

## **Ad multos annos**

AD MULTOS ANNOS WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS in his seventieth year

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THE seventieth birthday of William Butler Yeats was celebrated in June of this year. Poet, dramatist, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Senator of the Irish Free State, he has become the most exalted figure among English-speaking men of letters in his generation; & it is fitting that all generations now living should honor his achievement & seek to understand the springs of his genius.

The issue of the Irish Times for June 13, 1935, carried tributes to Dr. Yeats from ranking fellow-craftsmen of his own nation. At a banquet held in his honor in Dublin, a fortnight later, distinguished guests from many nations gathered to do him honor. To us of this western shore, as to his own people, Yeats is a great name, and it is characteristic of the man that what is so essentially Ireland's has become the world's pride.

William Butler Yeats was born on June 13, 1865, at Sandymount, near Dublin. His father was an artist of note, a member of the Royal Hibernian Academy; his mother's family came from County Sligo. Although he was educated in Dublin & London, he spent much time in the ruggedly beautiful and solitary country of the west. His first impulse was to express in painting his feeling for the woods and waters of Sligo, but the lore of Ireland, heard and unheard, had strongly enchanted him; his first book of poems appeared in 1889.

The few years following were spent, for the most part, in London. His formal schooling had been English, and it was natural that he should seek the scenes of English literature, & the men who were carrying on its tradition. These were the influences of his intention, but he was haunted by the magic of a place, and the ghostly pageantry of his nation; in his honesty he deplored the "Italian light" which suffused his own early work, & in 1896 he returned finally to Ireland.

It is strange to reflect that at that time—barely forty years ago—there was no one who could have realized the deep significance of this resolve. No man, that is, except perhaps one, young & little known; his head was teeming with old tales and wonders, the peopled splendor of Irish legend; and his being, then as in his remembered childhood, must have been shaken by their mystic omen, vibratory with premonitions of his own greatness.

This was not, in itself, remarkable. The young are close to many things, by the outward senses unperceived, and it is the nature of his choice, & the vigor with which he pursues it, which determine

the man. It is to the world's everlasting gain that the young Yeats was endowed with the courage to recognize his inevitable course, the genius to render it, and the vigor to follow and shape it to peculiar perfection.

Yeats made his choice when he turned to poetry; he defined it when he set himself to write out of, and about, Ireland; and he enormously enlarged it when he chose the English tongue. His inspiration was purely Gaelic, but his poems and plays were to be written in English. In so doing he would bring Ireland to the world, & by the sheer grandeur of his achievement, he was finally to bring the world to Ireland's feet.

His definite concern with the intellectual life of his country was evidenced in his activity in the formation of the National Literary Society (1891), & a few years later (1898), the Irish Literary Theatre. Already a lyric poet, he began to write for the stage, and this decision took him out of his rare world into the world of men. His natural concern was with hidden mysteries & passionate secret beauty, the lonely flowers of the soul; but his deeper concern became to understand those by whom he would be understood. There are few poets who would have ventured to set themselves such a goal, but the young Yeats went purposefully toward it. His debt to Lady Gregory at this time he acknowledges later, in his dedication to her of *"Plays for an Irish Theatre"* ... " ... my head was full of fables that I had no longer the knowledge & emotion to write. Then you brought me with you to see your friends in the cottages, and to talk with old wise men on Slieve Echtge, and we gathered together, or you gathered for me, a great number of stories and traditional beliefs. You taught me to understand again, & much more perfectly than before, the true countenance of country life."

George Moore, Lady Gregory, Synge, A. E. and others who were to become ornaments of the Irish Literary Renaissance were drawn into Yeats' project for an Irish theatre. It was his energy which assembled the materials for a national drama, and in so doing he rediscovered for the world the proud of race and true of heart, and restored Ireland's lost heritage of intellectual dignity. It has been said of him that he has no superior as a lyric poet in his generation, but is perhaps better known as a playwright. So are the purposes of greatness served. The pure loveliness of his early verse has given place to work that is more austere, precise, & bound to a more difficult philosophy, but try as he would he could not, even as a dramatist, be other than a poet, and the poetry that infuses his being pervades all he has written, and has finally established his fame.

In quality, he has become one with the great company of the poets of the English tradition. His own clear bell has overtones, in which ring faintly the archaic delicacy of Spenser, the sweet immortality of Shakespeare, the slow honeyed richness of Keats; these but slightly temper a musical ready burdened with the splendid sorrow, the ancient mystery, the faery laughter which is Ireland.

Naturally he was influenced by the poets writing in English at the time when he came to his maturity. Of the pre-Raphaelite group, he made his own unerring selection. He was perchance drawn by the virility of William Morris, but he was held by a deeper affinity; with Morris, he likes to plunge direct to a remote time, when men were close to earth-truths, the power of the beauty of the world; when music, poetry and a noble art were not subsidiary but essential to the business of living.

That is not to say that he has failed to become the poet of his own time and people. More than all others, except perhaps Masefield, he is profoundly tender; the homeless and the hungry-hearted turn to him and find a fair Lake Isle, a pitying, soft-eyed love; and the deep grace of his spirit shines through the restraint which marks his compassion, no less than his imagery. With the simplest words of English speech, he evokes a world, washed by the magic of old, simple things, & forever lost, when joyous innocence was lost.

To those who are able to follow his vision this is no nostalgic dream, but presages an unguessed perfection. A god in stone, however marred, however fallen, yet charms the eye, and lures it to complete the faultless line left fragmentary. Yeats points his meaning with appeal to the ear, as well as by shapes that glimmer and vanish. His rhythms are subtle and exciting; subtle in their hesitations, exciting in their portent ..... of a world beyond the world, scarcely heard, and rarely seen. Of all in the cottage, only Maire Bruin heard music blowing on the wind, or glimpsed, far off, the Land of Heart's Desire.

Yeats is not only a being of more than mortal vision, exquisitely sensitive to forces unseen, & to the whole range of visible beauty; by increasing discipline, vigor and purpose, his spiritual stature has been achieved. His light is the star of a great national movement in literature; he has been the chief founder of the Abbey Theatre, a national theatre movement second to none; his place is among the great poets of all time. More than all these, he is the brave dreamer who has piped our hearts home; in the wind of his passing drift odours of Paradise. All who will may seek with him apples of silver and gold, & finally, in his own words, offer him salutation:

*We who still labour by the cromlec on the shore ,*

*The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew ,*

*Being weary of the world's empires , bow down to you ,*

*Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.*

JOYCE MAYHEW



500 copies of Joyce Mayhew's *tribute to William Butler Yeats printed by the Eucalyptus Press for Albert M. Bender September 1935*