

W. B. Yeats

Poet,
Dramatist,
Author

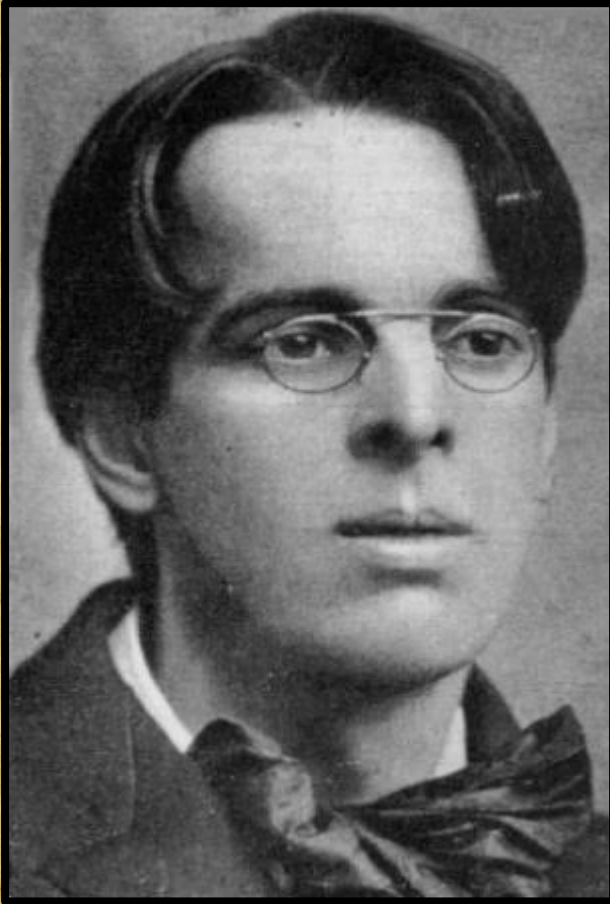


While reading law
at the Irish Bar,
John Butler
Yeats met Susan
Pollexfen, the
sister of an old
school friend.
They married in
1863.



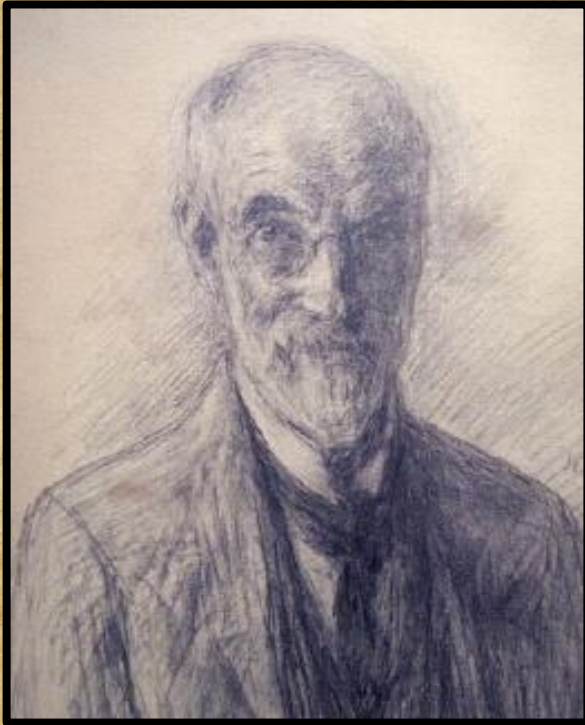
One of the Pollexfen Shipping Line buildings
on Wine St., Sligo

Susan's father,
William, owned
a milling
company and
shipping firm in
Sligo.



John and Susan
Butler Yeats had
six children, four
of whom survived.

William Butler
Yeats, the eldest,
was born in 1865.



Pencil self-portrait of John Butler Yeats, 1919

In 1867, John B. Yeats gave up the practice of law and started a career as an artist. He moved Susan and the children to London.

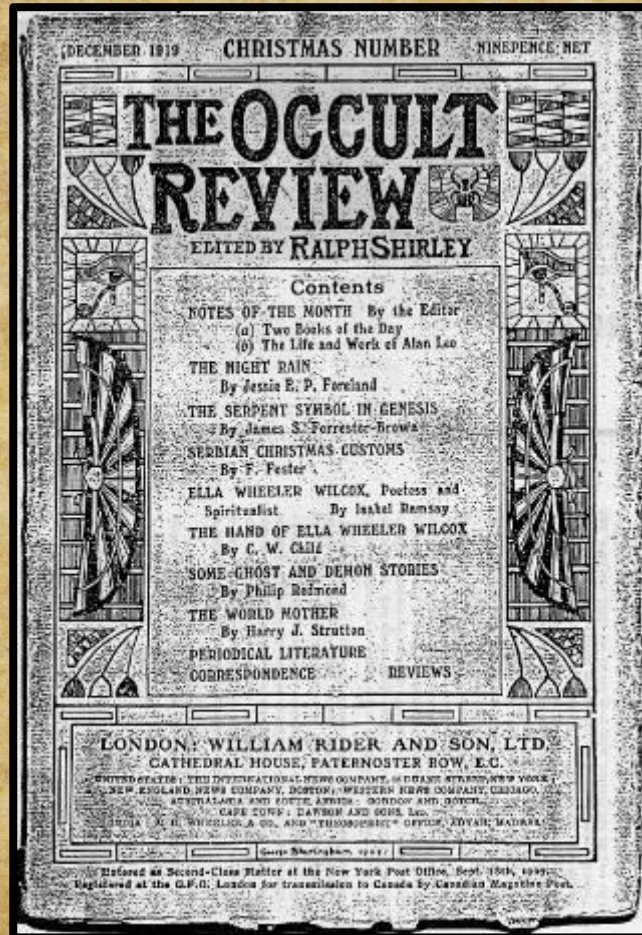


Ben Bulbin, Sligo

The family
spent their
holidays every
year in Sligo
and lived there
between 1872
and 1874.

In 1881, the Yeats family moved to Dublin, at first living near the sea at Howth, later moving to Harold's Cross. As a youngster, William dabbled in writing plays and poems and became more and more interested in using Irish history and stories as themes for his writing.

Yeats' writings began to be published in newspapers and journals. His first work, an epic poem, "The Wanderings of Oisín", was published in 1887. It was written in the form of a dialogue between St. Patrick and Oisín, the ancient Irish hero. Yeats was immediately recognised as a significant poet.



Throughout the 1890's, Yeats became fascinated by the occult, ritual magic and mystic Celtic tales, all of which were to influence his writings.



Maud Gonne

In 1889, William met Maud Gonne. He immediately fell in love with her and over the years frequently asked her to marry him.

“I have spread my
dreams under your
feet,

Tread softly –
because you tread
on my dreams.”

- from “He Wishes For the
Cloths of Heaven”

They never
married but she
became an
inspiration for his
poetry and he
wrote many
poems about her
and for her.

“I went out to the hazel
wood
Because a fire was in my
head
And cut and peeled a hazel
wand
And hooked a berry to a
thread.”

- from “The Song of Wandering
Aengus”

While living in London in
1890, Yeats founded
the Rhymers’ Club in
order to meet other
poets of the time.
Right up to his later
years he always
encouraged new
young poets.



Lady Gregory



Coole Park, Gort, Co. Galway

Yeats met Lady Gregory in 1896. The following summer he spent two months at her house, Coole Park, in Galway, the first of many summers he spent there. They collected folklore together and she provided him with space to write.

Plays of W.B. Yeats:

- The Land of Heart's Desire
- Deirdre
- At the Hawk's Well
- The Only Jealousy of Emer
- Calvary
- The Cat and the Moon
- The Dreaming of the Bones

About this time
Yeats also
became
interested in
poetic drama
and proceeded
to write many
verse plays.



Poster for the opening of the Abbey Theatre, Dublin

Yeats and others set up the Irish National Theatre Society to perform plays with a distinctly Irish theme. Early productions included John Millington Synge's "In the Shadow of the Glen" and Yeats' own "The Shadowy Waters".

This led to the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904. In January 1907, the Abbey put on a new play by J.M. Synge, “The Playboy of the Western World”. Audiences were outraged and riots ensued.



Abbey Theatre, Dublin



In 1903, Yeats embarked on his first lecture tour of the USA. This was followed up by further tours in 1911, 1914, and 1920. These enabled him to earn substantial sums of money.

Yeats was also aware of the politics of the time. He supported the workers in the 1913 Dublin Lockout. He also supported Lady Gregory and Hugh Lane in their efforts to establish a modern art gallery in Dublin.





The Cat and the Moon,
Sligo Drama Circle, 1984

Ezra Pound, a young American poet, introduced Yeats to the stylised Japanese Noh drama which immediately influenced his writings. He used this form of drama in “At the Hawks Well”, first performed in London in 1916.

The Easter Rising of 1916 took Yeats by surprise. Having previously bemoaned the fact that,

“Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone, It’s
with O’Leary in the grave”

(from September 1913),

Yeats was shocked at the execution of the leaders of the Rising.

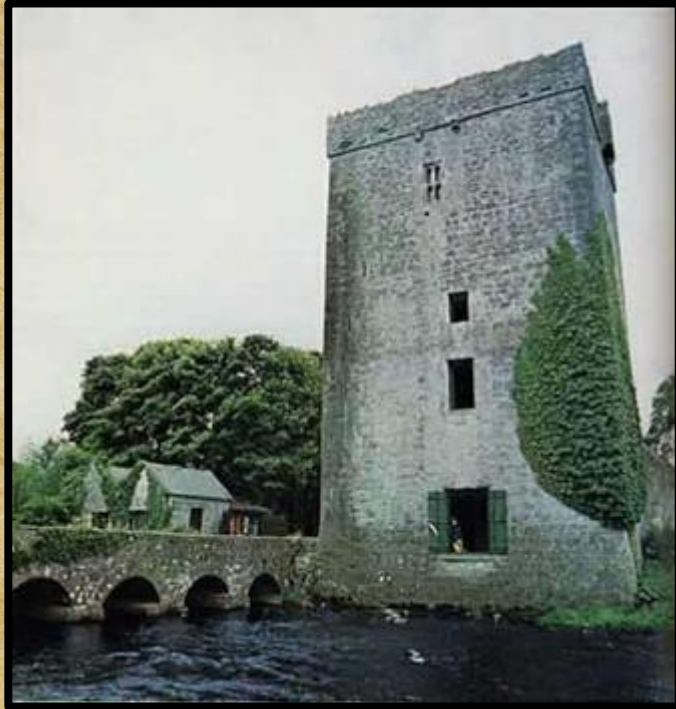
“What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;”
- from Easter 1916



George Hyde Lees

In 1912, Yeats met
Georgie Hyde-
Lees. He called
her George. They
were married on
October 20th,
1917, Yeats aged
52, Georgie was
25.

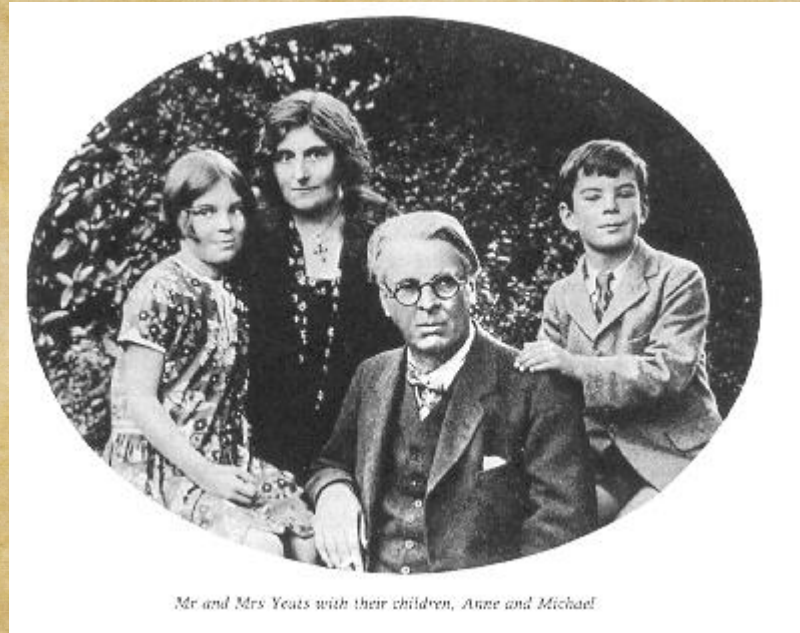
Shortly after the marriage, George attempted “automatic writing”. Yeats was so excited by this that he pledged the remainder of his life to “explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences”. George’s automatic writing formed the basis of “A Vision”, first published in 1926.



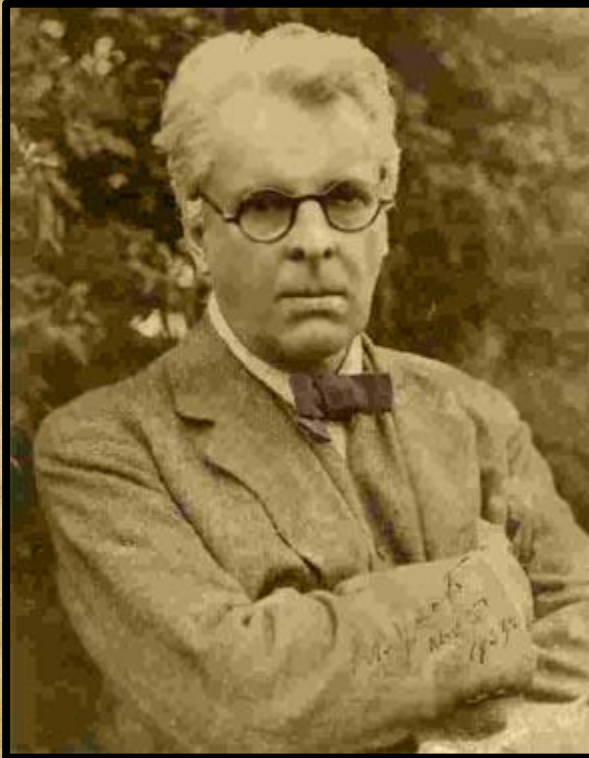
Thoor Ballylee

Yeats bought Thoor Ballylee, a ruined Norman tower house in Gort, Co. Galway for £35. He and George renovated it and spent many summers there.

William and George's daughter, Anne was born in 1919, followed by a son, Michael, two years later.



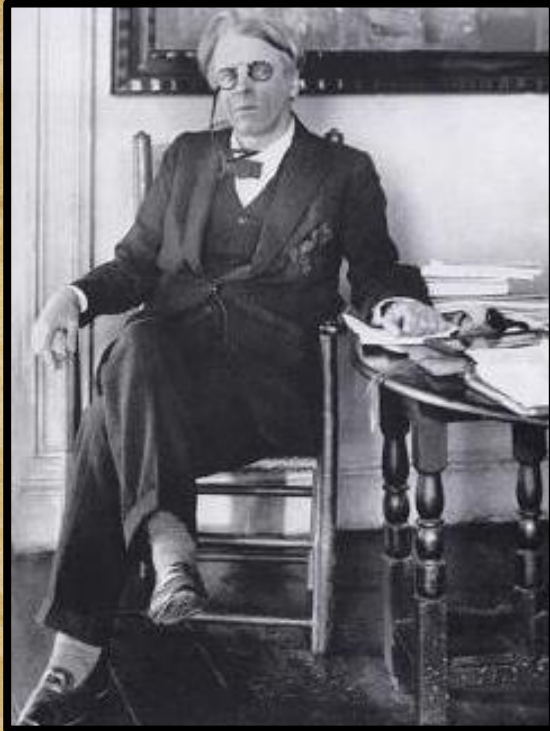
Mr and Mrs Yeats with their children, Anne and Michael



W. B. Yeats was appointed to the Senate, the Upper House of the Irish parliament, in the newly formed Irish Free State in 1922.

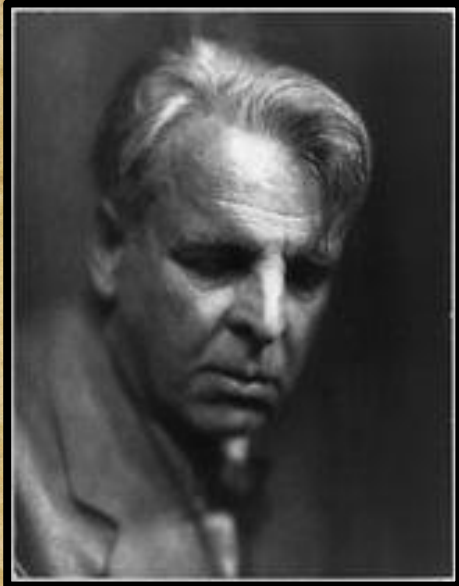


As the War of Independence raged in Ireland, Yeats, now living in Oxford, denounced the British policy in Ireland. In March 1922 Yeats moved from Oxford to 82 Merrion Square, Dublin.



In 1923, Yeats
travelled to
Stockholm,
Sweden, to
receive the
Nobel Prize for
Literature.

Yeats took an interest in education, and went on a tour of primary schools which led to him writing the poem “Among School Children”, in which he depicts himself as “a sixty year old smiling public man”.



Yeats' last play, "Purgatory", was produced in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin on August 10th, 1938, a few months before his death.

During the 1930's, Yeats was troubled more and more by ill health and underwent several operations. He died on January 28th, 1939 in France and was buried at Roquebrune.



In 1948, Yeats' body was returned to Ireland and reinterred in Drumcliff Churchyard, Sligo.

“Under Bare Ben Bulben’s head
In Drumcliff Churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye
On Life, on death,
Horseman, pass by.”

- from “Under Ben Bulben”

Read some of these Yeats Poems:

- The Stolen Child
- The Lake Isle of Innisfree
- Down by the Salley Gardens
- The Ballad of Moll Magee
- The Ballad of Father Gilligan
- The Fiddler of Dooney
- September 1913
- Easter 1916
- A Prayer for my Daughter

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