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LIFE IS WORTH GIVING

GREAT POETRY

OF W.B. YEATS

STILL RELEVANT

IN 21ST CENTURY by Fr. Kevin O'Neill Shanley

Ireland's William Butler Yeats is considered by most critics and ordinary readers as one of the greatest poetic talents in the English language in the 20th Century. This was confirmed in 1923 when the Nobel Prize for Literature was granted to him. And there is good reason to believe that his poetry will be equally revered well into the 21st Century. Part of the reason seems to be the somewhat mystical outlook of the poet and his work. It is often added that the English language brings out the best in the Irish. Rarely has the people as the Irish paid the lavish compliment and taken the subtle revenge of turning its English conquerers' speech into verbal sorcery.

A recent study of his work, entitled "Poetry for Young People: William Butler Yeats," tells of his birth in Dublin on June 13, 1865, into a more than talented family. His father, John Butler Yeats, had been training as a lawyer and then switched careers to become a well-known portrait painter. He read to his children the great works of literature, and encouraged his children to fulfill their talents. Another sibling, Jack B. Yeats, became one of Ireland's greatest painters.

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In addition to his great ~~accomplishments~~ ^(TALENTS) as a poet, Yeats was an accomplished playwright and in 1899, along with Lady Gregory, founded the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin. This is now called the Abbey Theatre. When rebellion broke out in Dublin in 1916, many of his friends were killed. When the rebels surrendered at the end of the Easter Week Rebellion, the British executed the leaders. Then followed the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. Yeats was influenced by all of these events as demonstrated in his poetry.

He also served as a senator in the Irish Free State Government from 1922-28 and worked hard to preserve Ireland's rich cultural heritage, oppose censorship, and improve education. Yeats died in 1939 at the age of 73. He now rests in Drumcliffe churchyard near Ben Bulbin mountain, IN CO-SLIGO.

In this remarkable introduction of Yeats' poetry, edited by Jonathan Allison, 26 of the Irish poet's better poems are used not only to acquaint young readers to the verses but to transport them to his beloved Ireland. And adding to the value of the book is a series of breathtaking illustrations by Glenn Harrington which range from Ireland's atmospheric natural landscapes to vivid portraits of Yeats' wonderful characters which are human, animal and fantastic.

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It needs to be understood, too, that Yeats was an ardent Irish nationalist and this fostered authentic Celtic/Irish identity in him. He drew from his own heritage, and fostered it, to counteract the English attempt to make the Irish into "West Britons."

Among the poems in this book is "The Song of Wandering Aengus," the legendary Celtic god of love, youth and poetry who is on a quest to locate the magical girl who was changed from a fish into a human being.

And in one of his better known poems, "The Lake Isle of Innishfree," Yeats was inspired by his own longing for Ireland to compose it while standing in a bustling London street. He heard the call to return home "in the deep heart's core."

A religious and somewhat mystical man, Yeats focuses on the return of Jesus Christ at the end of time in the poem "The Second Coming." But the poem actually deals with his fear that the world will be plunged into chaos and bloodshed by an anti-Christ.

And in a similar vein, Yeats' poem "Sailing to Byzantium," the poet is faced with the prospect of growing old and wishes to turn himself into a golden bird with the power of prophecy. He contrasts natural life, which does not last forever, with everlasting art such as his poem.

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A great lover of nature and animals, Yeats' poetry also focuses on a fish, the Wild Swans at Coole, a hawk, and the cat and the moon. All of the poems selected in the book, 26 in all, have a story to tell. The brief explanations by the editor at the beginning of each poem are great aids to the understanding and enjoyment of each. The book is a great way for the young and the not-so-young appreciate one of the best of modern poets. Yeats is, indeed, one of the greatest poets in our age to put pen to paper and produce stimulating and enjoyable verse.

As the literary world pauses in 2005 to honor the 140th Anniversary of the birth of this great poet, it would be good to reflect on his life and writings which have influenced modern poetry to such a great extent.