WB YEATS - LANDSCAPE & MEMORY

Who doesn't know The Lake Isle of Innisfree? Here's a poem that everyone should learn and enjoy because it is so musical and evocative ("lake water lapping..."), and because there is such a strong yearning for the landscape of memory and home. In Yeats' case, this was the rugged and beautiful landscape of Sligo on the west coast of Ireland.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree
BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
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.

January. Lough Gill with a bit of Innisfree showing in the distance. The bus driver only allowed me ten minutes with his engine running!

Seeing the landscapes where Yeats grew up adds an extra dimension to many of the poems. Yeats had a very pictorial imagination. His brother and father were fine artists and we can find some of his brother Jack's landscapes at the National Gallery in Dublin.

If you stand facing the Atlantic at Sandhill, the beach near Sligo where he grew up, you have, on your right, about 12 miles away, the huge, ox-like, “masculine” mountain of Ben Bulben. It thrusts forward towards the sea and dominates the countryside. Near Ben Bulben is Lissadell House, the very stately home of the Gore-Booth family and of the two daughters, Eva and her sister Connie (who married and became Countess Constance Markievicz). Yeats visited the house regularly as a boy.
(Another ten minute sketch, I’m afraid)

Eva and Connie Gore-Booth

Below is Lissadell House

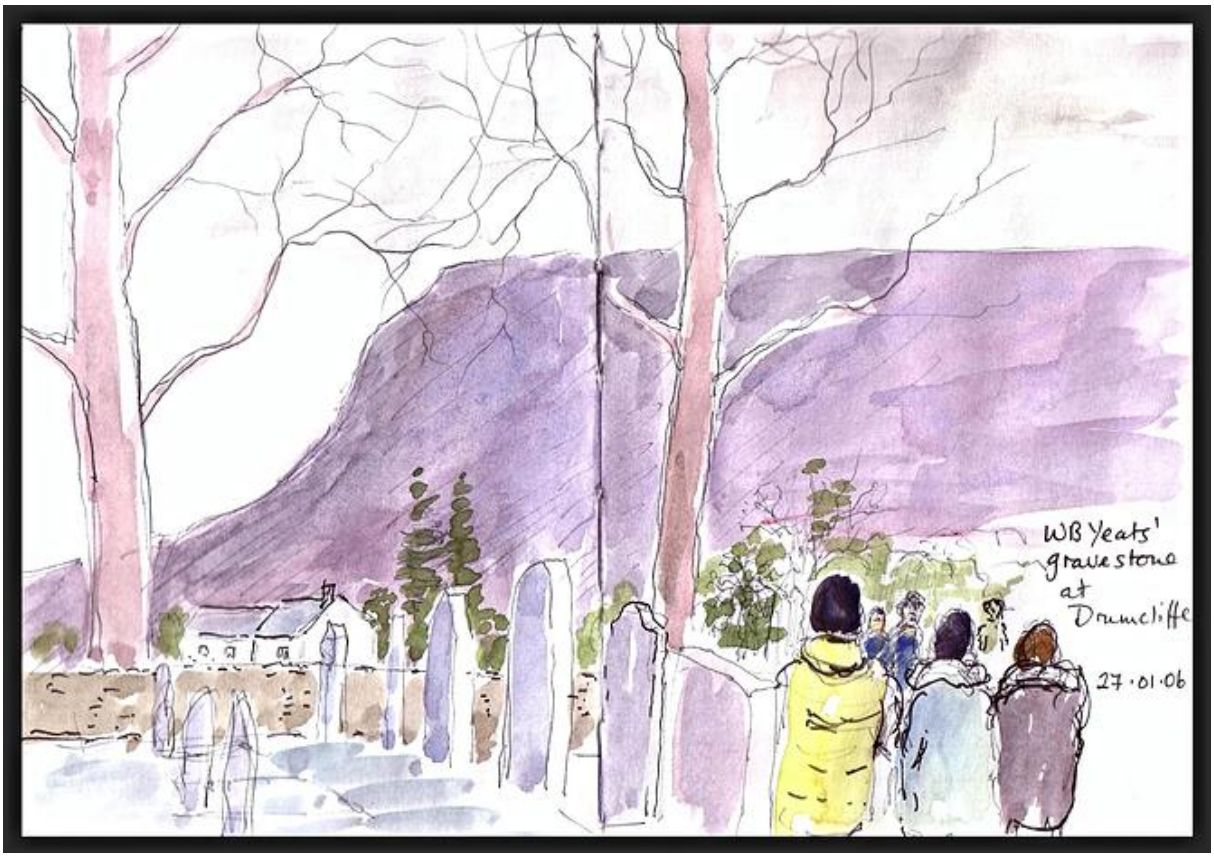
He was clearly fascinated by the sisters, who were both interested in politics, art and literature. However, he never forgot the fact that when he visited this glitteringly wealthy, upper-class house, he had been told to sleep in the stables rather than in the house itself. He was seen as an interesting but inferior local lad. Connie Markievicz became drawn into revolutionary politics and fought on the barricades at the Easter Rising. She was sentenced to death but had the sentence commuted to a prison term. She went on to become a minister in the first Irish parliament.

Connie, the revolutionary

Yeats' grave lies beneath the shadow of Ben Bulben, in the nearby church at Drumcliffe, with the epitaph he wrote for himself taken from the end of his poem Under Ben Bulben.

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!



To the left of Sligo, on the other hand, you have a mysteriously "feminine" mountain, looking rather like an enormous breast with a nipple on top: this is Knock-na-reay, which is a good walk up, with magnificent views of the west coast of Ireland. The nipple, when you reach the top, turns out to be a huge Celtic burial chamber, attributed to a Queen Maeve (whoever she was) - back in neolithic times. It has never been excavated

and archaeologists think it may have untold riches and passages and hundreds of chambers, like one of the pyramids. But it is so inaccessible that it will probably never be touched. It's better that way; let's keep a few mysteries in life!

Pupils and me at the top

Knock-na-reay is undoubtedly feminine, rounded, remote and mysterious - opposed to the arrogant, forward-thrusting, bull-like Ben Bulben. Yeats can be understood, I think, topographically as well as poetically: we can picture him as sandwiched between two worlds: a 'masculine' world of politics, the civil war and his duties as a senator; and a 'feminine' world, of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne (and for her daughter Yseult!), his fascination for automatic writing - as practised by his wife, Georgiana - and his interest in the great love stories of Irish celtic legends. The landscape shows it all.

Here, to finish, is a poem by Yeats, reflecting on his feelings for these two girls, about whom he was obviously so ambivalent. The poem was written after their deaths in 1926 and 1927. He, too, had been attracted by the idea of revolution, yet he had also seen through its double-edged nature (see Easter 1916, with, again, a very ambiguous portrayal of the time). He had been attracted, very much, to their affluent, leisured, artistic world. And yet, and yet...?

When we read the poems, we can wonder whether he was swayed more by his "masculine", or by his "feminine" side - and I think we can see some of this struggle going on here. At all events, landscape remained very important to him, both in real and in symbolic terms.

In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.
But a raving autumn shears
Blossom from the summer's wreath;
The older is condemned to death,
Pardoned, drags out lonely years
Conspiring among the ignorant.
I know not what the younger dreams -
Some vague Utopia - and she seems,
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
An image of such politics.
Many a time I think to seek
One or the other out and speak
Of that old Georgian mansion, mix
Pictures of the mind, recall
That table and the talk of youth,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

Dear shadows, now you know it all,
All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right.
The innocent and the beautiful
Have no enemy but time;
Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch;
Should the conflagration climb,
Run till all the sages know.
We the great gazebo built,
They convicted us of guilt;
Bid me strike a match and blow.

This is wonderfully rhetorical stuff. He wishes to burn up “time” in a magnificent bonfire. In terms of imagery, it is the answer to the “shadows” of the past. But what are the implications of the final 3 lines? A gazebo is an ornamental pavilion in a pleasure garden, usually. It's the sort of thing one would expect to find at Lissadell. Yeats seems to be sharing in the glory of some such construction, but is it a place from which to observe the "conflagration" or is it going to be itself part of the burning? What was Yeats guilty

of? If we "bid" him strike the "match" are we blowing the fire into an even bigger fire, or are we, or is he, trying to blow the flame out? The ambiguities reflect Yeats' own ambivalence, not just to the girls, but to his role as poet and politician. The politician is trying to act on the world, while the poet is trying to reflect on the world. In this poem, I sense Yeats' inability clearly to distinguish between these two worlds.

Sandhill Beach near Sligo