

*The poetry of William Butler Yeats was larger than life;
his famed 'Lake Isle' much smaller.*



A POINT OF INSPIRATION

Published on October 27, 2002

Author: EMILIE C. HARTING/ Special to The News

© The Buffalo News Inc.

"I will rise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made"

I'd had the picture in my mind forever, that is ever since I first read William Butler Yeats' famous poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

It was a sizable island of rocks and pines on a large lake. White waves, speckled by the sun, would lap at its shore. The view would be a transforming experience, certainly the high point of the trip my husband Rob and I took to Yeats Country in northwestern Ireland, which the poet himself described as "land of heart's desire." His other haunts, his grave, and his beloved mountain Ben Bulbin would not affect me nearly so much.



Yeats' influence is strongest in Sligo, the colorful town in western Ireland with a theatre, museum and summer school dedicated to the poet.

However, I was in for a surprise. By the end of the trip I found myself feeling closest to Yeats, not at the Lake Isle, but, quite unexpectedly, at Carrowmore's megalithic ruins.

Yeats' influence is strong in the county seat of Sligo, a sizable gray, hilly town with occasional blocks of colorful houses.

An extensive international summer school, which includes public readings, lectures, and plays, is held here every year. There is also a Yeats theater; a county museum dedicated to his brother, the artist Jack Yeats; and the Yeats Memorial Building, which is one of the best small museums on an author I have ever seen.

Photographic retrospectives show the development of W.B.'s literary career and the connections the Yeats family had in the area. Yeats spent much of his childhood here, and often returned as an adult even though he lived in London and on the Continent.

Our route took us to his grave in the churchyard at Drumcliffe, several miles north of the town. Halfway there, we pulled alongside the road in a newer section of suburban houses.

A wide valley of tan fields, green trees and occasional houses unfolded before us. On the horizon, the mountain of Ben Bulbin, shaped like a chopped-off nose, led a ring of mountains inland from the sea. At that point I felt I was getting closer to his poems.

Yeats had asked to be buried "in the shadow of Ben Bulbin's head." At the Drumcliffe churchyard you can read the inscription "Cast a cold eye/On life, On death./Horseman pass by!" and then look up to the mountain.



Yeats died in France in 1939. After the war was over, his body was brought to the church where his great-grandfather had been a rector.

In Irish folklore, Ben Bulbin legends abound, and they influenced many of Yeats' poems. At night, the side of the mountain was to have opened so that fairy people could fly out into the world. Ben Bulbin was also the hunting ground for the legendary leader Finn MacCumhail and his warriors, the Fianna. It seems hard to imagine, given the strong winds, that Christian settlers were able to build a monastery on top of the 1,730-foot mountain in the sixth century.

I took a narrow, tree-lined lane down to a bridge where I stood for a while looking up and down the creek, wondering if the bushes were as thick and high when Yeats ambled through here. He must have noticed the fast rustling of the water, yet I thought this land could not have affected him as much as the Lake Isle, where the surroundings would be

more remote and there would be fewer people.

Lissadell House, the now shabbily genteel Georgian mansion where Yeats spent quite a bit of time with the Gore-Booth family, is a few miles to the northwest. He often came here to visit his two sisters, poet Eva and political activist Constance, later Countess Markievicz.

Constance escaped execution for her role in the Easter 1916 uprising and later became the first woman elected to the British Parliament. I imagined Yeats in one of the old chairs, his hands resting on the arms, discussing politics with the family and reciting his poem "Easter 1916," which describes the rebellion against the British government. After naming the Irish nationalists who were executed, he ends with the lines: "Wherever green is worn . . . A terrible beauty is born."

The house is surrounded by thick woods where Yeats walked, and you can stand on the front steps and look over to Drumcliffe Bay, where he liked to sit on the rocks.

Down the road at a pebbled beach, I waded out into the water, wondering if Yeats had ever pulled up his trousers and strolled in the same spot. Could be, because he would have walked along the beach on his way from Lissadell to Sligo.

With only a few hours left in the day, and a threat of storms, we studied the Yeats' Passport Trail Map again and pressed on to the circuit around Lough Gill -- a series of stops with **Yeats** associations, each marked by a small wooden sign on the main road -- and the long awaited Lake Isle of Innisfree.

The first road mark was for Holywell, a dark recess in the woods where a six- or eight-foot waterfall flows down the hill into a small pond, and ledges in the middle lead to a small well. A number of crosses and small shrines, many of them polished white religious statues built into the ledges, stand out against the lush green foliage and moss.

During the 1700s, when Catholics were forbidden to gather for worship, congregants would journey to this secret glen alone so as not to alert the British soldiers that they were having a service. A priest would await them in the woods.

I felt the power Holywell must have had for Yeats when he thought of worshipers coming to this spot from many directions 300 years ago. And I was reminded again of the depth of his poems: beauty on the surface, yet tragic layers of history underneath.

Pilgrims had walked over the land we had driven over to Holywell. Now, visitors, mostly locals conducting business and Irish families on vacation, stop by for periods of prayer and reflection. They park their cars in a small lot and walk slowly into the forest to the shrines. Some buy flowers at a truck and carry them in to place on the shrines. Wooden boards painted with the word "Silence" are nailed to the trees.

I thought of the quiet, meditative Yeats farther on at the Dorney Park Nature Walk, a

heavily wooded trail leading down to the water. The high overlay of trees made us feel embraced by the natural world, as I imagined Yeats must have been.

Dorney Rock stands on one side of the path. It is 20 feet high and dates back 10,000 years when glaciers formed the area. Some scholars say the rock inspired Yeats' poem "Fiddler of Dorney . . . who danced like a wave on the sea" on the banks of Lough Gill.

Most of the ride around Lough Gill is parallel to the water, but not actually alongside it, and trees close to the edge of the road reach up like clasping hands to make an alee overhead. We kept our eyes peeled for small wooden signs pointing down narrow lanes to the left. Finally we finally saw the marker for the Lake Isle. After turning in we passed numerous small farms with white-washed houses and hayfields lined by hedges -- the kind of "idyllic Irish countryside" you want to swallow and keep for good. At one bend, I looked over a stone wall to see a classic cottage covered with red roses.

When we got to the gravel parking lot, I stood arrested by the view. The isle in the lake down below was so surprisingly small, perhaps 100 feet or so wide, and only 40 feet from the shore. I could not see how a hut, much less a small cabin of clay and wattles, could fit on this little mound of trees and reeds. No, this could not be the isle "where midnight's all a glimmer, noon a purple glow, and evenings full of linnet's wings."

I studied the faces of those coming up back the hill after their pilgrimage. Their expressions were pensive. I couldn't tell if they were disappointed, moved or concentrating on the steep climb, and I did not feel I could ask.

The tiny island offended my sense of literary proportion. I wanted to push it out and make it much larger and make the lake much larger. But then I began to see what marvelous solitude the little copse of trees provided.

Here was the problem: I had created a larger-than-life metaphor in my mind all these years. The Lake Isle had also served as a larger-than-life-symbol for Yeats, who was living in London and desperately missed the peace of Sligo when he wrote the poem. As a child his father had read him a passage from Walden, and from then on his ideal was to live as Thoreau had on the Lake Isle of Innisfree and to seek wisdom from his surroundings.

One day, as he was walking along London's Fleet Street in the heart of the financial district, he heard the trickle of water coming from a fountain in a shop window and began to remember the sounds on Lough Gill. He had no idea a line near the end of the poem, "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore," would be printed countless times in anthologies and on calendars.

In the early evening, after a drive past the serene village of Dromohair, we stood diagonally across from the isle on Lake Gough and took one more picture from the grounds of Parke's Castle. From this angle the little island is minuscule, and I remembered an anecdote about Yeats wanting to show the isle to his new bride. He kept

rowing around and couldn't find it.

Parke's Castle has a sad history. In the 1620s, Anglo Parkes had fortified the castle, the former home of the O'Rourke clan, to protect himself from dispossessed landowners. Much earlier the residents of the larger islands had built tunnels to hide from the Vikings. I could imagine Yeats on the grounds a century ago, hearing the voices of the hungry, angry and plundered, several centuries before him.

Carrowmore

The next morning we visited Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery, which is in the center of the Coolera Peninsula and surrounded by Ben Bulbin and the Dartry Mountain Range. At Carrowmore, a quarter of the several hundred "passage graves" are spread out over a vast flat plain with mountains almost all the way around.



Each is a large horizontal slab of stone held up by smaller rectangular boulders, which stand vertically and support the large, flat stone, like ushers carrying a heavy coffin at a funeral.

Postcard photo of a megalithic grave at Carrowmore. *Photo: The Office of Public Works, Ireland*

The tops and sides were originally covered by mounds of earth so that they looked like grass domes or hills. You would have entered through small openings or passages on the sides, and the cremated remains would have been inside. Over the years the mounds of grass and dirt have all but disappeared, uncovering the rock frames.

Passage graves date back to 4500 B.C., which means they were here before the Egyptian pyramids, and are 700 years earlier than Newgrange, in County Meath, one of Ireland's most popular tourist sites. Yet Carrowmore is very different from Newgrange, where the huge reconstructed passage tombs are close together and the land is not open and flat. Here the passage graves are set against the vast, open landscape, so you can visualize what the site was like in ancient times and you can recreate Yeats' world in your imagination.

Like other pre-Christian burial sites in Europe, including Stonehenge and Avesbury, the stones were organized into a coherent system of circles and lines. The Giant's Tomb at the center was circled by 100 to 200 passage graves. Each grave would itself have been circled by a smaller ring of stones. These passage graves were in line, not only with the Giant's Tomb, but also with the cairns that still appear like mushroom caps on the tops of the mountains. In its original state the entire site was shaped like a wheel. The Giant's Tomb was the hub, the smaller passage tombs lined up as the spokes, and the mounds on

the mountains were the wide perimeter of the wheel (except that here at Carrowmore there was a break with the seacoast on one side). There was one hour of the year, at the winter solstice in December, when the sun would go through the center of the passage tombs.

In the middle of Carrowmore I looked off and saw Ben Bulbin, the mountain which stood sentry behind Yeats' grave at Drumcliffe about 10 miles away. I then turned and looked over the surrounding mountain range trying to find the mushroom caps, the cairns, the guide had pointed out. When I turned three quarters of the way around I was facing the 1,083-foot limestone Knocknarea Mountain with a large mound on top. Supposedly, 40,000 tons of stone covers Queen Maeve's cairn. She was the mythic warrior queen of Ireland and was said to have been buried upright so that she could stand up to the enemy tribes of Ulster to the north. (The 45-minute climb up Knocknarea was one of Yeats' favorite hikes. On a clear day you can see north to the Cliffs of Slieve in County Donegal and southwest to Croagh Patrick in County Mayo where St. Patrick was to have banished the serpents and demons into the sea and out of Ireland.)

I wondered if Yeats had thought about how the spirit of Maeve might have looked across the open spot in the circle of mountains -- actually a strip of seacoast, not visible from here -- to glance at Ben Bulbin on the other side of the peninsula. Queen Maeve figures in his poetry as do imaginary pre-Christian warriors called Fianna who rode between Knocknarea and Ben Bulbin in his poems. All my understanding of Yeats came together here on the peninsula to which he often walked from Sligo, six miles away. Carrowmore had the kind of natural phenomena that inspired his poetry: the view of his beloved Ben Bulbin, the mountains and the cairns, and Queen Maeve's grave.

On that sunny day at Carrowmore, a black and yellow butterfly flew through the branches on a tree near one of the passage graves, and I wondered if Yeats would have been prompted to think out a poem after viewing such a collusion between nature and history.

He had grown up on Irish folklore, having heard tales from the servants in his grandfather's house, from fishermen at Rosse's Point, and from old men on the stoops in Sligo and nearby Ballysodare (the setting for his poem "Down in the Salley Gardens"). His grandmother believed that fairy or forgetful people lived under the surface of the earth and that butterflies could turn into fairies. When she threw hot water out the kitchen door at night, she would warn the little people that she was about to heave the bucket so they would run away and avoid getting scalded.

I heard Yeats' voice as I began to read the poems I carried with me, and I wondered if he had looked up to Knocknarea and imagined the Irish heroine Maeve standing up strong, the folds of her dress blowing in the wind. The horses of the Fianna would have made clapping noises as they galloped by enroute to a battle.

"The Hosting of the Sidhe," which was set within view of Knocknarea and Carrowmore, was quite apt: The host is riding from Knocknarea

And over the grave of Clooth-na-bare

Caolite tossing his burning hair

And Niamh calling Away, come away.

But now, at home, I keep reading "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The last lines keep resonating:

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;

While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

If you go

Material on the Yeats Passport Trail can be secured at the Irish Tourist Bureau, 345 Park Ave, NY 10154, (800) 223-6470 or in Sligo at North West Tourism, Temple Street.

It takes at least two days to do the Sligo area of the trail at a leisurely pace, doing all the hikes. Especially in summer, there are many plays and readings associated with Yeats in the town of Sligo. Thoor Ballyhee, the Norman tower and cottage which was Yeats's summer home for 12 years, and Coole Castle, a nature preserve on the site of Lady Gregory's home, are south in Gort, next to Galway.

Photo Captions as they appeared in the article:

- 1) The open countryside around Carrowmore Megalithic Cemetery, only six miles from Sligo, inspired much of Williams Butler Yeats' poetry. Photo by Emilie C. Harting
- 2) Yeats' influence is strongest in Sligo, the colorful town in western Ireland with a theater, museum and summer school dedicated to the poet. Photo by Emilie C. Harting.
- 3) Megalithic grave at Carrowmore. Photo by Brian Lynch/Irish Tourism Bureau