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Contents

“Irrigated Neither by the Seine Nor by the Thames”:
Jack B. Yeats’s Reception in London, Nathan O’Donnell



“Irrigated Neither by the Seine Nor by the Thames”: Jack B. Yeats’s Reception in London

Nathan O'Donnell

Abstract

This article investigates the history of the joint exhibition of Jack B. Yeats and William Nicholson at the National Gallery in 1942, an exhibition that has been described as the show that “made [Yeats’s] name in London”. The received narrative posits it as a “breakthrough” exhibition, an important British tribute to an Irish artist, precipitating Yeats’s acknowledgement at home and boosting the sale of his work internationally. What this account obscures are the decades Yeats had spent exhibiting and cultivating his reputation in London, the city where he had been born and educated, and where his career as an artist had started. This article examines the cross-currents of cultural diplomacy and wartime bureaucracy that led to the 1942 exhibition but also looks beyond them, at Yeats’s relationships within the London art world, including his connection to a network of artists and cultural figures who had supported him through the preceding decades: in particular, a dealer and gallerist whose name has not, to date, figured in the scholarship surrounding Yeats’s work, Lillian Browse. An examination of their relationship reveals Yeats as an engaged, responsive artist, attentive to developments in both British and European art, rather than a strictly “national” painter operating—as one critic put it—on the “periphery of the twentieth century”.

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The joint exhibition of Jack B. Yeats and William Nicholson's work at the National Gallery in London, which opened in January 1942, has been described by Bruce Arnold as the show that "made [Yeats's] name in London".¹ This attestation, from Arnold's 1998 biography of the artist, reflects the received narrative about the development of Yeats's career, his "breakthrough" National Gallery show representing an important British tribute to an Irish artist, precipitating his recognition at home, and boosting the sale of his work internationally. What is obscured in this account, however, is the extent to which Yeats had already, over many years, been cultivating his reputation in London, the city where he had been born and educated, and where his career as an artist had started. He began working as an illustrator and cartoonist in the 1890s, living first in London, then in Devon with his wife Cottie; at this time, he began providing illustrations for books and newspapers, including several for the *Manchester Guardian*, many of which drew from British city life. For many years, up until the 1940s, he also contributed cartoons to *Punch* under the pseudonym W. Bird. As a fine artist, he began by working in watercolours; from around 1900, he was also working in oils. He would go on to have a more-or-less continuous exhibiting history in Britain over many decades, even after he moved to Ireland permanently in 1912. This aspect of his professional life warrants further examination, revealing as it does his close, complex relationship to British art and, beyond Britain, to Europe.

The truth is that Yeats's career as a painter was as closely bound to England as it was to Ireland. He was cognisant from the outset of an English as well as an Irish audience and made the explicit decision to frame himself as an "Irish" artist exhibiting in London, with all the cultural connotations that came with it. He exhibited his work initially under the rubric of *Scenes from the West of Ireland*, although by the late 1920s he had shed this limiting national and illustrative framework. Yeats began to position himself, and to be acknowledged, as a "serious" painter of more international dimensions. Nevertheless, he remained committed to ordinary life in Ireland (and to the Irish landscape) as his subject, gradually earning the hard-won esteem of his peers, including eminent painters and critics in the English art world, for several decades before his purported "breakthrough". Particular approbation came from Walter Sickert, who wrote rather breathlessly to Yeats in 1924, stating that his work "fulfils my theory that there can be modern painting—Life above everything".² Sickert and Yeats would become close friends; Yeats called on Sickert whenever he visited London thereafter. In the two decades that followed, Sickert's admiration was shared by a circle of dedicated allies—painters and illustrators who knew his work—who continued to hold Yeats in high esteem, as did one particularly dedicated gallerist, who came to know Yeats's work in the early 1930s and would go on

to prove to be among his most dedicated supporters, the dealer later known affectionately within London art circles as “the Duchess of Cork Street”, Lillian Browse (Fig. 1).



Figure 1.

Ida Kar, Lillian Gertrude Browse, late 1950s, square film negative, 2 ¼ inch. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG x132102). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery.

The narrative of Yeats’s 1942 “breakthrough” obscures the ongoing support of figures like Browse, whose name does not feature in any of the standard accounts of Yeats’s life and work. In accounts like Arnold’s, Yeats’s ascension to international repute is predicated upon a series of more-or-less chance encounters with British cultural officials, in particular John Betjeman and Kenneth Clark, both of whom were indeed involved in orchestrating—if not organising—the National Gallery exhibition, Clark as Director of the Gallery and Betjeman as a conduit between Irish culture and British officialdom during the war. The implication here is that the 1942 exhibition was the result of affiliative cultural politics, with more than a suggestion of privileged male establishment cronyism. This has several negative effects, devaluing the merit of Yeats’s work, excluding other key figures like Browse whose support of Yeats was more longstanding and sincere, and underestimating

the significance of his not inconsiderable exhibiting history in London earlier in the century, prior to his “breakthrough” at the hands of the British cultural elite.

“Aour Natuv Artusts Here in Oireland”

The English poet John Betjeman was stationed in Dublin as press attaché to the British diplomat Sir John Maffey from January 1941 to August 1943. Speculation has surrounded his activities while in Ireland; suggestions that he was engaged in espionage have been largely disputed though never entirely dismissed.³ Be that as it may, during his time in Ireland, he became a much-respected figure and was lauded for his efforts in the field of cultural diplomacy. As Alex Runchman has noted, the news of his return to England in 1943 was accompanied by much eulogising, including an *Irish Times* report praising his ability not only “to interpret England to the Irish, but also to interpret Ireland sympathetically to the English”.⁴ Certainly, during his time in Ireland, he did much to foster cultural exchange between the two countries, for instance, extending the invitation to Cyril Connolly to give a lecture for the Royal Irish Academy in summer 1941, following which Connolly was persuaded to publish an “Irish Number” of *Horizon* in January 1942. Such diplomatic overtures in the literary field were accompanied by an equal campaign for the promotion of Irish art. In May 1941, Kenneth Clark visited Ireland, on Betjeman’s invitation; while there, Betjeman arranged his meeting with Yeats at his home on Fitzwilliam Square. Early the following year, the joint exhibition of Yeats and Nicholson took place at the National Gallery. An illustrated essay on Yeats’s work, written by Clark, also appeared in *Horizon’s* “Irish Number”.

This was one of several temporary exhibitions held at the National Gallery during the war, while the permanent collection was being housed in emergency storage in Wales. Already, by 1942, solo exhibitions of Walter Sickert and Augustus John, as well as a major group exhibition, *British Painting since Whistler*, had taken place, to considerable public acclaim. This was an august roster of artists, and Yeats’s inclusion gained him serious attention from some of the most prominent figures in the contemporary British art establishment, including Herbert Read and John Rothenstein.⁵ It was also the first such exhibition of Yeats’s work in a national institution in either the UK or Ireland. In the following year, Victor Waddington was persuaded—after initial disinclination—to take Yeats into his stable of living artists, among more conservative academic Irish artists like Seán Keating and Maurice MacGonigal.⁶ In June 1945, the National Loan Exhibition took place in Dublin, and in 1948, a solo exhibition of his work, organised by the Arts Council of Great Britain, toured from Temple Newsam House in Leeds to the Tate. Thus, though Yeats may have been regularly reviewed in the British

press for more than a decade beforehand, the National Gallery exhibition undeniably raised his profile. As a result, Clark has been credited with an instrumental role in Yeats's reputational fortunes. The National Gallery exhibition was referred to, by Flann O'Brien, for instance, as "London's Clark-sponsored Yeats-Nicholson National Gallery show".⁷ In a telling lapse, however, Clark on at least one occasion deflected public criticism of the exhibitions by claiming that he had not necessarily "selected" the work himself. He did not specify who was responsible for the selection; this failure to acknowledge the work of those under Clark's command was repeated by commentators until relatively recently.

It was customary at this time to credit the work of the National Gallery to its Director; this organisational diktat was compounded, for later scholars and critics, by the shortage of surviving records relating to the wartime period of the National Gallery's operations. Specific documentation of the Yeats/Nicholson exhibition, for instance, has not survived. As a result, accounts of Yeats's inclusion have long been dominated by the well-documented exchange between two powerful men, Betjeman and Clark. In May 1941, upon Betjeman's invitation, Clark visited Ireland to give a lecture to the National Art Collections Fund, a trip that was also from the outset conceived as a diplomatic exercise; items of relating correspondence from both men were marked by the header "Art Liason in Eire". At Betjeman's request, Clark also assisted in arranging an exhibition in London of

the work of a girl (twenty seven, red haired [sic] and awkward and not cognisant of any modern artists) called Miss Nano Reid. Her water colour landscapes are, if you will take my word for it, really beautiful and something both Irish and un-derivative [sic].⁸

This exhibition took place at the Redfern Gallery, though it received no notices in the press, and nothing sold. Likewise, at Betjeman's prompting, Clark visited Yeats, viewed his work, and proceeded to include it in the joint exhibition at the National Gallery in the following year.

Clark seems to have been a little ambivalent about Yeats's work. Following his visit to Ireland, Clark proposed to the board of the National Gallery on 10 June 1941 that they should hold a solo exhibition of Yeats's work that winter, Yeats being "much admired in Ireland" and thus offering the opportunity to organise a show that would be "of interest" and would also "strengthen good feelings with Ireland".⁹ The board gave their approval, yet Clark remained uncertain. On 16 September 1941, he wrote regretfully to Betjeman, stating that the exhibition was, at that point,

hanging fire, because to tell the truth I had one or two of his pictures to look at here, and I am sorry to say that they did not look nearly as well as they did in Dublin. It is a great risk ... and on the whole I am inclined to think that the risk is not worth taking. ¹⁰

To judge by these items of the correspondence, and to their references to Reid's work, Clark and Betjeman's attitude to Irish art seems both ill-informed and patronising, viewing Irish artists as provincial and ignorant, even if occasionally, at the same time, original or "underivative".

This attitude is crystallised in a spiteful letter from Betjeman to Clark, which survives in the archives of the National Gallery in London, and concludes with a paragraph in mock Hiberno-English:

and naow Sir Kenneth so hwat do you think of aour natuv artusts here in Oireland? Oi ventur to thank that there is no artust to-day workun in Europe—unless maybe in Germany—who can howled a candle to Miss Manie Jellet for modernism or to Mr Jack Yeats for the mystic or to Miss Laetitia Hamilton or Mr Paul Henry for the purely pictorial. Oi would add that thanks to Holy Oireland's constant intercessions to the Sacred Hyart, our stained glass is as fouin as—nay fouinur—than Chartres. ¹¹

Such sneering references to Yeats and his contemporaries are indicative of a condescending, hypocritical attitude to the work of those very Irish artists both Clark and Betjeman were engaged in promoting. The same tone of imperial (and imperious) condescension has been noted by Tricia Cusack, who has critiqued the "colonial paternalism" of Clark's *Horizon* essay, in which he "praised" Yeats's use of colour: "colour is [his] element, in which he dives and splashes with the shameless abandon of a porpoise". ¹² Clark's suggestion of an unregulated, lawless element in Yeats's work chimes with an attitude to Irish "ungovernability"; at one point in the essay, he remarks that Yeats's figures seem indifferent both to "law and order" and to the "Russian ballet". Yeats's Irish figures are civilised in neither a civic nor a cultural sense. Unsurprisingly, Yeats himself detested the essay. At the very least, it suggests that Clark's dedication to Yeats may have been less than wholehearted (Figs. 2-5).

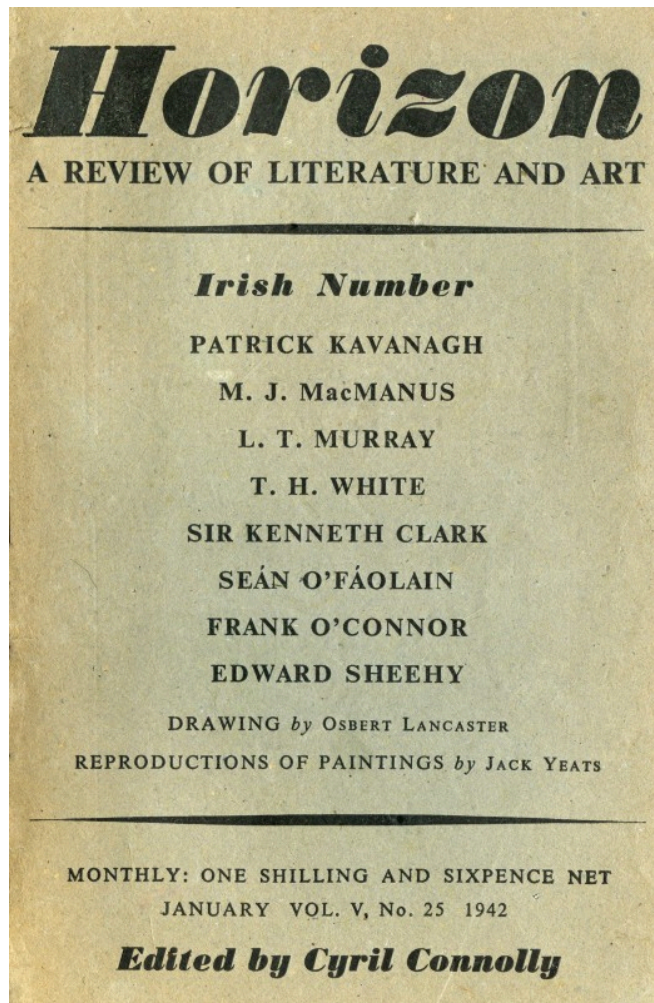


Figure 2.

Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art, Vol. V, No. 25, January 1942 (London: Horizon Publishing, 1942), cover page.

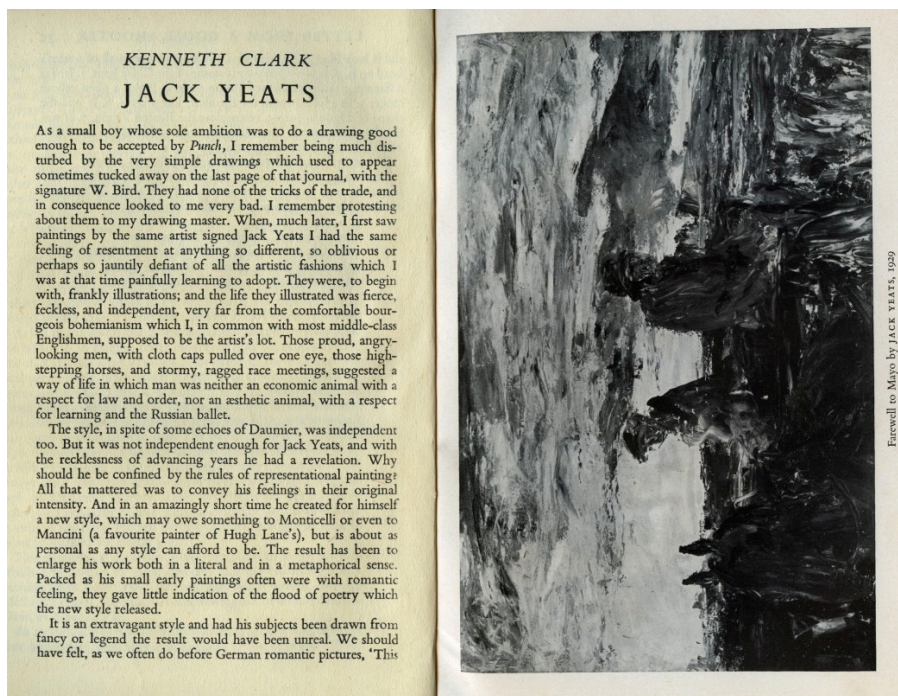


Figure 3.
"Jack Yeats" by Kenneth Clark, *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, Vol. V, No. 25, January 1942 (London: Horizon Publishing, 1942), 38-39.

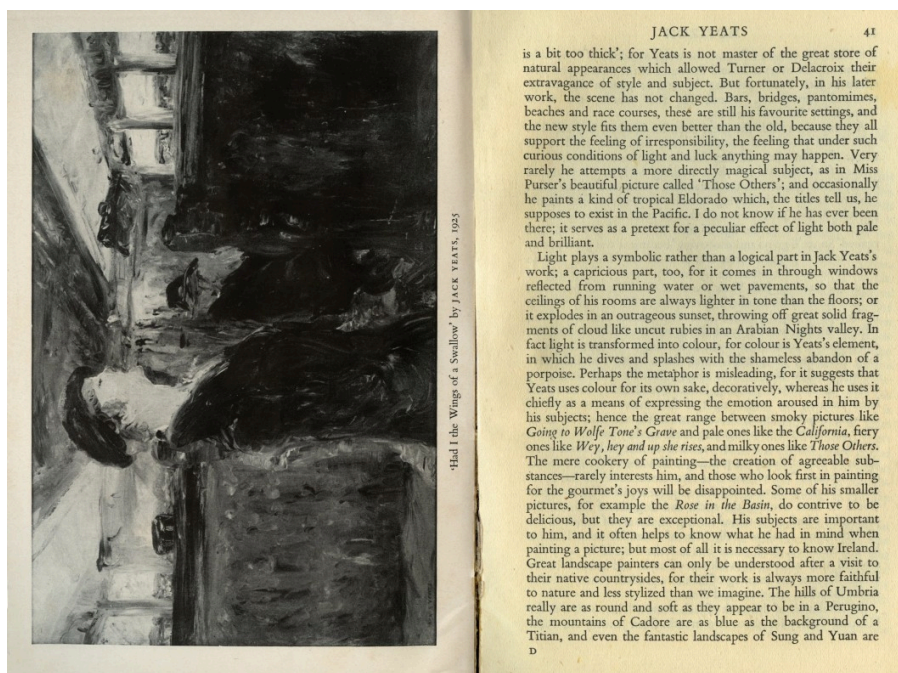


Figure 4.
"Jack Yeats" by Kenneth Clark, *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, Vol. V, No. 25, January 1942 (London: Horizon Publishing, 1942), 40-41.

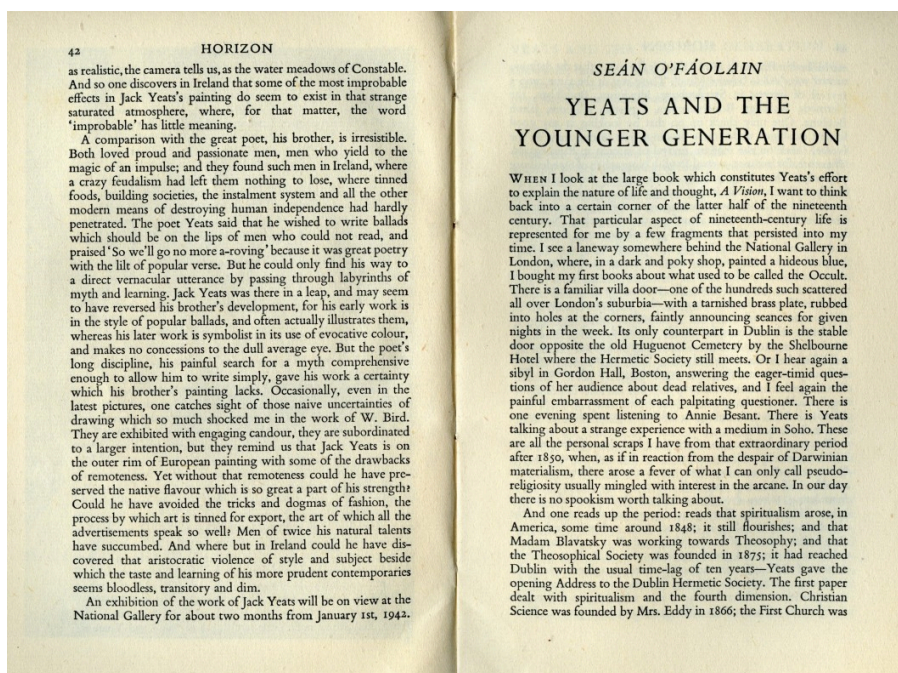


Figure 5.

"Jack Yeats" by Kenneth Clark, *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*, Vol. V, No. 25, January 1942 (London: Horizon Publishing, 1942), 42-43.

Close scrutiny of the surviving records at the National Gallery does suggest some alternative motivating factors. Clark was, at this time, serving on a number of official government committees and undertaking work of various kinds for the Ministry of Information. The Committee on the Employment of Artists in Wartime (CEAW) was one of several official committees set up to administer the arts in wartime Britain. Founded by the Ministry of Labour in 1939, it was in some senses a precursor for the War Artists' Advisory Committee (WAAC), which was established by the Ministry of Information later that year, absorbing certain of the CEAW's proposed functions, thanks to Clark's success in persuading the authorities to reclassify the wartime work of visual artists as "publicity" rather than a labour affair per se. Much has been written about the WAAC, including most notably Brian Foss's extensive 2007 study of British war art, which focused almost exclusively on the organisation.¹³ The CEAW has received less focused attention. This is not unnatural, given the shortage of surviving records. Nevertheless, the CEAW did continue to operate, serving as the official organisational basis for Clark's *Recording Britain*, through which—with the support of a grant from the Pilgrim Trust—artists were commissioned to paint landscapes of the embattled "home front", exhibited at the National Gallery and elsewhere during the war. The CEAW is not mentioned the Pilgrim Trust ledgers. Minutes survive for meetings in 1939; but none for the meeting on 4 January 1940, or

thereafter. Records for their exhibitions at the National Gallery are not held in the Gallery's archives. As such, the activities of the CEAW remain somewhat shadowy.

A note appended to the National Gallery's archive catalogue suggests that this may also account for the absence of records relating to the Yeats/Nicholson exhibition.¹⁴ The implication here, that the CEAW may have been the organisers of the 1942 exhibition, represents a tantalising proposition, though it has so far been impossible to verify. Be that as it may, the terms of the committee's agenda, as outlined in the paperwork that does survive, shed light on what may have been Clark's motives in visiting Ireland. In the committee chairman's initial memorandum, the remit of the CEAW is defined in the following terms: "to consider and report what action can be taken to utilise the services of artists and designers whose ordinary means of livelihood have been cut off or seriously diminished by the war".¹⁵ Yeats's work may have been included in several exhibitions of "British" art, and he was in fact born and lived for many years in England, but still the question of his "Britishness" would have seemed to most observers rather murky; certainly, the matter of his "employment", or otherwise, would not have been considered relevant to such an organisation.¹⁶ However, as an artist of a neutral nation, such semi-official British patronage might be considered an outcome of an international diplomatic strategy, an exercise in the cultivation of better British-Irish relations; and in fact, one of the stated subsidiary objectives of the CEAW was to consider cultural interventions in "neutral countries".¹⁷

This objective is fully in evidence in the correspondence between Clark and Betjeman, both of course affiliated with the Ministry of Information.¹⁸ The very first letter of invitation presents the visit in these terms, as "satisfying the craving for attention that there is in artistic and literary circles in Dublin. At present the German Minister has rather a monopoly of art and gave a dinner to old Jack Yeats recently." Similarly, the exhibition of Nano Reid's work is conceived explicitly as an exercise in cultural propaganda, with Betjeman claiming that "[i]t would be a great thing in this city of gossip, if you could get for me a London gallery to consider" such a prospect.¹⁹ In his letter to Rex Nan Kivell, Director of the Redfern Gallery, Clark reiterated this point:

A friend of mine who is our Representative in Ireland has sent over for me to see a selection of work by a lady called Miss Nano Reid, some of which is rather inconclusive, but the best renders more truthfully and sensitively than anything I have seen the atmosphere of the West of Ireland. I wonder if you would care to

exhibit some of the best? I think they would be liked, and it would be an excellent thing from the propaganda point of view if it is said that a young Irish artist is being exhibited in a prominent London gallery. *This is the only sort of propaganda we can do in Eire, and it is much more effective than one would think.*²⁰

When, in September 1941, Clark ventured to suggest cancelling the Yeats exhibition, he did so on the grounds of the risks to international diplomacy: “A successful exhibition of Jack Yeats would not greatly improve Anglo-Irish relations, whereas a few uncomplimentary notices would have a really bad effect.”²¹ Betjeman responded with an itemised handwritten set of diplomatic objectives—under the headline “STRENGTHENING EXISTING BONDS WITH EIRE”—that explicitly called for the Yeats exhibition to proceed. What is most notable about this exchange is that the only aesthetic comment passed upon Yeats’s work—either ignored or overruled by Betjeman—is in fact negative.

At a moment of such strained relationships between Ireland and Britain, this kind of pragmatism makes diplomatic sense. Cyril Connolly, in his editorial “Comment” for the Irish number of *Horizon*, went so far as to suggest that the “tact” and “gentility” of Britain towards a neutral Ireland are “proof of the fundamental democracy of the empire, a spirit utterly different and superior to that of Fascism”.²² Official British patronage of Yeats’s work—an artist who was openly committed to the cause of Irish nationalism—could be read as a shrewd gesture of cultural propaganda, demonstrating the tolerance of the British to dissident traditions, as opposed to the intolerant authoritarianism of the Axis powers. In any case, it was aimed at an elite Irish audience, demonstrating respect for Irish art and an affiliation (through the pairing of Yeats and Nicholson) between certain visual traditions shared by Britain and Ireland. The exhibition made explicit the shared background of Yeats and Nicholson in commercial art, produced for private presses, Beggerstaffs and Cuala Press; early work by both artists (woodcuts by Yeats, lithographic posters by Nicholson) were shown alongside their oil paintings. Such mass-reproducible visual formats were being championed at this time at official levels for their democratic potential. The CEAW’s minutes make clear the importance of these traditions in propaganda terms; for instance, exhibitions of poster art were common during the war, including the propaganda posters being produced by the Ministry of Information, again with Clark’s involvement.

Evidence for the CEAW’s direct involvement in the 1942 exhibition remains circumstantial, due to the absence of records, but given Betjeman’s involvement, Clark’s (and the National Gallery’s) involvement with the CEAW,

and the role of the CEAW as one of the National Gallery's funding sources, there is strong reason to believe that certain considerations were interpenetrating. Clark's decision to include Yeats's work in the 1942 exhibition seems hence to have been informed, not by his appreciation of the artist's work, but by the overlapping considerations of cultural diplomacy, international relations, and an exercise in propaganda aimed at a neighbouring "neutral country".²³ Interestingly, however, there was another keen supporter of Yeats in the National Gallery. For many years prior to the 1942 exhibition, the contemporary art dealer Lillian Browse had demonstrated her long-standing appreciation for and commitment to Yeats's work. Her involvement in the organisation of the Yeats/Nicholson exhibition was the culmination of a decade of support. It also demonstrated how the groundwork for Yeats's "breakthrough" had been laid well in advance by figures other than Betjeman or Clark. Certainly, the 1942 National Gallery exhibition was one of a series of important milestones for the painter over the course of the decade. Yet, it formed part of a longer sequence, building upon his professional activities in England as well as the network of institutional, critical, and curatorial support that had developed around him.

"That painting is to be looked at without comment"

Yeats was unable to attend the opening of the exhibition at the National Gallery on 1 January 1942 when audiences were regaled by a stage-Irish performance by Ireland's High Commissioner in London, John Dulanty, who was reported to have been in rambunctious form, entertaining the audience with hearty stage-Irishisms. The following day, a telegram was sent to Yeats: "EXHIBITION HUGE SUCCESS DEEPLY GRATEFUL FOR YOUR HELP VERY SORRY YOU COULD NOT ATTEND OPENING—KENNETH CLARK BROWSE".²⁴ The inclusion of Browse's surname on this telegraph, alongside that of the National Gallery's director, is significant. Under Clark's reign, all official correspondence with artists was strictly the preserve of the Director. Browse has described the inclusion of her name on the telegraph as a conciliatory gesture on Clark's part—following a snub the previous evening—but it seems likely her work on the exhibition, and her friendship with Yeats, would also have been factors. Browse had been heavily involved in the Gallery's wartime exhibitions to date; in fact, it was her suggestion to hold them in the first place, though for many years Clark took the credit for this idea, as well as for the specific exhibitions that Browse organised, in some cases alone.²⁵ Browse and Clark had a thorny relationship while she was at the National Gallery, though ultimately Clark seems to have maintained a grudging respect for her tenacious, fearless approach to the job of the gallerist. More to the point, however, when she joined the National Gallery in 1940, Browse had already been an advocate and promoter of Yeats's work for almost a decade, and went on to play a significant—if largely uncredited and since

overlooked—part in the organisation of the 1942 exhibition. Browse's role in the organisation of the National Gallery's wartime exhibitions has been acknowledged since at least the late 1990s—when she published her account of the period in *Apollo*, which later became part of her memoir—but to date her name has not figured in the scholarship on Yeats. ²⁶

By her own account, Browse joined the Leger almost by accident. She was born in London but grew up in Johannesburg, before returning to train as a ballet dancer under Margaret Craske. She decided, however, against pursuing a career on the stage and sought work elsewhere. While she was seeking a career, she undertook some ballet teaching, through which she was introduced to a cultural and artistic set, as well as beginning to learn about painting; she mentions an early interest in Degas in particular. At the same time, she was looking for a respectable secretarial job. She was introduced to a tapestry dealer, who couldn't himself offer her a position, but mentioned a Mr Leger, whose fine-art gallery was then expanding (from Duke Street to Old Bond Street and Brussels). She enquired and was given an interview, after which Harold Leger offered her an unpaid job in the gallery, which, in light of her lack of expertise or experience, she accepted. "And so in the vaguest possible way I entered the world of the visual arts." ²⁷

Browse was provided with an office on the second floor where for six months she was responsible for filing press notices, sale catalogues, and other paperwork. At the same time, she was attending a school of Adult Education, and reading at lunchtime to develop her knowledge of the Old Masters, which were Leger's stock in trade. In order to be able to read the *Klassiker der Kunst* books in Harold Leger's library, she undertook to learn German, under the tutelage of two recently arrived German art dealers, Heinrich Rosenbaum (later Henry Roland) and Gustav Delbanco, who had just gone into partnership, as dealers in Old Masters, with premises in Piccadilly. Browse also attended occasional auctions on the Leger Gallery's behalf. After a few months, the acting secretary departed and Leger offered Browse the vacant position, with a salary. Shortly thereafter, following the retirement of the gallery manager, she was again promoted. Her memoir is candid about her feelings of fraudulence in her new role, unaided of course by the amused courtesy with which she was met by other male dealers and gallerists, particularly during the first few years, before other women dealers began to arrive in London, in flight from Nazi Germany; she was, she writes, "something of a novelty, a woman in a world particular to men". ²⁸

She also documents her introduction to a circle of practising painters, whose knowledge and conversation helped inform her about the kinds of work being produced by her contemporaries:

After a couple of years in Bond Street, I got to meet a small number of artists, who were then quite well known but who, with the exception of [Charles] Ginner and [C.R.W.] Nevinson, and to a lesser degree James Pryde, have almost disappeared from the artistic scene. ²⁹

The other artists Browse names include William Gaunt, “Jos” [possibly Charles Walter] Simpson, John Flanagan, Rowley Smart, and Anton Lock, a frustrated painter and jobbing cartoonist whose advice she cites as having been particularly beneficial and instructive. It was at this point, with Leger’s acquiescence, she decided to reopen a large gallery on the second floor of the building, which had been lying vacant, for use as the site of a programme of contemporary exhibitions, featuring work by some of the artists whose acquaintance she had made, but also others they recommended. It was from conversation with this nexus of painters that she heard about Jack B. Yeats, who they regarded as the foremost painter “outside their own circle”.

In fact, Browse was not herself immediately enthusiastic: “Yeats’s early painting were easy. I knew that I liked them, but the more recent were something quite different; their wildness was confusing to my eye, then so raw.” ³⁰ Nevertheless, she decided to stage an exhibition of his work in the newly acquired space adjoining what had been the Leger Gallery, initiating a contemporary exhibiting programme which would continue through the 1930s. Under her oversight, the Leger would exhibit work by many of the circle of painters she came to know: Stanley Spencer, Charles Ginner, William Scott, and Edward Ardizzone. The solo exhibition of Yeats’s work, mounted by Browse in 1932, was succeeded by continuing inclusion of Yeats’s work in group exhibitions throughout the 1930s: paintings were included in the Leger summer exhibitions in 1935, 1937, and 1939, as well as Browse’s very popular 1936 group exhibition, *The Circus*, in which Yeats’s *The Double Jockey Act* (1916) was included (Fig. 6). Browse was not the only gallerist to have shown interest in Yeats, of course. Two solo exhibitions of his work were staged at Tooth & Son in 1927 and 1928, but the second was not a success; his work did not sell, and in the following year, the gallery’s director Dudley Tooth politely refused Yeats’s request for a third, on the grounds that his work was not sufficiently “advanced”. ³¹ Yeats also had solo exhibitions at the Alpine Club Gallery in 1929 and 1930—these were, at the time, the biggest exhibitions of his work to date—and another at the Dunthorpe Gallery in 1936. But during the 1930s, the Leger was the London gallery that provided Yeats with the most consistent, continuous support. ³²



Figure 6.

Jack B. Yeats, *The Double Jockey Act*, 1916, oil on canvas, 61.3 x 45.8 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Ireland (NGI.1737). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Ireland and the Estate of Jack B Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2019.

This relationship was never formalised, however. Yeats had no official gallery representation, in England or Ireland, before Waddington took him on in 1943. Prior to this, he maintained a certain professional aloofness as an artist, perhaps a result of the careful reputational equilibrium he sought to maintain, an “Irish” artist operating as much in England as Ireland, and in fact better-received in the former than the latter, at least until the 1940s. This aloofness found its way into his social as well as his professional life. In person, Browse seems to have found Yeats difficult company, at least at first. Yeats and his brother, W.B., both attended the opening of the 1932 exhibition; she noted that the artist, “though very Irish, was on the whole silent”. She describes asking him to “explain” one particular painting that she could not understand, to which he replied haughtily: “That painting is to be looked at without comment”. According to Browse, he was further

disgruntled by her lack of knowledge about the pieces of Irish mythology after which many of his paintings were named. Nevertheless, they became friendly; she would meet him for lunch on his rare trips to London, including on his last visit in 1947, when he noted with bemused approval “the new friendliness of the English” since the war. ³³

He had reason to feel warmly towards Browse, of course. His exhibitions at the Leger had ensured regular (and importantly, sustained) commentary from the British art press throughout the 1930s. This was, interestingly, a moment at which he was least prolific as a painter, focusing for much of the decade on writing, with several of his prose books—themselves a strange hybrid form of meandering colloquial first-person narrative, blurring fiction and non-fiction—being published in London. These prose works were, like his paintings, set in (often unspecified) places in the west of Ireland, but stylistically they were innovative and experimental, partaking in the exploratory spirit of contemporary modernism. It is known that he was reading Joyce; in turn, an influence upon Beckett has been suggested. ³⁴ It is also noteworthy that he maintained personal connections to other literary figures in London, including Osbert and Edith Sitwell, who occupied the centre of a cultural set interested in crossing boundaries between literature and the visual arts; Osbert Sitwell’s evolving style of perambulatory first-person prose provides an interesting parallel to Yeats’s work. Yeats’s first book, *Sligo*, was published by Wishart & Co., a publishing house closely connected to the important *Calendar of Modern Letters*; later books were published by major British publishing houses, including Heinemann and Routledge. Yeats was thus situating his work within the framework of contemporary (modernist) British literature. He was also staying abreast of artistic developments in the British capital, attending exhibitions including those at the Leicester Galleries, who hosted a series of seminal shows of international work, including the first solo exhibitions of Cézanne and Van Gogh in England. ³⁵ In the immediate post-war period, too, he was reading key contemporary critical texts about literature and the visual arts by Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, debating their ideas about professionalism and amateurism in the arts with his patron John Quinn. He was also attending lectures on contemporary art activities—including, in 1919, one on the Italian Futurists, about whom he expressed scepticism. ³⁶

The traces of these engagements can surely be discerned in the development of his work during the 1920s and 1930s, when his work underwent a notable stylistic shift, the early signs of his later, more gestural approach becoming apparent. In reviews at this time, British critics endeavoured to take account of this development. In the process, certain art-historical references were outlined and repeated, becoming critical commonplaces about his work. Earlier critics had made reference to predecessors such as Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, while others had spoken of

impressionist legacies in Yeats's paintings. Responses to the 1932 exhibition at the Leger retained traces of this view of his work; commentators noted the “romantic” aspects of his work, referring to it as “impressionistic” and “lyrical”, and invoking Monticelli’s work as a parallel.³⁷ T.W. Earp, in the *New Statesman and Nation*, described Yeats’s paintings as “vivid scraps of life brimmed with emotion and loaded to the fullest capacity of movement and colour”.³⁸ By the later 1930s, it was customary to speak of the “expressionist” vein in Yeats's work. Writing about the National Society’s 1939 group show, the art critic of the *Manchester Guardian*, Eric Newton, described the artist’s “fine frenzy”, likening his work to that of the German Expressionists.³⁹ Also that year, Yeats's work was included in another group show at the Leger, leading to comparisons of his work to Watteau: “a radiant symphony of form and colour, at once true to nature and unerringly personal”.⁴⁰

A noteworthy and persistent tendency among commentators was to place Yeats in a specifically European tradition, as an artist working in the lineage of Toulouse-Lautrec, Kokoschka, Monticelli, and latterly Van Gogh, Watteau, and Cézanne. Writing again for the *New Statesman and Nation*, Earp (a long-standing critical supporter of Yeats’s work), mentioned Daumier, Rouault, Kokoschka, Ensor, “even Chagall”, as his contemporaries—but in fact fitted him within an art-historical genealogy that included “Rembrandt, Rubens, Watteau, Goya”.⁴¹ In terms of British contemporaries, Earp bracketed Yeats with certain artists then being exhibited at Tooth & Sons—presumably those “Modern Advanced British and Foreign” artists from which group Dudley Tooth had specifically excluded Yeats—including Duncan Grant, Spencer Gore, Walter Sickert, and Paul Nash, whose greatly lauded *Wood on the Downs* (1929) is explicitly mentioned.⁴² Thus, Yeats was being viewed as the inheritor of a specifically European tradition, sharing certain antecedents with the British Post-Impressionists, but pursuing an expressionist direction that differentiated him from most British artists (a notable exception, with whom he was sometimes associated, was the Fauvist-influenced Matthew Smith). This reading of Yeats’s work was often combined with a romanticised view of his individuation and a sense that there was something uniquely Irish about his work. What is interesting here is the extent to which a view of Yeats as distinctly Irish was not incompatible with a sense of his Europeanness, at least for some British critics. For others, of course, Yeats’s Irishness was a problem. His work was critiqued on grounds of its nationality, in terms that were encoded with suggestions of backwardness, unsophistication, and provincialism. In 1936, for example, the English writer Hugh Gordon Porteus claimed, with reference to Yeats’s work, that:

[t]he Irish genius is essentially literary, impressionistic and romantic ... Why has the Irishman so seldom any plastic sense when it comes to the plastic arts? He uses paint as a poetic-dramatic medium, and the result is not very interesting.⁴³

Such generalisations were to dog Yeats's work intermittently throughout his career.

Browse continued to support Yeats after the outbreak of the Second World War, when she had to leave the Leger to undertake war work, initially as an ambulance driver. By chance, Browse met Kenneth Clark on a train to Coventry in summer 1939. Not long thereafter, she attended Myra Hess' free concerts in the National Gallery and had the idea that the galleries might be used for temporary exhibitions. She approached Clark with her proposal but he rejected it summarily; in fact, by her account, she had to approach him five more times before he agreed to hear her out, either "impressed by such tenacity or merely bored by this tiresome female who would not take no for an answer".⁴⁴ She suggested an exhibition centred upon the influence of Whistler on British art. Clark invited her to draw up a list of potential works held in private collections. Once her proposal—and her list of works, coming to more than 300 titles—had been approved, Clarke asked Browse to assist him with the exhibition's organisation, an invitation she said was both unexpected and unsolicited. Almost immediately afterwards, he was seconded by the Ministry of Information and Browse found herself in charge of the scheme, with the support of William Gibson, the Keeper of the Gallery, and a small weekly allowance. To start with, she sought—and was granted—a loan of two works by the Queen, a bold (and shrewd) step. She then travelled around the country viewing and requesting works from various private owners' collections. With what amounted to a royal stamp of approval for the exhibition, few declined.

British Painting Since Whistler opened in February 1940. In a survey of contemporary British art that included work by a wide range of painters (from Wyndham Lewis to Dame Laura Knight), Yeats was well represented, with three paintings included. The exhibition situated him in the context of a particular canon of modern "British" art, though his work was of course unavoidably "Irish" in terms of subject matter and titles. It is noteworthy—and at first sight surprising—that Yeats did not seem to find this framing uncomfortable. In any case, his work received favourable notice, for instance, from artist and critic John Piper, who noted the "pleasure" of these "small intense paintings".⁴⁵ Others were less effusive, in particular Clive Bell, writing for the *New Statesman and Nation*, complaining with some sourness of Yeats's over-representation:

[F]or some strange reason Jack Yeats, whose work is neither Post-Impressionist, nor Pre-Raphaelite, nor anything in particular, but is on a par with that of most of the young, or old, ladies who exhibit annually at Burlington House, has no less than three. That is as much as we are allowed to see of Duncan Grant. ⁴⁶

The terms of this critique are noteworthy, in that they demonstrate the zeal for categorisation that underpinned much of Bell's then widely read art criticism. Here, as well as being described as "on a par" with the "ladies"—presumably even more contemptible than the "men"—attached to the Royal Academy (an institution much reviled at the time by those who considered themselves "advanced"), Yeats was also essentially being critiqued for Bell's inability to *categorise* him. Bell was, of course, an advocate of a particularly narrow canon of British (Post-Impressionist) art; hence his anger at the inclusion of three works by Yeats, while other more "worthy" (British) artists like Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth, and (the critic's own wife) Vanessa Bell were represented by only a single work apiece. ⁴⁷

This grumble was minor compared to the controversy which was to follow—a fracas in which institutional misogyny undoubtedly played a role. A reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* gave a somewhat overheated account of Browse's role in organising the exhibition. Other journalists took umbrage at what seemed a diminution of Clark's role, and were critical of the absence of an exhibition committee. On 23 February 1940, the *Daily Mail* ran a front-page story on it: "ONE WOMAN TO OPEN NATIONAL GALLERY—BROWSE'S ACADEMY". The story was taken up elsewhere, though the *Daily Mail* led the attack, repeating the story in the following month under the headline: "WOMAN HANGS 360 PICTURES IN HER 'ACADEMY'". At this point, a number of Royal Academicians entered the fray. Julius Olsson and A.J. Munnings attacked Clark for what they saw as his dereliction of duty. Clark was, thereafter, more involved in the exhibitions at the National Gallery, and a committee system was implemented to oversee future wartime shows. Further tensions seem to have carried over, however, into subsequent exhibitions—of Sickert's work in 1941, and of Yeats and Nicholson in 1942—hence the conciliatory telegraph. There seems to have been continuing contestation over duties and responsibilities, and Browse was not inclined to be obliging and deferent in the way Clark perhaps expected of a woman under his employment. According to Browse, he was overheard complaining that "she is quite intolerable". ⁴⁸

Her account does not make entirely clear the extent of her involvement in the 1942 exhibition, and the absence of records at the National Gallery makes precise reconstruction impossible. While her name is mentioned in the minutes of the Gallery's board meetings, the extent of her contributions go unacknowledged; for instance, when the Sickert exhibition was first proposed, the idea was attributed to the Keeper of the Gallery's collection, William Gibson, rather than Browse.⁴⁹ Browse's hand is evident in an exhibition featuring both Yeats—with whom she had such a long-standing relationship, compared to Clark—and Sir William Nicholson, another great favourite of hers, whose catalogue raisonné she produced in 1956. (It is noteworthy that Clark's most recent biographer, James Stourton, in fact credits the Yeats/Nicholson exhibition entirely to Browse.) Clark's worries about the exhibition's potential threat to Anglo-Irish relations proved in any case unfounded. On the whole, the reviews were favourable, if not entirely enthusiastic. Two influential critics, Herbert Read and John Piper, writing for the *Listener* and the *Spectator* respectively, reviewed the show in glowing terms, both mentioning Sickert's work as a precursor to Yeats', with Read quoting Sickert's 1924 commentary on Yeats at length, and reiterating the now-familiar comparison with Kokoschka.⁵⁰ What is evident here is the extent to which the critical parameters for Yeats's work had already been established by a continuous exhibiting history, and a developing discursive exchange among reviewers. An editorial for the *Burlington* was similarly positive, mentioning Monticelli, Mancini, and "a young Cézanne" as precursors. "There is something extraordinarily stimulating in the performance of this turbulent restive genius, whose Art tends more and more to assume the character of a series of daring adventures in oil paint."⁵¹ Certain key works were singled out by reviewers; *An Evening in Spring* (1937) received particularly favourable comment (Fig. 7). Another important painting, *(A) Farewell to Mayo* (1929), was noticed by the actress Vivienne Leigh, for whom Clark arranged a night viewing of the exhibition.⁵² She said the scene—a departing emigrant, regarding the place of their birth—brought to mind the story of her Kerry-born mother's emigration to America; subsequently her husband, the actor and director Sir Laurence Olivier bought the painting for her as a gift (Fig. 8).



Figure 7.

Jack B. Yeats, (An) Evening in Spring (Dinner), 1937, 61 × 91.5 cm, oil on canvas. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Estate of Jack B Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2019 | Photo: Denis Mortell Photography.



Figure 8.

Jack B. Yeats, A Farewell to Mayo, 1929, oil on panel, 23 × 35.5 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Sotheby's, London and the Estate of Jack B Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2019.

Others were less enthusiastic, however. Maurice Collis was scathing about Yeats's recent, more pictorially diffuse oils, which "are alleged to reflect the artistic frenzy which overtook him in his middle age";⁵³ while the art critic of the *Connoisseur* echoed the anti-Irish sentiment of Hugh Gordon Porteus,

referring to Yeats as “an Irishman through and through, whose impulsiveness seems to us often to result in incoherence ... constantly at screaming pitch ... The paint seems to have run amok”.⁵⁴ Raymond Mortimer, writing for the *New Statesman and Nation*, described Yeats’s “startling virtuosity” and made a comparison to Joyce’s writing; neither comment was intended as praise.⁵⁵ These two poles of opinion would continue to dominate the terms of Yeats’s reception in Britain, some praising his work (often allying it with European traditions), others deriding its excessiveness, its “pitch”, its “ungovernability”, and its tasteless colouration, criticisms often delivered with reference to Yeats’s Irishness. What unites these two sets of critical parameters, this view of him as both Irish and European, is that in either case his work is coded as “not-English”.

Responding to his work in the inaugural exhibition of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), *40 Years of Modern Art*, in 1948, E.M. Gombrich noted that: “Yeats fitted amazingly into the continental tradition: temperamentally as well as technically he was in harmony with the Rouault and the Kokoschka in his neighbourhood.” Gombrich approved of the inclusion of work like Yeats’s from outside the conventional London and Paris circles, using this as an example of a role to which the nascent ICA might aspire, “to show that art grows even where it is irrigated neither by the Seine nor by the Thames”.⁵⁶ This show took place in the same year as the major Tate (and Temple Newsam House) retrospective of Yeats’s work, following a successful and well-received solo exhibition at Wildenstein in 1946.⁵⁷ However, Yeats continued to be the subject of ongoing opposition from the pugnacious artist and critic Patrick Heron, who criticised what he saw as Yeats’s lack of a sense of design or colour, his use of “raw meaningless pigment”.⁵⁸ Browse herself continued to exhibit Yeats’s work after the National Gallery exhibition. Works of his—including *No Man’s Dust* (1937; [Fig. 9](#))—were included in an exhibition at the Leger in April that year; Browse also included his paintings in the two annual exhibitions she organised, in 1942 and 1943, as part of CEMA’s “Art and the People” programme, a series of touring exhibitions, funded by the Pilgrim Trust and coordinated by the British Institute of Adult Education, which circulated art around the United Kingdom during the war. Her introductory note to the 1943 catalogue might be understood to reveal something of the basis of her sympathy for Yeats’s work: “these travelling exhibitions are organised with the idea of bringing the pictorial arts nearer to the people ... to establish this form of art as part of our daily lives”.⁵⁹



Figure 9.

Jack B. Yeats, *No Man's Dust*, 1937, oil on board, 22.5 × 35.5 cm.
Collection of IMMA Collection: On Loan, Private Collection (EX.2019.4.4).
Digital image courtesy of Christie's and the Estate of Jack B Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2019.

Yeats was, in the latter half of the 1940s, at the height of his reputation in London, but he still occupied a peculiar, complicated position in relation to British art. He was generally considered a solitary, even renegade figure, operating outside the main currents of the art world, pursuing his own ends in isolation from other artists. His geographical remove—living in an Ireland cut off from Europe after a war in which it had not participated—only strengthened this general romanticised impression. In 1947, he agreed to fly to London—the only flight he took in his life, and his last trip to London, which he had not visited since before the war—to be interviewed by Thomas MacGreevey for the BBC, believing it sufficiently important that he reach the British public in this way. This was the occasion on which he had his final meeting with Browse, who was an ongoing supporter; his work continued being bought, exhibited, and sold by the gallery Browse joined after the war, Roland, Browse, and Delbanco. His *Early Morning* (1944) was included in their 1947 exhibition, *Colour, Pure and Atmospheric* (Fig. 10); and there are records of further purchases and sales in subsequent decades, even after the market for Yeats's work (as for figurative art in general) had begun to decline. ⁶⁰



Figure 10.

Jack B. Yeats, *Early Morning*, 1944, oil on board, 22.5 × 35.5 cm. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of James Adam & Sons and the Estate of Jack B Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2019.

This decline was certainly in evidence by the 1960s. Keith Roberts, writing for the *Burlington* in 1963, called him “a disappointing painter”: “In Yeats’s mind the visions must have been slow, serene, and timeless but once he got the brush into his hand he would insist on painting nineteen to the dozen.”⁶¹ At the same time, the national dimensions of his work began to be reasserted. Eric Newton, writing for *The Times* in 1961, commented on the “Irishness of Jack B. Yeats”, comparing his work to a stereotype of the Irish national temperament; Newton described Yeats as painting “garrulously, humorously, charmingly, poetically”.⁶² This reiteration of his national status was indicative of what James Hyman has described as a widespread retrenchment of national canons and parameters in English-language art criticism, which he ascribes to the influence of Cold War politics in Britain.⁶³ In Yeats’s case, the connotations of “national” parameters—the implications of Irishness—are suggestive of peripheral status: remoteness, backwardness, stasis, the qualities projected onto the former colony. These qualities enter the discourse even among those who admired Yeats. John Berger, who visited Yeats in 1956, the year before he died, called him “one of the last living romantics”, a painter whose work had been produced “[o]n the periphery of the twentieth century”.⁶⁴ Denys Sutton was one British critic who continued to write appreciatively in the 1960s when Yeats was falling out of favour in London. But ultimately, the view of Yeats’s work within a European tradition was superseded, particularly after his death in 1957, by a narrower view of his status as a “national” Irish painter.

Nevertheless, as in the period prior to his “breakthrough”, a small number of admirers in London, many of them artists, continued to be interested in Yeats. Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach were two particular devotees; those close to Freud maintain that he viewed Yeats, in line with the critics of the 1930s, within a specifically European tradition, rather than a narrowly Irish or British one.⁶⁵ Readings such as Berger’s of Yeats as an “outsider”, as someone on the “periphery of the twentieth century”, arguably do a disservice to his work.⁶⁶ To view him instead as an artist who was engaged with art beyond Ireland, and cognisant of the currents and developments of modernism, allows a more complex, rounded view of his work to emerge: an artist who was both Irish and European, professionally situated and supported by an international network of friends and gallerists, engaging with contemporary currents in British and European art, even while he generated a body of work no less singular for having partaken of the twentieth century.

Footnotes

- 1 Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 331.
- 2 Letter from Walter Sickert to Jack B. Yeats, undated (ca. January 1924). Yeats Archive, National Gallery of Ireland (IE/NGI/Y1/JY/5/2/74).
- 3 Robert Fisk contested the popular rumours about Betjeman’s espionage in his 1983 book, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality, 1939–1945* (London: André Deutsch, 1983). Bevis Hillier disputed Fisk’s reading, arguing for a more complex reading of Betjeman’s position and activities while in Ireland: “‘Good Relations’: Irish Neutrality and the Propaganda of John Betjeman, 1941–1943”, *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 33–46; also Bevis Hillier, *John Betjeman: New Fame, New Love* (London: John Murray, 2002), 230–236. More recently, Eunan O’Halpin has uncovered the various agendas under which Betjeman was operating: *Spying on Ireland: British Intelligence and Irish Neutrality During the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 138. Alex Runchman has also recently revisited the question, noting the ‘sincerity’ of Betjeman’s advocacy on behalf of Irish artists and writers in Britain. Alex Runchman, “English Perceptions of Irish Culture, 1941–3: John Betjeman, *Horizon* and *The Bell*”, in Dorothea Depner and Guy Woodward (eds.), *Irish Culture and Wartime Europe* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), 87–98. See also Guy Woodward’s recent account of Betjeman’s involvement in a wartime whisper network, spreading “sibs” in Ireland and elsewhere. Guy Woodward, “John Betjeman’s Dublin Whispers”, *The Political Warfare Executive, Covert Propaganda, and British Culture*, Durham University Leverhulme Trust Project, blog post, 23 November 2018, <https://sites.durham.ac.uk/writersandpropaganda/2018/11/23/betjeman-in-dublin/>, accessed 28 January 2019.
- 4 Anon, “Mr John Betjeman Leaving”, *Irish Times*, 14 June 1943.
- 5 Hilary Pyle, *Jack B. Yeats* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 163.
- 6 For an account of Waddington’s introduction to Irish modernism, see Riann Coulter, “‘The Transmutation of Art into Bread and Butter’: Victor Waddington and Irish Art, 1943–57”, in Yvonne Scott (ed.), *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 120–137.
- 7 Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 303.
- 8 Nano Reid was a significant Irish artist who had studied in Paris in the 1920s and was influenced by European art. She would go on to exhibit regularly with the Irish Exhibition of Living Art, and later with the Independent Artists. She represented Ireland with Norah McGuinness at the Venice Biennale in 1950.
- 9 Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 10 June 1941. National Gallery Archive (NG1/12).
- 10 Letter from Kenneth Clark to John Betjeman, 16 September 1941, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA/8812/1/3/308).
- 11 Letter from John Betjeman to Kenneth Clark, 4 September 1942, National Gallery Archive.
- 12 Tricia Cusack, “‘A Living Art’: Jack Yeats, Travelling West and the Critique of Modernity”, in Yvonne Scott (ed.), *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 76–77.
- 13 Brian Foss, *War Paint: Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939–1945* (London: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2007).
- 14 This confusion was made apparent in correspondence with the National Gallery archive team in 2018.

- 15 The surviving records of the CEAW are to be found in the National Gallery's archives, where they sit alongside related files on the formation of the Central Institute of Art and Design, established in 1939 to survey working artists' availability for wartime work. These include a file, produced by the Institute, on the Employment of Artists, 1939, the "preliminary memorandum" of the CEAW, two "interim reports", a set of recommendations from other artists' membership institutions, several pieces of correspondence between Clark and ad agency director J.R.M. Brumwell (seeking to get involved in the production of wartime propaganda posters with the Ministry of Information), as well as minutes of a number of meetings of the committee held at the Gallery. In practice, issues such as the decoration of military huts and canteens seem to have dominated the committee's proceedings, as well as discussions about the closure of art schools, and the planning of international design exhibitions which were eventually subsumed within the activities of the British Council. Most prominently, the committee became the vehicle for Clark's ongoing commissioning and exhibition series, *Recording Britain*; the works commissioned as part of this project are now held in a dedicated collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum.
- 16 Yeats may have been a member of a prominent Anglo-Irish family who were well-established in both Ireland and Britain, but he was a professed supporter of the nationalist cause in Ireland. What is more, his dedication to the life of the country marked him out as "Irish" from the outset of his exhibiting career in Britain. This national categorisation certainly coloured his critical reception in England; nevertheless, his work was consistently shown in mixed exhibitions among British artists, and he was generally treated as an equal (if perhaps slightly exotic) contributor, alongside his British peers, to the fabric of the London art world.
- 17 The records that survive make reference to a number of discrete objectives. Committee members discussed potential exhibitions of design to stimulate demand, particularly export, meaning exhibitions internationally, orchestrated however with the input of the Ministry of Information, as "no such scheme of circulating Exhibitions overseas will fully achieve its purpose unless accompanied by skilful and sustained propaganda". "Second Interim Report of the Committee on the Employment of Artists in Wartime", 21 December 1939.
- 18 The two men had long been friends, introduced through a mutual acquaintance, John Piper (of the three, Piper is the one who in fact demonstrated the most interest and appreciation of Yeats's work as art critic for the *Spectator*). Betjeman was writing to Clark in some desperation in early 1940, enquiring about a position; and Clark indicated his intention to get Betjeman appointed to "Home Publicity" at the Ministry of Information, where he went on to be stationed before his posting to Ireland.
- 19 Letter from John Betjeman to Kenneth Clark, 14 March 1941, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA/8812/1/3/302).
- 20 Letter from Kenneth Clark to Rex Nan Kivell, 2 April 1941, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA/8812/1/3/303). Emphasis added.
- 21 Letter from Kenneth Clark to John Betjeman, 16 September 1941, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA/8812/1/3/308).
- 22 Cyril Connolly, "Comment", *Horizon* 5, no. 25 (January 1942), 3.
- 23 John W. Purser undertakes a reading of Yeats's 1942 play, *La La Noo*, as a meditation on Irish neutrality, with the distant violence of the play's finale a symbolic analogy for the reneging of Irish moral duties during the Second World War; see John W. Purser, *The Literary Works of Jack B. Yeats* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991), 89–93. Purser is one of very few critics who have seriously attempted to reckon with Yeats's writing.
- 24 Yeats Archive, National Gallery of Ireland.
- 25 According to his biographer, Meryle Secrest, it was Clark who "organised an exhibition to fill the empty rooms of the gallery. The idea of showing contemporary art seemed an effortless way to promote worthy British artists and fill the Gallery, if not with masterpieces, at least with some lively paintings." This was the received narrative regarding the wartime National Gallery exhibitions for many years. Secrest proceeds to recount his evasiveness about the "selection" of the works, in response to accusations that he was behaving as "a dictator of the arts". Like Clark, Secrest fails to specify who was in fact responsible for the selection; see Meryle Secrest, *Kenneth Clark: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984), 151. The oversight has been corrected in the more recent biography by James Stourton, which acknowledges Browse's instrumental role in organising the wartime exhibitions at the National Gallery; see James Stourton, *Kenneth Clark: Life, Art and Civilisation* (London: William Collins, 2016), 172–173.
- 26 Lillian Browse, "The National Gallery in Wartime, and Other Memories", *Apollo* (February 1997): 3–14. Following publication of her memoir, Browse's role in the National Gallery's wartime exhibitions came to be officially acknowledged. Details of her involvement feature, for instance, in a 2008 publication produced by the gallery itself: Suzanne Bosman, *The National Gallery in Wartime* (London: National Gallery, 2008).
- 27 Lillian Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street: The Autobiography of an Art Dealer* (London: Giles de la Mare, 1999), 53–54.
- 28 Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 54–60.
- 29 Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 60.
- 30 Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 62.
- 31 "I very much regret that I have not any Exhibition dates during 1929 to offer you. As you know, I have handed over full management of my exhibitions to Mr Keane and we are under a sort of contract with another firm to hold nothing but Modern Advanced British and Foreign Exhibitions for some time." Dudley Tooth to Jack B. Yeats, 4 October 1928. Records of Arthur Tooth & Sons, Tate Gallery Archive (TGA/20106/1/1/130).
- 32 Yeats was attentive, in turn, to his reputation in Britain, and internationally. He carefully collected any notices of his exhibitions—or reviews of group shows in which his work was mentioned—in Britain, the USA, or Europe. These have been pasted carefully and systematically in the ledgers in which he studiously collected all records of his work.

- 33 In her memoir, Browse recounts this last meeting with Yeats, without specifying the year; see Lillian Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 62. Given that Yeats took only one trip to London after the war, to record an interview with Thomas MacGreevey for the BBC, this meeting has to have taken place in November 1947. For a transcript of that interview, see John Purser, "Voices of the Past: Jack Yeats and Thomas MacGreevey in Conversation", *Yeats Annual* 11, edited by Warwick Gould (1995): 87-103.
- 34 See Purser, *The Literary Works of Jack B. Yeats*, 114-126.
- 35 There is a copy of the catalogue for the Leicester Galleries' 1925 exhibition of Cézanne's work in the Yeats Archive at the National Gallery of Ireland. Yeats's ongoing engagement with European art has recently been noted by Christina Kennedy, 'Introduction', Christina Kennedy and Nathan O'Donnell (eds), *Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats*, exhibition catalogue (Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 26.
- 36 See correspondence between Yeats and John Quinn, 15 September 1918, 5 December 1918, and 10 December 1919. John Quinn Papers, New York Public Library (NYPL 49/3-7). In these letters, Yeats can be seen engaging with the same questions about the professionalisation of the arts being addressed by Pound and Lewis in London. Quinn, as well as collecting manuscripts and artworks relating to the Celtic Revival (and the Yeats family in particular), was also the foremost collector of the art of the British avant-garde movement (with which Lewis and Pound were affiliated)—Vorticism.
- 37 Yeats's work was described as "romantic" by the critic for *The Scotsman*, 8 October 1932; "lyrical" by the critic for *The Morning Post*, 5 October 1932; and "impressionistic" by the critic for the *Spectator*, 15 October 1932, respectively. Yeats Archive, National Gallery of Ireland (IE/NGI/Y1/JY/4/2/2).
- 38 T.W. Earp, "A Group and Some Artists", *New Statesman and Nation*, 15 October 1932, 448.
- 39 "N." [Eric Newton], "Art in London: The National Society Show", *Manchester Guardian*, 16 February 1939, 5. The *Spectator's* critic, John Piper, was positive about Yeats's work in the following year's National Society exhibition, noting his four "vivid" paintings as being "so daring and genuine that they would stand out anywhere"; John Piper, "Art", *Spectator*, 1 March 1940, 285.
- 40 Thomas MacGreevey, "London Art Notes", *Studio* 118 (July-December 1939), 254.
- 41 These newspaper extracts are pasted into Yeats's scrapbooks where he kept meticulous records of all press coverage of his work at home and internationally.
- 42 Earp was unstinting and consistent in his praise of Yeats. Writing for the *Daily Telegraph* in 1936, he praised the rough texture of his paint, and the violence of colour in the artist's work. "There is an explosive quality in the art of Jack B. Yeats ... Jack Yeats views the world with a vision of his own, and the result compels attention"; T.W. Earp, *Daily Telegraph*, 20 March 1936. Yeats Archive, National Gallery of Ireland (IE/NGI/Y1/JY/4/2/3).
- 43 Hugh Gordon Porteus, "Art", *New English Weekly*, 9 April 1936, 516.
- 44 Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 83.
- 45 John Piper, "Art", *Spectator*, 5 April 1940, 482.
- 46 Clive Bell, "British Painting at the National Gallery", *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 April 1940, 492.
- 47 Bell's inclusion of Wyndham Lewis' name here, as an artist deserving of further representation in the exhibition, is interesting, given the long-standing enmity between Bell and Lewis; Lewis was the foremost critic of the work of what he saw as the privileged mediocrity of the artists and writers of the Bloomsbury Group, of which Bell (as well as his wife Vanessa and her partner Duncan Grant) was a prominent member.
- 48 Browse gives a full account of this period in her memoir, see Browse, *Duchess of Cork Street*, 88-96.
- 49 "Minutes of the National Gallery Board Meeting", 10 June 1941. In a letter written a few days previously, Clark made clear that it was Browse who had in fact suggested the Sickert exhibition, in a telephone conversation on 5 June 1941. See letter from Clark to Gibson, National Gallery Archive.
- 50 Herbert Read, "Nicholson and Yeats at the National Gallery", *Listener*, 8 January 1942, 50; John Piper, "Art", *Spectator*, 9 January 1942, 35. Bruce Arnold suggests that Piper's review was "no doubt encouraged" by his friends Betjeman and Clark; see Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 304. However, Piper's favourable notice of Yeats's paintings in his coverage of Browse's 1940 exhibition demonstrates his disinterested appreciation of Yeats's work prior to any diplomatic involvement of his friends in the artist's reputation.
- 51 Anon, "Editorial: Royal Academy and National Gallery", *Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 80, no. 467, Reynolds Number (February 1942), 29.
- 52 Leigh was, at this time, starring in a production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, not far from the National Gallery.
- 53 Maurice Collis, "London Exhibitions", *Time and Tide*, 10 January 1942. Yeats Archive, National Gallery of Ireland (IE/NGI/Y1/JY/4/2/4). Collis was far more sympathetic to Yeats's 1946 exhibition at the Wildenstein Gallery, which he reviewed favourably for *The Observer*, where he claimed that Yeats had "succeeded in pushing farther than any artist equal to him as a handler of the brush ... [achieving] a synthesis between the great tradition and modern experiments"; Maurice Collis, "Art", *The Observer*, 24 February 1946, 2.
- 54 H. Granville Fell, "The Connoisseur Divan", *Connoisseur*, 59 (January-July 1942): 79.
- 55 Raymond Mortimer, "London Exhibitions", *New Statesman and Nation*, 10 January 1942, 24.
- 56 E.M. Gombrich, "Forty Years of Modern Art", *Burlington Magazine* 90, no. 540 (March 1948): 82-83.

- 57 As well as Collis' high praise of the exhibition in *The Observer*, the 1946 Wildenstein show was favourably noticed by Michael Ayrton in the *Spectator* and Eric Newton in the *Sunday Times*. His work was also mentioned favourably by Wyndham Lewis that same year in an essay, "Towards an Earth Culture: The Eclectic Culture of the Transition", in Myfanwy Evans (ed.), *The Pavilion: A Contemporary Collection of British Art and Architecture* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1946).
- 58 Patrick Heron, "Jack B Yeats", *New Statesman and Nation*, 21 August 1948, 154.
- 59 Lillian Browse, "Introduction", *Forty Painters*, exhibition catalogue (London: CEMA, British Institute of Adult Education, 1943).
- 60 There are records of at least twelve oil paintings, watercolours, and drawings, having been sold through Roland, Browse, and Delbanco, between November 1949 and October 1971. The Leger Galleries also continued to buy and sell Yeats's work occasionally, including—on one occasion, in 1955—purchasing a work, *The Beggar Man in the Shop* (1924), on half-share with Roland, Browse, and Delbanco. The records of the Leger Galleries are held by Christie's archives in London; those of Roland, Browse, and Delbanco are held at the Tate Gallery Archive (TGA 975).
- 61 Keith Roberts, "Current and Forthcoming Exhibitions", *Burlington Magazine* 105, no. 722 (May 1963): 228.
- 62 "Anon." (Eric Newton), "A Raconteur in Drawing: The Irishness of Jack Yeats", *The Times*, 10 April 1961, 3. As if that were not enough, the first line of the article states baldly that "Jack Yeats is Irish". Newton had maintained a consistently ambivalent attitude towards Yeats's work since the early 1930s. Responding to his 1948 exhibition at Temple Newsam House and the Tate, Newton praised him as an illustrator, "[b]ut in many of his later and larger pictures he has assaulted his subject with such an avalanche of paint, such a welter of strong colour (red, orange, yellow, and blue are the favourites), that the story-telling quality, in which the artist's personality appears most strongly, is almost submerged and lost in it, and he seems in danger of becoming just one more slapdash colourist." "Anon." (Eric Newton, "Mr J.B. Yeats's Art: Exhibition at the Tate Gallery", *The Times*, 14 August 1948, 6. In the early 1950s, he voiced probably his harshest criticisms, claiming that for the viewer of Yeats's work, "so much passion and so little restraint in picture after picture produces, in the end a kind of malaise". Quoted in Brian O'Doherty, "Irish Painter: Jack B. Yeats", *The Irish Monthly* 80, no. 947 (May 1952): 203.
- 63 James Hyman, *The Battle for Realism: Figurative Art in Britain During the Cold War 1945–1960* (New Haven, CT: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, Yale University Press, 2001). Interestingly, perhaps tellingly, Hyman makes no reference to Yeats's work whatsoever in this otherwise extensive survey of figurative artists of the period.
- 64 John Berger, "Jack Yeats", *New Statesman and Nation* 52, no. 1343 (8 December 1956), 741.
- 65 The connection with Freud has been explored in an exhibition (for which this author undertook a programme of curatorial research) at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, *Life Above Everything: Lucian Freud and Jack B. Yeats*, 28 June 2019–20 January 2020. This course of research partially informs this essay. For Auerbach's comments on Yeats, see Mark Haworth Booth, "Jack B. Yeats Until Now", *Jack B. Yeats: Late Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, Arnolfini, Bristol, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, 1991, 32.
- 66 This view of Yeats's peripherality was shared, albeit in slightly different terms, by critics of his work in Ireland also. In 1972, in the opening manifesto-style editorial of his journal of art and literature, *Structure*, Michael Kane mounted a significant attack on Yeats's work, arguing that it had spectacularly failed to reflect the lived reality of urban modernity. According to Kane, "[Yeats'] spectral horses and sequestered squires were being evoked by a man in Fitzwilliam Square at times when jet planes had begun to roar across the sky and Joyce and Freud had long departed". Michael Kane, "The Light at the End of the Old Bog Road", *Structure* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1972), 2. For Kane, Yeats's continuing pre-eminence in Irish art was a problem for a younger generation committed to reflecting urbanised Irish life. This is a specific generational grievance, exacerbated by the fact that the conventional correlations between urbanisation, progress, and modernity do not map easily onto the Irish experience; what is more, the 1970s was a period of rapid industrial expansion and social change. Be that as it may, such critiques of Yeats's work have contributed to a false but nonetheless lasting impression of his having worked in some way "outside" of the main currents of international modernism.

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