

'THE BALLADS AND SONGS OF W. B. YEATS

**THE BALLADS
AND SONGS
OF W. B. YEATS**

**The Anglo-Irish Heritage
in Subject and Style**

COLIN MEIR

Macmillan Education

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Preface

Yeats is unavoidably a poet of two cultures, English and Anglo-Irish. Because his native language is English his artistic development owes much to English literary traditions, a matter which has been variously, if not perhaps exhaustively, dealt with by many hands. The Anglo-Irish heritage has, however, received comparatively little critical attention. Yet that heritage was important to Yeats, as is clearly shown in his published prose and his early journalism. Although he may at times be found saying one thing about Irish literature and doing something quite different in his own poetry, what he saw as distinctively Irish had a direct bearing on his theory and practice between 1886 and 1900; and what his later poetry owes to his native tradition has its beginnings in those early years when Yeats's critical energies so exclusively served deliberate Irish aims. This book first examines the effect on Yeats's work of his turning in the mid 1890s from the ideal of a popular national poetry to that of an esoteric literature which would perform a quasi-religious function for its people. The most important change in Yeats's development came after 1900. It was not until he had abandoned these ideals about the poet's role in Ireland that he was able to draw on the translations from the Gaelic which he now recognised as the central line of his native poetic tradition. The rest of the book deals mainly with what Yeats learned from this tradition, and with the influence — increasingly pervasive from 1904 onwards — of the syntax of Anglo-Irish dialect on his verse. Yeats's lifelong concern with the problems of subject, language and form testifies

to his vitality as a poet; and it is nowhere more evident than in his ballads and songs. They illustrate the changes in Yeats's view of popular poetry and its audience, and mark predominant features in the evolution of his style.

In addition to those listed in the footnotes and bibliography, I wish to acknowledge my general debt to the following critical works which contain material relevant to my subject: E.A. Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (1916); Stephen Gwynn (ed.), *Scattering Branches* (1940); Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (1941); Robin Flower, *The Irish Tradition* (1947); T.R.Henn, *The Lonely Tower* (1950); Robin Skelton and Anne Saddlemyer (eds), *The World of W.B. Yeats* (1965); Daniel Hoffmann, *Barbarous Knowledge* (1967); Phillip Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance* (1970).

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