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# LETTERS TO THE NEW ISLAND

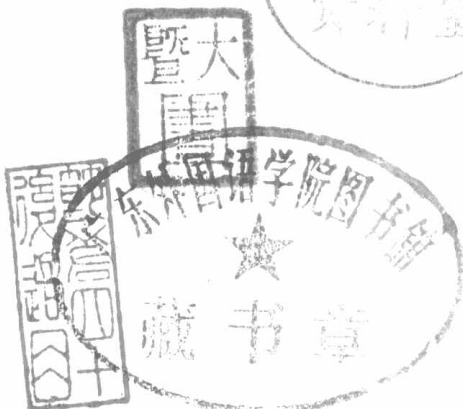
BY

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

HORACE REYNOLDS



CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

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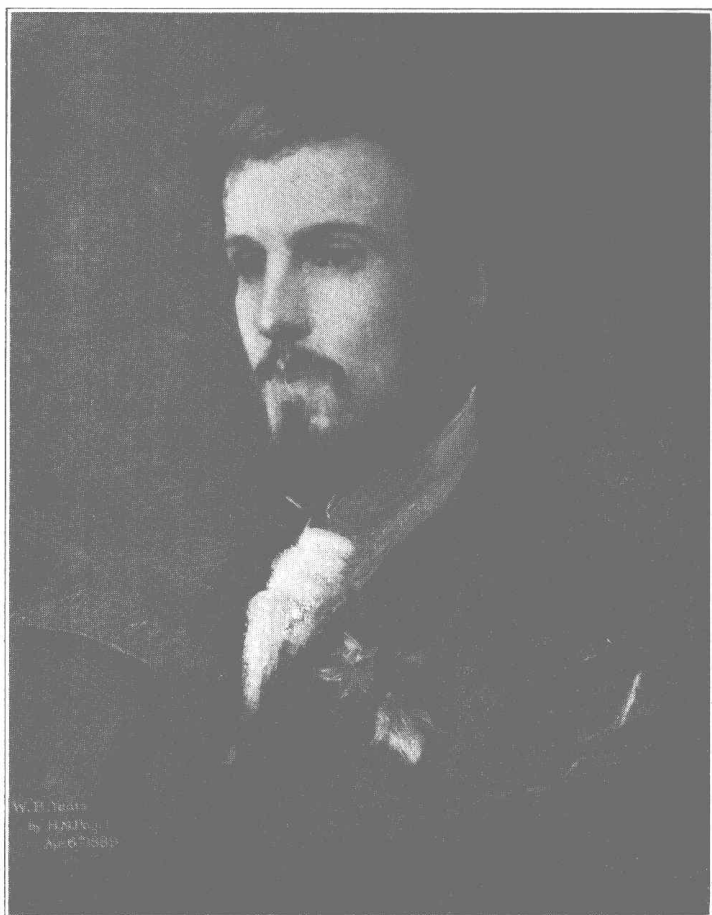
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# LETTERS TO THE NEW ISLAND

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W. B. YEATS AT THE AGE OF 23

From a portrait by H. M. Paget in the Belfast Art Gallery

*“Was man in der Jugend wünscht,  
hat man im Alter die Fülle.”*

OLD GERMAN PROVERB

## PREFACE

WHILE I was lecturing somewhere in the Eastern States Mr. Reynolds sent me a bundle of photographic copies of articles of mine published in American newspapers when I was a very young man, said they would interest students of the Irish intellectual movement and asked leave to publish them. I thought his letter generous, for all but two or three had been published before the Copyright Act of 1891. I read what was not too blurred or in too small print for my sight, and noticed that I had in later life worked out with the excitement of discovery things known in my youth as though one forgot and rediscovered oneself. I had forgotten my early preoccupation with the theatre, with an attempt to free it from commercialism with a handsome little stage in a Bedford Park Clubhouse. As



I read, Florence Farr's acting in Todhunter's *Sicilian Idyll* came into my mind, her beautiful speaking, the beautiful speaking of Heron Allen, cheiromantist and authority upon old violins, the poor acting and worse speaking of some woman engaged from some London theatre. Two or three times in later life I made, as I thought for the first time, the discovery made in that little theatre that the highly cultivated man or woman can in certain kinds of drama surpass an actor who is in all things save culture their superior. Since then my friends and I have created a theatre famous for its "folk art," for its realistic studies of life, but done little for an other art that was to come, as I hoped, out of modern culture where it is most sensitive, profound and learned. In these articles I overrated Dr. Todhunter's poetical importance, not because he was a friendly neighbour with a charming house, a Morris carpet on the drawing-room floor, upon the walls early pictures by

my father painted under the influence of Rossetti, but because a single play of his, the *Sicilian Idyll* — I did not overrate the rest of his work — and still more its success confirmed a passion for that other art. When Shelley wrote *The Cenci* — it had just been played for the first time — when Tennyson wrote *Beckett*, they were, I argued with Todhunter, deliberately oratorical; instead of creating drama in the mood of *The Lotus Eaters* or of *Epipsychidion* they had tried to escape their characteristics, had thought of the theatre as outside the general movement of literature. That he might keep within it I had urged upon Todhunter a pastoral theme, and had myself begun *The Countess Cathleen*, avoiding every oratorical phrase and cadence. A few months before I had seen George Macdonald and his family play in the Bedford Park Clubhouse a dramatised version of the *Pilgrim's Progress* before hangings of rough calico embroidered in crewel work, and thought that some like

method might keep the scenery from realism. I should have added that to avoid the suggestions of the press that bring all things down to the same level, we should play before an audience vowed to secrecy. I spent my life among painters who hated the Royal Academy, popular art, fashionable life. I could remember some painter saying in my childhood, "Holman Hunt will never come to anything, I have just heard that he gets his dress clothes at Poole's" — Poole was the most fashionable of all tailors. When I had founded the Irish Literary Society and gone to Ireland to found a similar society there I had all the fanaticism of the studios. The article that interests me most is that written in the Dublin National Library, where everybody was working for some examination, nobody, as I thought, for his own mind's sake or to discover happiness. New rules have compelled the students to go elsewhere for their school books, but Irish education is still commercialised.

I can remember myself sitting there at the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven looking with scorn at those bowed heads and busy eyes, or in futile reverie listening to my own mind as if to the sounds in a sea shell. I remember some old man, a stranger to me, saying, "I have watched you for the past half hour and you have neither made a note nor read a word." He had mistaken the proof sheets of "The Works of William Blake, edited and interpreted by Edwin Ellis and William Butler Yeats," for some school or university text book, me for some ne'er-do-weel student. I am certain that everybody outside my own little circle who knew anything about me thought as did that cross old man, for I was arrogant, indolent, excitable. To-day, knowing how great were the odds, I watch over my son, a boy at the preparatory school, fearing that he may grow up in my likeness.

I knew Blake thoroughly, I had read much Swedenborg, had only ceased my

study of Boehme for fear I might do nothing else, had added a second fanaticism to my first. My isolation from ordinary men and women was increased by an asceticism destructive of mind and body, combined with an adoration of physical beauty that made it meaningless. Sometimes the barrier between myself and other people filled me with terror; an unfinished poem, and the first and never-finished version of *The Shadowy Waters* had this terror for their theme. I had in an extreme degree the shyness—I know no better word—that keeps a man from speaking his own thought. Burning with adoration and hatred I wrote verse that expressed emotions common to every sentimental boy and girl, and that may be the reason why the poems upon which my popularity has depended until a few years ago were written before I was twenty-seven. Gradually I overcame my shyness a little, though I am still struggling with it and cannot free myself from the belief that it

comes from lack of courage, that the problem is not artistic but moral. I remember saying as a boy to some fellow student in the Dublin art schools, "The difference between a good draftsman and a bad is one of courage." I wrote prose badly, *The Celtic Twilight*, written before I had finished the last of the articles in this book, excepted, and that more for its matter than its form; prose, unlike verse, had not those simple forms that like a masquer's mask protect us with their anonymity. Perhaps if he had not been to so much trouble and expense I should have asked Mr. Reynolds to give up his project and yet been sorry afterwards, for these essays, which I have not seen for years, fill me with curiosity.

W. B. YEATS

DUBLIN

August 1, 1933

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## INTRODUCTION



