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978-0-521-83855-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats
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*The Cambridge Introduction to
W. B. Yeats*

This introduction to one of the twentieth century's most important writers examines Yeats's poems, plays, and stories in relation to biographical, literary, and historical contexts. Yeats wrote with passion and eloquence about personal disappointments, Ireland's troubled history, and the modern era's loss of faith in traditional beliefs about art, religion, empire, social class, gender, and sex. His works uniquely reflect the gradual transition from Victorian aestheticism to the modernism of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce. This is the first introductory study to consider his work in all genres in light of the latest biographies, new editions of his letters and manuscripts, and recent accounts by feminist and postcolonial critics. While using this introduction, students will have access to the world of current Yeats scholarship as well as to the essential facts about his life and literary career and suggestions for further reading.

DAVID HOLDEMAN is Professor of English at the University of North Texas.

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For Sam and Sarah

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Preface

William Butler Yeats ranks among the most widely admired and intensively studied writers of the twentieth century. He attracts such avid interest because, as T. S. Eliot famously suggested, his history is also the history of his time. Beginning as a late-Victorian aesthete and ending as an influential contemporary of Eliot and other modernists, Yeats set the pace for two generations of important writers. Along the way he responded with passion and eloquence to the political and cultural upheavals associated with Ireland's struggle for independence and with the decline (in Ireland and elsewhere) of traditional beliefs about art, religion, empire, social class, gender, and sex. But the same things that make Yeats captivating also make him difficult to study and to teach: few first-time readers know enough about his life and times to do justice to his poems, plays, and other writings. *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats* aims to assist such readers by providing introductory tours of the poet's most important works in all genres and by exploring their biographical, historical, and literary contexts. As the first new introduction to appear in more than a decade, it offers an up-to-date account that draws extensively on recent biographies, fresh editions of the letters and manuscripts, and path-breaking studies by critics influenced by feminism and postcolonial theory.

In keeping with the premise that Yeats became an interesting and difficult figure largely because of the way his life, his times, and his works gradually shaped and reshaped each other, this book adopts a chronological structure. Chapter 1 relates the poems and stories of the late 1880s and 1890s to the poet's early passions for occult spirituality, Irish nationalism, and the beautiful nationalist agitator, Maud Gonne. Chapter 2 focuses on the years between 1900 and 1915, when he rejected many of the Romantic idealizations of his early works, founded an Irish national theatre, and developed sparer, proto-modernist modes of both dramatic and lyric writing. Chapter 3 surveys the famous late phase that began with the onset of the Irish "Troubles" of 1916–23 and continued until his death in 1939. Chapter 4 offers a brief sketch of

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the major critical approaches that have developed between 1939 and the present day.

The first three chapters feature numerous accounts of particular, exemplary works: these accounts attempt to provide starting points for further thought rather than definitive interpretations. They also attempt to nurture the enthusiasm of first-time readers without descending into uncritical celebration. Many of Yeats's attitudes – about class, for example – deserve to be interrogated carefully, even by beginners. But most readers will never become sufficiently interested in the poet to think critically about him unless they are first encouraged to enjoy and appreciate his work. By and large, Yeats elicits admiration not because he worked out systems of thought and belief his admirers would wish to share. Instead, he teaches us and moves us mainly by virtue of his astonishing capacity for feeling and expressing both the universal contradictions that come with being alive and those particular contradictions that came along during the crucial period of his lifetime. His poems and plays do not make statements and ask us to agree or disagree. They transport us to the midst of vital, turbulent currents of thinking, feeling, believing, and doubting. They let us glimpse what it was like to be in love with someone like Gonne. They take us on spiritual quests that alternate moments of triumphant supernatural vision with long stretches of intervening darkness. They dramatize the political debates Yeats staged with himself and others as he watched the ideal Ireland he envisioned in early life lose out to middle-class materialism and to the “terrible beauty” of the Easter Rising and its aftermath. Learning to read Yeats is not only a matter of understanding his beliefs, of seeing how his views were shaped by his life and times and how they in turn shaped his works. It is also, more fundamentally and more excitingly, a matter of opening oneself up imaginatively, of experiencing for oneself the powerful currents of thought and feeling his works set free.

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Abbreviations

Unless otherwise specified, quotations from Yeats's works come from the first two editions listed below. Where further clarification is necessary, parenthetical citations appear. These employ the following abbreviations:

- P *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume I: The Poems, Revised*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Macmillan, 1989).
- PI *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume II: The Plays*, ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (Scribner, 2001).
- A *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume III: Autobiographies*, ed. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (Scribner, 1999).
- LE *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume V: Later Essays*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (Scribner, 1994).
- SR *The Secret Rose, Stories by W. B. Yeats: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Warwick Gould, Phillip L. Marcus, and Michael J. Sidnell (Macmillan, 1992).
- VP *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (rev. 3rd printing, Macmillan, 1966).
- VPI *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (Macmillan, 1966).