



W. B. Yeats

IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY
David Holdeman
and Ben Levitas

CAMBRIDGE

W. B. Y F r o s s i n _ O N T E X T

EDITED BY

DAVID HOLDEMAN AND BEN LEVITAS



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W. B. YEATS IN CONTEXT

W. B. Yeats is a writer who requires, and at the same time tests the limits of, contextual study. More than perhaps any other Irish writer, he produced his own context as much as it produced him. The scale of his cultural and political activities, combined with his potent and widely varied literary output, made an impact that can only be understood by close attention to his words in relation to the times in which he lived. *W. B. Yeats in Context* maps the landscape of Yeats's world in concise, lively essays, by distinguished critics and historians. The places, people, themes, and intellectual frameworks most important to his development receive close attention, as do his artistic influences, and the production and reception of his work. As a gateway into the study of Yeats, this volume offers much new information for both students, scholars, and anyone interested in the life and times of this enigmatic and influential poet.

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For Rachel, Daniel, Ruth, Diana and Bill Levitas
And
In memory of
Elizabeth and Frank Clouse

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Those who knew him will not be surprised that George Watson was supportive of this project from the outset, although what proved to be a fatal illness forced him to withdraw. This book is poorer for his absence though his generosity and scholarship endure in the ideas and arguments that remain, here and in the wider field.

We are grateful for the assistance of Catherine Fahy at the National Library of Ireland, to Neil Mann for permission to publish his diagrams on p. 278, and to Charles Barsotti for permission to publish his cartoon on p. 411. Our final and deepest thanks must go to our families (Karen DeVinney, Sam and Sarah Holdeman, Jennifer Grigg, Sam and Joe Levitas), who have kept us sane throughout. Hats off to you all.

Abbreviations

Note: Quotations from Yeats's manuscripts and *Collected Letters* preserve his original spelling.

- | | |
|---------------------------|--|
| AV | <i>A Vision</i> , Macmillan, 1962. |
| Berg | Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library. |
| Brown | <i>The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography</i> , by Terence Brown, Blackwell, 1999. |
| CL _I , 2, 3, 4 | <i>The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume I, 1865–1895</i> , ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville; <i>Volume II, 1896–1900</i> , ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly, Deirdre Toomey; <i>Volume III, 1901–1904</i> , and <i>Volume IV, 1905–1907</i> , ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard, Clarendon Press, 1986, 1997, 1994, 2005. |
| CL IntelLex | <i>The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats</i> , gen. ed. John Kelly, IntelLex Electronic Edition, 2002. Letters cited by Accession Number. |
| CW ₁ | <i>The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume I, The Poems</i> , 2nd Edn, ed. Richard J. Finneran, Scribner, 1997. |
| CW ₂ | <i>The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume II, The Plays</i> , ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark, Scribner, 2001. |
| CW ₃ | <i>The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume III, Autobiographies</i> , ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald, Scribner, 1999. |
| CW ₄ | <i>The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume IV, Early Essays</i> , ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein, Scribner, 2007. |
| CW ₅ | <i>The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume V, Later Essays</i> , ed. William H. O'Donnell, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994. |

- CW6 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume VI, Prefaces and Introductions*, ed. William H. O'Donnell, Macmillan, 1989.
- CW7 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume VII, Letters to the New Island*, ed. George Bornstein and Hugh Witemeyer, Macmillan, 1989.
- CW8 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume VIII, The Irish Dramatic Movement*, ed. Mary FitzGerald and Richard J. Finneran, Scribner, 2003.
- CW9 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume IX, Early Articles and Reviews*, ed. John P. Frayne and Madeleine Marchaterre, Scribner, 2004.
- CW10 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume X, Later Articles and Reviews*, ed. Colton Johnson, Scribner, 2000.
- CW12 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume XII, 'John Sherman' and 'Dhoya'*, ed. Richard J. Finneran, Macmillan, 1991.
- CW13 *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume XIII, A Vision, The Original 1925 Version*, ed. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper, Scribner, 2008.
- Ex *Explorations*, sel. Mrs W. B. Yeats, London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1963.
- Foster-1 *W. B. Yeats: A Life, I: The Apprentice Mage*, by R. F. Foster, Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Foster-2 *W. B. Yeats: A Life, II: The Arch-Poet*, by R. F. Foster, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- G–YL *The Gonne–Yeats Letters: 1893–1938*, ed. Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares, Hutchinson, 1992.
- L *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade, London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954; New York: Macmillan, 1955.
- Mem *Memoirs: Autobiography – First Draft: Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue, London: Macmillan, 1972; New York: Macmillan, 1973.
- Myth *Mythologies*, Macmillan, 1959.
- M2005 *Mythologies*, ed. Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- NLI Manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin.
- NYPL New York Public Library.
- SS *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pearce, Indiana University Press, 1960; Faber and Faber, 1961.

- UP₁ *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 1, ed. John P. Frayne, London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press, 1970.
- UP₂ *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, Vol. 2, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson, London: Macmillan, 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.
- VP *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, rev. 3rd printing, Macmillan, 1966.
- VPI *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, Macmillan, 1966.
- Wade Allan Wade, *A Bibliography of the Writings of W. B. Yeats*, third edn, rev. and ed. Russell K. Alspach, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968.
- YA *Yeats Annual*, Macmillan, 1982—.
- YL Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W. B. Yeats's Library*, Garland, 1985.

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Introduction

David Holdeman and Ben Levitas

W. B. Yeats is a writer who requires, and at the same time tests, contextual study. Few can challenge his literary dimensions: a protean sensibility spanning the transition from Victorian romanticism into modernism. His output, produced with sustained intensity for over half a century, encompassed lyric, narrative, and dramatic poetry; thirty-three plays; a library of prose ranging from fiction to polemic journalism to autobiography; and he also developed a complex occult system. His impact was, however, also cultural and political in a socially engaged sense: he led the Celtic Revival; was active in nationalist movements; established the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre; and served as a senator in the newly independent Irish Free State. As a complement to this prodigious activity, he spun a constant correspondence linking a huge range of personnel into his public and intimate passions.

Thus, more than most writers, Yeats insists on being seen not so much *in* his context as *of* it: as much the producer as the product of his times. The answer to the famous question he posed late in life: 'Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?' (CW1 353) is neither simple nor obvious. The retrospective look by the elder Yeats into the likely effect of his early influence construes the context that shapes his present verse as in part his own responsibility. He seeks to self-contextualize within a world he has helped to make. It is important to recognize within this a Shelleyan insistence on cultural politics, to promote poets as acknowledged legislators: and this is a fair conclusion, given Yeats's status. Any thoroughgoing attempt to contextualize Yeats must account for these imbrications, both recognizing and resisting his writing's tendency to set the terms for its own study.

W. B. Yeats in Context aims to meet this challenge. Firmly embracing the 'historical turn' that informs contextualization, this collection nevertheless views this process, rather than turning away from theoretical nuance