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Remembering Jack Yeats

Ann Russell

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Although I had met Elizabeth Yeats in Ireland before World War II, I did not know her artist brother Jack B. Yeats. However, my sister had become friendly with Mr. Yeats and his wife on a visit to Dublin, and they were delighted with her movies that showed mostly, as he said, "the houses and horses" of Ireland.

Some time afterwards I wrote Elizabeth Yeats about two of his rather confusing paintings on exhibition in New York, and the artist graciously answered my letter and explained them. We exchanged Christmas cards and occasional letters, and although I realized from references to the movies taken in Ireland that Mr. Yeats thought he was corresponding with my sister it did not seem important enough to tell him we had never met.

That is, not until I planned to go to Ireland in 1946. He wrote: "We are both delighted to know that you are coming over here, and are looking forward indeed to seeing you again." When I arrived in Dublin an invitation to tea awaited me and with my acceptance I admitted that we had never met, that he and his wife knew my sister. When I came to the flat in Fitzwilliam Square, where he and Mrs. Yeats lived on the second floor of a former private residence, Mr. Yeats tall and erect, his eyes in shadow under the green eye-shade he liked to wear, stood at the top of the curved staircase to welcome me with genuine hospitality. But he did not try to conceal his disappointment that my sister was not with me, and I do not think he ever quite forgave me for not having acknowledged my true identity.

We did not meet very often, but Mr. Yeats had a way of making each occasion a special event. He invited me to his studio a few times, and a tiny American flag topped a plateful of cakes to please the visitor from the States one afternoon that happened to be July 4th.

Mr. Yeats was a thoughtful and gracious host, moving about among his guests, never sitting down, introducing everyone with care and drawing people out, for he made others talk much more than he did himself, and as most of his guests were authorities in some field of endeavor the conversation was in-
evitably interesting. Mrs. Yeats, who was not very well, did not appear until late in the afternoon, and her husband served tea with the finest of chinaware and silver, although in those days of gas rationing the tea itself was made beforehand and poured from thermos jugs.

Mrs. Yeats had died when I was in Dublin again in 1950, and her husband wrote that he did not have "at home" days any more. He invited me to lunch at the University Club, commenting delightedly that he thought he was entitled to belong since he had received two honorary degrees. (He had had little formal education, in Sligo as a small boy.) During that same trip there was a tour of the National Gallery, dinner at Jammets and an evening at his studio with some of his friends.

When I was in Ireland in 1954 I was warned that Mr. Yeats was failing, but he looked much the same, and with his usual hospitality invited me to his studio with two of his friends I had met there several times. Late in the fall I visited Sligo for the first time and wrote Mr. Yeats about the poor weather but that I was impressed by the vigorous beauty of the "Yeats Country." When I returned to Dublin he was in "winter quarters," as he phrased it, at Portobello House Nursing Home. In a note inviting me to come see him, he wrote: "I am ashamed that the weather was so bad at Sligo, but glad you saw some of the City and its surroundings through the rain and understood them."

The reception room at Portobello House was gay with his paintings, and after admiring a family of swans and cygnets on the canal below the window of his own comfortable room, we sat before a glowing fire and chatted about Sligo, sipping Irish whiskey from champagne glasses. As he said goodbye, the last time I was to see him, he added: "Remember me to your sister."

He had never failed to mention her, and she shared our correspondence which was delightful but hardly voluminous — I have about forty letters. His imagination colored ordinary phrases. An Old Farmer's Almanac made his "heartbeats trot," and speaking of the weather in 1956, he said: "After an August in tantrums September, only four days old, is trying to pull itself together. Perhaps that is the trouble with the weather — it tries too hard."
Mr. Yeats's last letter came early in March 1957, after I sent him comments about himself made by his family which I had copied from various books. "We have had a lot of uncomfortable winter weather and I have not been able to attend to my correspondence as I wished to indeed. But now I must send these few lines to thank you for all these flattering remarks about a young man, who, I also thought I knew. I wish I had known in those old days what a golden-tipped boy he was. Thank you for giving me this happy picture of a human being." And referring to some remark I do not remember: "But please don't repeat that donkeys are 'so stubborn.' They are almost the smallest of God's creatures that carry burdens for the biped. The biped's bad handling has left the little creatures the way they are, if they are to survive a while. With all good wishes & good thought. Your friend Jack B. Yeats."

The kindness that made Mr. Yeats defend the "little creatures" which appear in so many of his paintings was characteristic of the artist. Although he looks rather severe in his photographs, his expression was habitually one of kindly humor. His keen blue eyes, his outstanding feature, were the eyes of the boy peering out of the portrait by John Butler Yeats that hangs in the National Gallery, Dublin. He told me he had hated sitting still while his father painted it, and that boyhood vitality stayed with him most of his life as well as a youthful intensity and enthusiasm.

Mr. Yeats's lean, unlined face had high cheek bones, and his rather large head suited his tall frame. It seems fitting that he was physically a big man; he could hardly be associated with anything small. Upon his death in 1957 a New York newspaper noted that he used almost no models, working "mainly from memory in his small studio in Dublin." Mr. Yeats would not have liked the diminutive adjective. "As they go here," he once wrote to me in protest of my calling the studio "little," "it is a fairly large one, an old Dublin drawing room" in the Fitzwilliam Square flat.

The studio, though very neat, was rather crowded with chests of drawers, a couch, numerous chairs, a huge mirror, several screens, the artist's easel, high-back settles his father had had made for each side of the fireplace in the Yeats home. Shelves held books, ship models and ivory figures. Pictures hung on the walls and were stacked upright on the floor; more figures
and pictures were on the mantel. Indeed pictures were everywhere.

Mr. Yeats disliked personal publicity, and when I was planning an article on him, he wrote: “Whatever you write let it be about my painting or the backgrounds, which you know plenty about, before which, and as part of which, I paint. I don’t like photographs of myself or of my pictures.” But he apparently did not mind answering questions about his painting, although mine must have seemed very dull. I know little about art and prefer his early pictures of horses and donkeys, the sea, the countryside and country folk. Although I can feel the excitement in the sweep and coloring of his later painting, I rarely understand them and even had difficulty seeing what he patiently tried to point out to me in such pictures as “A Place of Islands,” which he said was of a young man and his dreams on life’s threshold.

The artist’s style changed a great deal from the days when he illustrated John M. Synge’s The Aran Islands. Once my sister and I were confused by two of his pictures on exhibition in New York, and I questioned Elizabeth Yeats about them. She passed on my letter to her brother, who wrote: “My sister has handed me your letter so that I can tell you about my pictures about which you were uncertain. In ‘The Tinker’s Child’, there is a very small donkey foal, and in ‘The Kiss’ you were right. There is a horse lying down. It is the last moment of the old-fashioned Circus Act they used to call the ‘Haute Ecole,’ where the lady, in the black velvet riding habit, leans across her horse, as he lies in the ring, and he stretches his neck round towards her. But your sister may also be right for it might be quite possible to see things in my pictures which, in a sense, were not there, for though I have no desire to be difficult I am not able to paint doors to fit keys.”

Elizabeth Yeats, herself an artist, remarked in a letter while William Butler Yeats was still alive: “Queer how both brothers’ work gets more & more difficult & yet neither of them wants to puzzle people.” And she added: “I do believe his art will live.”

Mr. Yeats painted with delight. After one of his New York showings he wrote: “I am very glad you liked the exhibition, I myself got great pleasure out of painting ‘The Dark Bathe.’” And another time: “I am glad to think of your sister’s favourite
being the ‘Singing Horseman.’ I got a thrill out of man and horse when I painted them.”

When the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art and the Phillips Gallery in Washington bought pictures for their permanent collections during his Retrospective Exhibition of 1951-1952 in the United States, he was pleased, and when the touring exhibit came to the National Academy of Design in New York he wrote: “I was very happy to think of my paintings in those fine rooms. I was in the Gallery once, where my friends could see them, the paintings hanging easy, and my friends at their ease. It is a loss to me that I was not able to be there to see them together.”

He was also gratified when others enjoyed his writings. His sister described some of his books as “full of humanity and humour,” and his plays as “very queer.” When In Sand was produced at the Peacock Theatre in 1949, he wrote: “It got a fine reception from the five Dublin papers. Very unusual. I suppose they have got more used to my gait.”

Most of the writing in the family, however, was done by William Butler Yeats, and the artist was not easily persuaded to talk about his brother “Willie,” as he called him, waving aside many of the questions I tried to have him answer. He was kind with his criticism of some pieces I had written on the poet’s work, and Mrs. Yeats said in a letter about one of my papers: “He comes to life again, his gracious manners & beautiful voice. What an interesting trio! His father John Butler Yeats, himself William Butler Yeats & my own Jack B. Yeats.”

In spite of the many volumes published on William Butler Yeats, his brother said: “Most of the books about WBY have a great many noisy gaps,” and encouraged me to continue my writing. “There is room for a book on the racing of my brother’s life which made every post, as they say, a winning post and every dawn a rippling wave under sky, and the stars, and the sunsets going down beneath them, for man must rest a little while. Write yourself something about these flying stars and waves and himself.”

The brothers, so unlike, were a contrast even in the days when they were often seen walking along the Dublin streets: the artist never missing anything and delighted to meet and chat with his friends, the poet, so engrossed in his own thoughts, was said to have passed by his wife without a flicker of recognition.
This preoccupation never troubled her for she understood her husband and their relationship suited their temperaments, although it was very different from the close attachment between Mr. and Mrs. Jack B. Yeats.

When his wife died in 1947, Mr. Yeats wrote: “On May the 1st, a sad May Day, we buried my May Queen. Ah, I have had kind friends! I didn’t know how kind friends could be. We, my dear and myself, had several months of great sadness. She did not know that she could not recover but toward the last her instinct told her it was so. She was cheerful and brave and I do thank God that she had no pain. Doctors, nurses, the Matron all were so kind and loving to her and she was serene.”

The following Christmas, thanking me for a note I had sent, he wrote: “I am glad to know, as I know it all the time, that I have such comforting friends who remember my companion of fifty-three Christmases.”

Christmas must have meant a great deal to Mr. Yeats and to his wife. Greetings, chosen with care and imagination, were sometimes postcard pictures of items in Dublin museums and galleries: Oliver Goldsmith’s chair; a pencil sketch of Robert Emmet; a drawing by John Butler Yeats of the artist’s brother as a child sprawled on a chair absorbed in a book. One year there was a print of Mr. Yeats’s “The Storm”; another Christmas the program of his first play, *Harlequin’s Positions.*

Pen and ink sketches by Mr. Yeats were made into small greeting cards: a winged horse leaping over a gate; a man gaily carrying a large banner; clouds racing across the sky; the turbulent sea pounding the shore. Or they might be on his own note paper. During the War his version of the wheel and the butterfly pictured the butterfly chopping the wheel to pieces with a large hatchet, and the greeting: “From us both to wish you a Happy Christmas and a New Year where yourself and all poor featherweight Humanity shall be joyous forevermore.” Another year a large envelope contained an old-fashioned greeting card of a full blown rose and a picture of “A Duke in his Parliamentary Robes” of a style worn years ago, with the greeting: “Here are two somethings gathered on the quays here from a less complicated age to wish you a Happy Christmas and a New Year in the Freedom of Happiness.”

Most of his own life was passed in the “Freedom of Happi-
“ness.” Jack B. Yeats died March 28, 1957, and although his unique personality can never be replaced, something of his spirit lives on in his extraordinary paintings, and in the imperishable memories he left with his many friends.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS AT COLBY COLLEGE

By Richard Cary

IT was with some reluctance that William Butler Yeats left the newly acquired, desirable homestead at Riversdale to sail for America toward the end of October 1932. He and his family had barely settled in, and his head was brimming with ideas for additions and improvements. He did not especially enjoy talking from a podium, but this lecture tour (which turned out to be his last in the States), with its guarantee of a minimum twenty lectures at a then lucrative fee, held out two alluring compensations. It promised a large enough monetary harvest to effect the domestic projects he had in mind, and there were benefits to accrue for the Irish Academy of Letters.

With George Bernard Shaw he had conceived the Academy, publicly announced in Dublin on September 18th. Now he was busy inviting eminences to join, as well as raising sufficient moneys to give it a solid base. These funds he hoped to augment through a series of drawing-room talks. He had written expectantly to exile James Joyce from Riversdale on September 2nd, but from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York he expressed keen disappointment at Joyce’s refusal to become a member. A New York Times reporter quoted Yeats as saying that Joyce “finds it difficult, I think, to realize how important the Academy seems to men of Irish letters” (October 28, 1932, p. 17). With melancholy tolerance, he added: “His refusal was dictated, I am sure, simply because he is an anti-Academician. It was on a general principle.” At the same time he rejoiced that Eugene O’Neill accepted an associate mem-