

## Jack Butler Yeats

Well known to the readers of the *Hedgemaster* is the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats' winning of the Noble Prize for Literature in 1923. Less well known is that W.B. Yeats's brother Jack Butler Yeats was the new nation of Ireland's first Olympic Games medal winner. The 1924 Olympic Games had a competition in the Arts and Jack Yeats won Silver for his painting "The Liffey Swim." A talented family, the Yeats family. This essay will focus on the youngest child of the Yeats family, Jack Butler Yeats, whom some call Ireland's greatest painter.



Jack B. Yeats - "The Liffey Swim", 1923 - Oil on canvas - 61 x 91 cm.  
Photo courtesy of © National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

Jack B. Yeats shares with most Anglo-Irish a bi-national biography. He was born in London in 1871, and he lived for twenty-two years in southern England. He married an English woman, Mary Cottenham White. He studied at the South Kensington School of Art, Chiswick Art School and Westminster School of Art, and Yeats' first one-man show was in London in 1897. Yeats' grandfather had the not-very-Irish name of William Pollexfen and his grandfather was William Middleton. Yet, Jack Yeats was as Irish, of course, as his famous brother W.B.

Despite the name, the Pollexfens were, in fact, natives of County Sligo. It was while residing at the Pollexfen's home in Sligo that Jack Yeats received

his education from the years 1879 to 1887. In Jack Yeats's heart and artistic soul, Sligo was his home: "Sligo was my school and the sky above." His father John Yeats said of his son: "He is ever careful to preserve a certain roll and lurch in his gait, that being the mark of the Sligo man." Like many Anglo-Irish families, the Yeats family had a presence in both Ireland and England. The Yeats's Irish roots go back to Sligo as far as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but there was always an English component in the family history. For example, although Ireland was the birth place of brother William the poet (Dublin) and sister Susan (Sligo), London was the birth place of Jack and two other children where their father John Yeats was studying art.

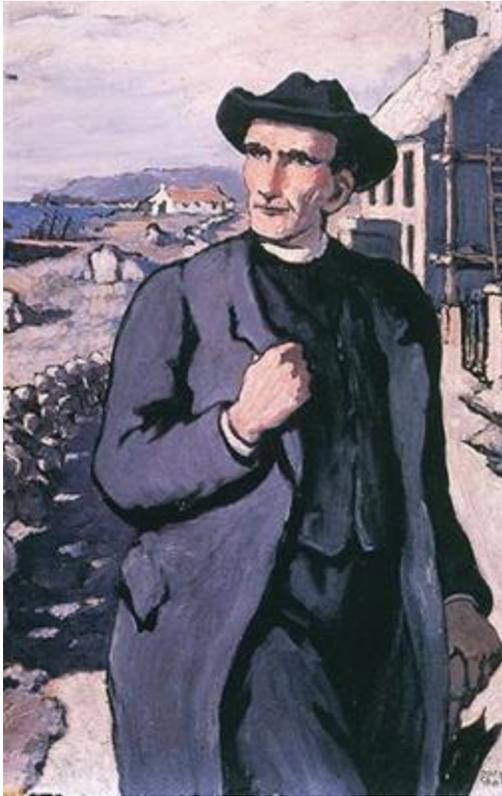
The rich visual environment of the Sligo of his childhood underpinned Jack's early art work. The ships in harbor, pony carts, fairs, circuses, sporting events and country people were the subjects of the developing artist. His biographer Hilary Pyle says of Yeats's Sligo youth: "It was left to the Sligo artist to recreate the spirit and the customs and culture in the West of Ireland in his drawings." Jack saw, too, in his years in Sligo his grandmother painting in watercolor.

When he returned to London to live with his family in 1887, Jack Yeats began his formal training as an artist. His father was well established as a prominent portrait painter at that time, and Jack would in time supersede his father's acclaim in the estimation of many art critics. Jack, as young as he was, and his brother William and his sister were expected to supplement the family income. Although not struggling artists, the Yeats family none-the-less was not wealthy. Jack's contribution to the family was his income from illustrations. He was published in *Punch*, where he regularly appeared from 1910 to 1941, the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Sketch*, and did illustrations for books. He loved to draw Buffalo Bill and scenes from entertainments, like circuses, horse races, and boxing matches and he even produced a cartoon strip of Sherlock Holmes. Jack Yeats's skills as an illustrator were supplemented by his literary skills which he used as editor and illustrator of several monthly magazines. Technology, at the turn-of-the-century being photography put many illustrators out of work. Fortunately, Jack Yeats had



already begun his career as a watercolor artist. For example, his watercolor *Strand Races, West of Ireland* hung in the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1895.

The story of Jack Yeats's marriage plans illustrates his practical side. When he got engaged to Mary Cottenham White (Cottie) in 1891, he worked day and night on illustrations for any kind of journal which would buy his work so that he could save to buy a home for his bride. It took him three intense



years to buy the house, and then he got married in August 1894. Jack and Cottie did not have any children. He and his wife lived in England, with frequent trip to Ireland, as was the Anglo-Irish way, until his return to permanent residence in Ireland in 1910.

In 1897 he opened his first one-man show of watercolors in the Clifford Galleries in London. These paintings are a product of his years in residence in England, but the subjects came from his Sligo years. His brother W.B. suggested that the exhibit could be called "Sketches of Life in the West Country." During his years as a watercolorist, Jack Yeats mined the memory of his youth in Sligo. He painted boxing matches, race meetings, fishermen, ballad singers, pig buyers, shop keepers, and the rest of the world he observed as a boy. From the success of his first one-man show, Jack Yeats kept his basic show together under the name "Life in the West of Ireland," adding and subtracting paintings. This exhibition was displayed in London and Dublin seventeen times until his move to Ireland in 1910. Although he attracted the attention of Lady Gregory and sold a painting to Patrick Pearse, Jack Yeats was not a popular artist until his later years. Fortunately, at this time he acquired an American patron, John Quinn, a collector who bought many of Yeats's paintings.

Jack and Cottie Yeats took up residence in Ireland at a time when the country was on the verge of its independence. Jack had a native attraction

to the heroism of rebels. In 1898, he attended the centenary celebration of the Rising of 1798 at Carrignagat where he experienced his first stirrings of nationalism, and he went to the lying in state of O'Donovan Rossa in 1915. As an artist, he painted Robert Emmet in watercolor and the funeral of Harry Boland and Wolfe Tone's grave in oils. Patrick Pearse is the inspiration of his painting *The Orator*. Jack even took up the task of learning Irish. He subscribed to the slogan *Tír gan teanga tír anam* ("A country without a language is a country without a soul.") Jack Yeats admired the men of action, but he remained passive. He was not keen on the Sinn Féiners, but he believed in the Sinn Féin ideal. In that way he was different from his brother William who supported the Free Staters and even served as a Senator in the Free State government.

By the time that Jack Yeats took up permanent residence in Ireland (1910), he was principally a painter in oils. James White points out in his introduction to *Jack B. Yeats: Drawings and Paintings* that Yeats was not influenced by the art movements of his lifetime, such as the Pre-Raphaelites, impressionism, and cubism. He stayed within the world he knew, Sligo being his greatest influence. Yeats was prominent enough as a painter internationally to be invited to the legendary Armory Show held in New York City in 1913. The art critic Alexander J. Finberg saw the Sligo/Irish influence in Yeats' work: "The people Mr. Yeats is interested in are a rough, hard-bitten, unshaven, and generally disreputable lot of men. His broken-down actors practicing fencing, his *Circus Dwarf*... are subjects no other artist would have chosen to paint." Whether Finberg meant his comment as criticism or praise, Jack Yeats would have agreed that the people and scenes he painted were genuine images from a place and time close to his heart.



John Millington Synge was an important influence on Jack Yeats' growing nationalism. He accompanied Synge to the Aran Islands, Connemara and North Mayo in 1905. For the first time, Yeats was immersed in the Irish-speaking areas and the most poverty stricken districts of Ireland. The "rough" people he met are the ones in his paintings at the Armory show. Synge wrote about their visit for the *Manchester Guardian* and Yeats illustrated the articles. He also illustrated Synge's books on the West, *The*

*Aran Islands* and *In Wicklow, West Kerry and Connemara*. Two outcomes from the Synge/Yeats collaboration are Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and Yeats's restlessness which led to his taking up permanent residence in Ireland, first in Greystones on the east coast of Wicklow and then in Dublin.

Cottie died in 1947 and her husband in 1957. Jack's creative life in the last forty years of his life continued to include paintings but also literary works and the theater. He designed sets for the Abbey Theatre and wrote novels and plays. He did not rival his brother William as a writer, but his father John was humble enough to acknowledge that Jack was a better artist than he. As so often happens with artists, they are discovered late in their lives or after they die. For Jack Yeats the year 1942 was a signature year. His exhibit in the Tate Gallery in London helped the public to separate Jack Butler Yeats from John Butler Yeats and William Butler Yeats.

After his death, Jack Yeats's esteem as an Irish artist had dulled until, in a 1971 exhibition of his paintings at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin, his reputation as an important painter was revived. He is sometimes referred to as the greatest and most influential painter of Irish life and character. These qualities have led to two of his paintings selling for over one million pounds: *The Whistle of a Jacket* (£1.4 in 2001) and *The Wild One* (£1,233,500 in 1999). At last, someone had quantified Jack Butler Yeats's value as an artist.

(Written by John Walsh)

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