

A Book of
Irish Verse

Edited by W. B. Yeats

With a new introduction by John Banville



London and New York

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

William Butler Yeats thrived on dissension. Conflict was his inspiration, as artist and as man, and he was nowhere happier than in the thick of the culture wars. He was thirty when in 1895 he published *A Book of Irish Verse*, 'towards the end of a long indignant argument,' as he wrote in the preface to the second edition in 1900, an argument carried on 'between a few writers of our new movement, who judged Irish literature by literary standards, and a number of people, a few of whom were writers, who judged it by its patriotism and by its political effect.' Hardly a new dispute—one as old, indeed, as Plato—yet momentous not only for what was to be the future of Irish literature, but even for the future of Irish life in general.

In the 1890s, after the death of Parnell and the political vacuum left by that event, Yeats faced the dilemma of deciding which kind of Ireland he wished to promote. From early on he had understood that his poetry would be inextricably linked with the destiny of his country. He had spent much of his youth and young manhood in London, and it was there that he had his

most vivid life. Ireland, however, was a constant call to 'the deep heart's core,' as he wrote in his early poem, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,' the inspiration for which, according to his *Autobiographies*, was a glimpse of a miniature fountain in a London shop window. When he was in Ireland, the choice was between Dublin's drawing rooms and committee rooms, where the din of nationalist wrangling could deafen an ear as finely tuned as his, and the woods and shadowy waters of Sligo, where his poetic sensibility was most productively at home. Much of the Dublin literary world regarded him with suspicion, if not outright hostility. Like many another Irish literary exile, Yeats, as R. F. Foster writes in his biography of the poet, was frequently portrayed 'as someone who had managed to fool opinion outside Ireland, but who would be seen for what he was "at home".'

In the final decade of the century his main critics and opponents were the members of the Young Ireland League, the surviving rump of the nationalist Young Ireland movement founded in the 1840s by Thomas Davis, John Blake Dillon and Charles Gavan Duffy. Yeats had wanted to extend the League to London and re-found it on strong Fenian principles, but the Irish Leaguers would have none of it. Gavan Duffy, a Catholic and a barrister, had emigrated to Australia in 1856 and in time had become Governor-General of Victoria; in 1881 he returned to Ireland, still a nationalist, but of a milder stamp than he had been in the rebellious 1840s. A collision was inevitable between the old-guardist Gavan Duffy and Yeats the Protestant champion of the new nationalism and patrician advocate of high art.

Under the aegis of the National Literary Society, Yeats sought to publish an influential and, not incidentally, lucrative library of classic Irish texts. Gavan Duffy outmanoeuvred him, however, and effectively took over the project. It was the end of what Foster describes as Yeats's plan 'to capture the National Literary Society and its Library for the Fenian interest, against the safe,

all-embracing platitudes located in the middle of the nationalist road.' In the *Autobiographies*, Yeats took a personal revenge, writing of Gavan Duffy:

One imaged his youth in some little gaunt Irish town, where no building or custom is revered for its antiquity, and there speaking a language where no word, even in solitude, is ever spoken slowly and carefully because of emotional implication; and of his manhood of practical politics, of the dirty piece of orange-peel in the corner of the stairs as one climbs up to some newspaper office; of public meetings where it would be treacherous amid so much geniality to speak or even to think of anything that might cause a moment's misunderstanding in one's own party. No argument of mine was intelligible to him . . .

Yeats saw his defeat by this old Young Irelander as, among other things, the triumph of old-style nationalist banality over true literary quality. He was fierce in his determination to banish the kind of bombastic versifying that had filled the pages of the Young Ireland newspaper, the *Nation*. The Celtic Twilight movement, of which he was the prime mover, was founded on the conviction that a new kind of poetry could be written in Ireland in the English tongue, which would be as authentically Irish as the work of the great Gaelic bards of antiquity. The readership that *A Book of Irish Verse* was aimed at was the 'leisured classes' who 'read little about any country, and nothing about Ireland.'

We cannot move these classes from an apathy, come from their separation from the land they live in, by writing about politics or about Gaelic, but we may move them by becoming men of letters and expressing primary emotions and truths in ways appropriate to this country.

In his introduction to the book, Yeats mocked the 'insincere and

mechanical' verse of the Young Ireland leader, Thomas Davis—'When he sat down to write he had so great a desire to make the peasantry courageous and powerful that he half believed them already "the finest peasantry upon the earth" '—and even took critical swipes at James Clarence Mangan, a poet revered by James Joyce, but who for Yeats was 'the slave of life, for he had nothing of the self-knowledge, the power of selection, the harmony of mind, which enables the poet to be its master, and to mould the world to a trumpet for his lips.'

Indeed, throughout his introduction Yeats is surprisingly severe even on those poets whose verse he has chosen to include. It seems almost that he has chosen them less for the quality of their poetry than for the fact that they worked 'apart from politics.' Yet there are very many delights and treasures here, most of which will be unfamiliar to readers of today. It would be foolish to claim that these pages are replete with great poetry, but what is exemplary is the determination of its compiler at least to follow the road of excellence in making his choices. His aim was to forge out of the English-language tradition in Irish poetry an authentic literature, one fit for what he was convinced would be a new, autonomous, modern Ireland, even if in his heart he was fully alert to the ambiguities inherent in that verb, 'to forge'.

JOHN BANVILLE

PREFACE

I have not found it possible to revise this book as completely as I should have wished. I have corrected a bad mistake of a copyist, and added a few pages of new verses towards the end, and softened some phrases in the introduction which seemed a little petulant in form, and written in a few more to describe writers who have appeared during the last four years, and that is about all. I compiled it towards the end of a long indignant argument, carried on in the committee rooms of our literary societies, and in certain newspapers between a few writers of our new movement, who judged Irish literature by literary standards, and a number of people, a few of whom were writers, who judged it by its patriotism and by its political effect; and I hope my opinions may have value as part of an argument which may awaken again. The Young Ireland writers wrote to give the peasantry a literature in English in place of the literature they were losing with Gaelic, and these methods, which have shaped the literary thought of Ireland to our time, could not be the same as the methods of a movement which, so far as it is more than an

instinctive expression of certain moods of the soul, endeavours to create a reading class among the more leisured classes, which will preoccupy itself with Ireland and the needs of Ireland. The peasants in eastern counties have their Young Ireland poetry, which is always good teaching and sometimes good poetry, and the peasants of the western counties have beautiful poems and stories in Gaelic, while our more leisured classes read little about any country, and nothing about Ireland. We cannot move these classes from an apathy, come from their separation from the land they live in, by writing about politics or about Gaelic, but we may move them by becoming men of letters and expressing primary emotions and truths in ways appropriate to this country. One carries on the traditions of Thomas Davis, towards whom our eyes must always turn, not less than the traditions of good literature, which are the morality of the man of letters, when one is content, like A. E., with fewer readers that one may follow a more hidden beauty; or when one endeavours, as I have endeavoured in this book, to separate what has literary value from what has only a patriotic and political value, no matter how sacred it has become to us.

The reader who would begin a serious study of modern Irish literature should do so with Mr Stopford Brooke's and Mr Rolleston's exhaustive anthology.

W. B. Y.
AUGUST 15, 1899

MODERN IRISH POETRY

The Irish Celt is sociable, as may be known from his proverb, 'Strife is better than loneliness,' and the Irish poets of the nineteenth century have made songs abundantly when friends and rebels have been at hand to applaud. The Irish poets of the eighteenth century found both at a Limerick hostelry, above whose door was written a rhyming welcome in Gaelic to all passing poets, whether their pockets were full or empty. Its owner, himself a famous poet, entertained his fellows as long as his money lasted, and then took to minding the hens and chickens of an old peasant woman for a living, and ended his days in rags, but not, one imagines, without content. Among his friends and guests had been O'Sullivan the Red, O'Sullivan the Gaelic, O'Heffernan the blind, and many another, and their songs had made the people, crushed by the disasters of the Boyne and Aughrim, remember their ancient greatness. The bardic order, with its perfect artifice and imperfect art, had gone down in the wars of the seventeenth century, and poetry had found shelter amid the turf-smoke of the cabins. The powers that history