



W.B. Yeats: A Life I: The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914

R. F. Foster

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William Butler Yeats has cast his long shadow over the history of both modern poetry and modern Ireland for so long that his preeminence is taken for granted. Now, in the first authorized biography of Yeats to appear in over fifty years, leading Irish historian R.F. Foster travels beyond Yeats's towering image as arguably the century's greatest poet to restore a real sense of Yeats's extraordinary life as Yeats himself experienced it--what he saw, what he did, the passions and the petty squabbles that consumed him, and his alchemical ability to transmute the events of his crowded and contradictory life into enduring art.

In the first volume of this long-awaited biography, Foster covers the poet's first fifty years, bringing new light to bear on Yeats's heroic and often ruthless efforts to invent himself as a poet and public figure. Drawn from a fascinating archive of personal and contemporary documents with the cooperation of surviving members of the Yeats family, it dramatically alters long-held assumptions about the poet's background, his relationship with Maud Gonne and other women, and his roles in the great cultural and political upheavals that transformed Ireland in his lifetime. A rich and entertaining account of Yeats's boyhood days amidst the talented but troubled members of the Yeats and Pollexfen clans provides important insight into the poet's deep and lifelong connection to the Irish landscape, his early, impassioned embrace of the nationalist cause, and his later retreat to the traditions of the once grand Protestant aristocracy. In his own day Yeats attracted enemies and admirers with equal passion, and Foster vividly recreates the friendships, love affairs, and simmering rivalries that swirled about the poet's circles in London, Dublin, and Coole Park. Complementing his meticulous scholarship with a shrewd wit and a novelist's eye for detail, he chronicles the romantic disappointments, financial difficulties, experimentation with hashish and mescal, and the growing preoccupation with the occult that prefaced Yeats's attempt to unite Irish politics with high culture and his creation of an Irish national theater. Here are the poet's memorable encounters with many of the most interesting people of his time, including Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Lady Gregory, J.M. Synge, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and the wildly diverse leaders of the Irish independence movement. And here at last is a full accounting of the complex bond between Yeats and the incomparable Maud Gonne, revealed as an influence eternally recreated 'like the phoenix,' affecting almost everything he did.

Poet, playwright, mystic and revolutionary; lover, confidant, and friend. This brilliant account of the public and private lives of William Butler Yeats illuminates not only the wellspring of his artistic vision, but the modern Irish identity he helped to create. It is essential reading for anyone intrigued by one of the most original and influential voices of the twentieth century.

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