

W.B. Yeats' Influence on Irish Nationalism, 1916-1923

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William Butler Yeats once said, “I understand my own race and in all my work, lyric or dramatic, I have thought of it . . . I shall write for my own people, whether in love or hate of them matters little, probably I shall not know which it is.”¹ This credo is evident in the majority of Yeats’ literary efforts. Yeats believed literature should shape a country’s cultural identity, specifically in Yeats’ case, Ireland, while being free of all political motives. Despite this intention, Yeats’ literary addition to Ireland’s culture also contributed to radical Irish nationalism. Yeats’ main objective was to create an Irish identity free from English cultural influence. By no means was Yeats either an Anglophobe or an advocate for using violent tactics in nationalist movements. However, this did not prevent Yeats’ works from inspiring Irish nationalists who believed in using violence in order to attain self-rule. Padraig Pearse and Michael Collins, both of whom admired Yeats, interpreted Yeats’ works as supporting their respective ideologies during the Easter Uprising of 1916 and the Irish Civil War in 1922-1923.

Yeats’ early poetry recounted Irish folklore, legends, and descriptions of Ireland’s natural imagery. Examples included “The Wanderings of Oisín” (1888), “The Madness of King Goll” (1888), “The Stolen Child” (1889), “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1890), and “Cuchulain’s Fight with the Sea” (1893). It was from this poetic style that Yeats contributed to the birth of the Irish Literary Renaissance. Based on the proliferation of Celtic mythology and imagery, and the absence of theological reference in his early literary output, it can be reasonably stated that Yeats hoped this new literary movement would transform the

¹ Herbert Howarth, *The Irish Writers, 1880-1940* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958), 111.

foundation of Irish nationalism from its bedrock of exploiting theological differences and belligerence towards England, to its being based on pastoralism and mysticism.²

In 1899, Yeats, with the collaboration of Lady Augusta Gregory, formed the Irish Literary Theatre. The Theatre produced performances that were representative of Yeats' nationalistic ideal. The main theme of these plays was the prevalence of Gaelic mythology and non-denominational folklore in modern times. Despite the critical and public success for most of the Theatre's productions, it was during this period when Yeats began to come in conflict with the morals of Ireland's Catholic middle class.

One of the plays the Irish Literary Theatre planned to produce in 1899 was *The Countess Cathleen*. In this play the main character sells her soul to the Devil so that the people of Ireland may be saved from starvation. The play's end depicts Cathleen's physical ascension into heaven.³ The play extols the virtue of an individual's sacrifice in exchange for the betterment of one's country. Deemed heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, this work received the personal censure of Cardinal Michael Logue of Dublin.⁴ This incident was shortly followed by the circulation of a petition signed by almost all of the students of the (Catholic) University College condemning the play (James Joyce was the lone refusal). This was just one example of Yeats' difficulties with the conventional morals of Ireland's Catholic middle class. Yeats vented his frustration by authoring such poems as "On hearing that the Students of our New University have joined the Agitation against Immoral Literature" (1910), "To a Shade" (1914), and "On Those that hated 'The Playboy of the Western World,' 1907" (1914).⁵ Yeats ultimately responded

² Although born to Protestant parents, whose ancestors were cleric, Yeats grew to regard organized religion with disdain. Yeats' preference for the occult culminated in his founding of a short-lived society in 1887, and in 1890 when he joined the Golden Order of the Eagle.

³ Michael MacLiammoir and Evan Boland, *W.B. Yeats and his World* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ In these poems, Yeats is venting his frustration with Ireland's puritanical beliefs. "On hearing that the Students ..." Yeats comments on the

by exiling himself from Ireland. He would not return until being persuaded to do so by Maud Gonne following the Easter Rebellion in 1916.

The 1916 Easter Rebellion lasted from April 24 to April 29. It was jointly planned by the Irish Republican Brotherhood led by Padraig Pearse and the political party Sinn Fein, under the leadership of James Connolly. The rebels seized Dublin's General Post Office and other key governmental buildings. The rebels proclaimed the creation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic (*Poblacht na h-Eireann*), with Pearse as its President. Outnumbered by British military units, the rebels were cut off from reinforcements; poorly equipped, the rebels at the General Post Office capitulated after six days. The revolt's leaders, Pearse, Connolly, Thomas MacDonagh, Thomas Clarke, and eleven other rebel leaders (including the husband of Maud Gonne, John MacBride) would be executed within a month.

Yeats learned about the facts of the uprising through the foreign press while traveling in England. At the behest of Gonne, Yeats ended his exile and returned to Ireland. It was Yeats' intention to depict the Easter Rebellion as an attractive, but in the end, self-destructive, form of nationalism. Yeats fashioned his rejoinder to the uprising in his poem, "Easter 1916" (1921).

In "Easter 1916," Yeats sought to portray the fallacy of militant nationalism that permeated throughout the rebellion. Cuchulain appeared as the Irish mythological equivalent to Achilles, and like the tragic Greek warrior, Cuchulain was destined to have a short life marked by legendary heroism. The image of Cuchulain became the standard to which the Irish rebels rallied around. No nationalist leader best utilized the ethos of Cuchulain, heroism, self-sacrifice, and resolve, than did Padraig Pearse. Pearse, himself a poet, had been a devotee of

restrictive intellect of Ireland's university students who condemned *The Countess Cathleen*. "To a Shade" is his recount of the Kitty O'Shea controversy that destroyed the political career of Charles Stewart Parnell and ended the aspirations for Irish Home Rule during the 1890s. "On those that hated 'The Playboy ...'" Yeats describes his increasing dissatisfaction with the Irish middle class' response to J.M. Synge's tragic comedic play depicting the rural people of Western Ireland (of whom Yeats thought best embodied true Irish culture).

Yeats' early works that prominently featured the legendary Irish warrior. Pearse became enamored with the heroic ideal of Cuchulain as described by Yeats in the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (1893), and in the play *The Green Helmet* (1910).⁶ Pearse was transported by the idea of dying a hero's death in the struggle for Irish nationalism. He wrote an unpublished poem entitled "Renunciation" in which he symbolically rejects attending to his bodily needs and senses so that he can concentrate on becoming a martyr for a united Ireland. This can be clearly seen in the poem's last stanza,

I have turned my face
To this road before me,
To the deed that I see
And the death I shall die. (17-20)⁷

As the headmaster of St. Edna's School in County Dublin, Pearse commissioned a mural at the school's entrance depicting Cuchulain preparing himself to do battle. Stephen MacKenna, a close friend of Pearse's and a fervent supporter of the Gaelic League, related that Pearse "hoped no less than to see Ireland teeming with Cuchulains; his ideal Irishmen, whom he thought might be a living reality in our day, was a Cuchulain baptized."⁸ Pearse, and a significant number of the rebel leadership, successfully established a Cuchulain cult.

⁶ As with *The Countess Cathleen*, the central theme in both works is the benefits of selfless sacrifice for the behalf of one's country. See Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), 89.

⁷William Irwin Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, Dublin, Easter 1916 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 123.

⁸Founded by Douglas Hyde in 1893, the Gaelic League sought a widespread revival in the usage of the native language in Ireland as a means to distance the nation culturally from England. MacKenna strictly forbade the speaking of English in his home. The only languages that were permitted to be spoken were Greek and Irish. See Ulick O'Connor, *Michael Collins, The Troubles: The Struggle for Irish Freedom, 1912-1922* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 26; Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, Dublin, Easter 1916, 76-77.

Yeats never intended to have Cuchulain serve as a symbolic call for the men and women of Ireland to take up arms and to resort to violence in order to gain their country's freedom. Yeats referred to this misinterpretation made by Pearse and his followers in the final stanza of "Easter 1916,"

We know their dream; enough
 To know they dreamed and are dead;
 And what if excess of love
 Bewildered them till they died? (70-73)

Yeats makes reference in this passage to Pearse and his followers confusing nationalism with blind fanaticism.

Yeats had mixed emotions about the Easter Rebellion. He admired the nationalistic ideal and promise of Pearse's Provisional Government's guarantee for both civil and religious liberties to an Irish populace that had been "oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government (England), which had divided a minority (Ulster Protestants) from the majority (Catholics) in the past."⁹ Yeats abhorred the loss of life and the destruction that was wrought from the uprising. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Yeats from praising the leaders of the rebellion or their objective. In "Sixteen Dead Men" (1921), Yeats likened the failed Easter Rebellion and its leaders to the 1798 Irish revolt led by Wolfe Tone and Lord Edward FitzGerald, both of whom died in the wake of the revolt's failure.¹⁰ The last stanza of "The Rose Tree" (1921), is a conversation between Pearse and Connolly. Previously noting that "politic words has withered our Rose Tree" (3-4), Pearse states:

When all the wells are parched away
 O plain as plain can be
 There's nothing but our own red blood
 Can make a right Rose Tree. (15-18)

⁹ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA, A History* (Bolder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1993), 15.

¹⁰ Even though the English executed fifteen participants immediately following the Easter Rebellion in May 1916, Yeats includes the execution of Sir Roger Casement in August 1916 in this elegy.

This passage can be argued as being parallel to the sentiment put forth by Thomas Jefferson during the aftermath of Shay's Rebellion "that the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."¹¹ The basic premise put forth by Yeats in these poems is that while the nationalist philosophy of the Easter Rebellion was flawed, it was not absent of admirable qualities. Yeats would later change his thinking on this topic after the Irish Civil War of 1922-1923.

Despite the failure of the Easter Rebellion, Irish nationalists never stopped resisting English rule in Ireland. This state of affairs intensified, starting in the summer of 1919 when elements of the Irish Republican Brotherhood initiated a guerilla war against both the British Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary. This merciless, undeclared war within Ireland lasted until the summer of 1921 when both sides agreed to a truce in order to start negotiations for the establishment of an Irish Free State. Ireland achieved a form of self-government in 1921 with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

According to the agreed terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 6, 1921, twenty-six out of thirty-two counties in Ireland would be granted self-governing dominion status in the British Empire. The six counties that were not included in this Home Rule status, Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Derry, and Tyrone, would remain under the direct control of Great Britain. A small majority in the Irish Senate ratified the treaty in March 1922. Yeats, who had been invited to become a member of the Senate in 1922, voted for the treaty's ratification. Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Fein, and General Michael Collins, a Sinn Fein party leader and President of the Irish Republican Brotherhood headed the five-man delegation that negotiated the treaty's terms in London.¹² Opposition to the treaty came from an Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) coalition directed by the

¹¹ Thomas Jefferson to William S. Smith, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 911.

¹² The other three men that comprised the Irish delegation were Robert Barton, Eamonn Duggan, and George Duffy.

leader of Sinn Fein and Prime Minister of Ireland, Eamon de Valera. The I.R.A.'s main contention was that they would not settle for less than a fully unified Ireland that was completely free from English rule.

What de Valera and other opponents to the treaty did not comprehend was that the terms of the treaty were abhorrent to every member of the Irish delegation. The delegation agreed to the treaty's terms in order to avoid the recommencement of hostilities between Ireland and England.¹³ However, this did not dissuade the treaty's opponents who absolutely refused to recognize both the authority of the British Empire and the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Correctly fearing that this situation would divide the newly born country, Collins, in a letter to a friend, expressed his concerns over the newly signed treaty,

Will anyone be satisfied at the bargain? Will anyone? I tell you this—early this morning I signed my death warrant. I thought at the time how odd, how ridiculous—a bullet may just as well have done the job five years ago.¹⁴

Collins' worst fears were soon realized. Civil war ensued between Irregular Republicans who opposed the treaty, and Regular Republicans.

The start of this national fratricide began on April 13, 1922, when a force of Irregulars seized hold of Ireland's seat of judicial control, the Four Courts in Dublin. As both Prime Minister and head of the Regular Republican military, General Collins bowed to English pressure and drove the Irregulars from the Four Courts in June. Within the next few months, Arthur Griffith would die of a heart attack and Irregulars in West Cork would assassinate General Collins. Neither side gained a

¹³ Prime Minister David Lloyd George led the British delegation. Throughout the negotiations, Lloyd George maintained that England was prepared to go to war in order to retain control over the Ulster province. On the last day of negotiations, Lloyd George hinted at the imminent outbreak of hostilities if the treaty was not been signed. See Frank O'Connor, *The Big Fellow: Michael Collins & The Irish Revolution* (New York: Picador USA, 1998), 168-170.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

discernible advantage throughout the conflict. Ireland's Civil War came to an end when the leadership of the Irregulars called for a suspension of all I.R.A. operations.

Ireland's Civil War and its aftermath caused Yeats to regret having imbued his literary works with nationalistic overtones. One of the unfortunate legacies of the conflict was that it alienated families and friends. Probably the most famous example of the civil war dividing Irishmen was the case of General Collins and Cathal Brugha. Allies and close friends, both men would take on opposing sides during the war. Brugha, a leading political figure in Ireland before the war, ignored the calls for surrender and suicidally attacked a Republican barricade armed only with a revolver, and was mortally wounded. Responding to a friend who questioned Brugha's loyalty to Ireland, Collins wrote,

At worst he [Brugha] was a fanatic, though in what was a noble cause. At best I number him among the very few who have given their all for this country, now torn by civil war, should have its freedom. When many of us are forgotten, Cathal Brugha will be remembered.¹⁵

This letter is hauntingly familiar to the sentiment expressed by Yeats in "Easter 1916" and "Sixteen Dead Men." In Yeats' opinion, the greatest tragedy was that unlike the Easter Rebellion, the Irish Civil War resulted in the sectarian division of Ireland. The Six Counties, which are predominantly populated by Protestants, chose to remain under the direct rule of England. Catholics, who were proponents of an united Ireland, responded by both persecuting the Protestant minority in the South and committing violent acts against the Protestant majority in the North. This reemergence of nationalism, influenced by a repressive Catholic majority, utterly dismayed Yeats. In one of his last poems, "Cuchulain Comforted" (1939), Yeats describes the making of a funeral shroud for the fallen Irish hero. The

¹⁵ Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins: The Man Who Made Ireland* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996), 387.

poem's symbolic meaning is for the Irish people to disregard both the political and religious differences within the country, and to reunite so that the tragedy of another civil war can be averted. A passage embodying this emotion includes these lines,

Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud;
Mainly because of what we only know
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

‘We thread the needles eyes and all we do
All must do together do.’ That done, the man
Took up the nearest and began to sew. (13-18)

Yeats soon recognized that his literary attempts to reunify Ireland were for naught, and permanently gave up any hope of influencing the Irish populace with his interpretation of nationalism. This caused Yeats to regret his reluctant endorsement for acts committed by the leaders of the Easter Rebellion. Above all, Yeats expressed precisely that the national tendencies of the Irish people, fueled primarily by both political and religious differences, would result in their own destruction. In the first stanza of “Meditations in time of Civil War, V. The Road at My Door” (1928), Yeats described the self-destructive nature of extremist nationalism,

An affable Irregular,
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,
Comes cracking jokes of civil war
As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun. (1-5)

Yeats was not indulging in hyperbole. Just a few hours before being executed by Republican Regulars, Liam Mitchell compares his death with those of Tone and Emmet, the Fenians, Tom Clarke, Connolly, [and] Pearse.¹⁶ Mitchell exhorts his mother not to grieve his death since he would,

¹⁶ Wolfe Tone's death is arguably the most famous example of Irish defiance against English rule. After being captured by the English in a failed invasion attempt, Tone was found guilty of treason against the Crown and sentenced to be hanged in Dublin. After his request to be shot like a soldier

die for the truth, vindication will come, the mist will be cleared away, and brothers in blood will before long be brothers in arms, against the oppression of our country and imperialist England ... I believe that those who die for Ireland have no need for prayer. God Bless and Protect you. Your Loving Son, Willie¹⁷

The emotion expressed in Liam Mitchell's letter represented the extreme nationalistic feelings which Yeats thought to be of his doing through his poetry and plays. This can be confirmed through a statement made by Michael Collins in which he declared that Ireland's literati,

will teach us, by their vision, the noble race we may become, expressed in their poetry and their pictures. They will inspire us to live as Irish men and Irish women should. They have to show us the way, and the people will then in their turn become the inspiration of the poets and artists of the future Gaelic Ireland.¹⁸

Though written in Yeats' lifetime, Collins' opinions would not be published until after his death. Yeats probably would have said that this misinterpretation of his literature by Nationalists contributed to a country whose sentiments are being expressed by its sons and daughters in a different manner than what both he and Collins expected.

Yeats' remorse for having his literature spur violent nationalism is apparent in "Remorse for Intemperate Speech" (1933), and in one of his final poems, "Man and the Echo"

was denied, Tone committed suicide on the courtroom by slashing his throat with a penknife. Robert Emmet plotted an insurrection against the English in 1803. Captured after its failure, Emmet was hung, beheaded, and drawn and quartered in the same year. See Coogan, *The IRA, A History*, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Michael Collins, *The Path to Freedom*, ed. Tim Pat Coogan, *Distinctive Culture: Ancient Irish Civilization, Glories of the Past* (Boulder, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1996), 103-104.

(1939). In “Remorse for Intemperate Speech,” Yeats described the futility of his attempt to influence the people of Ireland into accepting his philosophy of cultural nationalism. Further on in the poem, Yeats depicted his dismay for having his cultural nationalism perverted into a vehicle to spread a rabid hatred of the English and to cause the division of Ireland along religious differences. The poem’s final stanza describes Yeats’ view of Ireland in his day and for the future:

Out of Ireland
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start. (11-13)

The intense hatred and religious chauvinism that emerged from the Irish Civil War was now erasing the sacrifices made by individuals during both the Easter Rebellion and Anglo-Irish War. This caused Yeats to question whether or not his efforts to promote nationalist thought through his literary works were equally wasted. This is the question he asks himself in the “Man and the Echo.”

In “Man and the Echo,” Yeats takes a self-appraisal of his life’s accomplishments. As with most cases of surveying one’s own life, Yeats became plagued with regret and doubt for the results of his actions. Evidence of this is evident in this poem,

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers tight.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot? (6-12)¹⁹

¹⁹ The play to which Yeats is referring to is *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The general response elicited by the play from most of those who saw it was that of great patriotism. The play can also be viewed as a dominant influence to Pearse’s “Renunciation.” See Leonard Nathan, *The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 88-89; Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland, and Fascism*, 51-53.

By the poem's end, Yeats is unable to give an answer to this self-imposed question. His thoughts on the subject become diverted by the cry of a rabbit. Yeats employs the rabbit to serve as the metaphor for Ireland, snared in a trap and too self-involved in the pain of its current state to think of how it arrived at its present condition.

Yeats' later works served as outlet for both his increasing frustration, and at the end of his life, his complete disgust with the Irish people in their fanatical nationalism. Ireland's present situation would give Yeats little comfort or hope for its future. What appeared to have been a meaningful progression towards a peaceful resolution to Ireland's "Troubles," the Good Friday Accords, has been delayed with both Catholic and Protestant paramilitary groups refusing to disarm. If William Butler Yeats was alive to observe Ireland's current condition, he would be able to reluctantly answer his question posed to himself in "Man and the Echo" in the affirmative and accept his share of responsibility for the sad and violent experiences Ireland has endured during the twentieth century.