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## BROADCASTING THE RISING: YEATS AND RADIO COMMEMORATION

*Emily C. Bloom*

Ireland's Decade of Centenaries, which began in 2012 and will continue until 2022, has brought renewed attention to the political framing of the events that led to the establishment of the Irish Free State. Various acts of commemoration have taken place in an expanding media landscape that operates across multiple platforms. The state-sanctioned events and publications have emphasized workers' rights; suffrage and the role of women in nationalist organizations; provincial insurrections beyond Dublin; and Irish fatalities in World War I. Whereas earlier commemorations have been charged with focusing narrowly on the martyred leaders of the 1916 Rising, the contemporary Irish state has chosen to emphasize pluralism in its narrative of the origins of the nation. In addition to traditional media productions, including the large-scale documentary *1916: The Irish Rebellion* narrated by Liam Neeson, there have been a range of websites and social media feeds by the BBC, Raidió Teilifís Éireann, and the Irish government's Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht that have given audiences access to archival materials and interactive timelines.

One aspect of these commemorations across media has been persistent: the ubiquity of Yeats's "Easter, 1916." As Patrick Crotty observes, "this lyric which came into existence as an act of commemoration has over time become part of the national memory of the very event it commemorates."<sup>1</sup> Yeats's words have come to define the poetics of the Rising to such a degree that, even if one disagrees with how the poem characterizes the event—and there is much in the poem that is at odds with the post-conflict rhetoric of the Decade of Centenaries—it has become almost indispensable to narratives about the Rising.

Two decades following the Rising, one person shied away from using "Easter, 1916" to frame commemorations: Yeats himself. In a series of radio broadcasts from 1931 to 1937, Yeats presented several poems about the Easter Rising—"The Rose Tree," "On a Political Prisoner," and "Roger Casement," as well as poems that touch on the Rising obliquely, such as "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz"—but not "Easter, 1916." It is therefore worth asking why Yeats omitted his most famous Rising poem from the airwaves and what his choice of poems tells us about his poetics of commemoration in the 1930s, as well as his understanding of mass media. Yeats was unusually savvy about the possibilities for mass media in shaping historical memory and was early to see the radio as a key medium for reframing the Rising as it began to settle into history. He broadcast his 1916 poems on air as part of an ongoing

political strategy to shape the narrative of the Rising in the early years of the Irish Free State. The poems he chose and the ways in which he contextualized them in his radio broadcasts reveal his understanding of radio as a commemorative medium par excellence. Radio is at once an ephemeral medium—each broadcast fades away at the point of transmission, leaving hardly a trace—and, despite its mass audiences, a curiously intimate one, reaching listeners in the privacy of their homes. These two features of radio were especially well-suited for Yeats's minor poems about the Rising; through multiple broadcasts responding to new historical developments, Yeats could give listeners new perspectives on the Rising and emphasize the event's changing meaning from the vantage of the present moment.

The birth of the Irish Free State and the rise of the radio medium were closely connected. In the months leading up to the Rising, a makeshift signaling company was established at Joseph Plunkett's estate at Larkfield with Volunteers who were experienced Marconi operators. The initial purpose was to receive wireless messages from Roger Casement's submarine on his gunrunning expedition from Germany. The first deaths among the Volunteers on the Thursday before Easter were directly connected to broadcasting; a car, driven by Con Keating, was sent to Kerry to obtain a wireless apparatus when the driver took a wrong road and ended up plunging into the sea, killing himself and two other passengers.

During the Rising itself, a group of Volunteers that included the Abbey Theatre actor Arthur Shields took control of the School of Wireless Telegraphy with instructions to repair the wireless apparatus. One Volunteer, Captain Thomas Weafer, was killed on the roof in the process of repairing the aerial.<sup>2</sup> Once the wireless transmitter was in working order, the rebels broadcast a message proclaiming that the Irish Republican Army had taken over Dublin. Marshall McLuhan refers to this as the world's first radio broadcast because it was one of the first documented instances in which the medium was used for a one-way transmission rather than the point-to-point communications that preceded it.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the extensive links between the Rising and radio broadcasting, Christopher Morash writes: "the Irish Free State was thus born simultaneously with radio, coming into being in a world in which the airwaves were wide-open spaces suddenly filled with voices and music, a great lost continent conjured into existence from thin air."<sup>4</sup> If radio and the Irish Free State both represent the opening of a new territory—a lost continent, in Morash's words—then they also quickly became hotly contested spaces for warring ideologies.

Whether Yeats was aware of the connections between the Rising and the wireless is not clear, but he was certainly attuned to the mass publics that radio opened to the writer, and was alert to the medium's powerful potential as a tool of mass communication. In his influential study of the publication contexts

for Yeats's poetry, *Yeats, the Irish Literary Revival and the Politics of Print*, Yug Mohit Chaudhry argues that "our understanding of Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival can be enhanced significantly, and perhaps fundamentally altered, by relocating his work in its original bibliographical and socio-historical environment."<sup>5</sup> While Chaudhry emphasizes the initial publication contexts of Yeats's works as essential for understanding his complex and shifting politics, it is just as important to understand the venues that Yeats chose for subsequent publications and readings, especially in the case of radio. The 1930s broadcasts of the Rising poems show Yeats cultivating a commemorative sense of the event through not only the selection and omission of poems, but also the words he chooses to introduce the poems to his audience, which often aim to expand or correct his listeners' understanding of the key players, aims, and impact of Easter 1916. Through Yeats's radio broadcasts, we can see how the poems are deployed not only through their initial publication, but also, later, in new commemorative contexts.

Yeats took an active role in creating his radio programs, first with staged performances of his works from the Abbey Theatre for Radio Éireann, and later in the BBC studio where he collaborated with George Barnes on a series of poetry programs that included readings, songs, music, and commentary. Ronald Schuchard describes Yeats's BBC work as continuous with his "lifelong effort to revive the lost bardic arts of chanting and musical speech."<sup>6</sup> Even before Yeats became directly involved with broadcasting, there was great interest in airing his work. However, for the BBC it seems that the Irish poet of the pre-1916 poems was in many respects preferred to the post-1916 modernist. In the BBC's copyright files for the years 1924–39 there is a clear preference for the earlier Celtic Twilight poems over the later poems.<sup>7</sup> The poems that the BBC requested are decidedly less political than the poems Yeats himself selected for the air; they include love poems such as "Down by the Salley Gardens" and "When You are Old," as well as poems that draw on Irish folklore such as "The Song of Wandering Aengus" and "The Stolen Child."<sup>8</sup> The BBC also tended to request traditional ballads like the "Ballad of Father Gilligan" and "The Fiddler of Dooney." In their preference for ballads on air, the BBC and Yeats were in agreement. Charles I. Armstrong argues that radio "helped [Yeats] return to the ballad genre with reinforced urgency, rethinking his aims in relation to a large, public audience in the process."<sup>9</sup> Many of the Rising poems that Yeats composed are ballads, but the ballads that the BBC chose tended to shy away from overtly political themes.

In 1964, the BBC aired a radio program about Yeats called "Choice and Chance," written by the poet Patric Dickinson. The program was listed as "A study of W. B. Yeats based on the assumption that he lost his life in the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916."<sup>10</sup> Dickinson, who narrates the program, tells the audience: "At the age of fifty-one Yeats would have lost his life in the Easter

Rising—by mistake, I think, possibly meandering along to the Post Office to buy a stamp. Certainly, despite his theories about the glories of fighting, there would have been no question of his standing beside Pearse or Connolly gun in hand.”<sup>11</sup> If Yeats never stood beside Patrick Pearse and James Connolly, his radio broadcasts throughout the 1930s work to cement the association of his name with the Rising, keeping it fresh in the minds of his listeners and reframing his approach to the event in light of changing political circumstances.

In the years when Yeats was broadcasting his Rising poems, the debate over how to frame 1916 commemorations was already well underway. Roisín Higgins points out that “the Easter Rising was itself a commemorative event,” modeled in the image of the 1798 Rebellion and other moments of insurrection against the British.<sup>12</sup> Yeats was involved in the centenary celebrations of the 1798 Rebellion, working to call forth the memory of the event on behalf of *fin de siècle* nationalism. Yeats’s involvement in the 1798 centenary included speaking at a convention at Phoenix Park, a meeting at Dublin’s City Hall, and the ’98 Centennial Association of Great Britain and France in London.<sup>13</sup> In its design, the 1916 Rising follows the pattern of earlier annual commemorations and emerges out of what Guy Beiner describes as a “commemorative culture” in both Fenian and unionist movements.<sup>14</sup> In the 1930s, the wounds of the Civil War were still very raw and the debate over commemorations centered on the legitimacy of the founding of the Free State in 1922. The tenth anniversary of the Rising witnessed an unofficial commemoration by Anti-Treaty republicans in Glasnevin Cemetery where the martyred leaders were buried, and nine years later in 1935, 1,000 people marched to the cemetery for an alternative commemoration in defiance of the official state celebration.<sup>15</sup> Yeats’s broadcasts entered the public sphere at a time when both representatives of the Free State and Anti-Treaty republicans were making conflicting appeals on behalf of the martyrs of 1916.

Like these graveyard commemorations, Yeats’s 1916 poems are mostly elegies that lay political claims to dead bodies, and the most famous of these, “Easter, 1916,” dramatizes the fraught politics of commemoration. Heather Laird describes commemoration as the “highly selective process that transforms the past into history.”<sup>16</sup> We see this process unfold in “Easter, 1916” as Yeats’s acquaintances are “[t]ransformed utterly” by their martyrdom. When the poem turns from Yeats’s original reminiscences about the Rising’s leaders whom he knew personally—Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, Constance Markievicz, and John MacBride—and muses on the nature of their transformation, the speaker plays with the distinction between the Rising as an event that irrefutably occurred in the past and the event as it will be perceived over time as it becomes a part of history. The relationship between the stone and the river in the poem’s third stanza represents this tension between the historical event and historical memory:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
 Through summer and winter seem  
 Enchanted to a stone  
 To trouble the living stream. (*CW1* 180)

In this first description of the stone and the river, Yeats introduces the question of perception: the hearts in question “*seem* / Enchanted to a stone” (emphasis added). If we look at the stone in a river, we see it refracted by the stream. Moreover, time (the flow of the water) and perspective (the angle of the viewer) will change our vision of the stone. The imagery that follows includes a series of visual and auditory disturbances as the river is shadowed by passing clouds and distorted by the splashing of horse-hooves and moor-hens who call to each other. The stanza strangely lacks an eye or an “I” to perceive these changes and it is left to the reader to process the relationship between the shifting living stream and the immovable stone that lies beneath.

In the final stanza, dominated by questions, Yeats introduces the problem of sonic memory and tasks himself and the reader with the role of “murmur[ing] name upon name, / As a mother names her child” (*CW1* 181). This line suggests that, collectively, the community must sanctify the names of the martyrs through the spoken word, which is associated with the intimacy of the mother tongue. Several lines later, a question breaks the certainty with which he calls for this naming of the martyrs: “Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said” (*CW1* 181–82). This question acknowledges that further historical events may change the meaning of the Rising over time. If England keeps faith—granting Ireland the Home Rule that the Irish parliamentarian John Redmond negotiated as a condition of Ireland’s participation in World War I—then those names may no longer be recited in the communal litany. The spoken word is irrevocably yet invisibly altered by time. The historical meaning of the Rising, especially dependent on England’s actions, was still very much in flux when Yeats wrote this poem.

Yet for all this ambiguity, the poem ends by ceasing to question how history will perceive the Rising and, instead, fixes the event in the poet’s own commemorative statement:

I write it out in a verse—  
 MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born. (*CW1* 182)

When the poem moves from the maternal tongue to the written word, historical memory calcifies and the poet takes on the public role of commemorator. The questions of the previous section dissolve into a statement of fact and the flux of the river imagery turns static. Yeats claims that in committing these names to verse, they will forever signify the birth of a “terrible beauty.” John Wilson Foster observes that, in doing so, Yeats offers “a canonical image of the Rising that establishes the importance as much of Yeats to the Rising as of the Rising to Yeats.”<sup>17</sup> What is most definite in the poem is the power of the poet to create a canonical version of the historical event.

Whereas the poem forcefully asserts the poet’s capacity to frame the events of the Easter Rising, Yeats was, according to R. F. Foster, “extremely cautious” about its initial publication (*Life* 2 34). Not only was the poem potentially treasonous, but Yeats feared alienating his unionist supporters in the Hugh Lane controversy. The first published version of the poem appeared in a privately circulated pamphlet, only twenty-five copies of which were printed by Charles Shorter. Although there remains debate about the publication date of this pamphlet, Matthew Campbell dates it to Easter 1917 and notes that of these twenty-five copies one was registered at the British Library that year and therefore available to a broader public than the private printing might suggest.<sup>18</sup> The poem was subsequently printed for a larger audience in *The New Statesman* (October 23, 1920), followed by its publication in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). In this collection, the poem appeared as the first in a suite of Rising poems that included “The Rose Tree” and “On a Political Prisoner.”<sup>19</sup> Compared to the other Rising poems that Yeats published in that collection, “Easter, 1916” is a deeply ambivalent poem that neither directly praises nor blames the leaders of the Rising. Despite this ambivalence, publishing “Easter, 1916” in the heated aftermath of the Rising may well have been interpreted as support for the rebels. James Pethica observes that Yeats’s reluctance to publish it “surely reflected his uncertainty as to the long-term political consequences of the Rising.”<sup>20</sup> By the time of the 1930s broadcasts, however, the Irish Free State had been established and Yeats no longer needed to show caution in praising the leaders of the Rising. Moreover, Yeats was more secure in his public position and less cautious about making extreme statements, or acting as the old man “on the boiler.” In his broadcasts, Yeats went out of his way to include poems about the Rising—keeping the event active on the airwaves—without reading “Easter, 1916,” a poem that was quickly calcifying, stone-like, into the canonical version of the event. “Easter, 1916” dramatizes the shifting nature of commemoration, only to transform into an inescapable statement on the Rising. The poems that Yeats read on the air, on the other hand, are more self-consciously minor poems that intervene in the contemporaneous conversation about the Rising.

Radio has a unique relationship with time: just as a broadcast goes on air, it disappears. Especially in the period during which Yeats was broadcasting, programs were rarely recorded and so existed entirely in the present moment. Although the BBC maintained print records of broadcast scripts and correspondence, the record of Yeats's broadcasts is particularly incomplete since German bombs during the Blitz destroyed a section of the BBC archive housing the transcripts and correspondence relating to some of Yeats's broadcasts.<sup>21</sup> His broadcasts are therefore more stream and less stone. Drawing upon the medium's sense of ephemerality and flux, Yeats introduces his *Rising* poems on air with short preambles that signal the poet's intention to alter his interpretation of the events of the *Rising* from the distance of two decades.

Two figures who are not mentioned by name in the final passage of "Easter, 1916," Markievicz and Casement, became central to Yeats's radio broadcasts of the 1930s. Casement does not feature in "Easter, 1916" at all and Markievicz is described as the furious harpy of the second stanza but is not named in the poem (*CW1* 180). In his 1932 broadcast "Poems about Women," Yeats includes his poem about Markievicz, "On a Political Prisoner." It is the last poem that Yeats reads in the broadcast and, for this reason, it sounds a political note at the end of a program dominated by love poems. In the program, Yeats calls the poem "To a Political Prisoner," which suggests increased intimacy from the more impersonal "On a Political Prisoner": the poet is speaking *to* Markievicz rather than musing *on* her in the manner of a poetic ode. The shift from the page to the airwaves introduces a sense of intimacy into the poem and, in this respect, follows the radio style of Hilda Matheson, a friend of Yeats's who was the first Director of the BBC's Talks Department.<sup>22</sup> According to David Cardiff, Matheson "fostered the art of the spoken word as a means of domesticating the public utterance."<sup>23</sup> Matheson understood broadcasting as a strange fusion of the public and the private and encouraged presenters to address radio's mass publics through intimate forms of address. Yeats described radio's intimacy in similar terms, as the "remarkable experience" of speaking "to a multitude, each member of it being alone."<sup>24</sup>

Like the subtle shift from "on" to "to," Yeats's introductory comments foster intimacy by softening some of the poem's harsher charges against Markievicz. Yeats tells the audience: "In the lines of the poem which condemn her politics I was not thinking of her part in two rebellions, but of other matters of quarrel. We had never been on the same side at the same time" (*CW10* 242). With these words, Yeats draws listeners' attention to his own changing relationship to the poem's content. In the poem, the speaker asks:

Did she in touching that lone wing  
Recall the years before her mind

Became a bitter, an abstract thing,  
 Her thought some popular enmity:  
 Blind and leader of the blind  
 Drinking the foul ditch where they lie? (*CW1* 183–84)

Clarifying his intentions for this denunciation of Markievicz as “blind” and “bitter,” Yeats endorses her role in the two rebellions—both the Easter Rising and the Civil War—while alluding to “other matters of quarrel.” Yeats’s quarrel with Markievicz centered on what he saw as her lowering herself to the crowd and his distrust of her socialism, but the broadcast leaves the subject of the quarrel deliberately vague. In this respect, Yeats’s hint at his problem with Markievicz’s socialism, without clearly articulating it in the introduction, provides further evidence of what Margot Gayle Backus describes as Yeats’s banishing of socialism from his framing of the rebellion.<sup>25</sup> By the time of the broadcast, Yeats could confidently state his support for the Irish insurrection (he could not do so in its immediate aftermath), but his later support distanced the event from its association with socialism. In the broadcast, he positions himself as an admirer of Markievicz while obfuscating and undermining the nature of their disagreements.

Markievicz died of peritonitis in 1927. Although the poem was originally published in 1920, its broadcast five years after her death gives the poem an elegiac quality. Yeats introduces the poem with his personal reminiscences of Markievicz from his childhood in Sligo. While the poem, like “Easter, 1916,” does not name the political prisoner, Yeats’s introduction on air gives her a name and a detailed biography: he presents Markievicz as an admired but distant figure, defined by her role as daughter of the Big House. He remembers looking out of the windows of his grandparents’ house to see “Sir Henry Gore-Booth’s great grey house among trees”: “His daughter Constance lived there, a daring rider and country beauty. I had never spoken to her but I had often seen her upon horseback” (*CW10* 241). This portrayal of Markievicz accords with poems such as “Easter, 1916” and “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” in which Yeats emphasizes her youth and grace, presenting her as a famous rider. In “Easter, 1916” Yeats praises her beauty and aristocratic background, while chastising her for her involvement in politics:

That woman’s days were spent  
 In ignorant good-will,  
 Her nights in argument  
 Until her voice grew shrill.  
 What voice more sweet than hers  
 When, young and beautiful,  
 She rode to harriers? (*CW1* 180)

Here as in other poems about Markievicz, Yeats consistently undercuts her political career while over-praising her youthful good looks, allure, and vigor. When Yeats wrote “Easter, 1916” Markievicz was still alive and so he includes her in the descriptive passage, but her commuted sentence and, by extension, her gender, do not entitle her for inclusion among the list of martyrs named at the end of the poem. While “On a Political Prisoner”—also written before Markievicz’s death—uses some of the same vitriolic rhetoric as Yeats’s other poems about her, the introduction in the broadcast works to soften the tone and restore her name in the list of 1916 martyrs.

Yeats also included “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz” in “Reading of Poems,” his first poetry reading on air for the BBC’s Belfast studios in 1931, the year before his broadcast of “On a Political Prisoner.” In introducing “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” Yeats describes a turn from the folkloric subjects of his early poetry to the personal and elegiac nature of his late poetry: “Sometimes I have written of the death of friends and acquaintances and such poems are probably the best I have written of recent years” (*CW10* 227). Emphasizing the personal nature of these elegies for “friends and acquaintances,” Yeats again contrasts the beautiful young Anglo-Irishwoman with the hardened revolutionary: “The older is condemned to death, / Pardoned, drags out lonely years / Conspiring among the ignorant” (*CW1* 233). When Yeats returns to the microphone to broadcast a second poem about Markievicz, he seems determined to represent her in more complimentary terms.

Yeats makes an additional revisionary gesture in his introduction of Markievicz in his 1932 broadcast of “On a Political Prisoner” by offering an appreciative take on her role in the Rising. He tells listeners:

She was in command of the rebels who had seized and fortified the College of Surgeons. She fought bravely, was condemned to death and pardoned at the last moment. After the Treaty she took part in the rebellion against the Free State Government and was again imprisoned. I heard that while in gaol she tamed a seagull, taught it to come into her cell for food and take the food out of her hand. (*CW10* 242)

Yeats depicts Markievicz here as a full-blooded revolutionary who was unambiguously “in command” and “fought bravely” in the insurrection. He uses fewer valedictory verbs and adjectives to describe her role in the Civil War on the Anti-Treaty side, but continues to present her as an active rebel as if to compensate for the poem’s nostalgic focus on her lost beauty. Whereas Yeats’s Markievicz poems continually privilege the Constance of Yeats’s youth—the beautiful and spirited girl of the Big House—over the mature woman who

inhabits the public sphere, his 1932 broadcast takes some pains to reimagine Markievicz as a political agent and as a martial woman. Yeats wants the audience to remember his personal Markievicz, while also belatedly emphasizing her public role and softening some, but not all, of the more negative rhetoric of his poems.

By the 1930s Markievicz had become, if not a martyr, at least a figure rendered saintly by her death and the elaborate state ceremony that accompanied her funeral. There were a fair number of elegies among Yeats's radio poems, which may speak to the fact that, as Emilie Morin argues, in the Yeats household the radio medium was strongly connected to spiritualist practices.<sup>26</sup> In elegizing the dead Markievicz, Yeats felt the need to blunt the edges around his earlier personal attacks. Yeats's radio broadcast of "On a Political Prisoner" is his way of belatedly numbering Markievicz in his song of the Rising. His inclusion of this poem is not unlike the present Irish state's revisionist take on women in the Rising—the desire to name and explain a female presence that had been written out of history.<sup>27</sup>

While Yeats may not have been particularly worried over Markievicz's marginalization as a woman, he *was* concerned about the marginalization of Protestants in Irish public life. At a time when Yeats was producing numerous elegies to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, it is notable that he chose two Protestant leaders to commemorate in his broadcasts.<sup>28</sup> Promoting not only Markievicz's role in the Rising but also Casement's helped Yeats establish the relevance of Irish Protestants to Irish national culture at a time when the Catholic majority was exercising its newfound dominance in public life.

On February 1, 1937, Yeats broadcast a live program from the Abbey Theatre on Radio Éireann that he was planning to record and subsequently re-broadcast on the BBC. He also, ambitiously, believed he could circulate the recording through connections to Egyptian broadcasting.<sup>29</sup> He imagined a transnational audience for this broadcast that could help repudiate what he was convinced were false claims against Casement by the British government.<sup>30</sup> The poem was occasioned by the publication of William J. Maloney's *The Forged Casement Diaries* (1936), which argued that Casement's infamous "Black Diaries," chronicling his sexual exchanges with men and boys, were forgeries circulated by British emissaries to discredit Casement and clear the way for his execution. Yeats himself did not deny Casement's homosexuality, but he was appalled by the underhanded way in which the diaries were produced and disseminated.<sup>31</sup> He was therefore quick to believe that they were forgeries—a theory that has been subsequently dismantled and Casement's authorship of the diaries confirmed.<sup>32</sup>

If the 1932 broadcast of "Poems about Women" that included "On a Political Prisoner" had been a relatively straightforward reading of poems by the

author, the “Abbey Theatre” broadcast for Radio Éireann was a much more complicated and formally innovative affair that involved readings, songs, and sound effects, and ended up serving as a forerunner for the kind of programs Yeats would go on to make with Barnes, the BBC producer. The last item in the broadcast, “Roger Casement,” was read by John Stephenson and was preceded by a song setting of “Come Gather Round Me Parnellites.” It is no accident that Yeats ended both “Poems about Women” and the “Abbey Theatre Broadcast” with 1916 poems; in both programs, he leaves listeners with a parting message that asks them to recall the unfinished business of the Rising. Whereas there is a gap in time between the initial publication of “On a Political Prisoner” in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921 and its subsequent broadcast ten years later, in the case of “Roger Casement” the poem appeared nearly simultaneously on air and in print. It is therefore an example of one of Yeats’s radio poems which reached listeners on air for the first time.<sup>33</sup> When Yeats introduces “Come Gather Round Me Parnellites,” directly preceding the reading of “Roger Casement,” he asks listeners to imagine that they are hearing the song upon returning from Glasnevin Cemetery:

Now Mr. Stephenson is going to sing the poem about Parnell and you’re to think yourselves old men, old farmers perhaps, accustomed to read newspapers and listen to songs, but not to read books. You are old and decrepit, because you have been to Glasnevin on all the anniversaries of Parnell’s death for the last forty years. There are not many of you left, and you’re to imagine yourselves sitting in a public house, after you have returned from Glasnevin graveyard. (CW10 263)

Yeats’s strategy in adapting to the deterritorialized space of the broadcast medium was to encourage the audience to imagine themselves in specific settings and social milieus, in this case as farmers returning from Glasnevin graveyard.<sup>34</sup> Glasnevin was the site of the contested republican commemorations taking place in the 1930s, often in opposition to the Free State’s official commemorations. Yeats is therefore laying the foundation for “Roger Casement” by asking his audience to imagine themselves as Irish republicans engaged in acts of commemoration.

Yeats follows this rousing call to political identification with a poem that revisits one martyred leader of the Easter Rising and demands new justice. Yeats wanted the poem to reach people in positions of authority and not only broadcast it on Radio Éireann but published it the next day in the De Valera-backed *Irish Press*. The reference to Glasnevin commemorations preceding the poem was therefore in line with one of the main target audiences whom Yeats sought to reach in order to redress wrongs against Casement. If Irish

nationalists had backed away from including Casement in the pantheon of martyred leaders because of his homosexuality, Yeats wanted this audience to lead the charge in reinstating him. In preparation for the broadcast, Yeats sent out what Colton Johnson refers to as a “volley of alerts” to friends and influential figures to tune in to the broadcast in the hope that it would impact public opinion and political decisions.<sup>35</sup>

Yeats was wary about the British response to his poem, warning Barnes about the planned re-broadcast of the program on the BBC: “The last item is unsuited for the B.B.C., being political” (*CL Intelix* #6788). Here Yeats may have simply been anticipating that the BBC would censor “Roger Casement”—the corporation had a mandate to avoid politically divisive topics.<sup>36</sup> However, in the same letter, dated January 23, 1937, Yeats also laments how little authority he is able to exercise in London as opposed to Dublin: “I like working here [Dublin] because I am not afraid of anybody and most people are afraid of me. It is the reverse in London” (*CL Intelix* #6788). It was not, in the end, because of the political nature of “Roger Casement” that the program was not rebroadcast from London, but rather due to the disappointing quality of the broadcast itself. Yeats complained to Barnes: “Broadcast a fiasco. Every human sound turned in to the groans, roars, bellows of a wild [beast]. I recognise that I am a fool and there will be no more broad cast [sic] of verse from the Abbey stage if I can prevent it” (*CL Intelix* #6788). Blaming the poor production quality on the Abbey staff and his own inexperience with the radio medium, Yeats turned to the BBC to produce a higher quality of programming that better aligned with his ideas for presenting poems to a mass audience.

Despite his initial hesitation about broadcasting political topics on the BBC, Yeats explicitly turned to politics in a later broadcast, “My Own Poetry” (July 1937), in which he introduces what he describes as a “public theme” with a sequence of three political poems: “The Rose Tree,” “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” and “The Curse of Cromwell.” The program included readings and songs by V. C. Clinton-Baddeley and Margot Ruddock, with musical settings by Edmund Dulac. The first poem, “The Rose Tree,” presents a dialogue between Pearse and Connolly on the theme of martyrdom and was read on air by Clinton-Baddeley. The broadcast begins with Yeats introducing the events of the Rising to his listening public. His first words to the audience offer historical framing:

In 1916 the poet and schoolmaster Pearse, the labour leader Connolly, and others, including those two unknown men, De Valera and Cosgrave, seized certain public buildings in Dublin and held them against the English army for some days. Neither Pearse nor Connolly had any expectation of victory. They went out to die because, as Pearse said in a famous speech, a national

movement cannot be kept alive unless blood is shed in every generation. A poem containing this thought will be the first spoken. (*CW10* 283)

Yeats offers a vision of the Rising from the perspective of the present; he refers to Éamon De Valera and W. T. Cosgrave, two representatives of opposing sides in the Civil War, as “two unknown men” to point out the distance between 1916 and 1937. He describes these men as two obscure rebels in 1916, but by alluding to them, his reminiscence of 1916 is shadowed by the Civil War that followed. Planting De Valera and Cosgrave in his introduction to a poem that seems to glorify nationalist martyrdom points to the unfinished business of the Rising. By referring to both men’s role in the Rising, moreover, Yeats takes a neutral stance, refusing to identify either the Free Staters or Anti-Treaty republicans as true heirs to the Rising. Unlike his direct appeal to De Valera’s followers in presenting “Roger Casement,” Yeats identifies De Valera and Cosgrave as two “unknown men” in the Rising; they both have equal claims as participants, but neither rises to the status of its mythic leaders. By the 1930s Yeats was less hesitant about presenting himself as a partisan on the side of the martyred leaders of the Rising. On the other hand, in the aftermath of the Civil War, he shows caution by presenting his poems as amenable to both sides of this more recent conflict.

“The Rose Tree” represents Pearse as confident in his aims and their expected results: “O plain as plain can be / There’s nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree” (*CW1* 284). When paired with the introduction’s evocation of De Valera and Cosgrave, the broadcasting of this poem in 1937—after a devastating Civil War in Ireland, in a Europe on the brink of world war—feels ominous. Yeats introduces “The Rose Tree” as “a poem containing this thought” regarding blood sacrifice, and the passivity of the language distances the poet from the thought—it belongs to the speaker, Pearse, and perhaps to the poem itself, but not to the poet. This is not to say that Yeats was opposed to bloodshed—in fact some of his bloodiest poems were written in the period in which he was broadcasting—but rather, that in broadcasting the Rising poems he asks his listeners to consider the legacy of this bloodshed from the vantage of the present.

During his years as a broadcaster, Yeats was also writing new poems about the Rising, including not only “Roger Casement” but also “The O’Rahilly” and “Three Songs and the One Burden.”<sup>37</sup> The latter two poems are ballads that emphasize the importance of song and the spoken word to keep alive the ongoing commemoration of the Rising. Although neither poem was broadcast, both continue to emphasize the forms and themes that we see in the broadcast poems, including the use of the ballad form and calls on the audience to participate: to sing and to praise the dead martyrs of the Rising. Yeats insists that the Rising must be kept alive through constant oral invocation. He calls

on listeners to “Sing of the O’Rahilly” in “The O’Rahilly” and to “Come praise Nineteen-Sixteen” in “Three Songs and the One Burden” (*CW1* 307, 330). His radio broadcasts are an important iteration of this call to verbal commemoration. On air, Yeats could continually bring forth the memories of 1916, while also adapting them to changing circumstances.

Throughout the history of the Rising, from its earliest moments when the rebels broadcast their message into the ether, radio would play a key role in creating a platform for recursive invocations of the event, keeping it alive in public memory while also continuously adapting its meaning for changing times. In 1966, for the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising, the BBC aired a program on the Home Service comprised of interviews with survivors of the Rising, including those who fought as well as those who lost family members and friends. The hour-long program was compiled from recorded interviews by the Northern Irish broadcaster W. R. Rodgers and produced by R. D. Smith.<sup>38</sup> In addition to the interview, the program included readings by the actor Micheál Mac Liammóir of the “Proclamation of the Irish Republic” and two poems by Yeats: “The Rose Tree” and “Easter, 1916.” The placement and use of these two poems points to their disparate importance in historical memories of the Rising. The program quotes from “The Rose Tree” only to challenge its interpretation of events. Mac Liammóir delivers the poem in its entirety, ending with the lines that Yeats attributes to Pearse, extolling blood sacrifice: “There’s nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree.” The reading of Yeats’s poem is followed by critical commentary by a former soldier in the rebellion. Sean MacEntee, then a member of the Dáil, argues that Connolly did not share the view of blood sacrifice expressed in the poem: “Pearse and perhaps Joseph Plunkett, from what I know of them, may have had that idea of blood sacrifice. I doubt if that was really a compelling motive in the case of James Connolly.”<sup>39</sup> MacEntee goes on to speculate that Connolly was most likely motivated by his sense that Great Britain could lose World War I and that acting before the end of the war would give Ireland a seat at the table during peace negotiations.

Following the poem with MacEntee’s criticism resituates the Rising in the context of World War I and disentangles the pragmatic, socialist Connolly from the mythic Pearse. The radio program invokes “The Rose Tree” only to offer a platform for MacEntee to question its relationship to historical reality. Although Connolly was first and foremost committed to the cause of a workers’ republic, he was not entirely immune to Pearsian rhetoric. As he wrote in the *Workers’ Republic*: “we recognise that of us as of mankind before Calvary it may truly be said: *Without the Shedding of Blood there is no Redemption.*”<sup>40</sup> Although Yeats’s poem portrays Connolly asking questions rather than explicitly extolling martyrdom (those lines of dialogue are left to Pearse), MacEntee further distances Connolly from Pearse’s rhetoric of blood sacrifice.

In contrast, Yeats's most famous Rising poem, "Easter, 1916," appears at the very end of the broadcast, at which point it is given the final word. After listening to an hour of voices explaining different takes on the Rising, the listener once again hears the sonorous voice of Mac Liammóir delivering the poem's famous final lines. However, the program fades out mid-refrain, leaving the listener with an unfinished line: "A terrible beauty..." The program omits the third repetition of the refrain's ending—"is born"—and expects the listener to fill in the rest. Leaving the line unfinished prompts listeners to remember that the events of the Easter Rising are themselves incomplete and that their meaning remains to be defined by each future listener. The audience is called upon to finish the line, thereby participating in the oral evocation of the event and murmuring name upon name with each successive act of commemoration.

As seen in this radio program, which was not only broadcast on air but commercially sold as a gramophone recording, communications media have been central to framing historical memories of the Rising. In fact, there is a peculiarly close connection between commemoration and mass media in the twentieth century; the scheduling demands of radio and television feed off the flurry of programming possibilities that a commemorative year enables. The fiftieth anniversary, when the BBC's "Easter Rising" aired, was not only a politically fraught moment preceding the resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland, but also a significant stage in media history with the growing importance of television.<sup>41</sup> Changes in mass media prompt new forms of commemoration that allow for the continual re-invention of national origin myths.

Yeats's approach to broadcasting the Rising reveals the plasticity of historical memory. If the version that he presented in "Easter, 1916" helped set a still-fluid event into stone, then the versions that he would proliferate via broadcasting would introduce subtle changes; they would suggest more intimacy between Yeats and the Rising's leaders, incorporate new figures into the pantheon of martyrs, and include strident language supporting the republican cause while avoiding linking that cause too closely with either side in the Civil War that followed. It is perhaps no accident that Yeats was drawn to a medium such as radio, defined by its ephemerality. Radio allowed Yeats to reach a mass audience with spoken words that would immediately dissipate into the ether. In this respect, radio called to mind the oral literatures of the past and present. And yet radio was even more radically ephemeral than oral tradition, with no promise of the continuity that the word 'tradition' evokes. In this respect, it perfectly embodied the temporality of commemoration: characterizing historical events through the political imperatives of the present. Broadcasting his lesser-known Rising poems through new communication media allowed Yeats to project a moment in his shifting attitude toward the Rising out into the world and, in this process, to address the exigencies of the contemporary moment.

## Notes

1. Patrick Crotty, "Instant Commemoration? Yeats, 'Easter 1916' and the Easter Rising," *Journal of Irish Studies* 31 (2016): 4.
2. Fergus O'Kelly, Statement of Witness, Bureau of Military History, 1913–21, no. W.S. 351, Military Archives, Ireland. O'Kelly's first-hand account of the wireless operations surrounding the Easter Rising in the Bureau of Military History documents his time as a member of the Irish Volunteers attached to the Signalling Company.
3. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 266.
4. Christopher Morash, *A History of Media in Ireland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131.
5. Yug Mohit Chaudhry, *Yeats, The Irish Literary Revival and the Politics of Print* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 1.
6. Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xix.
7. The first poem of Yeats's listed among the BBC's copyright requests is, perhaps unsurprisingly, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," which was requested for a broadcast in 1927. See the W. B. Yeats Copyright File, 1924–39, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham.
8. One interesting exception to the BBC's apparent aversion to Yeats's political works is the frequent requests to air radio adaptations of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. One of the first works of Yeats's performed on the BBC, before any requests for poems appear in the archives, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was requested by the BBC as early as 1924, only two years after the BBC was formed. It is not in the scope of this paper to examine the plays produced on the BBC, but it is worth noting that the early copyright files suggest that the BBC was even more interested in Yeats the playwright than Yeats the poet. By the 1930s, Yeats would set out to distance himself from the unapologetic call to nationalist blood sacrifice that he presents in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and, in selecting poems for broadcast, would curate a more ambiguous mixture of political poems.
9. Charles I. Armstrong, "Pub, Parlour, Theatre: Radio in the Imagination of W. B. Yeats," in *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era*, eds. Matthew Feldman, Erik Tønning, and Henry Mead (New York, Bloomsbury, 2014), 34.
10. Patric Dickinson, "Choice and Chance," January 1, 1964, Scripts Library, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham, 1.
11. Dickinson, "Choice and Chance," 2.
12. Roisin Higgins, "'The Irish Republic Was Proclaimed by Poster': The Politics of Commemorating the Easter Rising," in *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland*, eds. Richard S. Grayson and Fearghal McGarry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 51.
13. Crotty, "Instant Commemoration?" 4–5.
14. Guy Beiner, "Making Sense of Memory: Coming to Terms with Conceptualisations of Historical Remembrance," *Remembering 1916*, 15.
15. Higgins, "The Irish Republic Was Proclaimed by Poster," 55.
16. Heather Laird, *Commemoration* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2018), 11.
17. John Wilson Foster, "Yeats and the Easter Rising," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 11, no. 1 (1985): 22.
18. Whereas earlier critics have characterized the first publication by Shorter as reaching only a narrow, private audience, Campbell points out that the poem was registered in the British Library as early as June 9, 1917 and was therefore "in the public domain—or at least was available to readers in the British Museum—three and a half years earlier than is usually

- thought.” Matthew Campbell, “Dating ‘Easter, 1916,” *International Yeats Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 57.
19. The other Rising poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* are “Sixteen Dean Men” and “The Leaders of the Crowd.”
  20. James Pethica, “‘Easter, 1916’ at its Centennial: Maud Gonne, Augusta Gregory and the Evolution of the Poem,” *International Yeats Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 42.
  21. Yeats’s first poetry broadcast, “Reading of Poems,” was one program that was destroyed in the Blitz. Its contents were reconstructed by Colton Johnson through Yeats’s working type-script and surviving fragments of recordings (CW10 391 n. 380).
  22. Matheson became part of Yeats’s circle through her long-term romantic relationship with Dorothy Wellesley. Yeats was particularly impressed with Matheson’s administrative abilities and, in a letter to Wellesley discussing plans to reorganize the Cuala Press, he wrote, “If only there were an Irish Hilda Matheson.” November 2, 1937, *CL InteleX* #7106.
  23. David Cardiff, “The Serious and the Popular: Aspects of the Evolution of Style in the Radio Talk, 1928–1939,” in *Media, Culture and Society* 2, no. 1 (1980): 31.
  24. Quoted in Colton Johnson, “Yeats’s Wireless,” *Wilson Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (2000): 24.
  25. Margot Gayle Backus, “‘More Useful Washed and Dead’: James Connolly, W. B. Yeats, and the Sexual Politics of ‘Easter, 1916,’” *Interventions* 10, no. 1 (2008): 69.
  26. Emilie Morin has pointed out that the wireless “provided a register in the Yeats family for thinking about the supernatural.” Emilie Morin, “‘I Beg Your Pardon?’: W. B. Yeats, Audibility and Sound Transmission,” *YA* 19 (2013): 201.
  27. Laird has criticized the tokenistic mode of including select women in Ireland’s Decade of Centenaries. She argues that “the project of making accounts of key historical events more inclusive often involves intentionally inserting women, who may have played a crucial though less overtly ‘central’ role in such events, into a history writing that is structurally patriarchal.” Laird, *Commemoration*, 19.
  28. A list of Yeats’s elegies to the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy that were published during the time of his broadcasting would include “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz,” “Coole Park, 1929,” “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” “The Curse of Cromwell,” and “The Municipal Gallery Re-visited.”
  29. Johnson, “Yeats’s Wireless,” 28.
  30. For more on “Roger Casement” and Yeats’s attitudes toward transnational broadcasting, see Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 36–42.
  31. Regarding Casement’s sexuality, Yeats wrote in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, “If Casement were a homo-sexual what matter! But if the British Government can with impunity forge evidence to prove him so no unpopular man with a cause will ever be safe.” W. B. Yeats, *Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, ed. Dorothy Wellesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 141.
  32. See William J. McCormack, *Roger Casement in Death: Or, Haunting the Free State* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2002).
  33. Other radio poems include “Sweet Dancer” and “The Curse of Cromwell,” which were first published on air. See Bloom, *The Wireless Past*, 46–63.
  34. For more examples of Yeats’s appeal to listeners’ imaginations, see Armstrong, “Pub, Parlour, Theatre” and Bloom, *The Wireless Past*, 35–45.
  35. Johnson, “Yeats’s Wireless,” 28.
  36. The founding Director-General of the BBC, John Reith, posted a memo to broadcasters in 1925 that included a list of prohibitions, including a ban on “political allusions.” Todd Avery, *Radio Modernism: Literature, Ethics, and the BBC, 1922–1938* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 21.

37. "Roger Casement" and "The O'Rahilly" both appeared in *New Poems* (1938) and "Three Songs to the One Burden" was published posthumously in *Last Poems* (1938–39).
38. Rodgers tape-recorded his interviews using an early recording system called the telediphone and then edited them into a portrait-like compilation, known as the "Rodgers Technique." His most famous use of this technique was for a series of "Irish Literary Portraits" for the BBC that, like the Easter Rising program, compiled interviews by people who knew famous literary figures such as Yeats and Joyce. Rodgers later described these programs as his "most intensive and significant work over the past twenty years." Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, *Introduction: W. R. Rodgers Papers* (Belfast: Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 2007), 5. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/rodders-papers-d2833.pdf>.
39. R. D. Smith, "The Easter Rising 1916," BBC Home Service, April 1966, Fontana Records.
40. Italics in the original. Thanks to David Dwan for drawing my attention to this quotation. James Connolly, "Notes on the Front," *Worker's Republic*, February 5, 1916, reproduced at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1916/02/fronta.htm>.
41. Roisín Higgins writes: "While the commemoration of the Easter Rising did not cause the conflict in Northern Ireland, it has been seen by unionist politicians as central to the build-up of tension and the subsequent breakdown of order." Higgins also points out the centrality of broadcasting to the fiftieth anniversary, noting that it was "the first commemoration to be broadcast on the recently established Irish television network Telefís Éireann, and at a point when Ireland was intensely aware of its image in the outside world." Higgins, *Transforming 1916: Meaning, Memory and the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Easter Rising* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), 1–2.