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Welcome to the latest edition of the IACI e-news.

Founded in 1962, the IACI is the leading Irish American cultural organization. The IACI is a federally recognized 501(c)(3) not-for-profit national organization devoted to promoting an intelligent appreciation of Ireland and the role and contributions of the Irish in America.

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## William Butler Yeats, Irish Poet and Playwright

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature

by

Raymond D. Aumack

William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and one of the foremost literary figures of the twentieth Century. He was born in Sandymount, Dublin on June 3, 1865. He was educated in Dublin and London. His father dropped out of law school to become and an artist, a painter of some note. His brother, Jack, became one of the leading artists of Europe. His two sisters, Elizabeth and Susan Mary, addressed as Lottie and Lily by family and friends, became leaders in the arts and crafts movement.

His great grandfather married into the prominent Butler family and from that time every child born carried the Butler name. His father had married Susan Mary Pollexfen from a wealthy merchant family.

Yeats was not a scholar. The family name carried him far better than his report card. He was not a slow student. He just marched to the beat of a different drummer. He was a late bloomer and flowered in adulthood. He was quite active in literary societies in London and was active among societies in Ireland that promoted the Irish literary revival.

The family summered in Sligo each year and it was here as a young boy that his interest in poetry developed. He developed an interest in Irish Legends and the occult. These became the subject matter of the earliest Spenser and Shelly. His later work became more physical and realistic as he outgrew his fascination the occult. His themes are clearly life and death. It shows up in the first of the following poem, *The Song of a Happy Shepherd*.

The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy;  
Of old the world on dreaming fed;  
Grey truth is now her painted toy;  
Yet still she turns her restless head;  
But O, sick children of the world,  
Of all the many changing things  
In dreary dancing passed us whirled,  
To the cracked tunes that Chronos sings,  
Words alone are certain goods.

Throughout this poem from Crossways, his first published work, he seems to be focusing on the inevitability of endings. The entire poem continues in this vain.

Though the family was part of the Protestant Ascendancy, the rise of nationalism created confusion in a world that was rapidly changing. The 1880s saw the rise of Charles Stewart

Parnell and the quest for home rule. Catholics became prominent around the turn of the century. These movements generated an identity crisis for the Protestant Ascendancy. These developments had a profound impact on his poetry and his search for an Irish identity.

To help his father's artistic career, the family moved to London. William was home schooled. In 1877, he entered the Godolphin School which he attended for four years. In 1880, the family moved back to Ireland, eventually settling at Howth, just north of Dublin. William enrolled at Erasmus Smith High School. His father's studio was nearby and it was here that he met many of the city's artists and writers. He started writing poetry at this time and in 1885, the Dublin University Review published his first poems.

A great influence in his life was Maud Gonne, a 23 year old (18 months younger than Yeats) English heiress and dedicated Irish nationalist. Gonne admired the Island of Statues and sought out his acquaintance. Yeats was fascinated with her. She had a lasting effect on his poetry for the rest of his life.

Alas, his affection was unrequited in part due his reluctance to participate in Irish nationalist activism. Yeats proposed marriage in 1891 but was rejected. He proposed three more times, in 1899, 1900, and 1901. In 1903, she married Major John MacBride. Yeats derided MacBride in his poetry and letters but he was horrified by the loss of his muse. He was offended that she had converted to Catholicism, even though he was a Protestant agnostic.

The marriage of Gonne and Mac Bride was a disaster resulting in a legal separation because there was not enough evidence for the French court to issue a decree of divorce.

Yeats friendship with Gonne had cooled but they finally did consummate their relationship three years later. However, that marked the end of the relationship forever.

In 1896, Yeats met Lady Gregory, having been introduced by Edward Martyn. With other writers such as J.M.Synge, Padraic Colum, and Sean O'Casey they established the Irish Literary Revival Movement. Working with writers they founded the Irish Literary Theatre. The collective lasted about two years but it was not successful.

In 1904 the with the help of the Fay brothers who had theatrical experience, they founded the Abbey Theatre. Yeats play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and Lady Gregory's play, *Spreading the News* was featured on opening night. Yeats served on the Board and was a prolific playwright until the end of his life.

In 1902, he helped establish the Dun Emer Press to publish works by the writers associated with the revival. The publishing company was run by the Yeats' sisters and lasted for 42 years. They had published over 70 titles, 48 of them by Yeats himself

The development of the nationalist revolutionary movement from the ranks of mostly lower class and working class Roman Catholics forced Yeats to reassess his attitudes.. Following are the introductory lines from *Easter 1916*.

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with the nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered a while and said  
Polite meaningless words.  
And though before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion  
Around the fire at the club,  
Being certain that they and I  
But lived where motely is worn  
All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

This is a very powerful poem and probably the most quoted among Yeats works. It reveals his ambivalence. These beginning verses of the poem highlight his initial indifference to the quest for a free state. A nation was born but at the cost of the deaths of great and brave men, many of them friends, fellow artists and poets. It is ironic that the hated MacBride is celebrated in this poem for his courage. On the other hand, it reduces even further his disdain for nationalism that was contrary to his lifetime of aristocracy and his heritage as part of the Protestant ascendancy.

In 1922, he was appointed a Senator for the Irish Free State. Yes, he had become an Irish Nationalist who sought a traditional lifestyle. He avoided the political landscape until he was appointed Senator for the Irish Free State.

He was once a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He distanced himself for core political activism during the Easter Rising even to the point of holding back the poetry inspired by the event until 1920.

In the 1930s he observed the emergence of authoritarian anti-democratic nationalist movements. He composed several marching songs for the far right Blueshirts but they were never used. He was a fierce opponent of individualism and political liberalism. He saw he fascist movements as a triumph of public order and the needs of the collective of common citizens and their individualism. He was conservative to the point where in today's language, he would be several degrees to the right of our Tea Party. On the other hand, he never lost his taste for aristocracy. He abhorred the idea of mob rule and saw democracy as a threat to good government and public order. When the Blueshirt movement began to phase out he tempered his views but maintained a preference for authoritarian and nationalist leadership.

In 1916 at age 51, Yeats was determined to marry and produce an heir. MacBride had been executed for his role in the Rising and again he had asked Maud to marry him. When she again rejected him, his thoughts turned to her daughter Iseult was now 21 years old. He proposed to her

in 1917 and was rejected. Later that year he proposed to Georgie Hyde-Lees whom he had met through his friend Olivia Shakespear. They were married in late October despite criticism from her friends. The marriage was a success. The couple had two children, Anne and Michael. In later years, he had several illicit affairs. George, who knew of these relationships, remained loyal to the end.

In December 1923, Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He accepted the prize as recognition for the literary development of the Irish Nation. The prize had resulted in increased sales of his books and for the first time in his life he had no money worries. He paid off his own debts as well as the debts of his father.

He was reappointed to the Senate in 1925. He became quite involved in the divorce debate and saw it as a confrontation between the emerging Roman Catholic ethos and the Protestant minority. He countered the opposition that a measure to outlaw divorce would alienate the Protestant minority and solidify the partition of Ireland. In 1924, he was chairman of the committee to design coinage. He was aware of the symbolic power hidden in the young state's currency. After much research and debate, he was pleased when the house finally decided on the artwork of Percy Metcalfe although, as suspected, he did not like the compromises necessary to secure his position. Democracy is messy. He retired from the Senate in 1928 because of ill health.

He was revitalized by a surgical procedure and his activity increased as a result and this is evidenced by his literary output and his erotic escapades with younger women.

He died at the Hotel Ideal Sejour, in Menton France, on January 28, 1939, age 73.. He was discretely buried at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin. He had often discussed funeral plans with his wife, George. The plans were followed as discussed. After a year his body was returned to Ireland and buried in Sligo. I visited his grave a couple of times. Though he was a very complex man he is not only my favorite poet, but a great influence on my own poetic efforts with several publications and even a couple of awards.

The following paragraph comes from his Nobel biography:

*After 1910, Yeats's dramatic art took a sharp turn toward a highly poetical, static, and esoteric style. His later plays were written for small audiences; they experiment with masks, dance, and music, and were profoundly influenced by the Japanese Noh plays. Although a convinced patriot, Yeats deplored the hatred and the bigotry of the Nationalist movement, and his poetry is full of moving protests against it. He was appointed to the Irish Senate in 1922. Yeats is one of the few writers whose greatest works were written after the award of the Nobel Prize. Whereas he received the Prize chiefly for his dramatic works, his significance today rests on his lyric achievement. His poetry, especially the volumes *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940), made him one of the outstanding and most influential of twentieth Century poets writing in English. His recurrent themes are the contrast of art and life, masks, and cyclical theories of life and the ideal of beauty and ceremony contrasting with the hubbub of modern life.*

## Some favorite Short Poems

### To a Child Dancing in the Wind

Dance there upon the shore;  
What need have you you to care  
For the wind or the water's roar?  
And tumble out o your hair  
That the salt drops have wet;  
Being young you have not known  
The fool's triumph, nor yet  
Love lost as soon as won  
Nor the best labourer dead  
And all the sheaves to bind.  
What need have you to dread  
The monstrous crying of the wind?

### That the Night Come

She lived in storm and strife  
Her soul had such desire  
For what proud death may bring  
That it could not endure  
The common good of life  
But lived as if 'twere a king  
That packed his marriage day  
With banneret and pennon,  
Trumpet and Kettledrum,  
And the outrageous cannon,  
To bundle time away,  
That the night come.

### On Woman (The first verse)

May God be praised for woman  
That gives up all her mind,  
A man may find in no man  
A friendship of her kind  
That covers all he has brought  
As with her flesh and bone,  
Nor quarrels with a thought  
Because it is not her own.

### Girl's Song

I went out alone  
To sing a song or two,  
My fancy on man,  
And you know who.

Another came insight  
That on a stick relied  
To hold himself upright;  
I sat and cried.

And that was all my song  
When everything is told.  
Saw I an old man young  
Or a young man, old?

## Irish Geography

Which two Irish cities are situated at either end of the N9 Primary Route?	Dublin and Waterford
Where would you find Kate Kearney's Cottage?	County Kerry
In Connacht, which county does not have a coastline?	County Roscommon
How many counties touch the River Shannon?	11
Which town's name translates as "Church of the sloes"?	Killarney
Which group of islands in Ireland also give their name to a type of sweater?	The Aran Islands
Name the county town of Leitrim?	Carrick-on-Shannon
Which holy place is regarded as the Lourdes of Ireland?	Knock
On which river would you find the Powerscourt Waterfall?	The River Dargle
Where in Ireland would you find Bangor Erris?	County Mayo
Which river flows under Dublin Castle?	The River Poddle
Cathair na Mairt is the Irish name for which Mayo town?	Westport
In which Leinster county would you find the village of Kilmuckridge?	County Wexford
Where would you find Kilkenny West and the River Inny?	County Westmeath
The largest park in Dublin is?	The Phoenix Park
Where did Dublin get it's name?	From 'Dubh linn' meaning "dark pool"
According to legend the devil spat out what?	The Rock of Cashel



## On this Day in Irish History

### June

1st 1944 - Fianna Fáil wins the general election.

2nd 1942 - Speed limits are introduced to reduce wear on tyres.

4th 1984 - US President Ronald Reagan addresses both houses of the Oireachtas.

7th 1921 - James Craig is elected first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

1944 - Further rationing of electricity is announced.

1996 - Garda Jerry McCabe is shot dead by the IRA in Limerick.

2001 - Ireland rejects the Nice Treaty in a referendum.

8th 1886 - Home Rule Bill is rejected, triggering riots in Belfast.

9th 1903 - University of Dublin agrees to award degrees to women.

10th 1961 - Prince Ranier and Princess Grace of Monaco are received in Dublin.

1983 - Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams is elected MP for West Belfast.

11th 1843 - Tuam is the location of the first of a series of Monster Meetings calling for Repeal.

12th 1986 - Two giant pandas arrive at Dublin zoo.

13th 1951 - Éamon de Valera becomes Taoiseach with a tiny majority.

14th 1928 - Amendment to the Court of Justice Bill ensures certain judges must have competency in Irish.

15th 1977 - Fianna Fáil win the general election.

1988 - IRA kill six British soldiers in Lisburn.

16th 1871 - Westmeath Act allows detention without trial.

1904 - James Joyce meets Nora Barnacle, and later sets Ulysses on this day.

1922 - A general election in Ireland shows 75% support the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

1997 - National University of Ireland, Maynooth, comes into existence.

18th 1969 - French President Charles de Gaulle meets President De Valera in Dublin.

1992 - Referendum in the Republic approves the Maastricht Treaty.

20th 1890 - St George's covered market is opened in Belfast.

1936 - Irish government declares the IRA an illegal organisation.

22nd 1911 - Sinn Féin protest Irish participation in the coronation of King George V.  
1932 - 31st Eucharistic Conference opens in the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin.

23rd 1914 - Government of Ireland Bill introduced to the House of Lords.  
1929 - Pontifical High Mass at Phoenix Park marks the centenary of Catholic emancipation.  
1993 - Dáil Éireann passes a bill to decriminalise homosexuality.

24th 1973 - Éamon de Valera retires from office aged 90.

25th 1938 - Douglas Hyde is inaugurated as the first President of Ireland.  
1945 - Seán T. O'Kelly is inaugurated as the second President of Ireland.  
1959 - Éamon de Valera is inaugurated as the third President of Ireland.  
1966 - Éamon de Valera is inaugurated for a second term as President.  
1970 - Bishops lift the ban on Catholics attending Trinity College Dublin.  
1973 - Erskine Childers is inaugurated as the fourth President of Ireland.

26th 1887 - Highest temperature ever recorded in Ireland (33.3C, measured at Kilkenny Castle).  
1949 - 80,000 people attend a Pioneer Total Abstinence Society meeting at Croke Park.  
1991 - The wrongful convictions of the Maguire Seven are quashed.  
1996 - Crime reporter Veronica Guerin murdered in Dublin.

27th 1963 - US President J. F. Kennedy addresses both houses of the Oireachtas.  
1998 - The Republic of Ireland qualifies for entry into the Economic and Monetary Union of the EU.

30th 1922 - Anti-Treaty forces storm the Four Courts and take 33 prisoners.  
1932 - The Tailteann Games open in Croke Park.  
1981 - Fine Gael leader Dr Garret Fitzgerald is elected Taoiseach.