

William Butler Yeats

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.

- Irish Poet, dramatist and prose writer, one of the greatest English language poets of the 20th century.
- Yeats's father, John Butler Yeats, was a barrister who eventually became a portrait painter. His mother was a daughter of a prosperous merchant in county Sligo, in western Ireland.
- Normally, Yeats would have expected to identify with his protestant roots – which represented a powerful minority among Ireland's predominately Roman Catholic population – but he did not. He was separated from the Catholics because he could not share their faith and from the Protestants because he felt repelled by their concern for material success. He believed that art and beauty are important for everything and that there was no god.
- In 1867, when Yeats was a young boy, his family moved from Dublin to London, but spent much of his youth in Sligo with his grandparents. This country---its scenery, folklore and supernatural legend would colour Yeats's work and form a setting for many of his poems.
- These beliefs and interest were evident in his collection of Irish folklore, *Fairy and folk Tales*, i.e. *The host of the Air*, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, etc... He maintained his cultural roots, featuring Irish legends and heroes in many of his poems and plays.
- In 1889 Yeats met Maud Gonne, an Irish Beauty, ardent and brilliant. From that moment, as he wrote, "the troubling of my life began." He fell in love with her, but his love was hopeless. Maud Gonne liked and admired him, but she was not in love with him. Her passion lavished upon Ireland, she was an Irish patriot, a rebel. A woman with a commanding voice and a commanding persona.
- When Yeats joined the Irish nationalist cause, he did so partly from conviction, but mostly for the love of Maud Gonne. When Yeats's play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was first performed in Dublin in 1902, she played the title role.
- It was during this period that Yeats became under the influence of John O'Leary, charismatic leader of the Fenians, a secret society of Irish Nationalists.

- In 1898, Yeats met Lady Gregory, an aristocrat who was to become a playwright and his close friend. She was already collecting old stories, the lore of the west in Ireland. Yeats found that this lore chimed with his feeling for ancient ritual, for pagan beliefs never entirely destroyed by Christianity.
- By 1898, Yeats spent his summers at Lady Gregory's Coole park estate in county Galway. He eventually purchased a ruined Norman castle called the Tower. This structure would become a dominant symbol in many of his latest and best poems.
- That same year, in 1899 Yeats asked Maud Gonne to marry him, but she declined. Four years later she married Major John MacBride, an Irish soldier who shared her feelings for Ireland and her hatred of English oppression; he was one of the rebels later executed by the British government for their part in the Easter Rising of 1916.
- Around this time, Yeats and Lady Gregory helped start the Abbey theatre in Dublin. He managed the theatre's affairs and encouraged its playwrights (notably John Millington Synge) and contributed many of his own plays.
- Yeats published many works some of which are (1) *The Wild Swans at Coole*, (2) *The Tower*, (3) *The Wind among the Reeds* (*won the Royal Academy prize in 1899*), (4) *the Winding Stair*.
- In 1917, Yeats asked Maud Gonne's daughter to marry him. She refused and several weeks later he successfully married Miss George Hyde-Lees which produced a daughter and a son.
- In 1922, on the foundations of the Irish Free State, Yeats accepted an invitation to become a member of the new Irish Senate. He served that role for 6 years.
- In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was now a celebrated figure and indisputably one of the most significant modern poets.
- As Yeats aged, he saw Ireland change in ways that angered him. The Anglo-Irish Protestant minority no longer controlled Irish society and culture, and with Lady Gregory's death in 1932 and the consequent abandonment of the Coole Park estate, Yeats felt detached from the brilliant achievements of the 18th century Anglo-Irish tradition. According to Yeats's view, the greatness of Anglo-Irishmen such as Jonathan Swift, philosopher George Berkeley, and statesman Edmund Burke, contrasted sharply with the undistinguished commonness of contemporary Irish society, which seemed preoccupied with the interests of merchants and peasants. He stated his unpopular opinions in his late plays.

- He died in France in 1939. Hampered by WW2, it wasn't until 1948 his body was taken back to county Sligo and buried in a little protestant churchyard.
- He wrote his own epitaph:
"Cast a cold eye/On Life, on death/Horseman. Pass by!"

Conclusion: Had Yeats ceased to write at age 40, he would probably now be valued as a minor poet. There is no precedent in literary history for a poet who produces his greatest work between the ages of 50 and 75. He wrote about tales and folklore, about love, about rebellion, about the magic and beauty of Coole Park, etc. As the Irish say "He was brilliant."