



# JACK YEATS AND THE IRISH PEOPLE

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**Jack B. Yeats, *Approaching Rosses Point, Early Morning, 1920***

Jack B. Yeats is by some distance Ireland's greatest painter,<sup>1</sup> and there is a magnificent exhibition of his work on show at the National Gallery until 6 February. To say I recommend it is an understatement.

The exhibition opened to controversy about the entry price of €17 at the weekends. This was completely justified. The €17 was a significant barrier to just the people who one would want to be able to see this work and sent the wrong exclusivist message about a body of work that is the exact opposite. Fortunately it is possible to get

in for considerably less at certain times and for free on Monday mornings, so don't be put off. Of course, art exhibitions, like museums in general, should be free, and money in general pollutes the art world, posing entirely the wrong questions—is this Van Gogh really worth €150 million?—and offering entirely the wrong answers: yes and no both equally miss the point. Attaching ridiculous prices to artworks serves to distract us from the work itself, to which I now want to turn.

What is so good about this exhibition, which contains many works normally hidden in private collections, is that it displays what is most essential about Yeats: that he was the supreme painter of the life of the Irish people in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact he was the supreme painter of the life of the Irish people in any century, and really in the whole history of Western art it is difficult to find any artist whose work embodies the 'spirit' of a nation, a society, and a people to this extent.

I should spell out what I mean by painting the life of the Irish people. First, Yeats didn't paint the rich and famous—he was not a society painter. Second, he didn't, like Lucian Freud, intensely study individual sitters, engaging deeply with their character and their flesh (Yeats' work displays little interest in flesh). Nor did he, like Toulouse Lautrec, paint a specific sector of bohemia or focus particularly on outsiders and the poorest, like Picasso in his blue period. Rather he painted a broad cross section of ordinary people, both middle class and working class, both urban and rural, as they went about their daily business: people on trains and boats, people shopping, people by the sea, people wandering. If he paints horses and people on horseback, it is because horses are important in Irish life, from the Galway

Races and the Mayo Fair to the streets of Ballyfermot. If he paints circus performers, it is not, as for a number of modern artists, because the circus was a particularly important metaphor for him but because the visiting circus was part of rural life. If he painted episodes from the Irish Revolution like *Bachelor's Walk, in Memory, The Funeral of Harry Boland, and Communicating with Prisoners*, it is not, I think, because he was a particular partisan of that struggle (though clearly that is where his sympathies lay, especially as two of the paintings date from the time of the Civil War) but because that struggle was an integral part of Irish life.

Also, Yeats paints his wide cast of characters with general affection and a strong sense of place. There is a certain cruelty to be found in painting (for example in Goya's depictions of the Spanish royals, in Grosz's German bourgeois, and in some of Picasso's dissected women<sup>2</sup>), but as a rule, painting is a kinder art form than, say, photography, which "snaps" people and "shoots" them, and which give us the work of Diane Arbus and Martin Parr; perhaps this is do with the way the painter needs to look at her/his subjects. In any event, there is no cruelty in Yeats. From the Sligo harbour pilot to the woman singing on the train, his subjects are presented with dignity and love. They are also always *in situ*, at Rosses Point or in Grafton Street, by Drumcliff Strand or on the Dublin Quays, not posed in a studio. He seldom if ever paints "pure" landscapes. Rather he evokes places as experienced with and by people. It is not surprising that the two locations which feature most strongly in his work—Dublin and the West—are the locations that dominate the Irish imaginary. And particularly in his later works, the figures, sometimes quite indistinct, seem to merge with or, more precisely, *emerge out*

*of the landscape or seascape. The Child of the Sea, 1948, is an example of this.*

Speaking of his later works, although there are strong continuities, especially in subject matter, there is a major shift in style between the earlier and the later Yeats. The shift occurs in the 1920s, when Yeats is in his fifties (he was born in 1871). The earlier work is clearer, more conventionally "realist," and his palette is sombre and more limited (predominantly to browns). There is a tremendous sense of physical, almost sculptural, space. *Before the Start, 1915, and Approaching Rosses Point, Early Morning, 1920, are good examples. The later work is freer, more painterly, more "mystical" or "metaphorical," and a riot of colour, as in Horsemen, 1947, and For the Road, 1951 (not in the exhibition but in the National Gallery Permanent Collection). This kind of transition is not unusual—there are parallels in Michelangelo and in Cezanne—perhaps as the artists feel more and more confident in their mastery of the medium. This exhibition makes a good job of showing us both phases of Yeats by juxtaposing early and late works on the same subject, such as *The Barrel Man, 1912, Humanity's Alibi, 1947, Before the Start, 1915, and Now or Never, 1930.**

The label "romantic" has often been attached to Yeats, especially his later work, which is often evocative of *faery*.<sup>3</sup> John Berger, in an essay written on his death, calls Yeats an "arch-romantic" and asks how he, "as a Marxist, can find so much truth and splendour in his work."<sup>4</sup> In our culture, the term "romantic" has, aside from its amorous connotations, come to be associated with lack of realism or with seeing the world through rose-tinted spectacles. I would challenge this. I think that much of what is thought of as

romantic literature and art is far more realistic than the “classical” alternatives or the “common sense” of the time. Rousseau’s “romantic” view of the so-called noble savage was far more accurate and realistic than the dominant European view of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; Wordsworth’s poetic diction was more that of the people than Pope’s; Gericault’s art was far more “realist” than David or Ingres’. And this is very much the case, often in the most literal sense, with Yeats. Berger himself acknowledged this. “Yeats seems too ‘mobile’, over spontaneous, until one has watched the West coast of Ireland.”<sup>5</sup>

Finally there is the question of Yeats and memory. The exhibition is entitled “Painting and Memory,” but maybe the key point is that Yeats painted from memory (i.e. he didn’t paint from life *en plein air* like the impressionists, nor from photographs like Bacon, and he gave up carrying a sketchbook in 1928). This method has a big impact on the work. The figures and the scenes “float” into view as he recalls them in his mind’s eye, and it is wonderful. It also enables Yeats to paint extremely prolifically. He was at his most productive in his seventies, in which time he made 556 paintings, over seventy a year between ’73 and ’78.<sup>6</sup> In this respect he resembles Picasso and Miró—the art flows out of him in a continuous creative stream. Obviously, with such a huge body of work, this exhibition can only show a small fraction of the total, nevertheless it is a substantial and well-chosen selection—an excellent introduction to this splendid artist.

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<sup>1</sup>In making this assertion I am discounting the figure of Francis Bacon. Bacon was born in Ireland but lived and painted overwhelmingly in London, and made his art out of that experience.

<sup>2</sup>For example, *Woman in an Armchair*, 1929. Though it should also be said that Picasso could paint women with affection and tenderness, as in his pictures of Marie-Thérèse Walter.

<sup>3</sup>Faery is an archaic word for fairyland but has very different, more mysterious, associations than the sweet Tinkerbells at the bottom of the garden: it is more akin to Tolkien's elves.

<sup>4</sup>John Berger, 'The life and death of an artist' in *Permanent Red*, London, 1960, p147.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p148

<sup>6</sup>Figures from the exhibition book, Donal Maguire and Branson Rooney (eds) *Jack B.Yeats: Painting & Memory*, National Gallery of Ireland, 2021, p24.