

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



W. B. YEATS

*Edited by Marjorie Howes
and John Kelly*

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EDITED BY
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521650892

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First published 2006

Reprinted 2007

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-65089-2 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-65886-7 paperback

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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Bernard O'Donoghue grew up in County Cork but since 1965 he has lived in Oxford, where he teaches medieval English and modern Irish literature at Wadham College. He has written on medieval love poetry, and is the author of *Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry* (1994). He was Director of the Yeats Summer School in Sligo in 2001 and 2002. He has published five volumes of poetry: *Poaching Rights* (1987), *The Weakness* (1991), *Gunpowder* (1995), *Here nor There* (1999), and *Outliving* (2003).

James Pethica teaches Irish and Modern British literature at Williams College, Massachusetts, and is currently at work on the authorized biography of Lady Augusta Gregory and a critical book on her creative partnership with Yeats. His publications include *Lady Gregory's Diaries 1892-1902* (1996), an edition of the drafts of Yeats's *Last Poems* (1997), and *Yeats's Poetry, Drama and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition* (2000).

Helen Vendler is the Porter University Professor at Harvard University. She is the author of books on Yeats, Stevens, Keats, Herbert, Shakespeare, and Heaney. Her new book, *Poets Thinking*, was published by Harvard University Press in 2004.

George Watson is Professor of Irish Literature in English at the University of Aberdeen. His publications include *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival: Yeats, Joyce, Synge and O'Casey* (1995, second edition; first edition 1979), *Drama* (1983), and *W. B. Yeats: Short Fiction* (1995). He has written many essays on Irish literature and cultural politics, and has lectured and taught extensively in Europe and the USA. He is on the editorial board of the *James Joyce Quarterly*, and was a founding member and later Vice Chairman of the British Association of Irish Studies (1990–5). He was Director of the W. B. Yeats International Summer School in Sligo, 1998–2000. He was Mellon Fellow of the National Humanities Center in North Carolina in 2000–1, and is currently working on a monograph on *The Ideology of Celticism in Scotland and Ireland 1760–1900*.

CHRONOLOGY OF YEATS'S LIFE

- 1865 13 June William Butler Yeats born in Sandymount, Dublin.
- 1867 John B. Yeats gives up law and moves to London to study art.
- 1871 Jack Butler Yeats born.
- 1872 July Family moves to Sligo.
- 1874 October Family moves back to London.
- 1877 Enters Godolphin School.
- 1881 Family moves to Dublin; Yeats enters Erasmus Smith High School.
- 1883 Hears Oscar Wilde lecture in Dublin.
- 1884 Attends Metropolitan School of Art; meets George W. Russell (AE).
- 1885 First meeting of the Dublin Hermetic Society.
First poems and *Mosada* published in *Dublin University Review*.
Meets Katharine Tynan and John O'Leary.
- 1886 Meets William Morris.
First Home Rule bill defeated.
- 1887 Family moves to London.
Meets Madame Blavatsky.
- 1888 Meets G. B. Shaw and Lady Wilde.
Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry
Joins Esoteric Section of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society.
- 1889 *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*
30 January Meets Maud Gonne.
- 1890 Helps found Rhymers' Club.
7 March Joins the Order of the Golden Dawn.
Asked to resign from the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.
- 1891 *John Sherman and Dhoya*
Representative Irish Tales
First marriage proposal to Maud Gonne.
- 1892 *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*
Irish Fairy Tales

- 1893 *The Celtic Twilight*
The Works of William Blake, co-edited with Edwin Ellis
 Gaelic League founded by Douglas Hyde.
 Second Home Rule bill defeated.
- 1894 *March–April The Land of Heart's Desire* produced in London.
 Sees Villiers de l'Isle Adams's *Axël* in Paris.
- 1895 Edits *A Book of Irish Verse*.
Poems
- 1896 Meets Lady Gregory.
 Affair with Olivia Shakespear.
Rosa Alchemica
Summer Visits Aran Islands.
December Meets J. M. Synge in Paris.
- 1897 *The Tables of the Law* and *The Adoration of the Magi*
The Secret Rose
 End of affair with Olivia Shakespear.
July–November At Coole Park with Lady Gregory.
- 1899 *The Wind Among the Reeds*
The Countess Kathleen produced at Antient Concert Rooms in
 Dublin; opening of Irish Literary Theatre.
- 1900 *The Shadowy Waters*
- 1901 *October Diarmuid and Grania* produced in Dublin.
- 1902 Meets James Joyce.
2 April Cathleen ni Houlihan produced in Dublin.
Where There is Nothing
 Dun Emer (later Cuala) Press established.
- 1903 *21 February* Maud Gonne marries Major John MacBride.
Ideas of Good and Evil
In the Seven Woods
The Hour-Glass
 American lecture tour.
- 1904 *14 January The Shadowy Waters* produced in Dublin.
26–9 June Where There Is Nothing produced in London.
The King's Threshold
27 December On Baile's Strand produced at opening of the Abbey
 Theatre.
- 1905 Maud Gonne granted a separation from John MacBride.
November Abbey company on tour in England.
Stories of Red Hanrahan
- 1906 *Poems 1899–1905*
 Edits *The Poems of Spenser*.

- 1907 *January* Riots over Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*.
John B. Yeats moves to USA.
Deirdre
21 *November* *The Unicorn from the Stars* produced at the Abbey.
- 1908 *Collected Works in Verse and Prose*, eight volumes.
Affair with Mabel Dickinson.
- 1909 24 *March* Synge dies.
- 1910 Granted Civil List pension (150 pounds per year).
The Green Helmet and Other Poems
The Abbey Theatre continues production after death of King Edward VII.
- 1911 *September–October* With Abbey Players on American tour.
Meets Ezra Pound.
Synge and the Ireland of His Time
Plays for an Irish Theatre
- 1912 Meets Rabindranath Tagore.
The Cutting of an Agate
- 1913 *Poems Written in Discouragement*
November–January At Stone Cottage in Sussex with Ezra Pound.
- 1914 *January–April* American lecture tour.
4 *August* United Kingdom declares war on Germany.
Responsibilities: Poems and a Play
- 1915 May Hugh Lane killed on the *Lusitania*.
December Refuses a knighthood.
- 1916 *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*
4 *April* *At the Hawk's Well* performed.
24 *April* Easter Rising begins in Dublin.
3–12 *May* Leaders, including Major John MacBride, executed.
July–August Final marriage proposal to Maud Gonne, in Normandy.
- 1917 *March* Purchases Norman tower house outside Gort, Co. Galway; names it Thoor Ballylee.
August Marriage proposal to Iseult Gonne rejected.
20 *October* Marriage to Bertha Georgie Hyde Lees.
George Yeats begins automatic writing that becomes basis for *A Vision*.
The Wild Swans at Coole
- 1918 *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*
Moves to Oxford.
Robert Gregory killed in action in Italy.

- Thoor Ballylee restored.
 11 November End of First World War.
- 1919 January Irish War of Independence begins.
Two Plays for Dancers
 26 February Birth of Anne Yeats.
The Player Queen produced in London.
- 1920 January–May American lecture tour.
- 1921 *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*
 22 August Birth of Michael Yeats.
Four Plays for Dancers
Four Years
 6 December Anglo-Irish treaty signed in London.
- 1922 3 February John B. Yeats dies in New York.
 Becomes Senator in the Irish Free State.
 June Civil War begins.
The Trembling of the Veil
Later Poems
Plays in Prose and Verse
 Joyce's *Ulysses* published.
- 1923 May Civil War ends.
 November Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature.
Plays and Controversies
- 1924 *Essays*
The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems
- 1925 January–February Travels to Sicily and Rome.
The Bounty of Sweden
Early Poems and Stories
A Vision published privately.
- 1926 15 January *A Vision* delivered to subscribers.
Estrangement
Autobiographies
- 1927 October *Blast*
 November Visits Algeciras, Seville, and Cannes.
- 1928 *The Tower*
Sophocles' King Oedipus
The Death of Synge
 Resigns from the Senate.
 Winters in Rapallo.
- 1929 *A Packet for Ezra Pound*
The Winding Stair
 December–early 1930 Suffers Malta fever in Rapallo.

- 1930 Meets Virginia Woolf and Walter de la Mare.
17 November *The Words upon the Window Pane* produced at the Abbey.
- 1931 Receives honorary degree from Oxford.
Arranges an Edition de Luxe with Macmillan, London.
- 1932 *Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends*
22 May Death of Lady Gregory.
Moves to Rathfarnham, Dublin.
Words for Music Perhaps
October–January American lecture tour.
- 1933 *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*
The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats
- 1934 *Letters to the New Island*
April Undergoes Steinach operation in London.
Wheels and Butterflies
The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats
The King of the Great Clock Tower
- 1935 17 July Death of George Russell (AE).
A Full Moon in March
Dramatis Personae
Arranges for the Dublin Edition with Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.
- 1936 January Illness in Majorca.
Edits *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*.
- 1937 Revised edition of *A Vision*.
Essays, 1931–1936
Writes Introductions for Scribner Edition.
29 December New constitution for Éire comes into effect.
- 1938 *The Herne's Egg*
New Poems
10 August *Purgatory* produced at the Abbey Theatre.
Death of Olivia Shakespear.
- 1939 28 January Dies and is buried at Roquebrune, France.
Last Poems and Two Plays
On the Boiler
- 1940 *Last Poems and Plays*
- 1941 17 September Body reinterred in Drumcliffe churchyard, Co. Sligo.

ABBREVIATIONS

- A *Autobiographies*. Ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald. New York: Scribner, 1999.
- CL_I *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume One, 1865-1895*. Ed. John Kelly. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- CL_{II} *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume Two, 1896-1900*. Ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly, and Deirdre Toomey. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- CL_{III} *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume Three, 1901-1904*. Ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- CT *The Celtic Twilight*. London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1893.
- EC&I *Essays and Introductions*. London and New York: Macmillan, 1961.
- Ex *Explorations*. Selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats. London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1963.
- GY *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*. Ed. Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares. New York: Norton, 1993.
- L *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-David, 1954; New York: Macmillan, 1955.
- LAR *Later Articles and Reviews*. Ed. Colton Johnson. New York: Scribner, 2000.
- LE *Later Essays*. Ed. William H. O'Donnell. New York: Scribner, 1994.
- LNI *Letters to the New Island*. Ed. George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer. London and New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Mem *Memoirs*. Transcribed and ed. Denis Donoghue. New York: Macmillan, 1972.
- Myth *Mythologies*. London and New York: Macmillan, 1959.
- OTB *On the Boiler*. Dublin: Cuala, 1939.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- P&I* *Prefaces and Introductions*. Ed. William H. O'Donnell. London and New York: Macmillan 1989.
- SF* *W. B. Yeats: Short Fiction*. Ed. G. J. Watson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995.
- SS* *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Donald R. Pearce. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960.
- UP_I* *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*. Vol. I. Ed. John P. Frayne. London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
- UP_{II}* *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*. Vol. II. Ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson. London: Macmillan, 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.
- VA* *A Critical Edition of Yeats's "A Vision" (1925)*. Ed. George Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood. London: Macmillan, 1978.
- VB* *A Vision*. London: Macmillan, 1962 [1937].
- VP* *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach. New York: Macmillan, 1957.
- VPI* *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*. Ed. Russell K. Alspach. London and New York: Macmillan, 1966.

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I

MARJORIE HOWES

Introduction

Few modern writers have had careers as long, varied, and complex as W. B. Yeats. Born in 1865, he produced works that arguably belong to each of three major literary historical periods or traditions: the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modernist. His thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he also embraced a counter-truth: a proposition that contradicted the first truth, was equally true, and did not negate it. He repeatedly remade himself as a writer, as a public figure, even as a person. And yet his life and work revolved around a few central preoccupations and themes: the Ireland of his day, the occult, sexual love, and the power of art to work in and change the world. In 1938, the year before he died, he wrote "The Spur," whose speaker accuses the reader of thinking it "horrible" that an old man should be filled with "lust and rage" and retorts "They were not such a plague when I was young. / What else have I to spur me into song?" (VP 591). The continuity Yeats asserts here is both genuine and false. If we turn from this poem to the early poetry expecting to see the young Yeats lusty and raging, we will be disappointed. The explicit embrace of lust and rage is a feature of Yeats's later years, when he cast himself as the wild, wicked old man to avoid settling into any of the more comfortable poses available to him: the venerable sage, the elder statesman, or the famous poet. All these roles appealed to him, and he adopted each of them at times, but he also drove himself beyond them, towards more risky personae. As he put it in "An Acre of Grass," "My temptation is quiet. / . . . Myself must I remake" (VP 575-6).

On the other hand, the continuity between the early and late work implied by "The Spur" is not simply spurious: there *is* a real continuity there. Yeats's early poems are not exactly lustful, but they do circle obsessively around desire and its objects. They depict a kind of desire that cannot be satisfied; it feeds off its own frustration, and it exceeds its objects. This desire is an eternal, disembodied force that sweeps across humanity; poems like "The Travail of Passion" describe what happens "When an immortal passion breathes in

mortal clay" (VP 172). As for rage, Yeats's early works do not display the naked anger and the will to shock that one finds in many of the later poems, but they repeatedly portray speakers who are struggling, isolated, and embattled in some way; many are poet-figures. The speaker of "The Sad Shepherd," for example, tries to comfort himself by finding or creating sympathetic correspondences between his mood and his natural surroundings in the manner of the Romantic poets. But nature remains alien and indifferent to him; the shell to whom he tells his story "Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him" (VP 69). So we can and should discern, beneath the shifts and transformations that mark Yeats's career, the underlying threads that link all the phases of his work together.

Most of his major preoccupations were established quite early in his life. His lifelong interest in the theatre manifested itself in his earliest writings; his very first publications, in the spring of 1885, when he was just twenty, consisted of several lyrics and a verse play, *The Island of Statues*. Throughout his career, dialogue appealed to him because it allowed him to stage conflicts between opposing principles, voices, or moods. His earliest work was not Irish in its themes, but that same year Yeats met the ageing Fenian John O'Leary, and, at O'Leary's urging, joined the Young Ireland Society. This and his connection with another society, the Contemporary Club, brought Yeats into contact with a circle of nationalist intellectuals. He began to read Irish literature, and his subsequent publications bore the marks of that new interest. Over the next few years he began to establish himself as a freelance critic and editor. The year 1885 also attests to Yeats's early and enduring interest in spiritualism and the occult. That year he helped found the Dublin Hermetic Society, and in 1886 he met the charismatic Mohini Chatterjee, whose Eastern mystical philosophy was much in vogue in Theosophist circles. In the late 1880s he met Maud Gonne for the first time, and conceived one of the most famous unrequited passions in literary history. Within three months of their meeting (as Yeats later dated it), Gonne became pregnant by her lover Lucien Millevoye; Yeats would learn about Millevoye and their two children nearly ten years later. By 1890 he was living in London, and helped start the Rhymers' Club, a bohemian literary society with a significant homosexual subculture and a set of aesthetic ideas that participated in Decadence and Symbolism.

His early work often combines all these elements: nationalism, the occult, love, and contemporary avant-garde poetry. Perhaps the most famous examples are the Rose poems of *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); the Rose is imagined variously as a symbol of eternal beauty, a bringer of apocalypse, an actual beloved, the priestess of an occult shrine, a figure for Ireland, a force for peace, and an incitement to war. For the