

CURRENT BOOKS

The Great Organizer

W. B. YEATS: A LIFE

Volume I: *The Apprentice Mage*.

By R. F. Foster. Oxford University Press. 625 pp. \$35

by Patrick J. Keane

Shortly after the visit to the Waterford classroom that engendered one of his greatest poems, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) jotted down this note: “School children and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher’s hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.” Traceable back to the poet’s 1909 diary, this “old thought” was resurrected at the close of *Reveries*, the memoir Yeats completed in December 1914: “All life weighed in the scales of my own life seems a preparation for something that never happens.” With poetic triumphs (including the Nobel Prize) still to come, with cultural battles yet to wage, with marriage and children in the future, this summary was, to say the least, premature. The “enormous irony” of Yeats declaring his life anticlimactic and essentially over is noted by Foster, who quotes this passage at the conclusion of the massive first volume of the long-awaited authorized biography.

There have been times during the past quarter-century when the thought of “preparing for something that never happens” threatened to become ironic in another sense. The authorized biography was assigned in 1971 to Denis Donoghue. But crossed signals between Senator Michael Yeats and Donoghue, who had requested exclusive access to unpublished papers, led to a reassignment of the task in the mid-1970s. The new biographer was the distinguished historian F. S. L. Lyons, whose sudden death in 1983 required yet another passing of the torch. Foster, the man selected, made use of Lyons’s notes and transcripts but chose to leave unseen the small portion of text he had begun.

Thus, while Foster’s book is dedicated to his late predecessor, it is not a cooperative project. The work has, of course, benefited not only from the generosity of the Yeats family but also the labors of the Yeats Industry. Foster has had the advantage of William Murphy’s studies of the poet’s family, the ongoing and splendidly annotated *Collected Letters*, and a host of specialized studies. He has ably incorporated these materials into his own formidable research in libraries and collections in Ireland, England, and the United States.

Like Lyons, Foster (the Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford) is a major and sometimes controversial historian, the author of, among other works, the widely read “revisionist” history *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*. “Revisionists” in general set out, with cool lucidity and astringent skepticism, to correct the more pious, sentimental, teleological versions of Irish history—sometimes forgetting that an objective case can be made for the “traditionalist” expression of righteous indignation at historical injustice. Like Yeats himself, Foster maintains an agile balance in negotiating these crosscurrents. To say that he succeeds in being fair-minded may be to say little more than that his informed and nuanced description of the politics of the period seems just to this reviewer.

In addition, readers will expect not so much a critical exegesis of the poetry, illuminating the “work” in terms of the “life,” as a study bristling with facts, personal details enmeshed in a rich ancestral, familial, and sociohistorical context, with especially adroit handling of cultural and political complexities. This is precisely what Foster delivers. As he notes, most biographical studies of Yeats “are principally

about what he wrote; this one is principally about what he did.” This distinction follows Foster’s tribute to the “luminous works” of Richard Ellmann. By separating the strands of Yeats’s multiplicitous interests and treating them individually and thematically, Ellmann created masterpieces of analysis to which all Yeatsians remain indebted. But as Foster observes, Yeats, like all of us, lived not by “themes, but day by day.” To dissect a complex lived experience can clarify at the expense of creating a false impression. Foster’s own clarifications are not thematically imposed but emerge from the tangled matrix of the life lived by Yeats through the age of 50, when he wrote *Reveries*.

Perforce, Foster covers some well-traveled ground. Yet never before in a single volume have the intersections and nuances been presented in such sophisticated detail. Or with such grace: Foster recreates Yeats’s experience with an aphorist’s concision and a novelist’s wit, while never forgetting that his man is a poet, an alchemical transmuter of experience into great art. Reciprocally, the art remains grounded in the life. One of the two epigraphs to the book records Yeats’s insistence that a writer’s life “is an experiment in living” and that “poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man.”

Indeed, Yeats’s poetry was the speech of a resilient and sometimes ruthless man who—despite money problems, political and organizational setbacks, endless controversies, sexual frustrations—strove single-mindedly to achieve literary distinction and to dominate the Irish cultural scene. The youthful and maturing man we encounter in these pages was concerned not only with literal and literary immortality but with tactical and strategic *success*. Well before the establishment of the

Abbey Theatre, the Great Organizer was an active founder and participant in any number of societies—literary, nationalist, occult. The dreamy young poet of Celtic twilight and shadowy waters was also a hardheaded realist, adept at working the political and literary levers and determined both to forge a personal identity and to shape his milieu.

Foster is especially good at discriminating between what actually occurred and versions that emerged in Yeatsian retrospect, filtered not only through the poet’s shaping imagination but through his later positions and concerns. In time, Yeats abandoned his earlier Fenianism, what Foster gingerly describes as “advanced national-

ism,” in favor of a more moderate constitutional nationalism anticipating Home Rule. Though Yeats was always capable of tailoring, even contradicting, his political stance for one audience or another, by and large he stood for a commitment to literary quality as opposed to political banality. In battle after battle, he courageously defended intellectual and artistic freedom against the force aligned against him—that mixture of Fenian

frenzy, nationalist piety, Catholic censorship, sexual repression, and commercial vulgarity that constituted, in his eyes, Irish philistinism.

Yeats’s assaults on the ignorant, in print or from the Abbey stage, were hardly calming. Always held suspect by the Catholic majority and often eager for a row, he became increasingly combative. Foster rightly emphasizes the importance of the first American tour, of 1903–4, in building Yeats’s confidence. This journey was double-edged because it both confirmed the poet’s leadership of the Irish Renaissance and created resentment. Foster supplies many colorful and perceptive por-



traits by Yeats's contemporaries, typically more admiring of his genius than personally flattering. The best known is doubtless the writer George Moore's puncturing of the Yeats afflatus in describing how the great man returned from his American triumphs clad in certitudes and a chinchilla coat.

The Moore anecdote is well known. But there will be, even for Yeatsians, many surprises; this biography, though remote from the schools of leveling and debunking, is not without its revelations. For example, those who thought that Yeats's experimentation with drugs was limited to a brief sampling of "hemp" in decadent Paris will learn that he continued to smoke hashish and ingest it in the more potent form of tablets; he also experimented with mescaline. But he discontinued the use of hallucinogens, and there is no evidence that he derived any creative benefit from them.

Also illuminated are Yeats's relations with women. Interestingly, most of his liaisons or near-liaisons overlapped with other interests. His first "full" experience was with the lovely and unhappily married Olivia Shakespeare, with whom he would enjoy a lifelong personal and epistolary friendship. The attractive Florence Farr is remembered as an actress, occult fellow traveler, and psaltery-playing chanter of Yeats's poetry; many will be intrigued to learn that she was also a firm believer in the health benefits of daily sexual intercourse—a regimen that required a goodly supply of lovers, including George Bernard Shaw and, 10 years after they met, and then briefly, Yeats. Foster quotes Farr's typically wry assessment of the affair: "I can do this for myself."

The fling with Farr occurred in 1903, soon after the bombshell of Maud Gonne's marriage. As everybody knows or else should know, the beautiful, elusive, exasperating firebrand Irish patriot Gonne haunted Yeats almost from the day he first saw her. There is no need here to rehearse the familiar—and no space to detail the unfamiliar—aspects of the troubled history of Yeats and his Muse, fairly and fully presented by Foster. Gonne was cordially despised by the poet's sisters and by his friend and collaborator Lady Augusta Gregory, who wished Gonne no peace in

the afterlife but who nevertheless saved her temporal fortune by advising her to marry John MacBride under English law, so that she could keep control of her own money in case the marriage failed—which, of course, it spectacularly did, with both personal and political implications for Yeats. Yes, Yeats and Gonne did become lovers 20 years after they met, only to rapidly revert, at her wish, to their purely mystical marriage.

Then there was the extravagant and dazzling Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the celebrated actress who once demanded if Yeats was "afraid" of her. "Not in the least," he replied, "you merely fill me with alarm." Lily Yeats, the alarmed man's sister, recalled that when Campbell came to discuss doing the verse drama *Deirdre*, it was "as if a fiery serpent had invited herself to tea." Nonetheless, Campbell gave Yeats one of his greatest triumphs. Thanks to her magnificent performance as Deirdre, the Abbey Theatre turned the financial corner and began to pay its own way.

Prior to that success, the chief financial support for the Abbey had been supplied by Yeats's English admirer Annie Horniman. Foster meticulously details the turbulent relationship with Horniman, whom Yeats cultivated until she became the Abbey's principal, if troublesome, benefactor. Her interest was multifaceted and at times as proprietary as Lady Gregory's. Though Yeats was not attracted, Horniman, flirtatious even when hurt or angry, certainly was. In the words of one Dublin-diverting limerick, it was a mistake for Horniman to choose "Willie Yeats/Who still masturbates/And at any rate isn't a horny man." In July 1909 Horniman wrote Yeats a remarkable letter that, in addition to expressing her disappointment and continued longing, astutely characterized the poet's attitude toward her: "I know that you hold the Nietzschean doctrine that you have no duties towards those who have neither Genius, Beauty, Rank (race or family) nor Distinction, that there are 'Slaves' & that I am one of them. . . . I have tried my best to serve Art in your country. . . . Perhaps you will see some good points in the despised 'slave' when you look back on the

past six years when you are an old man.”

In printing this unpublished document, which he perceptively describes as, for all its mixed tonalities, “a love-letter by other means,” Foster allows Annie Horniman, of all people, to locate the philosophical source of the ruthlessness and hauteur that, while alienating many peers and rivals, expedited the emergence of a Nietzschean noble spirit from the mists of the Celtic Twilight. Yeats’s further devel-

opment into the 20th century’s most powerful poet writing in English was still ahead in the watershed year 1914, this splendid volume’s terminus. But with *The Apprentice Mage* as “preparation,” one can hardly wait for Foster’s fleshing out of the life that did most brilliantly “happen.”

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Come Hell & High Water

RISING TIDE:

*The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927
and How It Changed America.*

By John M. Barry. Simon & Schuster. 524 pp. \$27.50

by *Bertram Wyatt-Brown*

With the Russian bear no longer threatening, Americans have become preoccupied with the forces of nature. Blizzards, wildfires, and mudslides dominate the headlines; twisters and volcanoes fill the cineplexes. Moreover, political debate rages about how we should treat pristine environments—as friends to be protected or enemies to be controlled. Under such circumstances, a history of the Great Flood of 1927 could hardly be more timely. The struggle to control the Mississippi River bears enough marks of hubris and human frailty to be America’s equivalent of the Tower of Babel.

Barry, a journalist and author of *The Transformed Cell* (1992), demonstrates how the best of intentions can lead to calamity. Power, greed, noble vision, and personal sacrifice are all part of the human epic he presents. Yet he also shows how the great midcontinental river presides over human destinies; in his telling, the statistics of water dynamics are as engaging as the idiosyncrasies of engineers, politicians, and flood relief workers. The Mississippi River moves, Barry writes, “in layers and whorls, like an uncoiling rope made up of discrete fibers, each one following an indepen-

dent and unpredictable path.” Whirlpools 800 feet long and 200 feet across gulp down flotsam, trees, houses. In high flood, the current can race as fast as 18 miles an hour, and a crevasse, a wall of water up to 100 feet high, can roll across open ground at 30 miles per hour.

In movies about natural catastrophes, the special effects often overshadow the human drama. But not here: Barry shapes his account around the vigorous and controversial personalities who, beginning in the 1850s, cut their own channels of influence in the struggle to rule river policy. First introduced is General Andrew Atkinson Humphreys, a neurotic but politically adept West Pointer who took over the Army Corps of Engineers after Appomattox. Humphreys denounced fresh approaches to water management, such as jetties (designed to wash away sandbars) and man-made outlets (to drain off flood waters), in favor of the techniques recommended by outdated West Point engineering textbooks: levees (raising the riverbanks) and dredging (deepening the riverbed). By perpetuating these hoary remedies, Humphreys fixed the agency in a surrealistic time warp.

If Humphreys is the villain of the