

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC: IMPRESSIONS OF ENGLAND, IRELAND, AND
ANNE YEATS

by Charis Chapman



The Author and Anne Yeats in Dalkey, Ireland

When I heard last year that my father¹ was taking yet another research-related trip to England and Ireland that summer, I begged him to let me tag along. To my infinite surprise, he agreed. And so, that June, after we'd waved a tearful goodbye to the family cat² and put Mom and my brother, Willie, on a flight bound for Grandma City (Portland, Oregon), we boarded our plane and made our flight-attended way

to London, from which, after yet a third week abroad, we would return home.

We stayed at the Penn Club (which sounds like a Quakers-only type of place, though really a haven for all sorts of itinerant scholars), taking the opportunity to visit many of London's fine bookshops—long jaunts in Bloomsbury and Soho, as it turned out—and to get in touch with several old friends. Though much of that week was devoted to Dad's "business," we did manage a trip to the British Museum and even made it over to Trafalgar Square one evening.

Well, time enjoyed is time soon spent, and before long our first week was up. It was time to say goodbye to the busy, be pigeoned streets of London; Dublin, here we come!



The thing that first struck me upon arriving in the Dublin airport was the profusion of "Happy Fourth of July!" banners strung up throughout the baggage claim area. This was the last thing I expected to find upon arriving in a foreign country, but I suppose there must be enough American tourists floating around Dublin in the summer that the airport wanted to make them (and their money) feel especially welcome. On the other hand (as Dad pointed out), it might have something to do with the fact that the Irish, like us, achieved their independence from Britain and get double the satisfaction from celebrating our victory as well as their own. It's the Irish spirit of rebellion, I suppose.

We made our way from the airport to the B&B where we were to stay, dragging our luggage behind us. It rained the whole day we arrived, though not hard enough to make us break out the umbrellas. Dublin, like London, is a very green place and therefore very wet. Dublin "wet," though, is very different from South Carolina "wet," where the air is so water-saturated you can drown on a sunny day. Dublin "wet" is more of a cool drizzle: water falling *from* the sky rather than water actually *being* the sky. I thought it was very refreshing and found myself wandering through the streets of Dublin, glasses flecked with tiny drops of water, grinning foolishly at all who passed.

We had other purposes in Dublin, though, than sampling the weather. Dad had a good deal of research to get done at the National Library of Ireland, during which times he turned me loose to do a bit of sightseeing. Also, since the bulk of his research related (and still relates, and probably always will relate) to the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats, he planned to spend some time over in Dalkey (a small village only a short train ride from Dublin), where Yeats's daughter lives. For, you see, Anne Yeats has in her house many of the books that belonged to her father, and it is by studying what he read that Yeatsians—my father included—hope to achieve a better understanding of what the poet wrote.

Also, one can learn much about Yeats himself and the rest of the Yeats family by talking to those who knew them best. Willie Yeats was not the only artistic member of the family. His brother, Jack B. Yeats, and their father, John Butler Yeats, were artists in their own right—though their art was of the visual rather than the literary variety—as were the poet's sisters, Lily and Lollie. Anne Yeats, too, became an artist. She worked at the Abbey Theatre for several years in the 1930s and early 1940s, designing sets for at least two of her father's plays: *On Baile's Strand* and *Purgatory*. She eventually struck out on her own as a free-lance painter.

Although no stranger to her house, Dad had written Anne for an appointment (for

one cannot just pop up to the house, demand to be let in, and expect to be taken seriously). He gave her a call to arrange the specifics once we had gotten ourselves settled. A day or two later, around mid-afternoon, Dad and I boarded the DART train out to Dalkey, and we were on our way.

It is a very pleasant trip, what with the lulling rhythm of the rails, the wildflowers in bloom, and the occasional glimpse of the Sea; it's positively picturesque.

Once in Dalkey, it takes little time to reach Anne Yeats's house. However, to get there, one must first pass through the gates of Avalon. This is not as difficult as it may sound, Arthurians, for they are marked as plainly as the house number. Beyond the gates, there is a lovely garden, through which runs a short path up to the front door. The garden was beautiful that day, I remember, vibrantly green and fragrantly blooming.

The first time I saw Anne, she was sitting at her desk in front of the wide window that looks out over the garden. When she saw us walking up, she gave us a wide, welcoming smile, and got up to answer the door. Anne is a large woman, with bright, intelligent eyes, ready smile, and a quick wit.

After Dad had introduced me (for he and Anne were already well acquainted), she led us into the sitting room, where we sat and visited with her for some time. At first, much of the talk related to Dad's various research projects, and other such subjects beyond my ken, so I took the opportunity to examine the surroundings. At the other end of the room was a large desk, as well as the wide window overlooking the garden through which I had first glimpsed Anne Yeats. The desk was neatly organized, with a variety of writing utensils sprouting from plastic containers. Lining the wall farthest from the window was a row of short bookshelves, containing a wide assortment of books, notebooks, and papers, and there were several potted plants placed about the room. On the wall above the shelves was one of the most interesting clocks I had ever seen. It was one of those regional bird clocks that has twelve different kinds of birds on the face in place of numbers. Instead of chiming, it cheeped.

Well, there's only so much "examining one's surroundings" that one can possibly do, but before I had a chance to get bored, the conversation swung to less scholarly topics. We spoke of many things then: of Dad's research, of other people's research, of the weather and the places we've seen, of the sad state of affairs at Drumcree (where the standoff between the Protestant Orangemen and the Catholics whose neighborhoods the Orangemen wanted to march through had recently erupted in violence), of England and America. We also spoke of Anne Yeats's memories: those of her father, of her mother, and of herself.

When her father worked, Anne remembers, he required silence and solitude. This rule extended to the children. According to her, when Yeats was writing "A Prayer for My Daughter," *her* poem, she was not even in the house with Yeats—let alone the same room—sleeping "under this cradle-hood and coverlid" in the tower at Ballylee.

When he composed his poems, Yeats would go into a sort of trance, chanting under his breath, making back-and-forth metronomic motions with his right hand, oblivious to what was going on around him. This sometimes made for some interesting encounters. One day, for example, Anne—perhaps a teenager herself—was returning home from art school by way of the small local bus that stopped at their front gate. Upon boarding the bus, she saw that her father was riding as well. He was obviously composing, muttering to himself and completely oblivious. She said nothing to him, not wanting to distract him from his work, and moved to the back of the bus. When the bus came to their stop, Anne followed

her father off and across the street to their gate, still keeping her distance. He was evidently not completely unaware of her presence, because, as they approached the gate, he turned to her abruptly and asked, “Who do you wish to see?”³

Another story Anne related to us involved her mother, George Yeats. Mrs. Yeats was extremely valuable to W. B. as a secretary, editor, and sounding-board for various ideas, keeping detailed notes on his work. Early on in the marriage, however, she apparently didn’t realize exactly how much this role would define the relationship. One day, Yeats came home to Woburn Buildings (a London address he maintained until only shortly after his marriage) very excited to have found something wonderful in a fashionable district known for its finery. “George, George!” he said. “I’ve just seen the thing! It’s all by itself in a window in Bond Street!” Upon hearing this, George thought to herself: “Oh! Willie’s going to buy me a hat!” He insisted that she come down to the shop with him immediately. She did, and, sure enough, there in the shop window was “the thing” he had earlier espied: a brand new, shiny typewriter—one of the first so-called “silent” ones. This incident must have been something of an eye-opener to her.

“When Mother told that story years later,” Anne said, “the disappointment was still in her voice.”

Even after Yeats’s death in 1939, his wife continued to work, cataloguing and typing. At one point, though, she broke her wrist and was temporarily out of commission. While her wrist was still in the cast, she re-broke it while trying to save her sister-in-law, Lollie Yeats, from a fall (Lollie died in 1940). Attempting to comfort Mrs. Yeats on the state of her wrist, some kindly person told her consolingly, “At least it was your *left* hand,” thinking that her ability to write would remain unhampered. George, however, was left-handed, and the whole affair left her unable to type after that.

Anne enjoyed telling us these stories of her parents, I think, but she delighted in telling us of her own life, as well. It is not hard to imagine Anne Yeats as a spirited, independent young woman—the daughter of the greatest poet of the twentieth century, yes, but very much her own person. There is a certain something about the eyes, a confidence in the voice that speaks of a life well-lived. Though she relies on a pair of canes to help her get around, one gets the impression she is still socially active and very full of life.

She remembers the years she worked at the Abbey Theatre designing sets and of the Management’s increasing rigidity and unwillingness to experiment. The Gate Theatre, the Abbey’s main competitor, began to have more interesting things going on, so (with the Abbey’s permission) Anne began to go to the Gate to watch rehearsals. Despite their grudging consent, the higher-ups at the Abbey didn’t much care for this, and soon she left the Abbey to strike out on her own.

She rented a room for a studio, a sort of fixer-upper in Exchequer Street, Dublin, where she could work on her art. She related to us, eyes shining with delight, how, like Michaelangelo, she had to paint the ceiling of her Sistine Chapel—and the walls and everything else—by getting right down, up, and into it. This would have undoubtedly led to the ruination of many a garment had she not done the sensible thing and saved her clothes from the ragbox by painting in the nude. After all, the windows were all curtained off, and the whole procedure made cleaning up so much easier.

Once settled and the paint having dried, Anne determined to invite a special friend over to her studio for a celebratory dinner. In the days before tin foil, a good French ragout

required baking in a clay pot, its wine, brandy, beef, and herbs hermetically sealed to bring out the richest, most extraordinary flavors. (This sounded to Dad like the recipe for a stew *bomb* until he was assured that, with a certain space left at the top of the pot, the meat would shrink as the broth expanded.) Anne sealed the lid to the pot with a flour-and-water paste which, after hours in the oven, bonded the pot and lid so well that, with her guest waiting, she wondered how lid and pot were ever to be separated.

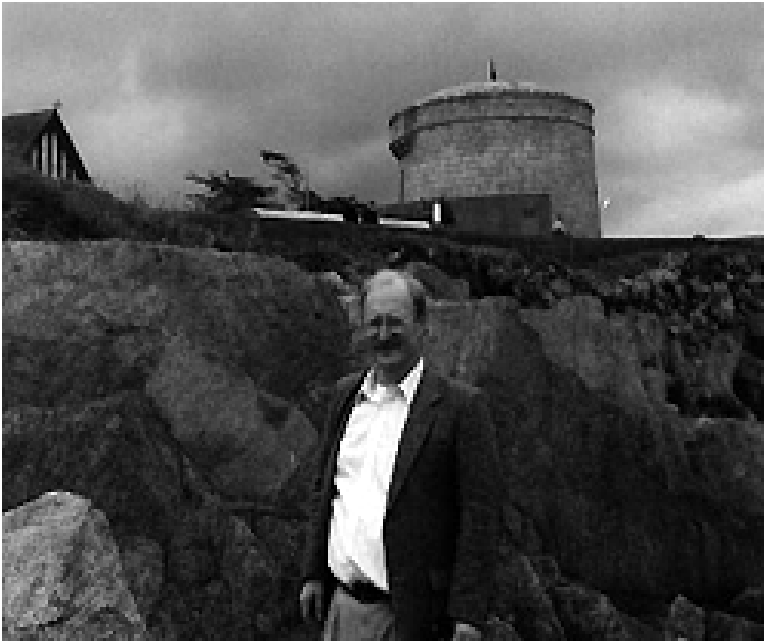
Fortunately, though, Anne is blessed with ingenuity. The means to save dinner, she realized, were right there in the studio. Taking up her trusty hammer and a handy chisel, she managed to rescue the ragout. And a wonderful meal it turned out to be, too, besides one to remember a lifetime.

We chatted with Anne for a good long while, but soon it was time to put talk aside and get down to work. She took us across the hall to the library so that we could get to work. It is a fairly small room, with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on every available inch of wall. One side of the room is taken up by a sturdy wooden table placed in front of a large window. W. B. Yeats's books line the shelves, organized neatly in a sort of grid system. Dad immediately set to work, giving me a book and some quotes to verify. It was tedious but interesting work, and I kept getting distracted trying to decipher the nigh-illegible notes Yeats—notorious for his unintelligible handwriting—had scrawled in the margins.

By the time we had finished in Dalkey for the day, it was early evening. After we'd stopped for dinner at a local restaurant, we found that we still had time to explore Dalkey a bit. It had rained very hard while we were at Anne's, but now the sun, perched low in the now-cloudless sky, was suddenly very bright. We walked down the main street, peering into shops and such, and stopped to investigate the remnants of an old church and a castle keep, both of which were closed to visitors by that time of day. It was a positively gorgeous evening, and the bridge between the two railway platforms (though it may seem a peculiar place from which to admire the scenery) offered one of the most beautiful views I have ever had the good fortune to behold. The tragedy of it all is that that was the day we'd picked to leave the camera at the B&B.

By the time we got back to our room it was fairly late, yet the sun still shone. Due to the northerly location, it doesn't get truly dark in England and Ireland in the summer until well after eleven o'clock—which was certainly something to get used to. I was very tired, though, and had no trouble falling asleep.

In the morning we got up and headed for the DART station. We had a little time to kill before we needed to be at Anne's, so Dad decided to take me to the Joyce Tower, which is located in a little town called Sandycove on the way from Dublin to Dalkey. The Joyce Tower is just what it sounds like: a water-side Martello tower that was once inhabited by the writer James Joyce. It is now a museum. You can go up into the tower and see some of Joyce's personal effects, or you can climb up to the top and have a look at the view. When we arrived around eleven, it was closed for lunch, so we decided to go down to the beach to look for shells and to clamber around on the rocks (a task which I found unusually difficult due to the fact that I had been dubbed "Keeper of the Umbrellas"). After we had snapped a few pictures, . . .



(of which this is a specimen) . . .

we returned to the Joyce Tower, paid our admission, and climbed the stair. It was overcast and drizzling, but the view at the top was still lovely. I remember that, as Dad and I stood there talking and looking around, a whole fleet of sailboats suddenly appeared out on the water, taking advantage of the day's wind. The boats came so suddenly that it was as if they had materialized out of the air (or, rather, out of the drizzle). Before long, they had disappeared into the misty gray horizon.

Considering the panorama of the harbor, viewed over the famous gentlemen's-only bathing rocks at the foot of the old battery near the tower, I recalled Anne Yeats's point that it is not always convenient to be recognized (or almost recognized) as a member of one of the most well-known families in Ireland. Thirty years ago, not long after moving to Dalkey, she tried to direct a taxi driver who attempted to impress her by suggesting implicitly that he knew who she was. The road to Avalon, the quickest route along the coast without going through the village at Dalkey, requires a turn at Bullock Harbour, and thus she instructed him.

"Sandycove Harbour," he corrected her.

"No, Bullock Harbour," she said.

"Sandycove Harbour," he returned; for who knows the way better than Dublin's cabbies, whose pride rests on this assumption?

"No, Bullock Harbour."

“Sandycove Harbour.”

“Bullock Harbour.”

“Sandycove Harbour.”

“*Bullock Harbour!*” she said, emphatically, so that he should understand that she knew where she lived. The cabbie considered this.

“You’re Miss Yeats, aren’t you?” he said, at last.

“Yes.”

“Och! I was mistaking Joyce for Yeats!” he exclaimed, making light of a colossal literary blunder.

Soon we were back on the DART train headed for Dalkey. We chatted a bit more with Anne when we got there, but most of that afternoon was spent in the library engaged in matters of a more scholarly nature. Partly, the effort went into Matthew DeForrest’s essay “Philosophical Differences . . .” (see below), wherein I learned the value of editing quotations with respect to originals—a humbling experience.

The next day was our last in Ireland. I had some last-minute souvenir purchases to make in Dublin, and Dad was scheduled to spend the morning at Anne’s doing some last-minute research; so we parted ways for a time, agreeing that I should meet him in Dalkey once my shopping was done. When I first got off the DART in downtown Dublin, I was baffled by the elaborate system of barriers and footbridges that had been erected about the streets. Because of the barriers, there were no cars, and Dublin seemed a town deserted. This, I remembered belatedly, was to be the day that the Tour de France passed through the very part of Dublin I wished to get around in. It turned out well, however, as it was not early enough for large crowds. People were starting to accumulate as I made my way back to the station, but (since they were coming and I was going) they didn’t prove to be a problem.

When I arrived in Dalkey, Dad was nearly finished, and there was little for me to do but sit and admire my new purchases, the “gem” of which was a marvelous, snail-shaped paperweight of glass, hand-blown in County Wicklow. It had little swirls of blue and white running through it and distorted shapes wonderfully when held up to the light. Being a snail-lover, I had naturally fallen head-over-heels the moment I spotted it and had exhausted my funds in the purchase.

It did not take long for Dad to wrap things up in the library. We gathered our things, took a last look around, said our good-byes to Anne Yeats,⁴ and made our way to the DART station. Our bags awaited us at the B&B; soon we would be airborne, Dublin and Dalkey fading quickly into the mists beneath us.

The train back to Dublin clattered to a stop before us. Solemnly, we boarded; I found a seat, sat back, and listened to the rhythm of the rails, watching Ireland pass by.



When we arrived in London again, it was frigid, and there was a terrible wind. It was the kind of wind that goes right through clothes, whips your hair in front of your face, and brings tears to your eyes. Needless to say, it was not a pleasant experience having to drag ourselves—not to mention our luggage—through the tube all the way from Victoria Station to Russell Square and, from there, to our lodgings, leaning into the wind. I for one was

relieved when we finally got into the Penn Club and out of the gale. In short, it was good to be back. And soon we dined again with Jean and Cecil Woolf, at the table used by Virginia and Leonard to cut their precious hand-printed books at the Hogarth Press—old Bloomsbury friends, as I said in part one.

Those last few days in London passed relatively slowly; all of the activity had gotten somewhat wearing, I guess. The last day, however, positively sped by. We had done very little sightseeing up until then, but one can't go to London without stopping by a few important spots: Trafalgar Square (which we'd already visited), Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, the Tower of London. We managed to make it to Big Ben and the palace (where we had to muscle through a swarm of fellow tourists). And, though we didn't actually get to go *into* the Tower, we did almost pass *beneath* it on the Underground. We also spent a while wandering around the Parliamentary buildings, watching important-looking government people rushing about on evidently important government business, and amused ourselves with the spectacle of pseudo-Augustan statues of Victorian men, their too-large, bushy mustaches and well-groomed hair looking entirely out of place, perched, as they were, atop muscular stone bodies clothed in marble togas.

Soon, though, it was time to leave such hilarities behind and trek back to the Penn Club; we had packing to do. Although I had by this time grown eager to return home, I still had not really come to grips with the idea that that was actually going to happen—and soon. It had been a wonderful trip, full of new people and surroundings, of beautiful scenery and Victorian art. There were bikes and beggars and (in London, at least) traffic phenomena that seemed to defy the laws of physics. I had said goodbye to Ireland (and AnneYeats) already; only the farewell to London remained.

Passing a small park on the way back to our lodgings (it might have been Gordon or Tavistock Square), I paused to gaze at the flowers, at the people passing by, and at this statue of Gandhi, sitting solitary on his stone tablature:



And so we departed.

NOTES

1. The Editor, who believes in nepotism as a form of mentoring and enjoys his work the more because it requires research in England and Ireland most summers, shamelessly commissioned this article as a sequel to an episode that Anne Yeats recalls from her own years in school, when her father, for a time, took a direct interest in her development as an essay writer. See Marilyn Gaddis Rose, "A Visit with Anne Yeats," *Modern Drama* 7 (1964): 301.
2. [The Editor intrudes to relate a conversation with Anne Yeats on the subject of cats. The occasion was the reading to her of a draft of this paper in May 1999, some fifteen years after we first became acquainted. I asked her how well she knew Ezra Pound, who is still remembered in Rapallo, Italy, as the Pied Piper of stray cats. She said that she didn't think she was around much when the Pounds were visiting, but she thought Ezra Pound might have given the Yeates a memorable white Persian cat at a time, in the late 1920s, when her father was recuperating from serious illness in Rapallo. This connected with a snapshot I had seen in a batch of letters (now at the Huntington Library) that Mrs. W. B. Yeats had written to Lennox Robinson. The poet, sporting a beard that he was too weak to care for himself, was marvelously tolerant of the large white cat that stretched itself full length across his stomach, on top of a sheet and comforter that were pulled up to and neatly tucked around his arms and chest.

"Oh, that was the Suicidal Cat," said Anne.

"What do you mean?"

"He used to love to sleep with Father on his bed, or across the bed, like that. The cat had had a succession of owners who were invalids, and it preferred an indolent life, which was the normal state of affairs in its experience. So, as Father got better, the cat got suicidal and decided to jump out windows. I don't remember who saved the cat by finding him a new home. Perhaps Mother. But it was given away to a blind sculptor, and they were happy with one another."

"And as to the beard your father cultivated in convalescence?" I asked.

"He would trim one side of it himself and become too tired to do the other. Mother would have to even it out. She finally lost patience with the beard and had a barber brought in to remove it completely, once and for all."

One of George Yeats's letters to Robinson expressed triumph in the event, and I related this to Anne, switching the topic back to cats because I wanted her to explain her long-term commitment to cats as a subject in her art. A few semi-abstract "cat portraits" were lodged in her Dalkey studio, a dozen years ago, when I'd run back from the Yeats library (at the front of the house) to sharpen pencils.

"I prefer dogs, personally," she said. "You can make friends with a dog. But a cat is independent-minded. They like to sit on the laps of people who don't like them. People who don't like cats will watch them, and a cat will take that as a sign of attention. So if you don't like a cat and he jumps up on your lap, you should not pay him any attention. Certainly, you shouldn't look at him because that is what he wants you to do. In similar circumstances, if you were to smile at a dog, that might make him leave because baring your teeth is taken as a signal that he has invaded a space you mean to protect.

"A cat is a small wild animal when hunting in the garden; it likes its independence," she observed and then recited the first stanza of the 8th century Irish poem "Pangur Bán," which a student in a seminary composed for a lark in a copy of St. Paul's Epistles:

I and Pangur Bán, my cat,
 'Tis a like task we are at;
 Hunting mice is his delight,
 Hunting words I sit all night.

Forgetting Yeats's poem "The Cat and the Moon," I replied that domesticated felines were probably not *wild enough* to survive long in the acre of "jungle" my family and I had just bought in Pendleton, South Carolina, replete with beavers, raccoons, opossums, and snakes. But Tiffani, our family cat, as the author well knows, is really almost a dog, anyway. —WKC]
3. A version of Anne's story is also now told by her brother. See Michael B. Yeats, *Cast a Cold Eye: Memories of a Poet's Son and Politician* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1999), 35.
4. Recommended readings, beyond the Rose interview with Anne Yeats, include Richard Ellmann, "At the Yeateses," in *a long the riverrun: Selected Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 239-55; a

1949 BBC interview with Anne Yeats, her mother, and others, by W. R. Rodgers, "W. B. Yeats," rpt. in *W. B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 2, ed. E. H. Mikhail (London: Macmillan, 1977), 316-33; John Unterecker, "An Interview with Anne Yeats," *Shenandoah* 16.4 (Summer 1965): 7-20; "All Fresh and Wide-Eyed," *New Yorker*, 2 Nov. 1963: 40-1; Kay Kritzweiser, "Yeats Keeps an Eye on Yeats: Living in the Shade of a Famous Father," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 11 Feb 1978: 37; Michael Moynihan, "A Poet and His Daughter," *Sunday Times* (London), 14 Aug. 1966: 32; Anne Yeats, "Faces of My Father," *Irish Times*, 1 Dec. 1976: 10; and Ida Grehan, "Miss Yeats, and the Problem of Living in a Poet's Shadow," *Daily Telegraph* (London), 15 Jan. 1971: 15. Furthermore, for a view of Yeats's beard and the "Suicidal Cat" to which the Editor refers in note 2 (above), see Brenda Maddox, *George's Ghosts: A New Life of W.B. Yeats* (London: Picador, 1999), plate 35.