

YEATS: A LIFE

BACKGROUND SLIDESHOW

PARENTAL PULLS: INFLUENCE AND OPTIONS

- 1866: John Butler Yeats (WBY's father), having begun sketching his seniors while sitting as a barrister in the law courts, notes their pompous triviality & waste of talent. Announces to affronted in-laws at Sligo his intent of going to London to become a painter. A rational atheist with disdain for the church.
- July 1872 thru Oct 1874: WBY and family vacation at maternal, Protestant Pollexfen home in Sligo and stay for 28 months. A crucial time for WBY's developing mind. He delights in the landscape, fairy lore, stories of the supernatural and the sea. Imagination also stirred by nearby legendary mountains of Ben Bulbin & Knocknarea.

TRANSITIONS OF PLACE & PERSPECTIVE

- 1876: JBY switches from portrait to landscape painting. Begins new apprenticeship in Slough, taking WBY. WBY endures lessons in geography, chemistry & literature from father. Enjoys solitary walks through countryside.
- 1877: WBY goes to Godolphin School, Iffley Road, Hammersmith. Undistinguished academic record, though achieves at science in last year (1881).
- 1879: family moves to Bedford Park estate, designed as a sort of artist's colony. Stay through 1881. Romance of the garden city w/ its beautiful houses transcends bleakness of home and difficult financial life. *Perhaps here WBY conceives his life-long meditation on the ideal human city (Byzantium, etc.)*

TRANSITIONS OF PLACE & PERSPECTIVE

- 1881: JBY & family move to Dublin, then to seaside village of Howth, where WBY & mother (Susan) thoroughly enjoy sea, open sky & small fishing community. Here, WBY *may conceive life-long dream of crossing water to enchanted islands and cities*. Takes daring boating outings to Lambay Island. Takes train into Dublin w/ father for 3 yrs to attend Erasmus Smith High School, Harcourt Street, though prefers intellectuals in his father's studio.
- 1887: family moves to ugly London

FRIENDS AND FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

- 1883: WBY enters Metropolitan School of Art, Kildare Street, but finds he can only imitate his father's style. Meets George Russell ("A.E.") whose visions of the old Celtic gods and Irish fairies absorb and inspire Yeats to a new concept of art and reality for more than a decade.
- 1884: Family moves from Howth to uninspired Ashfield Terrace, Harold's Cross. WBY reads A.P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*; loans to friend Charles Johnston (Hermetic Society begins June 1885). WBY settles on career in literature.

FRIENDS AND FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

- 1885: JBY becomes member of Contemporary Club in Ponsonby's Bookshop & brings WBK along. Befriends Douglas Hyde, Michael Davitt, and others. WBK forms lasting opinions about Irish nationalism & develops skills in rhetoric and debate (primary opponent the vehement Catholic nationalist John F. Taylor).
- 1885: falls under spell of native Catholic John O'Leary, who returns in 1885 from 20 yrs in exile; O'Leary holds a dignified patriotism and devotion to *cultural* nationality more than militant nationalism. Represents "romantic" Ireland for WBK.

THE FANTASTIC & EARLY, ASSORTED

- 1885: 1st poems, lyrics “Song of the Fairies” and “Voices,” published in *Dublin University Review*. WBY is 20 yrs old. Later in yr, extended poetic drama *The Island of Statues* w/ epilogue “The Song of the Happy Shepherd.”
- 1886: writes essays lauding achievement of poet Ferguson; also shapes short epic on legendary King Goll and folk lyric “The Stolen Child”
- 1887: publishes essay in appreciation of James Clarence Mangan
- 1888: publishes essay praising William Allingham, “The Poet of Ballyshannon”

THE FANTASTIC & EARLY, ASSORTED

- 1889: 1st collection of poems. Title poem, “The Wanderings of Oisín,” contains a hero who never finds the looked for Isle of Content.
- 1890’s: WB’s builds practice as freelance literary journalist (e.g. *The Boston Pilot*). Also produces and edits 7 separate collections of Irish tales, stories and poems
- 1891: publishes novel *John Sherman*
- 1892: *The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends*
- 1897: stories in *The Secret Rose*. 1899: symbolist poems *The Winds Among the Reeds*

A SAGA OF UNREQUITED LOVE & DEAREST FRIENDSHIP: GONNE & GREGORY

- 1888: meets Maud Gonne. Her secret love for French patriot Millevoye, her insensitive political alliance w/ John F. Taylor (WBY's enemy), and her abstracted concern for humanitarian causes over the poet's intense desire for her drive him close to the edge of psychic breakdown (AM 26).
- 1896: meets Lady Gregory at Coole Park. (earlier in year, meets John M. Synge and probably gives him celebrated advice to go to the Aran Islands and discover a life not yet expressed in literature.)

CULTURAL REVIVAL, NATIONALIST FERVOR & THE THEATRE

- 1899: English company of players perform WBY's *The Countess Cathleen* (published in 1892) at Dublin's Antient Concert Rooms. About a saintly countess who sells her soul to demons to save her people from famine. Play provides cultural nexus for strong opinions.
- 1901: WBY and George Moore collaborate to write and then produce tragic *Diarmuid and Grania*. Production hampered by Englishness of the cast. (Same night the more successful Irish-speaking play by Douglas Hyde, *Casadh an tSúgáin* (The Twisting of the Rope), is produced w/ Irish actors).

CULTURAL REVIVAL, NATIONALIST FERVOR & THE THEATRE

- 1902: W. G. Fay's Irish National Dramatic Company produces WBY's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (as part of a double bill w/ A.E.'s *Deirde*). About old woman who enters a house preparing for a young man's wedding, and convinces the young man to pursue a greater (more dangerous) destiny than that offered by marriage. He chooses the patriotic course, and the woman transforms into a beautiful young woman with the walk of a queen. WBY's play makes him a temporary hero in patriot eyes.
- 1904: **Abbey Theatre** opens w/ WBY's tragedy *On Baile's Strand* and Lady Gregory's rural comedy *Spreading the News*. (Takes place of Fay's Irish National Theatre Society.)

CULTURAL REVIVAL, NATIONALIST FERVOR & THE THEATRE

- 1907: J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* opens Jan. 22. Creates sensation.
- 1910: WBY's *The Green Helmet*, produced, a 'heroic farce' on the Cuchulain theme which ends for at least ten years his involvement as a playwright in the Abbey theatre workshop (AM 55)

INTER-PERSONAL INTERSECTIONS

- 1903: In Feb, WBY is given a letter by **Maud Gonne** telling him of her marriage to Major John MacBride immediately prior to WBY's addressing a public meeting in Dublin. Though the audience applauds him, he can't remember afterwards a word he's said. "This desperate hour on the podium, when the real world so savagely intruded upon his drama of heroic love, is recalled in a poem called 'Reconciliation' written six yrs later [in 1909]" (AM 38-39).
- 1903: WBY goes on lecture tour in North America, organized by **John Quinn**. Is given \$3000, which helps him face his literary career w' new courage. While WBY is away, the Irish literary theatre in Dublin becomes accepted part of culture.

INTER-PERSONAL INTERSECTIONS

- 1913: In autumn, WBY stays w/ **Ezra Pound** (whom he met in 1912) at Stone Cottage in Sussex, cementing a friendship of great creativity. WBY introduces Pound into mysteries of spiritualism.
- 1917: In Dublin, WBY asks **Iseult Gonne** (Maud's daughter) to marry him for the 2nd time, then meets **Georgiana ("George") Hyde-Lees** and soon after marries her. She helps WBY's artistic creations, especially *The Vision*, by writing "in seemingly automatic script" (AM 114).

PERSONAL MISCELLANY

- 1919: Feb. 24, WBY & George's daughter Anne is born. For the summer, family returns to Ballylee and lives in the tower Yeats has purchased.
- 1922: WBY **nominated to Senate** of the Free State Parliament. In 1923, speaks on law enforcement, film censorship, etc. Throughout 6 yrs in parliament, WBY encourages what he called "authoritative government," feeling that **only strong policies would bring peace** to the fledgling state.

PERSONAL MISCELLANY

- 1923: WBY receives **Nobel Prize**--accepts award as increases chances of his being listened to in Dublin, and money will help his ailing sister.
- 1917: In Dublin, WBY asks **Iseult Gonne** (Maud's daughter) to marry him for the 2nd time, then meets **Georgiana ("George") Hyde-Lees** and soon after marries her. She helps WBY's artistic creations, especially *The Vision*, by writing "in seemingly automatic script" (AM 114).

PUBLICATIONS

- 1925: 1st ed. of *The Vision*. In dedication, he writes that he “wished for a system of thought that would leave my imagination free to create as it chose and yet make all that it created, or could create, part of one history, that of the soul’s”
- 1926: WBY’s version of *King Oedipus* produced and does so well that WBY creates a version of *Oedipus at Colonus* for production in 1927.
- 1928: poem collection *The Tower* published to universal public acclaim. Today considered by many his greatest collection.
- 1933: poem collection *The Winding Stair* published
- 1935: poem collection *Parnell’s Funeral*: mourns savagely for the kind of leadership Parnell had represented. Represents violent & sometimes feverish political debate
- 1937: 2nd ed. of *The Vision*
- 1938: poem collection *New Poems* and production of play *Purgatory*. Dies 1939.

POETIC PUBLICATIONS

- 1889: *The Wanderings of Oisín*
- 1893: *The Rose*
- 1899: *The Wind Among the Reeds*
- 1910: *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (play and poems)
- 1914: *Responsibilities*
- 1919: *The Wild Swans at Coole*

YEATS: LIFE VS. ART

“The Choice”

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it takes the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
When all that story's finished, what's the news?
In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
That old perplexity an empty purse,
Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse.