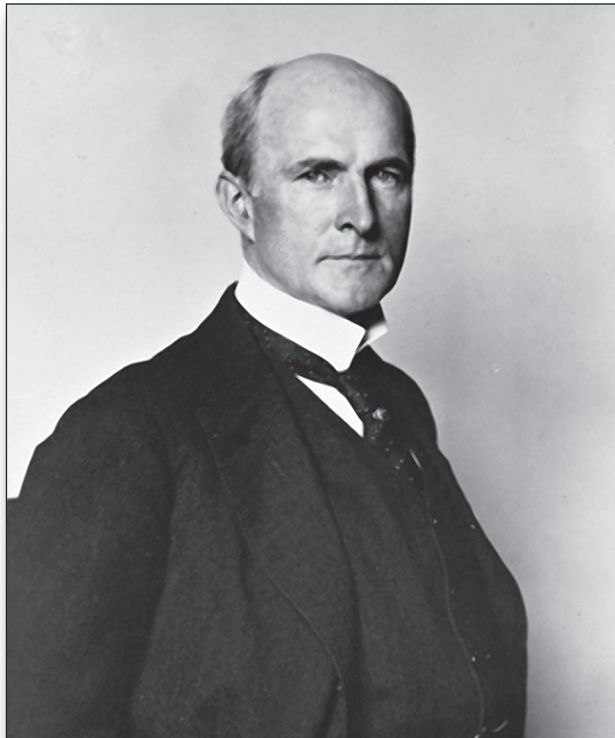


John Quinn, William Butler Yeats, and a Moment in New York Irish Culture, 1903–1904

BY STEVEN BUTLER, PH.D.

In the summer of 1902, John Quinn ventured across the broad Atlantic in hopes of becoming personally acquainted with the figures of the Irish Revival. Quinn was an Irish American from Ohio who had made himself an extremely successful corporate lawyer in New York City as well as a generous patron of modern art and literature.¹ After meeting his idols, Quinn was touched with the zeal of an acolyte and immedi-



ately set about organizing a New York branch of the Irish Literary Society that had been founded by William Butler Yeats and others in London in 1892. He decided that a performance of Yeats' drama would make an outstanding debut for the New York organization. Quinn made all the arrangements and eventually three plays, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, *The Pot of Broth*, and *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*, were performed at the Carnegie Lyceum on the evenings of June 3 and June 4, 1903. In a letter to Yeats dated June 6, Quinn told him: "the plays came off very successfully" and "the performances were excellent."²

Despite the promise of this debut, the New York Irish Literary Society was immediately confronted, and one could say doomed,

by an issue that had much more publicly greeted Yeats' Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin, namely, the accusation of heresy directed at Yeats.³ Almost as soon as the New York Society had formed, Quinn ominously reported that a motion to make Yeats an honorary vice-president had "aroused some opposition" on grounds that Yeats was "anticlerical." Ultimately, one of the other honorary

vice-presidents, Archbishop John M. Farley of New York, had withdrawn his name for the sake of propriety.⁴ Not surprisingly, perhaps, the performance of Yeats' three plays was the first, and last, dramatic event sponsored by the New York Irish Literary Society under Quinn's directorship. Once the scheme had, for all intents and purposes, collapsed, Quinn turned his attention to another project—lining up a lucrative lecture tour for Yeats.

In his article "Yeats in America," Declan Kiely has suggested that the lecture tour was arranged by Quinn and Lady Gregory partly as a means of distracting Yeats from his heartbreak over Maud Gonne's sudden marriage to John MacBride.⁵ But Quinn was no doubt concerned just as much with burnish-

Photo:

John Quinn (b.1870 in Tiffin, Ohio – d. 1924 in NYC) was a generous and an enthusiastic supporter of the Irish Literary Revival. His professional career as a corporate lawyer allowed him to be a patron and advisor to both William Butler Yeats and James Joyce, along with numerous other writers, painters, and sculptors. An early champion of modern art, his vast collection was sold off after his untimely death. Courtesy of New York Public Library.

Stephen Butler is a Lecturer in the Expository Writing Program at New York University. He holds a Ph.D. in Modern History and Literature from Drew University. His research explores the intersection of Irish writers and Irish-American audiences. A native of Woodside, Queens, he currently lives with his wife and three daughters in Glen Rock, New Jersey. ©2017. Published with permission of Stephen Butler.

ing Yeats' reputation in America, and to do so he realized he would have to counteract the charges of anti-Catholicism. As such, Quinn instructed Lady Gregory to contact a friend of hers named Fr. Donovan, who Quinn hoped would promote Yeats among other American priests of a literary nature; Quinn explained that "the point of this request is that in case any narrow-minded priest objects to the theology of Yeats' writing there may be some priests here who can be relied upon to defend him or whose friendship for him could be pointed to as an evidence of the fact that he is not a Presbyterian in disguise."⁶

SUPPORT FROM NATIONALISTS

While clerical support may have been difficult to obtain, Quinn had no trouble getting Yeats favorable press in the nationalist weeklies published in America. Yeats' tour was respectfully and enthusiastically advertised by Patrick Ford's *Irish World* as well as by John Devoy's new publication, the *Gaelic American*, which had debuted in September, 1903. A few rep-

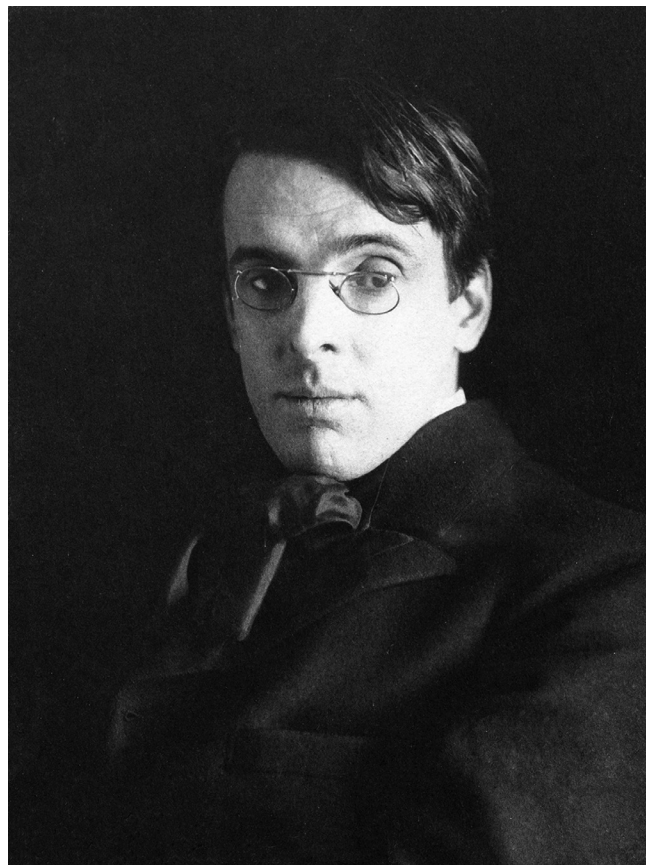
resentative headlines include: "Yeats' Patriotic Mission: Using the Irish Theatre as a Means to Help Along the National Revival Movement"⁷; "W.B. Yeats Honored: County Sligo Men Give a Dinner to the Irish Poet and Dramatist"⁸; "The Irish Literary Revival: Splendid Lecture by William Butler Yeats at Carnegie Hall—Tells a Strongly Nationalist Audience of the Good Work in the Old Land."⁹ The last of these articles claimed: "No Irishman who has spoken on a New York platform for very many years received a warmer welcome or more hearty applause than Mr. Yeats, and none deserved it better. He touched the hearts as well as the imagination and the reason of his audience, and it was one of the most thoroughly representative Irish gatherings ever held in New York."

This adulation followed Yeats as he journeyed from the Northeast to the Midwest. Both the *Irish World* and the *Gaelic American* reported on the welcome Yeats received from a nationalist audience in Indianapolis.¹⁰ While in the Midwest, Yeats also experienced the

Photo:

William Butler Yeats (b. 1865 in Dublin — d. 1939 in Mentone, France) was one of Ireland's greatest cultural nationalists.

Over the course of his long life, Yeats endeavored through his collections of folk tales, through his volumes of poetry, through his work in the theatre, and through his literary criticism to help foster a non-sectarian Irish identity rooted in a mythic and mystic Celtic past. He visited America many times to raise awareness and funds for his various efforts. The first of these visits took place in 1903–1904. Courtesy of Wikipedia.



**Photo:**

Archbishop John Ireland (b. 1838 in Burnchurch, Kilkenny – d. 1918 in St. Paul, Minnesota) was a prominent and progressive leader of the Catholic church in America. Ireland's family emigrated to the United States in 1848, and throughout his career he advocated patriotism and assimilation to his immigrant flock. In 1904, he invited W.B. Yeats to speak in his diocese. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

positive reception of two extremely Catholic audiences. After he lectured at the University of Notre Dame, Yeats told Quinn: "The Fathers were a delight, big merry Irish priests who told me fairy stories & listened to mine & drank punch with me."¹¹ Yeats also wrote to Lady Gregory describing his astonishment at "the general lack of religious prejudice" he found on all sides at Notre Dame.¹² From Notre Dame, Yeats traveled to St. Paul, where he was invited to speak by Archbishop John Ireland. Yeats described that audience to Quinn "as one of the easiest to stir." That report was probably surprising, considering that Yeats claimed "a great part of it" was comprised of "priests to be."¹³

PRAISE FROM COAST TO COAST

From Minnesota, Yeats continued west, all the way to the Pacific coast, where he was greeted in San Francisco with yet more praise from the Irish-American press. The *Gaelic American* ran an article effusively headlined "Yeats Captures California—The Great Irish

Poet Addresses Immense Audience in San Francisco."¹⁴ The article also mentioned that in addition to speaking before academic audiences at Berkeley, Stanford, and Santa Clara, Yeats had spoken "under the auspices of the League of the Cross" to an audience comprised of "all manner of people—men and women interested in the cause of Ireland, clergy, professional men, litterateurs." On that occasion, according to the *Gaelic American*, Yeats had been introduced warmly by a Reverend Philip O'Ryan, whose remarks once again suggest that the clerical circumspection that dogged Yeats in Ireland was not present in this part of America.

And the apex of American Irish adoration for Yeats came when Yeats returned to New York and delivered a speech that had been advertised in the *Gaelic American* for weeks: an address on "Robert Emmet, the Apostle of Irish Liberty" at the annual celebration held under the auspices of *Clan Na Gael*. This organization was, of course, the American wing of the Irish Republican

Brotherhood. John Devoy, editor of the *Gaelic American*, had long been the leading member of this organization. Moreover, 1903 was the centenary of the rising led by Emmet. According to Declan Kiely, “[t]his was [Yeats’] only overtly political lecture subject, one he had been reluctant to deliver until persuaded by Quinn.”¹⁵ The increased fee of \$250 he earned for the night no doubt aided Quinn’s considerable powers of persuasion. But days before he delivered the lecture, Yeats wrote in a tone of frustration to Lady Gregory:

*I am dreadfully busy over my Emmet lecture, which is a frightful nuisance. It is indeed, as you say, a sword dance and I must give to it every moment. I had no idea until I started on it how completely I have thought myself out of the whole stream of traditional Irish feeling on such subjects. I am just as strenuous a Nationalist as ever, but I have got to express these things all differently.*¹⁶

But the four thousand patriots who turned out to hear Yeats speak, by far the largest audience Yeats addressed while in America, were in no way disappointed with what the newest apostle of Irish liberty had to say. The *Gaelic American* reported that Yeats “received a welcome that will

tingle pleasantly in his ears as long as he lives” and that his address was “fully appreciated by the audience and will long be remembered.”¹⁷

YEATS IN THE SHADOW OF SYNGE

The historical evidence demonstrates that while some conservative Irish-Catholic clergy in America did not embrace Yeats, a significant number of the clergy and a preponderance of Irish-Catholic organizations did so eagerly and enthusiastically. This relationship between Yeats and Irish-Catholic America—aloof circumspection by conservative clergy, but zealous acceptance by the patriotic societies and the nationalist press—would have perhaps continued for the remainder of Yeats’ long, distinguished career, if he had not been instrumental in introducing to the western world another talented Anglo-Irish littérateur whom he had first met floundering in Paris in 1896. Yeats had advised the young artist to forsake the cosmopolitan and to embrace the local, to forgo imitation of current literary trends and develop his own style based on the national traditions of Ireland. Forget Paris and go to Aran, Yeats had told him, and go he did. The eventual result of John Millington Synge’s pilgrimage to those primitive isles was a slim oeuvre of just six plays that would forever alter

Illustration:

The New York Clan na Gael invited W.B. Yeats to deliver an address at their annual gala, which was held on February 28, 1904 and which commemorated the centenary of Robert Emmet’s failed 1803 rebellion. The affair was heavily publicized in the Gaelic American newspaper. Yeats was paid handsomely by the organizers and received a warm response from the large, nationalist crowd. Courtesy of Steven Butler.

THE GAELIC AMERICAN

William Butler Yeats

The Renowned Irish Poet and Dramatist, will deliver the
ADDRESS ON ROBERT EMMET

At the annual celebration held under the auspices of
The Clan-Na-Gael
At the Academy of Music
14th Street and Irving Place

On Sunday Evening, Feb. 28, 1904

Mr. W. B. Yeats is one of the leaders of thought in Ireland and has done splendid work in the new Irish literary movement, which is fast restoring Ireland to the place she once held in the opinion of the world. He is now on a lecturing tour in this country and his address on Feb. 28 will be the last delivered, during this trip, in the United States. He is the only European who has ever been invited by forty-six American universities to speak before their students and he has made a most favorable impression, both for himself and his country, on the men who will rule this Republic in the near future. His address on Robert Emmet will be a literary and artistic treat, which no Irishman or woman, who has the opportunity should miss.

An appropriate musical programme will be announced later.
Comptroller Grout will preside.
General admission, 50 cts., reserved seats, 75 cts.

the course of modern Irish Literature.

But with respect to Yeats' reputation among the American Irish, the result of his championing of Synge was that "the great Irish poet" who had so impressed audiences with his preaching about the Irish revival, would be transformed, suddenly and shocking when he returned in 1911 with the Abbey Theatre's touring company, into a so-called "British Government Pensioner" who peddled lies and blasphemies about the Irish-Catholic peasantry to American theatre audiences eager to have their stage-Irish stereotypes reinforced.¹⁸

And as for John Quinn, when it came to choosing between Irish-American nationalists and Irish poets and playwrights, that was no choice at all. When the Abbey players were arrested in Philadelphia at the behest of the prominent *Clan na Gael* man Joseph McGarrity, and charged with performing blasphemy and obscenity, Quinn journeyed south from New York City and defended them *pro bono*, securing a dismissal of the charges and earning, once again, the continued gratitude of the Irish intelligentsia.¹⁹

Endnotes

- 1 The definitive biography of Quinn is B.L. Reid's *The Man from New York: John Quinn and His Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Chapter One, "Beginnings" (pages 3–32), covers the period from 1870–1904.
- 2 Alan Himber, ed. *The Letters of John Quinn to William Butler Yeats* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 48.
- 3 The charge of heresy was provoked in large part by the performance, in May 1899, of Yeats' play *The Countess Cathleen*, a play which depicts starving peasants selling their souls to merchant-devils for food. Catholic opposition to the play is summarized succinctly by Frank Hugh O'Donnell in two letters to the editor of the *Dublin Freeman's Journal* that were later published as a pamphlet titled *Souls for Gold!: A Pseudo-Celtic Drama in Dublin*. Undergraduates at the new Catholic university in Dublin protested the play, a protest that was memorably depicted by James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

- 4 Himber, *JQ to WBY*, 51.
 - 5 Declan Kiely, "Yeats in America," *The Recorder*, v. 15, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 44.
 - 6 Quoted in Kiely: 44–45.
 - 7 *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, 19 December 1903.
 - 8 *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, 26 December, 1903.
 - 9 *Gaelic American*, 9 January, 1904.
 - 10 *Gaelic American*, 23 January, 1904; *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, 23 January 1904.
 - 11 Warwick Gould et al. eds. *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume III: 1901–1904* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 522.
 - 12 Gould et al. *CL III*, 520.
 - 13 Gould et al. *CL III*, 534.
 - 14 *Gaelic American*, 13 February, 1904.
 - 15 Kiely, "Yeats in America," 50–51.
 - 16 Gould et al. *CL III*, 552
 - 17 5 March, 1904.
 - 18 *Gaelic American*, 9 December 1911.
 - 19 See "The Playboy Controversy" section of the website for *Joseph McGarrity: Man of Action, Man of Letters*, a digital exhibition curated by Brian J. MacDonald for the Falvey Memorial Library at Villanova University <https://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/joseph-mcgarrity-man-of-action-man-of-letters/playboy-controversy/>
- See also, Reid, Chapter Five, "1911" (pages 93–118) for a description of Quinn's involvement in *The Playboy* fiasco.

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- Reid, B.L. *The Man from New York: John Quinn and His Friends*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.