W. B. Yeats
Interviews and Recollections
Volume 1

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British Drama 1900–1950

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W. B. YEATS

Interviews and Recollections

Volume I

Edited by
E. H. Mikhail

With a Foreword by
A. Norman Jeffares

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To my wife

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Foreword

This collection of interviews and recollections of Yeats throws light upon the authors as well as the poet himself. His brilliant school fellow Charles Johnston writes appreciatively out of a cautious, perhaps less brilliant early middle age – his marriage to Madame Blavatsky's niece having probably subdued his wilder questing for the philosopher's stone – summarising the elements of culture which informed Yeats's early work. The attraction of the Ireland Yeats was presenting in his work and into which he was trying to bring a new attitude of mind, a regard for the Gaelic past and a richer, independent intellectual future is shown in the article by Cornelius Weygandt, who gives a lyrical account of the 'druid charm' he found in the west of Ireland. There is the inevitable contrast: reports and interviews: the Abbey row over *The Playboy of the Western World* where Yeats reveals himself as a good, pugnacious propagandist, generalising on the special dramatic genius and capacity for fantasy of the Irish, notably in an interview with Robert Lynd. Yeats's interviews in America show his ability to alter his approach to suit a different audience, and his interview with 'F. H.' conveys something of the meditative monologue that converted his conversations into a complex commentary on life.

Yeats's difficulty in talking easily on common topics seemed to St John Ervine to arise out of his being uncomfortable with individuals, and yet having trained himself to an elegance of demeanour, an elaborate courteousness. His effect on other writers comes clearly through this commentary, and, though his praise of St John Ervine's *The Magnanimous Lover* and *John Ferguson* stimulated and encouraged the Ulster playwright, it was the adverse criticism of *Mrs Martin's Man* which seemed especially valuable. This long piece slowly puts together Yeats's power to attract – and repel. Both St John Ervine and Montrose J. Moses convey the reaction of lesser writers to Yeats's eloquence: there was 'no trace of social intercourse about it' writes the latter, thoroughly confident that Yeats would never remember that Moses had called upon him. But what emerges from those articles, and, particularly, Marguerite Wilkinson's, is Yeats's very real interest in other writers' work, and his awareness as a Senator, of what was happening in Ireland. And in his interview in the *Irish Press*, on his seventieth birthday, he welcomed the absence of the bitter partisanship which 'spoiled everything' when he was a young man.

The recollections of other writers fill in the picture. Ernest Rhys remarked, when Yeats missed a train, that he did not mind at all and

'seemed to regard trains as things that came and went at random'. Sir William Rothenstein, W. J. Turner, Oliver St John Gogarty, Lennox Robinson, and E. R. Walsh give us their very different views of him. His practicality appealed to Lennox Robinson, and his criticisms of plays—especially realistic plays. 'Smear cow dung on their faces,' he exclaimed when the actresses playing some farmer's daughters were too clean.

Frank O'Connor felt that in Yeats's relations with F. R. Higgins and himself 'a circuitous and brilliant strategy was performing complicated manoeuvres about non-existent armies'. His piece about Yeats and AE (whose friendship he understood) and his subsequent article written in 1964 entitled 'Quarreling with Yeats: a friendly recollection', though they convey his admiration for the poet (so notably communicated in the lectures which he gave on him in Trinity College Dublin), also contain enough of Dublin's literary sharpness to show the reader the kind of milieu Yeats enjoyed, avoided and occasionally manipulated.

Hugh Kingsmill's article illustrates some of Yeats's 'set piece' remarks, and L. A. G. Strong records his Monday evenings with reverence. Richard Eberhart's memory of meeting Yeats is delightful, full of acute comedy, not least his description of how they left Gogarty's house, and walked in an eloquence of silence through the Dublin streets. Gabriel Fallon produces an interior view of life in the world of the later Abbey, Arthur Power adds to our sense of the Dublin background, as does Thomas MacGreevy with an awareness of Yeats's sense of fun, while V. S. Pritchett rightly records his detestation of Irish attitudes of mockery of Yeats.

This book of varied views reinforces our awareness of the largeness of Yeats. Some aspects of his personality patently puzzled smaller men. But even their doubts and occasional disparagement add to the dimension of his achievement, for they show how he preserved his inner vision while playing a powerful part in contemporary life, the extent of which is slowly being realised in his own country. And some of the writers included here knew what it was like to work with Yeats. Theirs are probably the most interesting contributions to our knowledge of a very complex creative character.

Stirling

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

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Introduction

A definitive biography of W. B. Yeats does not exist. There are already at least three books in print which are properly classified as biographies of Yeats. Joseph Hone's *W. B. Yeats: 1865–1939* was published in 1943,¹ and it was the result of considerable discussion with the poet's widow, his family and friends. Naturally, a high degree of tact had to be maintained, and a good deal of detail excluded, lest anyone's feelings be wounded. So there are many vacant places in Hone's book. The same applies, though perhaps in different measure, to Professor A. Norman Jeffares's *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* and Professor Richard Ellmann's *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, both published in 1949. Mrs Yeats gave both Professor Jeffares and Professor Ellmann access to some materials. Still, certain things were not made available for publication, and both biographers must have accepted this restriction in good spirit. So, in effect, an authorised biography in the full sense of that phrase, a biography with any claim to the quality of being definitive, such as Professor Ellmann's life of James Joyce, could not with decency have been proposed until after Mrs Yeats's death in 1968.

Nearly six years ago the Oxford University Press suggested to Senator Michael Yeats that the time had come for such a biography of his father, and proposed Professor Denis Donoghue as the person to write it. This was warmly welcomed by Senator Yeats and the press's subsequent invitation to Professor Donoghue to write the 'authorised, definitive Life of Yeats' was gladly taken up. Professor Donoghue was not immediately free to start on the work but contracts were signed. Some time ago, however, certain problems arose which, despite the good will in all of the interested parties, could not be resolved to Professor Donoghue's satisfaction, and he has recently asked the publisher to release him from his contract.

Professor Donoghue's attitude was that if the phrase 'authorised biographer' meant anything, it meant that he should have sole access to unpublished materials, and sole use of them during the years in which he would be at work on the biography. 'My position was that . . . the entire Yeats industry, so far as unpublished biographical material was in question, should have been closed down on the day on which I signed the contract as authorized biographer.'²

Senator Yeats's attitude, on the other hand, was that while he would do everything possible to help Professor Donoghue in the work, he could not 'close down the entire "Yeats industry" for an indefinite period'. On 29 November 1972, he wrote to the Oxford University Press that he had now

adopted, in giving scholars access to unpublished materials, the following form of warning: 'I should perhaps warn you, however, that I may not be in a position to allow publication of any of this material, until Denis Donoghue's "authorized biography" has been published.' This, however, did not satisfy Professor Donoghue, who felt that its only effect was to convince him that he was not to have sole access to anything.

Yeatsian scholars, therefore, have to wait for the official biography of the poet.³ In the meantime, the much augmented edition of Yeats's letters, at present in the capable editorial hands of John Kelly and Eric Domville, will not appear for some years and the separate publication of individual unpublished letters has been proscribed. Such letters, however, would surely produce many new interesting details of the poet's life and perhaps reveal more of his views. Admirers of Yeats will also be pleased to learn of the publication of his unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*, which is in several respects autobiographical and at which Yeats worried sporadically in the late 1890s.

The present collection of interviews and recollections is a small effort to contribute to Yeats scholarship. It is hoped that it will constitute an added source of material for future biographical research.

E. H. MIKHAIL

NOTES

1. This edition was misdated 1942.
2. Denis Donoghue, 'Viewpoint', *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 16 Feb 1973, p. 178.
3. The Provost of Trinity College Dublin, Professor F. S. L. Lyons, has been commissioned to write it.

Interviews and Recollections