

Yeats's Wireless

William Butler Yeats took to the radio in the 1930s with poetry that he hoped would sound a public theme and stir the public interest.

by Colton Johnson

On February 2, 1937, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) wrote to a half-dozen friends, calling himself “a fool,” “a bore,” “an ignoramus,” and, most improbably, “a humbled man.”

This rare moment of self-reproach came not from artistic failure or political defeat, but from his radio. He was sure he had utterly failed in an ambitious scheme to use the new technology to advance a long-standing hope of engaging public issues through poetry, directly and without the mediation of the printed page.

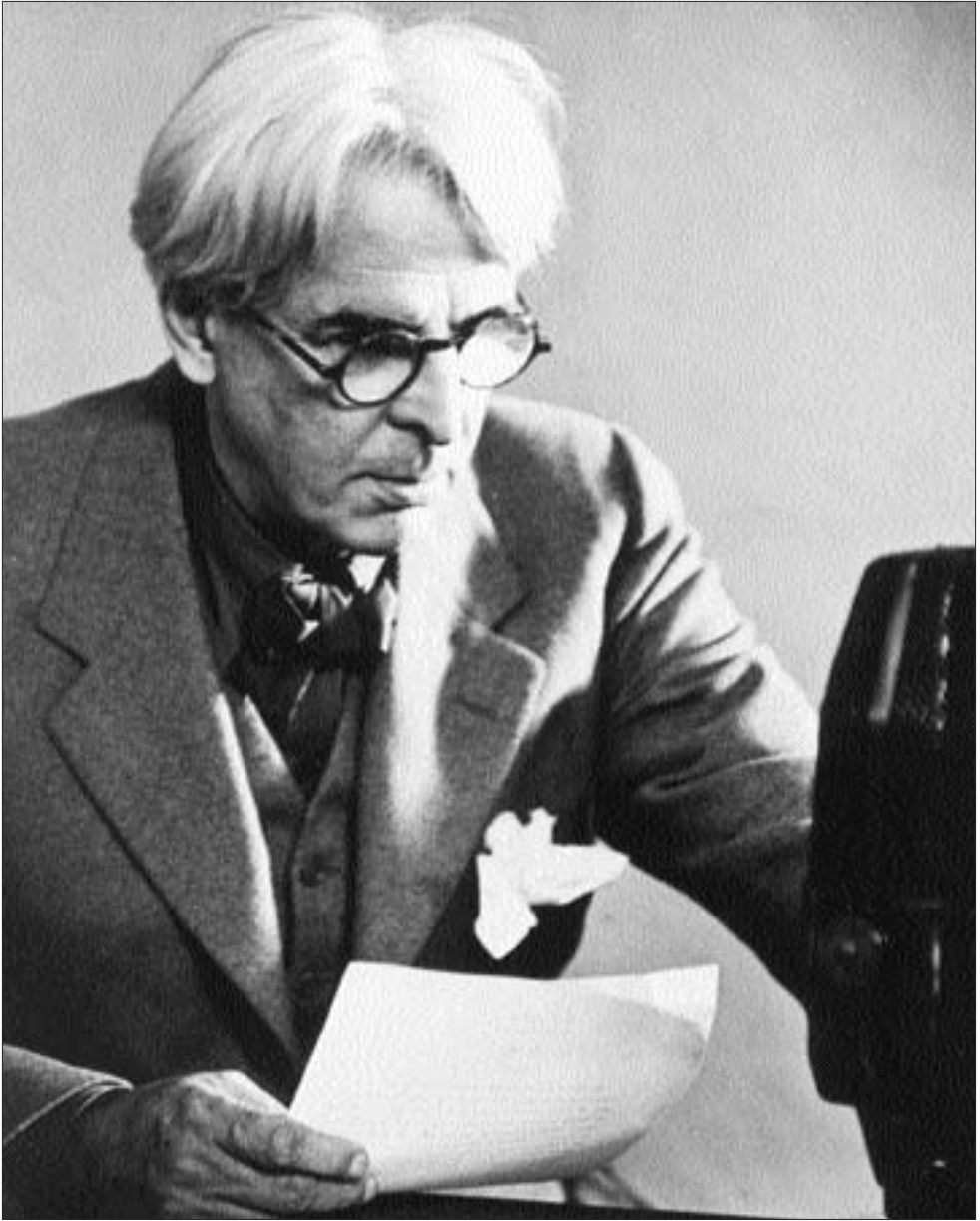
Arguably the greatest poet to write in English in the 20th century, Yeats the dramatist, senator, elitist, converser with the spirit world, father, loyal friend, meandering husband, social theorist, authoritarian, editor, lustful old man, and Nobel laureate increasingly kneaded his public and private lives—and his confusion about them—into his verse, prompting the American poet Archibald MacLeish to call him “the best of modern poets.” Accepting the declaration of the German writer Thomas Mann that “in our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms,” MacLeish wrote in a 1938 essay that he found in Yeats’s later verse “the first English poetry in a century which has dared to re-enter the world. . . . It is the first poetry in generations which can cast a shadow in the sun of actual things. . . . Writing as Yeats writes, a man need not pretend an ignorance of the world, need not affect a strangeness from his time.”

Yeats’s experiments with radio between 1931 and 1939 extend this aspect of his

modernism. He played down the radio work to Ezra Pound as “a new technique which amuses me & keeps me writing,” and to his wife as a means to “pay for my legitimate London expenses,” but he devoted much time and energy to the “remarkable experience” of speaking “to a multitude, each member of it being alone,” sometimes even seeing in it “an historic movement.” In all, he participated in 11 radio broadcasts, and at least three more were planned when declining health made him concede in 1938, “My broadcasting is finished.”

Wireless voice transmission was barely a decade old and the BBC only in its ninth year when Yeats began his experiments. But poetry on the radio was not entirely new, and the medium’s potential for the literary artist was under broad examination. In 1930 John Masefield, the poet laureate of Britain, urged poets to recover their heritage through radio. Imagining ancient times, when poetry was central to the lives of every member of a relatively small and simple community in which “all ranks and classes of men met together,” Masefield decried the printing press as “a detriment to the poetical art” that “put away the poet from his public.” “It may be,” he concluded, “that broadcasting may make listening to poetry a pleasure again, tho’ this can only come about with difficulty and with a great deal of hard work.”

In America, Harriet Monroe, the founding editor of *Poetry*, a cradle of American modernism, was musing on the same ques-



Yeats at the BBC microphone in 1937. Poetry, he said, was “before all else good speech.”

tions. Although not herself “a radio fan,” she granted that “this radio subject” called for serious attention. Among her many worries—that only inferior poetry seemed to find its way to the studios, that poets might make poorer radio readers than trained professionals, that publishers seemed oddly uninterested in allowing poets’ works to be broadcast—she sounded a theme similar to Masefield’s: “The public cannot yet listen intelligently to poetry,

for they have had no practice in listening since the invention of printing.” Monroe lamented the “500 years poetry has been silent,” suggesting that “the radio is the poet’s one best chance of escape from that condition. Poetry is a vocal art; the radio will bring back its audience.”

Among the first poets in Britain or America to take to the radio, Yeats clearly started out with little theoretical

intent and even less knowledge of the medium. His poems had been aired on the BBC since at least 1926, but he had never heard them. “What it feels like to listen to a man speaking over the radio I do not know,” he told a journalist just after his first broadcasts, “for although I have heard music broadcast I have never listened to anyone speaking over the wireless.” His first 15-minute programs, aired from the Belfast studio of the BBC on September 8, 1931, consisted of an introduction to an upcoming radio performance by Dublin’s Abbey Theatre company of his translation of Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* and a reading of poems.

Yeats’s tone was familiar and instructive, and he speculated about the new medium: “You should try and call up not the little Abbey Theatre but an open-air Greek theatre with its high-pillared stage, and yourselves all sitting tier above tier upon marble seats in some great amphitheatre cut out of a hillside. If the wireless can be got to work, in the country house where I shall be staying, I shall be listening too, and as I have never heard a play broadcasted I do not know whether I shall succeed in calling into my imagination that ancient theatre.”

His translation of the play, he said, needed to be “simple enough and resonant enough to be instantaneously felt and understood . . . something that everybody in the house, scholar or potboy, would understand as easily as he understood a political speech or an article in a newspaper.”

In his second broadcast, Yeats introduced and read five of his poems as part of “An Irish Programme.” Afterward, he explained that speaking before a microphone—“a little oblong of paper like a visiting card on a pole”—was “a poor substitute for a crowded hall.” He wryly compared the experience to “addressing the Senate in Dublin. . . . You see, you are speaking to an audience which is only just not there.”

Yeats spoke in two later programs of poetry as putting “the natural words in the nat-

ural order”; it was “before all else good speech.” He returned to his struggle to reconcile the transient and political with his art in a comment on his poem “The Fisherman”:

I had founded Irish literary societies, an Irish theatre, I had become associated with the projects of others, I had met much unreasonable opposition. To overcome it I had to make my thoughts modern. Modern thought is not simple; I became argumentative, passionate, bitter; when I was very bitter I used to say to myself, “I do not write for these people who attack everything that I value, nor for those others who are lukewarm friends, I am writing for a man I have never seen.” I built up in my mind the picture of a man who lived in the country where I had lived, who fished in mountain streams where I had fished; I said to myself, “I do not know whether he is born yet, but born or unborn it is for him I write.” I made this poem about him.

In 1935, Yeats gave a formal talk on modern poetry. A version of his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, published a month later, the talk concluded with Yeats combining his thoughts about technique with a favorite observation by an early idol, the English poet and social reformer William Morris:

When I have read you a poem I have tried to read it rhythmically; I may be a bad reader; or read badly because I am out of sorts, or self-conscious; but there is no other method. A poem is an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech and their association with profound

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feeling. To read a poem like prose, that hearers unaccustomed to poetry may find it easy to understand, is to turn it into bad, florid prose. If anybody reads or recites poetry as if it were prose from some public platform, I ask you, speaking for poets, living, dead or unborn, to protest in whatever way occurs to your perhaps youthful minds; if they recite or read by wireless, I ask you to express your indignation by letter. William Morris, coming out of the hall where somebody had read or recited his *Sigurd the Volsung*, said: "It cost me a lot of damned hard work to get that thing into verse."

Shortly after the modern poetry broadcast, Yeats discussed extending the audience for poetry with George Barnes, the BBC's producer of talks. In agreeing to plan at least two programs, Yeats renewed his early enthusiasm both for popular poetry and for poetry performed with a distinct musical emphasis. In 1901, writing about a revival of ballads, he had contrasted the poetry of 19th-century middle-class poets as different as Burns and Browning with true "popular poetry" unbound by the printed page—spoken poetry understood by aristocrat and peasant alike: "Before the counting-house had created a new class and a new art without breeding and without ancestry, and set this art and this class between the hut and the castle, and between the hut and the cloister, the art of the people was as closely mingled with the art of the coteries as was the speech of the people . . . with the unchanging speech of the poets."

About the same time, praising the British actress Florence Farr's method of speaking while playing a psaltery, he had linked his dislike of "print and paper" to "something" he had always disliked about singing. "Although she sometimes spoke to a little tune," he said, "it was never singing, never any-

thing but speech. A singing note . . . would have spoiled everything; nor was it reciting, for she spoke to a notation as definite as that of a song, using the instrument, which murmured sweetly and faintly, under the spoken sounds."

In his collaboration with the BBC, Yeats tempered these dreamy archaisms with modern pragmatism. He busied himself with new plans in Dublin, where he could draw on the Abbey Theatre's talented company, but also where, he told Barnes, "I am not afraid of anybody, and most people are afraid of me. It is the reverse in London."

In Dublin, Yeats finished his "Casement poem," an attack on what he saw as British perfidy in the summary execution in 1916 of the Anglo-Irish martyr Roger Casement. A recent book had convinced Yeats that Casement's "black diaries," purported accounts of his homosexual activities, were British forgeries meant to suppress agitation for his reprieve.

The actor John Stephenson's reading of "Roger Casement" was to be the climax of the broadcast on February 1, 1937. The ballad named the two men Yeats held responsible for spreading the calumny against Casement in America—Sir Cecil Arthur Spring-Rice, the British ambassador to the United States at the time, and the English poet Alfred Noyes, who in 1916 had been teaching at Princeton University.

Roger Casement

(After reading "*The Forged Casement Diaries*" by Dr. Maloney)

I say that Roger Casement
Did what he had to do,
He died upon the gallows
But that is nothing new.

Afraid they might be beaten
Before the bench of Time
They turned a trick by forgery
And blackened his good name.

A perjurer stood ready
To prove their forgery true;
They gave it out to all the world
And that is something new;

For Spring-Rice had to whisper it
Being their Ambassador,
And then the speakers got it
And writers by the score.

Come Alfred Noyes, come all the troop
That cried it far and wide,
Come from the forger and his desk,
Desert the perjurer's side;

Come speak your bit in public
That some amends be made
To this most gallant gentleman
That is in quick-lime laid.

As the broadcast drew near, Yeats sent out a volley of alerts. He told a friend that if she had “any body from the Foreign Office or its neighbourhood to dinner, postpone dinner & both listen in & watch results. The last item is my Casement poem. The Foreign Office has forgotten its crime.” He informed another that the poem would be “sent out on the wireless from Athlone” and, in a baffling geopolitical leap, that “the ‘record’ of it will then be sent to Cairo, where the wireless is in Irish hands.” He spoke of hopes for a recording contract with “a certain big gramophone firm” and sent the poem to a Dublin newspaper, requesting “the utmost publicity on National grounds.”

Yeats evidently expected much to come together in the broadcast. But when it was over, everything seemed to have fallen apart. The next morning's flurry of notes described what he had heard when he tuned in his wireless: “Every human sound turned into the groans, roars, bellows of a wild [beast].” It was “a fiasco,” he ruefully informed his BBC producer. “Possibly all that I think noble and poignant in speech is impossible. Perhaps my old bundle of poet's tricks is useless. I got Stephenson

while singing . . . to clap his hands in time to the music after every verse and [the poet F. R.] Higgins added people in the wings clapping their hands. It was very stirring—on the wireless it was a schoolboy knocking with the end of a pen-knife or a spoon.”

A few days later, however, things looked better. Higgins convinced Yeats that he had “mismanaged” the new wireless set on which he had been listening and that a different arrangement of microphones would solve the other technical problems. The Abbey actors repeated the program at the Dublin radio station, and Yeats pronounced their recording a success.

His public's response to the reading and to the ballad's publication the following morning in the *Irish Press* was as important to Yeats as the technical revelations. Mrs. Yeats told him of a marked “deference” to her as she went about the Dublin shops, and Free State President Eamon De Valera's Republican newspaper proclaimed that “for generations to come,” the ballad would “pour scorn on the forgers and their backers.” Yeats was especially pleased when the antiquarian and revolutionary Count George Plunkett hailed it as “a ballad the people much needed.”

The first comment on the poem in the English press disappointed Yeats. It focused, he wrote, “on my bad rhymes and says that after so many years it is impossible to discuss the authenticity of the diaries. . . . Politics, as the game is played today, are so much foul lying.” He became, however, increasingly satisfied with the event, deciding that his ballads “though not supremely good are not ephemeral; the young will sing them now and after I am dead. In them I defend a noble-natured man. I do the old work of the poets but I defend no cause.” Alfred Noyes responded to Yeats's charge with what Yeats called “a noble letter” to the *Irish Press*, explaining his apparently slight involvement in the Casement affair and urging a full-



The British shelled Dublin's post office during the 1916 Easter Rising and villified Roger Casement, hanged for his role in the rebellion. A poem by Yeats castigated their treachery.

scale investigation of the matter, preferably headed by Yeats.

The case remained closed, but public poetry had stirred the people after all, and Yeats went forward with his radio plans. His subsequent broadcasts, more complex and less overtly political, originated from London. They introduced the reader V. C. Clinton-Baddeley and included musical interjections, patter, and “rough singing of rough songs” by “ordinary people who sing because we are in love or drunk, or because we don’t want to think of anything in particular.” In one broadcast, “In the Poet’s Parlour,” one or two other poets present find Yeats’s selections too melancholy and interrupt him; they insist on taking over the remainder of the program, which also introduced as a reader Margot Ruddock, a young English actress and poet with whom Yeats had become infatuated.

Yeats wanted “a public theme” in his July 1937 broadcast, “My Own Poetry.” Trying not to “stress the politics,” he contrasted what he called “the

tragic real Ireland” with “the dream.” The first section consisted of three political poems. “The Rose Tree” was a dialogue between two leaders of the Easter 1916 Rising, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly. “An Irish Airman foresees His Death” was Yeats’s elegy for Robert Gregory, who joined the Royal Air Force during World War I and was shot down over Italy. Quoting Pearse’s claim that “a national movement cannot be kept alive unless blood is shed in every generation,” Yeats noted Gregory’s abnegation, in his military service, of allegiance to Britain. “The Curse of Cromwell” completed the trio of poems. Yeats elucidated the enduring hatred in Ireland of the 17th-century English mastermind of Catholic suppression and Ulster separation who “came to Ireland as a kind of Lenin” and “destroyed a whole social order.” The second half of the program, “the dream,” included the poems “Running to Paradise” and “Sailing to Byzantium.”

Yeats especially valued his work with Clinton-Baddeley, and the interplay

among readers, producer, and poet intensified. He discussed techniques for reading, chanting, and shaping the poetry programs with his collaborators eagerly and with uncommon openness. Clinton-Baddeley recalled telling Yeats in rehearsal that the opening of “Sailing to Byzantium” (“That is no country for old men. The young/In one another’s arms, birds in the trees . . .”) was “easier on the page than on the tongue.” When he came to the broadcast, Yeats handed him some new lines (“Old men should quit a country where the young/In one another’s arms, birds in the trees. . .”).

Time and the times, however, were conspiring against Yeats and his coworkers. They aired one last program on October 29, 1937. Two broadcasts planned for April 1938 were canceled, as was another (tentatively called “Poems of Love and War”) scheduled for July.

Yeats left Ireland for the last time late in 1938. In failing health, he went to the south of France. Amidst prodigious activity—finishing several poems and a play—he wrote in December to Clinton-Baddeley proposing a small book on music and the speaking of verse, but he responded with chilling finality to the indefatigable George Barnes’s request that he join Masfield, Walter de la Mare, and E. M. Forster in broadcasting “a Christmas or a New Year’s message” on the BBC, “whatever you would most like to say to the country as a whole.” Yeats responded: “I am sorry that I could not do what you wanted. But surely a man so intelligent as yourself understands that if I were to write whatever ‘I would most like to say to the country as a whole,’ or to my family as a whole, it would be altogether unprintable.”

Within months, Yeats was dead and the world was at war. Only one complete recording of his BBC broadcasts survived the bombing of London, along with the re-recording of the 1937 Abbey Theatre program, which had been returned from London to Dublin. Among the effects of

the war, broadcasting was changed forever. What emerged in the following decade, both in England and the United States, bore faint resemblance to the fledgling medium within which Yeats and his colleagues had contrived their experiments. The war validated radio’s importance as a medium for news and the immediate, as well as its value as a form of popular escape into largely irrelevant entertainment. Attempts at “poetic radio scripts” resulted largely in just the sort of leveling, jingoistic, and falsely “popular” works against which Yeats had railed, intermixed with the kind of obscuring “sound effects” that would doubtless have provoked one of his vituperative outbursts. What he might have made of the amalgamation of words, politics, and “rough singing of rough songs” that emerged in radio and recordings in the late 1950s and early 1960s can hardly be imagined.

It may be that another casualty of war was the public voice of the poet that is part of Yeats’s legacy—the opposing balance of the personal with the political, each side sharp and articulate and each confirming and confounding the other—which is keenly evident in the poem that stands, at his choice, at the conclusion of his collected lyrics:

Politics

“In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.”

Thomas Mann

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here’s a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there’s a politician
That has both read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war’s alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms. □