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## A Review of Yeats's Legacies: Yeats Annual No. 21

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**A REVIEW OF YEATS'S LEGACIES: YEATS ANNUAL NO. 21**

Warwick Gould, ed., *Yeats's Legacies: Yeats Annual No. 21, A Special Issue* (Cambridge, UK: OpenBook, 2018), lxxviii + 609 pp., ISBN 978-1-78374-455-8.

*Reviewed by Alexander Bubb*

The theme of this year's edition of the redoubtable Annual was "Yeats's Legacies," with a marked focus on the final twenty years of the poet's life, and the first decade of his (textual) afterlife—including a close look at some of his very last works, such as *On the Boiler*. The book's title echoes the call for historical reflection that has been sounded during Ireland's ongoing round of centenaries (the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and now two years that will require the most sensitive retrospection). It was in part prompted also by the two auctions that took place in Autumn 2017 of Yeats family documents, drawings, furnishings, and mementoes. Warwick Gould's editorial introduction helpfully enumerates the lots, their selling prices and—when known—their buyers based on his own first-hand observations; it also features a number of those high-quality color reproductions that have become such an admirable feature of the *Annual*. These aid us not only to visualize the *writing space* of W. B. Yeats, as Gould comments, but also the *reading space*—see for example the young poet, painted by his father, lounging in the overgrown garden at 3 Blenheim Road, thinking a green thought in a green shade, or the reference card index he used much later at Broad Street in Oxford (est. £100–150, hammer price £2,400). Also reproduced is a delightful sketch that Jack B. Yeats inserted into a letter to Lady Gregory, showing a sign-painter at work on the slogan:

MAKE PROVISION FOR  
YOUR OLD AGE!!!!  
BUY JACK B YEATS' PICTURES  
WHY INSURE LIFE  
WHAT IS LIFE WITHOUT HIS PICTURES  
WHY TAKE SHARES IN A COMPANY  
EVERY PICTURE  
A SHARE OF THE WORLD

It will be some years yet before publications begin to appear bearing directly upon these sale items, but as tokens of a writer embedded in his place, time, and family (significant considering the conclusion Yeats came to during composition of *On the Boiler*, as William H. O'Donnell's essay relates, that man stands "between two eternities, that of his family, that of his soul"), the trove offers a suggestive textured backdrop to the subsequent essays (*CL InteLex* 7259). The

editor's own extended piece, "Satan, Smut & Co," is fundamentally concerned with what Gould calls "the quotidian realities of Irish public life" (180), and the need to restore Yeats to that complex, animated, and productively confusing "actuality" that some of his interpreters, preoccupied with critical narratives of Modernism and other overarching concepts, have been tempted, perhaps, to wish away. The revisions Yeats made in late 1924 to his dedicatory verses to *Representative Irish Tales* (1891), for example, were executed specifically for publication in *To-Morrow*, the periodical which the newly-crowned Nobel Laureate was mischievously promoting as part of a campaign of provocation against the Free State's new laws on the regulation of blasphemous and indecent publications. That of course was tied intimately to Yeats's stand against censorship in the Seanad, but also to the little-known campaign of vigilantism that took place in this period, orchestrated originally by Canice Craven of *Our Boys* and cheered on lustily by his editorial colleague at the *Catholic Bulletin*, Timothy Corcoran.

Gould tells the story with verve, drawing on a number of overlooked or underused sources such as Louis M. Cullen's 1989 history of the Dublin bookseller and stationer Eason & Son. Easons were the somewhat uneasy distributors of *Our Boys*, a monthly periodical modelled on the *Boy's Own Paper* but intended as an Irish substitute for it, carrying wholesome sentiments into the hearts of the nation's youth and expelling the impious and degrading influences put there by imported, "unclean" literature. Seeking to win notoriety—and a greater market share—for his own beleaguered publication, in 1925 Craven publicly burned piles of *Pears' Annual* outside the *Our Boys* offices because it contained Cecil Sharp's version of "The Cherry Tree Carol." This, then, is without doubt the second of two lurid episodes Yeats refers to in his article for the *Spectator* of September 1928:

Ecclesiastics, who shy at the modern world as horses in my youth shied at motor-cars, have founded a "Society of Angelic Welfare". Young men stop trains, armed with automatics and take from the guard's van bundles of English newspapers [...] A Christian Brother publicly burnt an English magazine because it contained the Cherry Tree Carol, the lovely celebration of Mary's sanctity and her Child's divinity, a glory of the mediaeval church as popular in Gaelic as in English, because, scandalized by its naïveté, he believed it the work of some irreligious modern poet [...] (CW10 214–18)<sup>1</sup>

I confess that when I originally read these words ten years ago, I half-fancied the first episode to be some exaggerated version owing its imagery to Yeats's well-known fondness for westerns and adventure stories. It thus came as quite a surprise to discover that this great train robbery actually happened—at Dundalk in 1927—along with various less-romantic incidents involving threats and boycotts imposed on unfortunate newsagents who dared to stock *The News*

*of the World*. Such manifestations of the “bitter fissiparity” (124), as Gould calls it, exhibited in the daily life of the early Free State, along with the neighboring color reproduction of an *Our Boys* front cover with its wholesome jumble of skulls, footballs, cricket bats, and hurleys, calls to mind a contemporary cartoon shown in a recent lecture by Roy Foster. In this sketch the clutter is made up of instruments of modern entertainment, among them a saxophone and its presumed owner, a black musician, who is being swept away head-over-heels by the giant broom of a muscular young patriot. However terrifying, frankly, such images are, I cannot help but regret Gould’s implied analogy with Islamic moral policing, through the throwaway use of such words as “madrasa” (148) and “jihad” (145) that, taken by themselves, should not be thought of as necessarily carrying any extremist connotations. This, to my mind, slightly muddies the otherwise clear expostulation of this fascinating material. And by alienating us from the context it has the potential to interrupt further, branching routes of thought into such countervailing issues as Yeats’s own history of objection to the spread of urban mass culture in Ireland—notably his dislike for the bawdy music hall, which he deprecates in *Autobiographies* (CW3 87).

Gould’s introduction explains that his original theme for this volume was intended to be the “vain battles” (lxv) that Yeats participated in throughout his career, making both rhetoric and poetry out of quarrels with others. That volume is still envisaged (and keenly anticipated by this reviewer) but in the meantime several of the essays do address themselves either to Yeats’s zest for controversy, or to the contentious politics that subsequently came to surround individual works. O’Donnell has meticulously researched the publication history of *On The Boiler*, a tortuous process set in motion by F. R. Higgins’s inexplicable decision to entrust printing of Yeats’s self-styled “Fors Clavigera” to a firm so inexperienced that they were not even equipped with italic type! With her focus instead on the late 1920s, Lauren Arrington offers insights from her upcoming book on Yeats’s circle at Rapallo, detailing how the poet’s thought was transformed under the combined impressions of Mussolini’s Italy and the Japanese books passed on to him by his American friend. As she puts it, “if *A Vision* gave Yeats metaphors for his poetry, then Pound and the Noh gave him metaphors for his politics” (283), referring to the complex analogy between contemporary Ireland and medieval Japan that Anita Feldman, an expert on the Noh, also discusses in her essay. Feldman’s contribution is one of two to focus explicitly on the 1916 Rising and its aftershocks. The first, by Denis Donoghue, uses personal family memories to illustrate the “anthem”-like status (59) that “Easter 1916” obtained among nationalists born in the interwar years. The essay raises several problems that remain unresolved at the close. Donoghue lays great stress on the difference between “change,” the word that recurs throughout the poem, and “transformed,” which is applied only to the figure of John MacBride. “Transformation is what culture does” (58), writes Donoghue—but what is this culture? The demotic “book of the people” that Yeats

spent much of his youth trying to read, or the high culture of which he became a staunch defender? The essay ends by expressing the hope that Ireland's politicians will come finally to celebrate "without embarrassment" (61)—though not without circumspection, surely?—the anniversary of the Rising, and celebrate too the fact that Ireland has retained its democratic values and never subsided into the Blueshirt "cruelty" (61) that offered such a dangerous temptation to the poet. But isn't it Yeats's very preoccupations with the persistence of culture, and with that decisive intervention "the sublime act" (58), that predisposed him to authoritarian forms of governance? Donoghue's essay is anchored in the controversies of three years ago, but it will speak no doubt also to the Civil War commemorations, and it complements its neighboring essays by touching again on the matter of Yeats's "actuality" and daily existence. He begins his essay by citing a remarkable letter of 1915 in which Yeats welcomes Lennox Robinson's proposal to bring his play about Robert Emmet to the Abbey stage. How extraordinary it seems that Yeats would risk bringing a rebel scenario before the public at a time of such acute tension. But then, history looks very different to those who are living it in their present.

It is right that the *Yeats Annual* should be a forum not only for the latest research on Yeats, but also on his family and his wider circle. That side of its mission is supported here by John Kelly, who with his usual eye for precise chronology has used a short story published by Maud Gonne in 1889 to help plot her transition from Colonel's daughter to physical-force nationalist—a timely supplement to the somewhat broader brushstrokes used by Adrian Frazier in his new book on Gonne and her lover Lucien Millevoeye, *The Adulterous Muse*.<sup>2</sup> Another recent biographer, Grevel Lindop, has shared material in a neighboring essay from his close investigation of Charles Williams, the poet, occultist, and admirer of Yeats, whom circumstances brought into dialogue with his idol when Yeats commissioned him on behalf of Oxford University Press to produce the *Book of Modern Verse*. Yeats's famous assessment of his 1890s contemporaries in the preface, and Lindop's discussion of the editorial decisions that baffled Williams only just a little less than everybody else, throw an interesting sidelight on the first essay in the volume by Hannah Sullivan. She seeks to explain that counterintuitive progress whereby Yeats's "metrically uneasy" (8) early lyrics were consciously hardened into more constrained and traditional forms, even while "vers libre," as Yeats had known it in his youth, was growing ever more prevalent and viable. It seems churlish to point out lacunae in such a thoroughgoing analytic account, though it seems to me that a missing piece of the puzzle here—and one that would have more closely connected Sullivan's essay with Lindop's—may be retrieved in the shape of W. E. Henley. His collection *In Hospital* (written in the early 1870s) is an early landmark of English free verse and, according to *Autobiographies*, Yeats made a conscious decision not to emulate his mentor's prosody. "I associated [it] with Tyndall and Huxley, and Bastien-Lepage's clownish peasant staring with vacant eyes at her great boots" (*CW*3 121). When he came to assemble the *Modern Verse*, Yeats included four of Henley's poems. But none of them are drawn from *In*

*Hospital*, and none are in free verse. Incidentally, another of Henley's protégés claims to have made the same rejection at the same time, teasing the avid angler over dinner by remarking that *vers libre* was "like fishing with barbless hooks." Here I must desist from indulging my own interests, though Sullivan's final point that it is Yeats's confidence with finite verbs (in phrases like "That is no country for old men"), that makes him "so quotable" and "so memorable" (37) in an era when poets avoided direct propositions, may call to mind for other readers too the easily-forgotten figure of Kipling.

As mentioned earlier, none of the essays in this year's *Annual* draws directly on those materials exposed to the public eye by the 2017 auctions, but nonetheless one essay is based entirely on newly-uncovered archival sources, and forms another layer in James Pethica's longstanding contribution to the study of Augusta Gregory. As he constructed an imagined lineage of predecessors who trod with iron heel the winding stair at Thoor Ballylee, Yeats seems to have paid little mind to the people who were living there immediately prior to his purchase of the tower in 1917. The story, told through a series of letters that until recently were held by the Naval & Military Club in London before being deposited in the Bodleian, unfolds thirty years earlier, when Sir William Gregory reluctantly opened legal proceedings against his recalcitrant tenant Patrick Spelman. Spelman was ultimately deprived of his lease, though he was allowed to remain in the tower on the sufferance of his son-in-law, and it is this uneasy family that Yeats would have encountered when Lady Gregory first took him folklore-hunting in the neighborhood. The article is accompanied by transcripts of the letters, one of the most remarkable of which is a petition written to Sir William by Spelman's daughter Elizabeth, in which the old farmer would have it known that he "inherits gentlemanly principles beyond the common herd, and should not be illtreated in his decline of life by you" (253). So Yeats's occupancy, as it turns out, did add its chapter to a history of proud tower-dwellers, and in search of a prototype for his own lordly, masterful utterance he needn't have looked back even so far as the Land War.

That brings us back to battles—some vain, some not—and we may look forward with interest to the upcoming *Annual* on that theme, and to similarly exacting and close-grained studies of Yeats's career in conflict.

## NOTES

1. "Angelic Welfare" is an error for "Angelic Warfare."
2. Adrian Frazier, *The Adulterous Muse: Maud Gonne, Lucien Millevoye and W.B. Yeats* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2016).
3. Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 82.