterance as a blueprint, an escape route for the modern poet. His choice of the lyric showed the possibility of building a form that was an ecosystem for the weather of changes and sorrows.

Now when I took down his book I was no longer looking at the stylised and abstract landscapes he invented nor at the rhetoric he used to commend them. I was seeing with surprise and admiration his unerring progress towards a stronger lyric always being made ready for a more vulnerable humanity.

His fear of ageing, his humiliation in memory, his loss of strength – for these dark themes he made a light skiff of language.

The stanzaic control of *Sailing to Byzantium*, the gruff music of *Cuchulain Comforted* and the power of *The Circus Animals' Desertion* all show this. And all can be connected back to the moment on shipboard, when the emigrant's inexpert words made his eyes fill with tears.

For someone like myself, trying in those earlier years to make both language and structure from unlikely everyday materials, his involvement with the lyric was critical. It was also a complex problem-solving example for any poet who wanted to look more closely.

The time-wasting debates in contemporary poetry, which would crop up in almost every decade in the 20th century, about autobiography and disclosure, about the persona versus the self, are set in context by Yeats's later work. For his purpose there was no difference between the invented self and the revealed one. They are indistinguishable, both linked to his project of finding the most powerful medium to express the most powerless human state: ageing, mortality and loss.

I still remember those evenings reading Yeats in a new way. Opening the same book in a different light. Looking at those cadences of power and music in a house beneath the foothills of the Dublin Mountains, where every car headlight, every lamp in every suburban living room signalled an Ireland he would have raged against. I remember thinking how he would have lamented this new world, how little the poet of those Sligo reflections would have found to console himself with in the busy streets and crowded supermarkets.

And yet, for me as a poet who lived in that world, who wanted to find a language for it and for the life I lived there, his example was, ironically, a saving grace. His mapping of the relation between a durable lyric form and a vulnerable human experience remains one of the great formal achievements of poetry. And it still seems to me one of the most moving parts of Yeats's legacy that this poet, who had such a complex and troubled relation to democracy, in the end left his great invention there open and available, for anyone to find.

Our Favourite Yeats Poems

Byzantium

Chosen by Colm Tóibín and John Banville

The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after Spirit! The smithies break the flood.
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Why John Banville chose this poem:

The earlier *Sailing to Byzantium* is better known, but *Byzantium*, dated 1930, is surely one of Yeats's greatest poetic achievements. Although his occult and alchemical preoccupations, collected in that dotty compendium *A Vision*, are entirely risible, they served to inspire magnificent poetry. The fourth stanza of *Byzantium*, in particular, with its mysterious images of flame, spirit and entranced dancing, has the power to make the hair stand on end. It was Yeats's gift to transmute the base metal of common words – look at the plainness of the vocabulary here – into pure gold. Great art such as this will never be beaten down.

Why Colm Tóibín chose this poem:

Mirroring Yeats's great public poems are more powerful private poems, poems that come from the mind in reverie, from a haunted whispering voice, using imagery that is often dense with mystery. The world of *Byzantium* is a dream world that allows, nonetheless, great clarity of vision, moments of pure distinction and sudden realisation. The poem dramatises in ghostly tones the human spirit as its most desolate and grand and exalted. The power of its play between light and darkness, its forceful insistence on death as a sort of energy, depend on the poem's high-toned music. The constant repetition, the certainty in the hard iambic beat in some of the lines, the insistence of taking the most abstract terms and phrases and making them seem real and concrete and true, add gravity and strangeness to the poem's magisterial rhetoric.

Adam's Curse

Chosen by Fiona Shaw

We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, 'A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world.'

And thereupon

That beautiful mild woman for whose sake
There's many a one shall find out all heartache
On finding that her voice is sweet and low
Replied, 'To be born woman is to know –
Although they do not talk of it at school –
That we must labour to be beautiful.'

I said, 'It's certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
There have been lovers who thought love should be
So much compounded of high courtesy
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks
Precedents out of beautiful old books;
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.'

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;
We saw the last embers of daylight die,
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell
About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:
That you were beautiful, and that I strove
To love you in the old high way of love;
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

Why Fiona chose this poem:

I was introduced to Adam's Curse by Roy Foster, who asked me to learn it for the publication of the first volume of his Yeats biography. As I recited it I could see it happening in the room in front of me. It starts like a Chekhov play: three characters in a room, two men talking about writing, and then the woman speaks. She is like Edna O'Brien, in my mind beautiful and combative.

“To be born woman is to know
Although they do not talk of it at school
that we must labour to be beautiful.”

And then the poem falls away as the writer collapses inward. Silence in the room, but we are with him in his mind and the roar of his passion. And then they are lost, “as weary-hearted as that hollow moon”. A perfect journey from one part of his mind to the other: the intellect to the heart. Who cares about writing when there is love?

The Song of Wandering Aengus

Chosen by Olwen Fouéré

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire aflame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

Why Olwen Fouéré chose this poem:

I first came across this poem when I was about 10 years old. It may have been in a school poetry book. It speaks to me now as it spoke to me then, when a fire is in my head, burning with questions and yearnings, before an idea or a vision or a love is born. The vision calls to us, appearing only for a moment, and then she slips away like a fish into the streams of the Milky Way. Every journey we make to find her will be worth it, but we will never hold her for longer than a moment. Except, maybe, in our death.

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

Chosen by Blake Morrison

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Why Blake Morrison chose this poem:

“I think it's better that in times like these / A poet's mouth be silent,” Yeats wrote, and he criticised Wilfred Owen for making passive suffering a theme for poetry. Fortunately, far from keeping his mouth shut during the First World War and the War of Independence Yeats wrote his greatest poems then. A resigned yet positive tone defines this one. Neither bellicose nor pacifist, the airman acts for himself (his motivation “a lonely impulse of delight”) rather than for country or tribe. The control of the verse form is immaculate, especially those last four lines, which, in their rhythm, rhyme and syntax, beautifully enact the idea of balance.

Politics

Chosen by Joseph O'Connor

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.' –
Thomas Mann

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms.

Why Joseph O'Connor chose this poem:

Yeats's uncharacteristically self-deprecating and even gently funny poem *Politics* (1939) is far from his greatest achievement, but it's hesitantly cognisant of human frailty in ways I find endearing and oddly touching. It's a late poem, perhaps his last. He loved being on the stage of public discourse, but this time he's off it, a bit bored by fine speeches. He trusts us enough to drop his mask. It has something of the charm of The Beatles' *I Saw Her Standing There*, a tender little admission of a moment that stirs recognition. And I adore that final, pouting exclamation mark: "But O that I were young again / And held her in my arms!" It's a rare, lovely twinkling, Yeats with tongue in cheek.

Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop

Chosen by Anne Enright

I met the Bishop on the road
And much said he and I.
'Those breasts are flat and fallen now
Those veins must soon be dry;
Live in a heavenly mansion,
Not in some foul sty.'

'Fair and foul are near of kin,
And fair needs foul,' I cried.
'My friends are gone, but that's a truth
Nor grave nor bed denied,
Learned in bodily lowliness
And in the heart's pride.

'A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent.'

Why Anne Enright chose this poem:

The movement in *Among School Children* into complexity was a revelation, when I was a schoolchild myself, of what a poem might do that prose could not. But the poem that held me tranced was *Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop*. This was something I could almost understand: Jane's pride in the face of shame, her wit and transgressive rage. Of course, I did not understand it at all, which was perhaps just as well.

Why WB Yeats matters

Denis Donoghue

Many years ago I gave a lecture at Queen's University Belfast on a theme I have long since forgotten. After the lecture Prof Singh of the Italian department came up to say hello and to invite me, if I were so inclined, to listen to a tape recording of a recent lecture given at Queen's by the literary critic FR Leavis. The subject was William Butler Yeats.

I was indeed so inclined, especially as Dr Leavis had turned down my request that he write an essay for *An Honoured Guest*, a collection of new essays on Yeats that JR Mulryne and I were compiling. Leavis's assessment of Yeats was hard to find – he did not write on him as often as on TS Eliot – so his lecture would be a pointed occasion. The following morning, before catching the train to Dublin, I listened to it in silence with Prof Singh.

Leavis began by asserting that although Yeats was obviously a major figure, it was difficult to point to a single poem in which his genius was manifest. Without more ado, Leavis chose to comment on three poems: *Sailing to Byzantium*, *Byzantium* and *Among School Children*, in that order.

The poems of *Byzantium* did not in the end survive his most concentrated attention. Leavis dismissed them, although with blessings on their heads: they were too dependent on Yeats's private scheme of reference. When he turned to *Among School Children*, I felt that nothing less than western civilisation was in question. If the poem survived Leavis's scrutiny, than civilisation would have a chance: if not, not.

Leavis's commentary was far-reaching, a quest of significances for which the local detail of Yeats's language in the poem was resorted to for evidence. I still recall the tension and the excitement I felt as Leavis's phrases leaned one way or another in the commentary: they seemed to hold themselves in reserve, endlessly postponing the verdict.

To my nearly exhausted relief, *Among School Children* passed with honours; it survived Leavis's concerned analysis; it was a fully achieved thing. Not only did the poem withstand any degree of critical pressure as a poem, but it also testified to cultural possibilities that might be invoked in its name.

I was immensely gratified and took the train to Dublin with *Among School Children* and Leavis's commentary almost equally in my head. In the meantime, and perhaps because of Leavis's praise, *Among School Children* is accepted, so far as my reading goes, as Yeats's finest poem. The two Byzantine poems are argued over, sometimes given a splendid pass, sometimes not.

I hope that my recollection of Leavis's recorded lecture is accurate, but it may not be. Many years later I find that, in his *Lectures in America* (1969), he declares both of the poems of *Byzantium* to be "triumphs of a wholly original art of creative expression that is contemporary with Eliot's". Speaking of *The Tower*, Leavis said that "the volume containing *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Among School Children* impressed one – and impresses – as coming from a major poet".

This points to another instance of unanimity. It is universally agreed that Yeats became a great poet, not merely a post-Victorian lyricist, with the publication of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933).

In these books he achieved a poetry of which even Leavis, a critic not disposed to admire it, wrote: "There is no element of a man's experience in the twentieth century that, of its nature, it excludes."

Anyone is free to admire some earlier and some later poems, as TS Eliot admired *Who Goes with Fergus?*, *The Folly of Being Comforted*, *Adam's Curse* and *Pardon, Old Fathers*. Conor Cruise O'Brien spoke well of the very late *Cuchulain Comforted*, and nearly everyone likes *The Circus Animals' Desertion*.

Still, the crucial poems are still thought to be those of the three central books. I would cast a vote for *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), if only because it contains *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, *A Deep-Sworn Vow* and *Upon a Dying Lady*. But to make a case for that book is another day's work.

Michael Robartes and the Dancer, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* are the books in which Yeats solved, or came closer than any other modern poet in English to solving, the problem that defeated so many of his contemporaries: how to reconcile the claims of common speech, morally responsible, with the insisted-on autonomy of the poem, a reconciliation of image and discourse, meaning and form, a claim to unity inherent in the symbolism that modern English poetry inherited from French.

The poem, whatever its materials, must be one, complete, independent, as articulate as a piece of music, a painting or a dance by Balanchine, which it resembles in everything but the fatedness of speech.

Yeats made this achievement difficult for himself by writing poems in response to occasions. Something happens that makes something else happen in its turn. Robert Gregory was killed. Then we get *In Memory of Major Robert Gregory*, one of the classic poems. Most of Yeats's poems are occasional. Something arouses him to anger, rage, disgust, love, pity: he writes a poem, and perhaps with Jonathan Swift for master he puts aside for the moment the supreme need of his art to ensure that the aesthetic function will prevail.

Eliot never worked in this way. He was a man of the world, he paid attention to nearly everything that was going on, but when he was impelled to intervene he consigned his words to an essay, a lecture, an editorial in the *Criterion*, a letter to some editor. He kept his poems at a distance from such provocations. Yeats was also a man of the world, but he took his observances differently.

Leavis thought Eliot's way the better one. "Where Eliot is in question, it is the economy, concentration, perfected art and assured creative purpose of the body of achieved poetry that tells." The jury on that question is out.

In *A General Introduction for My Work* (1937) Yeats made an attempt, laborious indeed, to distinguish between the poet and "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast". The poet "has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete". "Idea"

doesn't convince, if he means the poet concentrating on his craft and the tradition he honours. Yeats tries again: "he is more type than man, more passion than type." That is no help.

There is always a phantasmagoria, Yeats says, and I presume he means that the poet's imagination is all the time working, as if independently, projecting a bizarrerie of images, scorning what goes on at the breakfast table.

Then Yeats gives us a sentence we can use. We adore the poet, he says, "because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power". Presumably he means that it is the poet's business to show this growth happening, or to make it happen.

So Yeats has been intuiting the life common to all forms of it and bringing particular forms to the state of being intelligible. This is easy with landscape, because landscape has nothing to say for itself: if it seems to be eloquent, it is our eloquence. In *The Wild Swans at Coole* the streams are "companionable" not because they just are but because Yeats sees them as such, bringing them to that version of intelligibility.

It follows that the intelligible must be conveyed in common speech, and that much of the work is done by adjectives, which indicate modes of existence. As in *The Second Coming*:

. . . somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

"Indignant" does the work of intelligibility; it is what we would feel if we were a desert bird. In *Leda and the Swan*:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

"Indifferent" is one of our feelings, not an attribute of beaks. If a reader were to point to the tyranny of adjectives in these and other poems, I don't see how I could defend the words: they convert the natural modes of being to human modes, inexorably. But that is our way of being alive. Everything ends up in the humanity of speech. Nouns are more resistant, such as "stone" in *Easter 1916*: they are what they are. I see no way out of these quandaries.

No matter how often I read *Among School Children* I still find it thrilling – and would be quite willing to see the fate of western civilisation hang in its balance. The first stanza – "I walk through the long schoolroom questioning" – is just as stirring as the great last lines, gnomic as they are:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
I would say: all of the above, like St Patrick's
shamrock, three things in their unity one:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

A harder question. I would say: we can't know the dancer from the dance, if by knowing you mean the same knowledge that distinguishes leaf, blossom and bole. But I can't imagine under what conditions, and with what motive, we would need or want to practice such knowledge. Dancer and dance are two names for the one figure, an act of culture, not of nature, which comes to intelligibility in the form of appreciation. That, too, is part of our creative power.

A poet in love: WB Yeats and Maud Gonne

Theo Dorgan

Becoming an adult means, or should mean, among other things, learning to distinguish between loving another and being “in love” as understood by adolescents. I am perfectly prepared to believe that Yeats was “in love” with Maud Gonne when a young man, but have come more and more to the view that he never loved her as an adult might love another. This is absurd, in a way, since none but the two involved in a relationship can ever really hope to understand with any confidence the dynamic between two people.

Nevertheless, the enduring fascination with Gonne that Yeats kept alive into his late poems seems to me a willed thing rather than an authentic passion of the loving heart. A genuine passion it very likely was, when both were young, and it is clear that some bond between them endured as long as they both lived – but Maud gave her heart elsewhere, and there is no evidence in the poems that Yeats had ever an adult understanding of this, any more than he is likely to have reflected on her right to command and direct her own affections and passions.

There is, of course, something finally endearing about an old man maintaining some loyalty to the scalded, elated heart of his youth – but something sad, too, since that resolute backward gaze tells us Yeats was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to accept that Maud had grown into her own life and separate destiny.

I would be more persuaded that he loved her if there were poems that speak in love and affection to her own full independent life as she chose to live it. None of this matters when it comes to the poems we have, since a poem is neither biography nor autobiography and must be valued for itself, but I do sometimes yearn for the poems Yeats might have written for and to the actual adult woman he could have loved as a grown man.

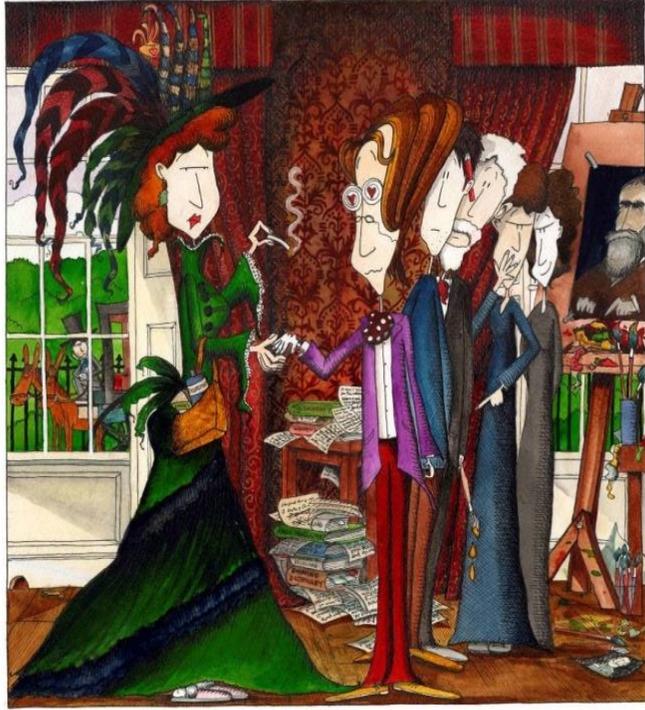
On the other hand, nothing attracts the imp of comedy as readily as does high seriousness – as long as it’s the high seriousness of someone else. Leafing through Annie West’s images here, two things struck me. The first is that it is indeed possible to find a gentle comedy in Yeats’ professed lifelong infatuation; the second is that perhaps, after all, the old boy was putting it on a bit.

Young love has been the stuff of comedy since hormonal imbalance first announced itself, and I doubt there will be a single person, leafing through this book, who has not some rueful memory of how ridiculous they must have seemed to others when first they fell in love.

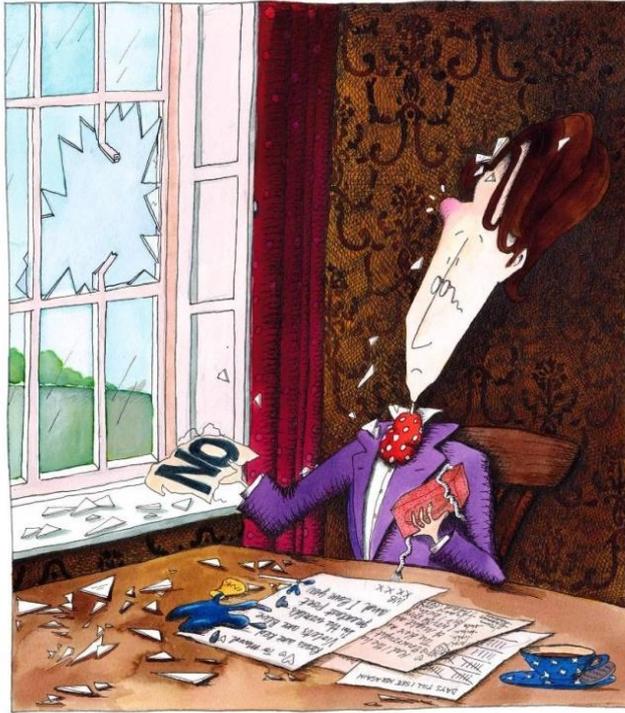
Annie captures that first high foolishness very well, I think, but she captures equally well the comedy of what happens when a mature poet like Yeats, wilful, self-centred and with a grand notion of himself, decides to put his youthful passion on life-support, intending to harvest as many poems as possible from the unwilling, sometimes unconscious, donor.

It is possible to say that there is something very silly about Willy “in love”, about the prolongation into late life of a tempest that had very likely blown itself out by the time he’d reached 30. The paradox, of course, is that he may not have loved Maud with the high seriousness proposed by the poems, but he managed to make real love poems, enduring and convincing poems, out of the whole dubious business.

Which may have been all he cared about, or all that should, finally, concern us. What does it matter, in the end, whether you know or I know if Yeats “really” loved Maud? What’s it to us? Annie’s gentle humour sends us out past the high seriousness of presuming to judge the truth of the matter, back to the poems themselves, with a sense that Yeats was, as Auden put it, “silly like us”, but a supreme love poet for all that.



Yeats proposes to Maud Gonne for the first time



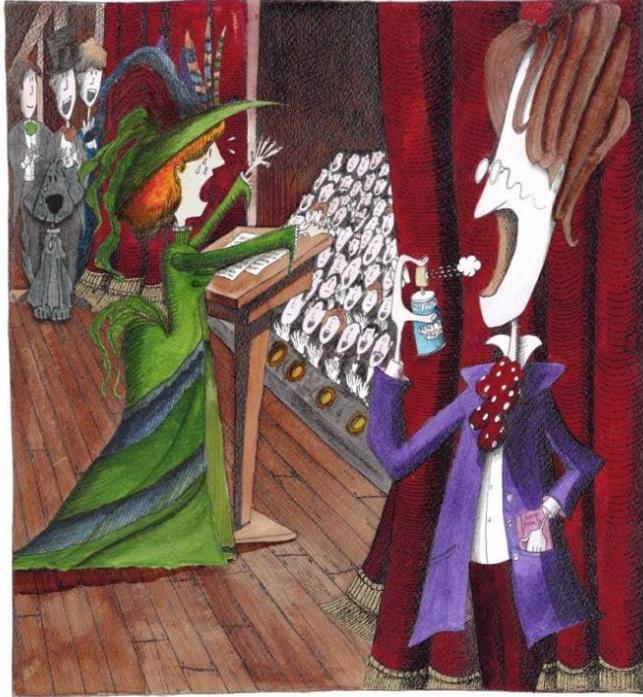
Yeats receives the reply to his second proposal



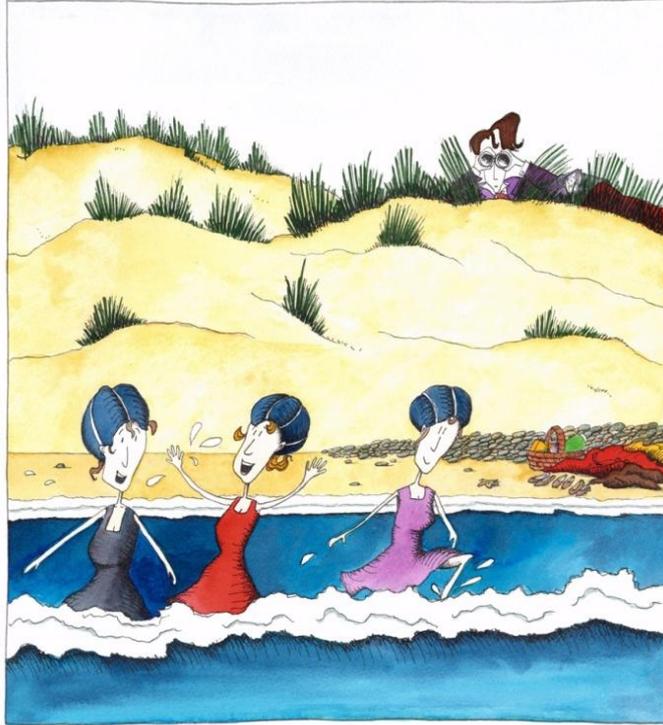
Yeats arrives to propose for a third time



Yeats proposes to Maud Gonne for a fourth time



Maud Gonne delivers another impassioned speech



Maud Gonne goes for a little swim

Annie West on creating *Yeats in Love*

Asked by a fourth class pupil: “Why do you always make fun of William Butler Yeats?”

Well. Somebody has to do it.

I ought to be a Yeats scholar, know his poetry inside out, living as I do in the heart of Yeats country. My Grandmother played the church organ at his funeral. Everywhere in Sligo there are monuments to Yeats, from statues to restaurants to football clubs.

I had always found the deification of Yeats somewhat hard to follow, since my relationship with the Nobel Laureate was irretrievably soured in a Dublin secondary school by a teacher who clearly not only disliked me, and all my friends, but also Yeats, all literature, English in general, and the whole entire process of teaching. By the time I emerged from school, blinking and gasping, with my (not hugely impressive) Leaving Cert in my hand I vowed never to open another poetry book again.

Things took a turn for the better in the nineties when I moved to Sligo and was given the job of church warden at St Columba’s Church, Drumcliffe. As a result I got to meet many visiting Yeats’ scholars who unwittingly assisted in my imminent rehabilitation by recounting stories of Willie Yeats and his Muse. The Muse who made him great.

It was on a gloomy day in March when I happened to meet Stella Mew, the then president of the Yeats Society. What started as a short conversation became a very long one. Stella is the most erudite Yeats scholar but has a charming and delightful side of mischief; after a long chat I ran back to my drawing board and began what I thought was one single cartoon strip.

I began to read about Yeats and Maud Gonne. His hopeless pursuit. His four marriage proposals. How he waited for Iseult to grow up and then proposed to her as well. And how she turned him down too. Somehow I had missed this remarkable, painful yet amusing story.

It started slowly: just one illustration, a comic strip where Yeats meets Maud Gonne for the first time. I thought that was it but then more started coming. Ideas arrived in my head by themselves, with no prompting at all.

I realised quite early on I could almost always reduce each scenario into one single image. Before long I had four images. Then six. The *Yeats in Love* series grew and grew and culminated in a touring exhibition which was opened in Dublin for the first time in 2008 by Senator David Norris.

As the years went by people began to send me funny stories and quotes by or about Willy. I read books about the love story, even the one-sided love letters, ignoring all else as a distraction.

The one thing I wanted to be sure of was that this story would, although embellished to a ridiculous degree, have a solid basis in fact. I wandered down many side roads while making this series but many images were discarded because they weren’t real or likely to be.

Then my interpretation of his poetry was simply based on the way I used to annoy my English teacher: I took every word literally. Many detentions were imposed over an argument about where exactly his ladder went, et cetera.

Since that murky day in Drumcliffe with Stella in 2007 I find I have, without noticing, rehabilitated myself after the trauma of that mind-numbing secondary education. I am, nearly, at peace with my Yeats.

During my research I read much about the flame-haired, chain-smoking, dog-loving, bird-collecting, chloroform-sniffing patriot Maud Gonne and how mean she was to him. Curiously in 10 years I have found myself feeling a bit sorry for Willy. I never thought I would hear myself saying that. But here we are, 10 years later and friends at last.

How I've used WB Yeats in my role as an Irish Ambassador

Daniel Mulhall

I can clearly recall the day when the unique literary standing of WB Yeats was brought home to me. It was in Kuala Lumpur in February 2003, and the 13th summit of the Non-Aligned Movement was being held in the city. I was invited to the opening session, where I heard the movement's outgoing chairman, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa – successor to Nelson Mandela – base his keynote speech almost entirely on Yeats's *The Second Coming*.

The poem's adamant phrases peppered the president's speech: "things fall apart"; "the centre cannot hold"; "the ceremony of innocence is drowned". Yeats's lines tapped into the concerns of the assembled leaders at a time when, many of them probably felt, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer".

Yeats's collected poems came into my possession in 1976, and I have been carrying this book around the world with me ever since. It is showing the effects of wear and tear, for I have dipped into it quite frequently in faraway places.

The poet's work has served me well. It has opened doors in the countries where I have served. I have used it in my travels as a primer on Ireland and Irish identity. It has contributed to my own understanding of the Ireland in which Yeats lived, a defining era for the country I have been proud to represent internationally for more than three decades.

In India in 1980 I discovered that Yeats's work provided us with a connection to the world's largest democracy. On one occasion I met Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet post and the first woman president of the United Nations general assembly (as well as being a former ambassador to Ireland). She recited a couple of Yeats poems and told me how important his work had been to her family during the struggle for Indian independence. Around the same time I shared a conference platform with a prominent Indian politician, Karan Singh, son of the last maharaja of Kashmir, who astonished me with his seemingly boundless ability to recite by heart large chunks of Yeats's verse.

Much later, during my time in Berlin, I noticed that German visitors during Embassy open days would gaze in surprise at an old poster featuring our leading writers. I subsequently toured a Yeats exhibition around some of the major German universities, and, at a time when Ireland was in the news in Germany mainly on account of our economic travails, it was refreshing to find audiences who were eager to commune with our rich literary heritage.

All countries aspire to gain the esteem of the community of nations, but this poses a constant challenge for smaller states like ours. There are various ways in which we present ourselves to the world, through our sustained contribution to UN peacekeeping and through the programmes run by Irish Aid, to give just two examples.

Our writers and other artists form an important part of what makes Ireland attractive to so many people around the world who might otherwise have far less interest in us. I probably shouldn't put it this way, but I have employed Yeats over the years as an instrument of public diplomacy.

This brings me to my present role, in London, at a time of unprecedented amity between our two countries. It also coincides with the centenary of momentous events in Dublin and on the Western Front that changed both countries and remade relations between us.

William Butler Yeats was coming to the top of his game as war and revolution raged around him in the years between 1913 and 1923. Throughout his life he kept a close if often disdainful eye on public affairs in Ireland. Indeed, those troubled times sparked new life into his work. There is a sour, unpleasant tone to his 1914 collection, *Responsibilities*, with his jibes at “Paudeen”, “Biddy” and “the blind and ignorant town”, but this is replaced by the majestic sweep of his later poems, impressive meditations on his own life and the life of Ireland.

Yeats had it out with Ireland in *September 1913*, when he pronounced the death of “Romantic Ireland”, but *Easter, 1916* signalled a resurrection of his engagement with the country of his birth and lifelong affiliation. With acute antennae, he quickly pinpointed the change wrought by the Easter Rising. Ireland had been “transformed utterly”.

In the years that followed he mulled over the War of Independence and the general disorder of the world, in *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* and *The Second Coming*. A little later he observed the Civil War from close range from Thoor Ballylee, his tower house in Co Galway, which drew from him a suite of fine meditative poems.

In each case memories of specific people or incidents triggered magisterial reflections: “a terrible beauty is born”; “man is in love and loves what vanishes”; “the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity”; and “more substance in our enmities than in our love”.

While images of Innisfree and “heaven’s embroidered cloths” sustain Yeats’s popularity, it is his more complex, later works that justify his claim to be regarded as the most important English-language poet of the 20th century.

The present set of centenaries offers an opportunity for us to deepen appreciation of that vital slice of our past. For Ireland and Britain this is a time for recognising the interlocking complexities of our histories – their separate dynamics as well as the overlaps between them.

I see Yeats as a worthy witness, particularly because he was from the start fretful and uncertain about the great changes unfolding around him. He is neither a cheerleader for the Easter Rising and its aftermath nor an opponent of what was happening in Ireland. What we have in Yeats is an engaged observer – both “cold and passionate”, as he might have put it – seeking to make sense of it all. That is why it is so rewarding to follow his path through those years of change.

For me it is difficult to engage with the events of 1916 without chewing on Yeats’s lines: “He too has resigned his part in the casual comedy”; “Hearts with one purpose alone . . . seem enchanted to a stone”; “We know their dream; enough to know they dreamed and are dead; And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?”; “now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn”.

These eloquent witness statements will be especially relevant in the year ahead. I plan to call them in evidence in efforts to deepen understanding of events in Ireland that troubled “the living stream” a century ago.

Our Favourite Yeats Poems

The Stolen Child

Chosen by John Connolly

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water rats;
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berrys
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
you can understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim gray sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
you can understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,

For the world's more full of weeping than
you can understand.

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal chest.
For he comes, the human child,
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than
he can understand.

Why John Connolly chose this poem:

I first came to *The Stolen Child* through *The Waterboys*, who set it to music for their *Fisherman's Blues* album. Before that I had associated Yeats, unfortunately but understandably, with school work and cramming for my Leaving Cert, but hearing Tomás Mac Eoin – “a Matterhorn of a voice”, to borrow Mike Scott's description – recite *The Stolen Child* against *The Waterboys'* gentle, understated musical backing transformed my perceptions of the poet and helped awaken a love of poetry that has never since faded. It is, I think, the most haunting of Yeats's poems, and its ending, as the “solemn-eyed” child (God, how I love that description!) departs “a world more full of weeping than he can understand”, never fails to move me.

News for the Delphic Oracle

Chosen by Mike Scott

There all the golden codgers lay,
There the silver dew,
And the great water sighed for love,
And the wind sighed too.
Man-picker Niamh leant and sighed
By Oisin on the grass;
There sighed amid his choir of love
Tall Pythagoras.
Plotinus came and looked about,
The salt-flakes on his breast,
And having stretched and yawned awhile
Lay sighing like the rest.

Straddling each a dolphin's back
And steadied by a fin
Those Innocents re-live their death,
Their wounds open again.
The ecstatic waters laugh because
Their cries are sweet and strange,
Through their ancestral patterns dance,
And the brute dolphins plunge
Until in some cliff-sheltered bay
Where wades the choir of love
Proffering its sacred laurel crowns,
They pitch their burdens off.

Slim adolescence that a nymph has stripped,
Peleus on Thetis stares.
Her limbs are delicate as an eyelid,
Love has blinded him with tears;
But Thetis' belly listens.
Down the mountain walls
From where pan's cavern is
Intolerable music falls.
Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum,
Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.

Why Mike Scott chose this poem:

It is full of fabulous words: “codgers”, “Pythagoras”, “Plotinus”, “intolerable”, “bum”, “nymphs”, “satyrs”, “copulate”. It is otherworldly, golden, mythical. Dolphins that laugh, an ocean that sighs for love and, in its final passage, a visceral evocation of the god Pan, complete with sex amid the elements. It is eternity in three darkly flowing verses, a slice of

mastery wildly ahead of its time in the 1930s and still ahead of its time today. I wonder what priests made of it then. I don't give a fig what they make of it now.

When You are Old

Chosen by Terry Wogan

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Why Terry Wogan chose this poem:

As everyone you've asked to contribute will say, it's impossible to pick just one favourite Yeats poem. But this is the one that has always touched my heart: poignant and of increasing relevance as I, and the ones I love, grow old. I recommend a song of the same title, written in tribute by the American songwriter Gretchen Peters. If you have tears to shed...

No WB Yeats, no Samuel Beckett? Why the poet's plays still matter

Fintan O'Toole

In his influential book *The Empty Space* the English director Peter Brook wrote about what he called the Holy Theatre, or “the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear”. He lamented its death in the European theatre and looked towards its revival.

Brook drew on three figures as totems of inspiration: the French actor and writer Antonin Artaud, the American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham and the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett. He did not mention WB Yeats at all, even though he was describing exactly what Yeats had wanted to do in the theatre. Here is one token of the way Yeats the dramatist had not so much fallen out of fashion as never quite become fashionable in the first place. The holy theatre Brook was invoking was certainly what Yeats also longed for. But Yeats's plays have always struggled to hold their place against the monumental presence of his poems.

In a sense the most damning verdict on Yeats's lifelong engagement with the theatre comes in the prologue of his own last play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, in which the supposed producer appears as a mad old crank, making a virtue of the necessity of playing to a small and select audience: “I wanted an audience of fifty or a hundred, and if there are more, I beg them not to shuffle their feet or talk when the actors are speaking . . . If there are more than a hundred I won't be able to escape people who are educating themselves out of the Book Societies and the like . . . pickpockets and opinionated bitches.”

That contempt for an ordinary audience – and the protesting-too-much desire for a pitifully small house – is self-parody, but it acknowledges the failure of Yeats's drama to embrace the essential vulgarity of the theatre. As Yeats's friend John Synge predicted, “I do not believe in the possibility of ‘a purely fantastic, unmodern, ideal, breezy, spring-dayish, Cuchulainoid National Theatre’ . . . No drama can grow out of anything other than the fundamental realities of life, which are never fantastic, are neither modern nor unmodern and, as I see them, rarely spring-dayish, or breezy or Cuchulanoid.”

That failure has to be set against Yeats's once high ambitions for the theatre. As a founding member of the Irish Literary Theatre, in 1899, and later as dramatist, codirector, manager and propagandist for the Irish National Theatre Society – better known after 1904 as the Abbey Theatre – Yeats threw his immense energies into the making of plays. He did so because he believed that a supposedly ancient form of tragic verse drama would play a leading, even decisive role in reinventing an Irish national culture.

Yet, by 1937, looking back, he admitted that this tragic drama had never taken fire in the public imagination: “My audience was for comedy – for Synge, Lady Gregory, for O'Casey – not for me. I was content, for I knew that comedy was the modern art.”

The vision he once had of the Abbey as a kind of Irish Bayreuth, with himself as the Irish Wagner, fusing ancient myths into a total theatre, was long gone. As early as 1916 he had taken refuge in the notion of an elitist drama: “I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way – an aristocratic form.”

The great puncturer of that aristocratic pretension was Yeats's successor, Samuel Beckett. It might be telling to mark the gulf between William Butler Yeats and Beckett, whose influence on 20th-century theatre is unquestioned. Beckett remarked in 1980 that Yeats "went after all the wrong things in Irish life"; for him the poet's brother, Jack B Yeats, was a much more productive influence. When, in Beckett's early novel *Murphy*, the anti-hero decrees in his will that his ashes be flushed down the lavatory at the Abbey, "if possible during the performance of a play", Yeats's theatrical legacy is given the middle finger.

Yeats was overwhelmingly interested in symbolism, Beckett overwhelmingly insistent on not being symbolic. Yeats drew for most of his theatre on the heroic world of Irish mythology, Beckett on tramps, vagabonds and derelicts. There is a grandiosity to Yeats's plays that Beckett chased (and laughed) off the stage.

Yet things are not so simple. Beckett did see Yeats's plays at the Abbey, and their impact is obvious: the compression, the starkness, the belief that a dramatist must write not mere words but whole actions, the use of repetition, the sense of the stage not as a slice of life but as a supercharged ritual space. In the second act of Beckett's *Happy Days* Winnie says, "I call to the eye of the mind . . .", half-remembering the line from Yeats's play *At the Hawk's Well*. The quote is not accidental: Beckett, like Yeats, asks us to see with the mind's eye. And it is surely impossible to encounter the stark setting of Yeats's *Purgatory* – a road, a tree – without thinking of *Waiting for Godot*. That play, in turn, could be an enactment of Yeats's thought in an early draft of *At the Hawk's Well*:

Accursed the life of man. Between passion and
Emptiness what he longs for never comes. All
his days are a preparation for what never comes.

And while Yeats at one point suggested putting actors in barrels on castors that could be pushed on and off stage with sticks, Beckett has the protagonist of *Endgame* in a chair on castors – and his parents not quite in barrels but in dustbins. Maybe there is some continuity between Yeats and Beckett after all.

Perhaps the real problem with Yeats the dramatist is that he asked to be judged by two successive, and equally preposterous, standards. The first was that his drama should vivify an entire nation; unsurprisingly, it didn't. The fallback position was that it should appeal only to a socially superior and impossibly refined audience; even if it did, there is something obnoxious in the ambition. But what if we scrap both of these standards and adopt a plain and ordinary one: are these plays any good? Can they hold the stage and touch something in an audience that approaches them with an open mind?

If we take away the ideological trappings of an aristocratic theatre and contempt for the mob, Yeats's failure to realise his great project of a tragic national drama does not look so ridiculous. His drama is a body of work that, if he had never published a poem, would still make him a remarkable figure.

Although some may feel it's not saying much, he is easily the most successful writer of poetic drama of the 20th century. He is restlessly inventive, moving between the extreme formality of his Noh plays and the almost-naturalism of a late play like *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, moving between verse and prose, masks and faces, between ancient myths

and modern moments, stripping the stage of its naturalistic clutter and seeking to integrate music, dance, light and a severe visual presence into contemporary drama.

If anything these innovations work against his reputation. Yeats is too often left to amateurs, but he is rigorous and relentless in the demands he makes of performers. Like Beckett, he imagined every detail of his plays on the stage. Like Beckett, he has to be done well or not at all.

It is almost taken for granted that the words are marvellous – but why should it be? Yeats worked out a kind of verse that can hold its own on stage, a poetry that is clear and robust without losing its mesmeric beauty. That opening of *At the Hawk's Well* that Beckett parodied is stunning in its sheer evocative power:

I call to the eye of the mind
A well long choked up and dry
And boughs long stripped by the wind,
And I call to the mind's eye
Pallor of an ivory face,
Its lofty dissolute air,
A man climbing up to a place
The salt sea wind has swept bare.

But it is not just about the words. Yeats didn't need theatre if it was to be a mere poetry recital with costumes. He needed it because it is, literally, where the action is. The idea of action is central to Yeats's thinking, and what drew him to the stage is what could happen on it.

And what happens in a Yeats play can be startling. *Purgatory*, for example, verges on the lurid. Its material is the rough red wine of sex and violence: a woman's lust for her groom and their son's murderous determination to extirpate her sin in blood. Yeats's genius is to distill that red wine into a fine but heady spirit, a short, incredibly potent theatrical essence that goes straight to both the head and the guts.

If we strip them of the rhetoric that obscures them Yeats's plays are serious attempts to address the situation of theatre in a modern world of disembodied imagery. His holy theatre is a response to the spread of "realistic" images through cinema and photography. And it is a response to the emergence of a secular society, trying as it does to make theatres the new churches, places where mysteries are explored through revived rituals. Those ideas are, if anything, even more urgent in our digital and secular culture.

It seems shameful, therefore, that Yeats the dramatist still gets such a raw deal in his own theatre. There has been no concentrated exploration of his plays on the Abbey stage since James Flannery's Yeats festivals of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Someone needs to have enough faith in Yeats's artistry to decide that, in spite of himself, he might have made plays good enough not for artistocrats or pickpockets but for real live audiences.

From Celts to rough beasts

Terence Brown

In 1886, at the age of 21, Willie Yeats published a two-part essay on the poet Samuel Ferguson, who had recently died. Yeats declared of Ferguson, author of works such as *Congal* and *Deirdre*, which drew on ancient Irish legends, that he was the “greatest poet Ireland has produced, because the most central and most Celtic”.

It is a measure of Yeats’s achievement as a poet that it was his work that would give greater currency and richer allure to the term Celtic with reference to his native land. For, arguably, it was Yeats’s early poetry that helped to popularise an Ireland of the imagination that became a constituent of national self-understanding, extant even today in popular culture.

The idea of the Celtic had been made available to writers, artists and composers in the pan-European fashion for the Ossianic in the 18th century. In *The Study of Celtic Literature*, a series of lectures delivered in 1865, the English poet Matthew Arnold had given less exalted, less rhapsodic definition than James Macpherson had done to the idea of the Celt when he quoted a French thinker who had discerned in the Celtic temperament a tendency always to react against “the despotism of fact”. Arnold considered in his lecture how the Celt lived close to Nature and possessed an awareness of “natural magic”.

In 1898 William Butler Yeats published an essay, *The Celtic Element in Literature*, that reflected his thinking and reading on the subject since he had first deployed the term “Celtic”. In this essay Yeats frankly acknowledged how much his thinking on the subject had been influenced by the English poet’s published lectures, but he was at pains to challenge Arnold in a very important way. He could agree that aspects of English and of European literature suggested that they derived “from a Celtic source”, but he insisted of Arnold’s ideas, “I do not think any of us who write about Ireland have built any argument upon them.” Yeats wrote of Arnold, “I do not think he understood that our ‘natural magic’ is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her, that certainty of all beautiful places being haunted, which it brought into men’s minds.”

The remarkable implication of this essay is that the poet’s Ireland is the place where the ancient religion of the world is residually present. What all this meant for Yeats was that beautiful places in Ireland, especially in the west of the country – he had spent much of his childhood in Co Sligo – were vested with a sense of the numinous. How inspiring this was to the neophyte poet is suggested by the conclusion to *The Celtic Element in Literature*, in which he wrote of the “symbolical movement” as “certainly the only movement that is saying new things”.

He believed that the arts had become religious and were seeking “to create a sacred book”. He thought, too, that the arts must utter themselves through legend and was manifestly excited by how the Irish legends “move among known woods and seas, and have so much of a new beauty that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols”.

Books of poetry by Yeats in the 1890s had evoked an Ireland of mystic profundity, as a land of beautiful places that served as portals to the transcendent. The atmospheric title of his 1899 collection, *The Wind Among the Reeds*, captured the sense of Ireland as a site of magical inspiration that he sought to create.

The opening poem in the book, *The Hosting of the Sidhe*, imagines fairy folk “riding from Knocknarea”, the mountain in Co Sligo, to “Cloon-na-bare”. The book, like much of Yeats’s early poetry, is a celebration of twilight as a time of visionary transition, making the poet seem a member, as many thought him, of a Celtic Twilight school of poets. Poems are set in “dim” light with mixed tints, like “dove grey” and “pearl pale”. This, together with the call of the curlew and “Desolate winds that cry over the ‘wandering sea’ ”, help make for a Yeatsian Ireland as a country of the mind that has had lasting popular appeal.

The idea of transition implicit in the twilight states he evoked was important to Yeats in the 1890s, committed as he was to the occult rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (a London-based Rosicrucian society), which could, if efficacious, raise normal consciousness to transcendent heights. Poems such as *The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland* and *The Stolen Child* endow Irish place names – Dromahair, Lissadell, Lughnagall and Glencar – with mantra-like powers to transform spiritual life. In *The Wind Among the Reeds*, in his poem *The Song of Wandering Aengus*, Yeats dramatised a moment of natural magic that provokes a lifelong quest for alchemical transformation: “The silver apples of the moon / The golden apples of the sun.”

Transformation on the spiritual plane in the 1890s had on the sublunary level its correlative in the poet’s desire to help effect political transformation in Ireland. As a sworn member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood Yeats hoped separation from the United Kingdom would transform Irish culture, saving it from the crass materialism of industrial Britain. In 1898, encouraged by the fervently nationalist Maud Gonne, for whom he had written ardent love poems, Yeats involved himself in the laying of plans to commemorate the United Irish Rebellion of 1798.

A site in Dublin was chosen where a statue of the republican martyr Wolfe Tone could be erected. Yeats and his confederates hoped that the laying of stone for the statue might be the occasion of a mass demonstration of separatist feeling in the Irish capital. As Yeats had it, “Ireland was appealing to the past to escape the confusions of the present”. An almost magical transformation in the country’s life might be effected in a revived spirit of rebellion (although Yeats was uncomfortable with the IRB’s commitment to physical force as a means to free Ireland).

Despite the fact that the 1798 commemoration did not provoke the kind of radical change Yeats and Gonne had hoped for, the poet’s enthusiasm for the idea of transformation found dramatic expression in a play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which premiered in Dublin in 1902 with Maud Gonne in the principal part. This work, written in collaboration with Lady Gregory, is set at the time of the United Irish Rebellion as French forces arrive to assist the rebels. A mysterious old woman arrives at a peasant cottage in Mayo and speaks of her four green fields of “strangers” in the house and chants of the virtue of sacrifice in her cause.

As the play ends it is clear that young men are joining the French, prepared to sacrifice themselves in the cause of Cathleen Ni Houlihan. A young boy is asked, in the final moments of the play, if he saw an old woman going down the path. The curtain line has him declare: “I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.”

In the obvious allegory of the play, in which the old woman is a figure of Ireland, it seemed blood sacrifice could rejuvenate Ireland, could effect transformation. In 1948 a moderate nationalist commentator remembered the impact of this play on popular Irish feeling at the

time: “No more potent lines were ever spoken on an Irish stage. All our hopes were in that answer, it had an echo in every heart. It symbolized and rekindled that flame of romantic revolutionary nationalism which was to consume so many of its devotees.”

The young men of Ireland in Yeats and Gregory’s play were being challenged to embrace a heroic destiny. The death of the noble had been a theme for Yeats from early in his writing career. The death of Parnell, in 1891, had drawn from him an obituary poem, *Mourn and Then Onward*, that had honored the politician’s memory as a “tall pillar”. The publication in 1878-80 of Standish James O’Grady’s *History of Ireland: Heroic Period* had supplied the poet with another exemplar of heroism in the person of Cúchulainn, who would figure as hero in five of Yeats’s plays and recur in his poetry as an image of the heroic.

In the first decade of the 20th century the Yeats who had hoped for a transformed country became severely disillusioned with Ireland, when his friend John Millington Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World* was attacked in 1907 by nationalists, hastening, as Yeats believed, the dramatist’s death, in 1909.

Yeats thought, as he wrote in an article published in 1908, that “as belief in the possibility of armed insurrection withered, the old romantic nationalism would wither too”. Such feeling found intensified expression in 1913 with the publication in *The Irish Times* of *Romance in Ireland* – now known as *September 1913* – where the “greasy till” of money and trade had killed the kind of self-sacrificial patriotism that had fomented heroic rebellion in the past. “Romantic Ireland” was “dead and gone”.

Yeats was staying with friends in England when an insurrection broke out in Dublin at Easter 1916. Like most of his compatriots he was deeply affected by the event and by the executions that followed. He spent the summer in Normandy with Maud Gonne and her daughter – Gonne had been married to one of those executed, John MacBride – when he worked on a palinode that retracted the harsh judgment he had expressed in 1913.

Now he could honour men whom he had known who had given their lives for Ireland. The poet recognised in *Easter, 1916* that all was changed, “changed utterly”, a “terrible beauty” had been born. What gave this remarkable poem – one of the poet’s finest works – its special power was that it dramatised how quite ordinary men had been transformed by a historic moment in the nation’s history. Instead of being players in a “casual comedy” they had become heroes in a tragic drama.

The poem enacts, too, Yeats’s experience of transformation at this momentous time. Where at the opening of the poem the poet recalls how the executed men might have been the object of his mockery at his gentleman’s club, by the end the poet has become not a supercilious clubman but an awestruck bard taking on the duty of eulogy – “I write it out in a verse” – of reciting the names of the fallen martyrs to Ireland’s cause.

In the turbulent years that followed the Easter Rising and the end of the first World War Yeats would publish poems that consolidated his reputation as one of the finest English-language poets of his era. This was recognised when, in 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In this period of political transformation and violence in Ireland, poems such as *The Second Coming* and the two great sequence poems *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen* and *Meditations*

in Time of Civil War were able to record what it was like to live in a time of historic transition. These poems in powerful symbols – the “rough beast” of *The Second Coming*, for example – managed to represent history as a reality in the grip of uncontrollable, horrifying forces.

In the 1920s Yeats increasingly felt alienated from the independent Irish state that the years of struggle and conflict had brought into being. Although he served as an outspoken and effective senator in the upper house of the new parliament – he also chaired the committee that chose the designs for a beautiful new coinage – he could not accept the Irish Free State’s infringement on what he thought were fundamental rights: to divorce when marriage broke down and to freedom of expression in literature.

The Censorship of Publications Act of 1929 particularly affronted him. The problem was that Ireland was no longer the magical land he had imagined in his early verse but a place where what he would later term a “filthy modern tide” ran without check. By this he meant that populist democracy could put in place an administration inimical to the libertarian values he held dear.

In 1933, in reactionary, even fanatical mood, Yeats indicated his willingness to support the Blueshirt movement when he met with its leader Eoin O’Duffy. He even wrote some songs (probably never used) for his troops of marching men.

About this political association with what looked like an embryonic Irish fascism Yeats wrote to an English friend at the time, “doubtless I shall hate it but not so much as I hate Irish democracy”. To the same friend he also wrote, “I find myself constantly urging the despotic rule of the educated classes.”

It was such elitist thinking that made Yeats in the last years of his life a keen student of eugenic theory. It was this that may have prompted him to write the distinctly unpleasant line in *Under Ben Bulbin* that refers to younger Irish poets as “base-born products of base beds”.

Elitism accounts, too, for how Yeats increasingly identified Protestant Anglo-Ireland as the epitome of good breeding and cultural superiority, with Lady Gregory’s house at Coole Park serving as a retreat where “last romantics” like Yeats himself could choose “for theme / Traditional sanctity and loveliness”.

WB Yeats and 'The Irish Times'

Sara Keating

Before he made his name as a poet WB Yeats was a prolific journalist, contributing to dozens of newspapers, magazines and periodicals on matters of both politics and poetry, although for the budding writer the two were indivisible.

The young idealist may have had loftier aspirations than the industry he later decried as “jeering, tittering, emptiness”, but it was a good and important beginning for him: a way to augment his meagre living and increase his profile for his poetry.

At the start of his writing life Yeats's most regular outlets were overtly nationalist periodicals, such as Charles Stewart Parnell's *United Ireland* and Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin publication *United Irishman*. But Yeats also maintained a close relationship with *The Irish Times*, and several of its journalists, throughout his long career.

Yeats made his first appearance in the newspaper as a minor character in the burgeoning Irish Revival, when a review of a 1888 compilation called *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* singled out his poems *The Stolen Child* and *King Goll* for their “wild mystic music”. By 1892 Yeats was being named as the heir of Irish poetry: “it is no longer a question of promise but of performance,” a correspondent wrote in a review of his second collection of poetry, *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*.

It was also a question of persona, and the correspondent was as bewitched by Yeats's demeanour – “a head an antique sculptor might have modelled” – as he was by the “wild sweet liquid charm” of his poetry. The mythology of Yeats – the aesthete, the aristocratic artist – was already being spun.

Over the years *The Irish Times* carried interviews with the poet, reports on his activities with the Irish Literary Society and the *Abbey Theatre*, and, of course, reviews of his prodigious output.

On occasion the newspaper was the first publisher of what would become some of his best-known poems. These were, invariably, the more political ones: Yeats was well aware of newspapers' potential to reach an untapped audience and of poetry's potential to persuade.

The controversy about plans to establish a municipal gallery in Dublin, for example, which came to a head at the end of 1912, yielded two new poems, both initially published in *The Irish Times*. *The Gift* (later retitled *To a Wealthy Man*) appeared in January 1913. *Romance in Ireland* (later retitled *September 1913*) followed in September.

In a letter to Lady Gregory Yeats explained the rationale of publishing them in the newspaper: “What might seem offensive in a letter or article will not do so in a poem or in the comment on it.”

But both poems struck a contentious note with readers. As Roy Foster puts it, this was poetry as political manifesto. The letters page teemed with responses, both to the admonishing tone of the poems and the issue of the gallery itself.

One letter, by a self-proclaimed wealthy American, Montagu McNaughton, chided Yeats for his “rhyming appeals to the purse” and offered £100,000 to anyone who would close all the galleries in Ireland. The absurdity of McNaughton’s proposition was not lost on the editors, who, in a note following the letter, revealed that their research suggested the letter was a fiction; they saw fit to print it anyway.

Of course, Yeats made vivid appearances in the artistic controversies at the Abbey Theatre as well. The riot that followed the opening of *The Playboy of the Western World*, by John Millington Synge, in 1907, and the disturbances after the premiere of *The Plough and the Stars*, by Seán O’Casey, in 1926 were widely reported and commented on in the letters page.

There were defenders and objectors and, occasionally, measured responses that saw both sides of the battle between nation and stage. Ellen Duncan praised Synge’s play but criticised the theatre’s “policy of non-resistance” in dealing with the protesters, proclaiming herself “astonished that no use was made by management of the able-bodied policemen who lined the walls of the pit.”

When the brouhaha following the production of O’Casey’s play provoked Dublin Literary Society to debate the necessity of a national theatre, *The Irish Times* printed a report that ran over a page: the fate of the Abbey was a matter of both politics and art.

According to *The Irish Times*, Yeats’s award of the Nobel Prize in for Literature, in 1923, was also politically important. The editorial announcing the news deemed Yeats’s success “as a national as well as personal triumph, and it constitutes a fitting sequel to the recent admission of the Free State to the League of Nations”.

Bertie Smyllie, who went on to be one of the best-known editors of *The Irish Times*, called the poet at home with the news. Yeats wrote in *Autobiographies*, “A journalist called to show me a printed paragraph saying that the Nobel Prize would probably be conferred upon Herr Mann, the distinguished novelist, or upon myself. I did not know that the Swedish Academy had ever heard my name . . . Then some eight days later, between ten and eleven at night, comes the telephone message from *The Irish Times* saying that the prize had indeed been conferred upon me; some ten minutes after that comes a telegram from the Swedish Ambassador; then journalists come for interviews. At half past twelve my wife and I are alone, and search the cellar for a bottle of wine, but it is empty, and as a celebration is necessary we cook sausages.”

Smyllie was among those who came to congratulate and record Yeats’s reaction, and an article the following day praised the poet’s humility: “He refused to admit that [his lyrics] had been responsible for his election to the Nobel Prize.” Yeats said it was a recognition of the achievements of the Abbey and the cultural nationalist movement.

The article made no mention of Yeats’s first reaction, which Smyllie later recorded: “It was fairly late in the evening, getting on to eleven o’clock I suppose, and I rang him up at his house, hoping that he didn’t know the news. I said, ‘Mr Yeats, I’ve got very good news for you, a very great honour has been conferred upon you,’ and I was rather enthusiastic and gushing at the time, and I said, ‘this is a great honour not only for you but for the country,’ and I could tell that he was getting slightly impatient to know what it was all about, so I said, ‘you’ve been awarded the Nobel Prize, a very great honour to you and a very great honour to

Ireland . . .and to my amazement the only question he asked was, ‘how much?, Smyllie, how much is it?’”

There was no comment from Yeats in the two-page spread marking his 70th birthday, in 1935. The tone of celebration, defence and gentle criticism by literary figures showed how the artistic and national ideals that Yeats was instrumental in shaping had faltered as the new Free State evolved.

Denis Johnston reminded readers that “pioneers of course are the first to be forgotten, particularly if the weapons they have forged are as successful in the hands of their successors as those of Mr Yeats”.

He praised Yeats’s commitment to art as exemplary of his mettle: “If he does not like a play he will turn it down, even if in so doing it involves a newspaper correspondence with furious bricklayers.”

Perhaps Johnston also meant to rib the letter-writers who complained so vehemently during the squabbles that Yeats had sparked and contributed to over the years.

When Yeats died, in France in 1939, *The Irish Times* saw no need for such criticism; commentary included a description of him as “a man renowned in the world of letters, who, while justly placed among the foremost poets of our time, is a no less able master of prose”.

In life so it was in death, and even the poet’s passing did not unfold without controversy. When he was buried in France, contrary to his wishes, *The Irish Times* reported on the affair with an exclusive publication of Yeats’s late verse *Under Ben Bulbin*, the closing lines of which were later cut for the epitaph on his gravestone, when his remains were repatriated, in 1948:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!

Our Favourite Yeats Poems

Easter, 1916

Chosen by Paula Meehan

I have met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
 In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
 Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
 When, young and beautiful,
 She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
 And rode our wingèd horse;
This other his helper and friend
 Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
 So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
This other man I had dreamed
 A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
 To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
 He, too, has resigned his part
 In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
 Transformed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem

Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road.
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse splashes within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Why Paula Meehan chose this poem:

Miss Shannon's class, Central Model girls' school, Gardiner Street, 1966. The 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising. She beats out the metre with her stick. "Who does the poet meet at close of day, girls?" "Who knows what 'motley' means?" "Who can tell me what 'vainglorious' means? Hands up!" I am 11 years of age. I live on a street named for one of the dead heroes. I want to grow up and die for Ireland myself. They go in deep, these early poems. And this poem goes in deepest of all. Mesmeric and mysterious: "what if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?"

Sailing to Byzantium

Chosen by Liz Roche

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Why Liz Roche chose this poem:

My aunt, a teacher of English, read me the poem at a young age. What struck me then, and today still, was the daunting prospect of one day leaving the realm of “whatever is begotten, born, and dies” and journeying beyond, into the unknown. This impermanence gets played out in my dancing life over and over again. For me nothing is constant; the body is always changing, always moving, bringing me to places I don't yet fully understand. Yeats seemed to soften that journey for himself by sailing to Byzantium, where he imagined all to be right and balanced. He eventually found his “permanence” in art, a comforting thought perhaps. For me, I'm still wondering.