

December 2016

## A Review of Yeats 150

Sandie Byrne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys>

---

### Recommended Citation

Byrne, Sandie (2016) "A Review of Yeats 150," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/IYS.01.01.13>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Yeats Studies by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact [kokeefe@clemson.edu](mailto:kokeefe@clemson.edu).

## A REVIEW OF *YEATS 150*

Declan J. Foley, ed. *Yeats 150* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2016), pp. 588

*Reviewed by Sandie Byrne*

This collection commemorates 150 years since Yeats's birth in 1865 but celebrates more than the man and his work. It is appropriately dedicated to Seamus Heaney, himself an insightful and accessible Yeats scholar, and its subjects include the Yeats family, prizes named for Yeats, prize-winning poems, Yeats-related places, influences, personal recollections, and the Yeats International Summer School, in addition to the corpus of Yeats's work. It is truly international, bringing together writers from Australia, Canada, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. Essayists include poets, scholars, students, and teachers, among them some of the most notable voices in contemporary criticism: Helen Vendler, Denis Donoghue, Warwick Gould, James Pethica, Anne Margaret Daniel, Deirdre Toomey, Colin Smythe, Peter Kuch, Ann Saddlemeyer, Lucy McDiarmid, Bruce Stewart, Martin Mansergh, and the late Daniel Albright.

But there are also notable and surprising absences—eminent Yeats scholars such as Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Richard Ellmann, Richard J. Finneran, John Kelly, Declan Kiberd, Bernard O'Donoghue, and Jon Stallworthy, to name just a few. In case of those living, a note in Foley's introduction suggests that some academics who were keen to contribute were thwarted by time constraints, which is a pity. The editing and editorial apparatus—bibliography, index, and (sparing) notes—are well produced, though the material form of the paperback edition of the collection somewhat lets down the content and the striking minimalist design of the cover. Perfect binding of nearly 600 pages prevents its staying open and some of the illustrations, particularly those to "Byzantine Materiality and Byzantine Vision," are over-inked to the point of unreadability.

The division of the collection is at first puzzling: what will be the difference between the sections headed "Academic Essays" and "Scholars"? Are the essays under "The Plays" not academic? Will the section on Tír na nÓg be about Yeats's youth, his young writing, or the Oisín stories? How does the essay entitled "Sorry About that, Mr Yeats" relate to the section "Sligeach: Sligo—'The Place of Shells'; Slí Dhá Átha 'The Way of the Two Fords'"? The organisation seems eccentric until we read the introduction, which explains the principles of the collection, drawn from the ethos of the International Yeats Summer School in Sligo, which welcomes any and everyone to the study of Yeats. Declan Foley

explains that the aim of the volume is to “reflect the esteem in which the man and his works are held internationally,” not only in academia but also “by the public at large” (3). Foley notes that the intention of the collection from its inception was to have more contributions from other types of “scholars” than from academics, since it was assumed that there would be many academic publications to mark the sesquicentennial (6).

The essays on Yeats’s early life emphasise the unhappiness of his childhood but reconsider some of the biographical writing of the 1970s and earlier, such as William M. Murphy, *The Yeats Family and the Pollexfens of Sligo* (Dublin, 1971) which placed the blame on the poet’s mother, Susan Pollexfen Yeats. Maneck H. Daruwala, in “‘Every Paddler’s Heritage’: W. B. Yeats, Hans Christian Andersen, Susan Pollexfen Yeats, S. T. Coleridge and Children’s Stories,” finds the stories read or narrated by Yeats’s mother influential in Yeats’s love of natural and supernatural worlds, and reads Yeats’s poems through these folktales. Deirdre Toomey in “Away” looks more extensively at mother-son and substitute-mother-son relationships, abandonment, and the importance of storytelling; the “away” of the title refers to people stolen away to faeryland, and to dead mothers who are never truly away. Other essays on the Yeats family look at George Yeats, J. B. Yeats, and Lady Gregory, and extend our view and understanding of the lives of Yeats’s children far beyond their appearances in the “Prayer” poems.

The academic essays include both elucidation of context and close readings of Yeats’s work. Patrick J. Keane traces themes and patterns of myth and symbol across a volume in “Elegy and Affirmation in W. B. Yeats’s *The Winding Stair*.” Denis Donoghue in a masterly reading of “The Cold Heaven” reconsiders the function of criticism, which is “reading in slow motion” to elucidate a text, and a modified version of Eliot’s “correction of taste.” Tomoko Iwatsubo examines drafts and revisions of “Coole Park and Ballylee 1931” to show how Yeats finally joined “the great symbol of Lady Gregory, Coole Park” with his “permanent symbol” and “powerful emblem” the tower (233). Aspects of performance of Yeats’s plays are discussed in three essays: Richard Londraville looks at dance and Melinda Szüts at dramatic space in *The Dreaming of the Bones*, while Sam McCready writes about drama workshops at the summer school. Yeats’s editorship of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (“the most insulted anthology of poetry ever made” (237)) is reconsidered by Lucy McDiarmid both in terms of Yeats’s stated intended readership and his paradigm for poetry.

In “Byzantine Materiality and Byzantine Vision: ‘Hammered Gold and Gold Enamelling,’” Warwick Gould tracks Yeats’s geographical and intellectual travels to explain the syncretisation of Byzantine art and ideas, Celtic knotwork and imagery, and modern mysticism in “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium”

and the poems' respective material iterations, *Stories of Red Hanrahan and the Secret Rose* and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

José Lanter's study, which describes George Russell's relationship with a number of writers, is aptly titled "A.E.I.O.U.: George Russell, National Being." Yeats is briefly analysed, mostly in anecdotes that compare him, unfavourably, to the saintly and airy Russell, but more is made of the reactions of Joyce and others. Colin Smythe's account of his collection of Yeats's editions and publication of the definitive edition of the works of Lady Gregory revises his essay in *The Private Library* from spring 1971.<sup>1</sup>

Among the non-academic "scholars," Doug Saum delineates Yeats's references to the Muse and the "Unknown Instructors" to whom he attributed his inspiration, his "metaphors for poetry," and his philosophical system. Saum argues that "Among School Children" is Yeats's expression of gratitude to those instructors. Craig Kirk offers an original interpretation of Yeats's "The Second Coming," arguing that this enigma of a poem masks "a positive resolution of Armageddon behind a veneer of puzzling dramatic images," one of which, the "vast image from Spiritus mundi" he reads not as a sphinx but as a mythological hero (457). Katy Plowright surveys memoirs of Yeats, relating the reconstruction of Yeats to larger literary movements; Kristóf Kissa looks at the interaction of past and present in Yeats's "Among School Children," reading the poem through images in Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode."

The Tír na nÓg section celebrates the work of now lost to many Yeats scholars as they are long out of print or otherwise difficult to access. Glen Cavaliero appreciates the important work of Irish literary scholar Thomas Rice Henn (1901–74), who wrote the seminal *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats* (London: Methuen, 1950) and gave the Wharton Lecture on the subject of Yeats and the poetry of war (1965), and who, with Colin Smythe, worked on the Coole Park edition of Lady Gregory's work. This is followed by a useful reprint of Henn's essay "The Place of Shells," from A. Norman Jeffares, ed., *Yeats, Sligo and Ireland: Essays to Mark the 21st Yeats International Summer School* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1980). The section also includes "Yeats: The Great Comedian" by Vincent Buckley (1925–88), the Australian scholar, editor, and poet, a particularly welcome addition, as its original appearance has been untraceable. Finally, there is a piece by another Australian scholar, Classicist and Professor of Literature Alec King's (1904–70) "Yeats the Poet," from Francis King's edition, *The Unprosaic Imagination: Essays and Lectures on the Study of Literature* (Nedlands, Australia; Portland, Oregon: University of Western Australia Press, 1975).

The focus of the essays of "Sligeach: Sligo—'The Place of Shells'; Slí Dhá Átha 'The Way of the Two Fords'" complements the emphasis on place in Anne Margaret Daniel's biographical piece "Homecoming: Yeats and Sligo." Fiona

Gallagher establishes the importance of Sligo in the lives of the Yeats children, and Gerry Foley illustrates the way in which geology shaped the landscape, which in turn moulded the lives of its people, and “ultimately fashioned the creative talents of W. B. Yeats” (525). The breadth of the collection is illustrated by essays from Earl Livings, who attended the Yeats Summer School and finds at every corner a reminder of the ever-present mythic history of Ireland; John Kavanagh’s poem “Train Home” takes us into the heart of “Yeats country.”

The final essay fittingly ends the volume at the burial of Yeats at Drumcliffe, in a personal reminiscence by John Carroll, so that the final words, a recollected conversation, close the subject that has been a thread throughout the collection: “It was indeed fitting that life’s final courtesies should be rendered to the ‘Sligo poet’ by such a Sligo man,” Declan Foley, who was born in Sligo in 1950 (550). Although the collection’s organisation is idiosyncratic, it is wide-ranging, and its greatest strength is its concentration of Yeats’s origins, in people, and place.

### Note

1. Colin Smythe, “Collecting Yeats and Publishing Lady Gregory,” *The Private Library*, 2nd Series, 4:1 (Spring 1971) 4–24.