

# The Yeats Family Sligo Connections

**A Tourism Information Booklet  
Including a Self-guided Town Centre Walking Trail**



# A Sligo Tidy Towns Project



*Keep Sligo Beautiful*



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Including a Self-guided Town Centre Walking Trail**

Our thanks to Joyce Enright and Damien Brennan for reading the first draft, and for their valuable comments for the final version.

Design by Michael Bell *Nature Learn*

Researched and Compiled by Peter Tiernan for  
Sligo Tidy Towns



# Foreword

Benjamin William Yeats, great-great-grandfather of W. B. and Jack B. Yeats, married Mary Butler in 1773. Mary Butler was a descendent of the Butlers of Ormonde. A branch of their family owned Kilkenny Castle until it went into part dereliction, and in 1967 it was taken into public ownership and refurbishment commenced.

The Butlers were an aristocratic family who claimed a family lineage going back to Anne Boleyn. This link was one which the Yeats family were pleased to preserve. Future generations of their family made generous use of "Butler" as a middle name for their male offspring, including the poet, his painter brother, as well as their father John Butler Yeats

Benjamin William Yeats and Mary Butler Yeats' son was the Rev John Yeats, "Parson John" who was Rector of Drumcliffe Church, Sligo.(1811-1846) Rev Yeats' son named William Butler Yeats (the first) married Jane Grace Corbet, and they were the parents of John Butler Yeats, who married Susan Mary Pollexfen. They in turn, were the parents of W.B. Yeats, Jack B. Yeats and their siblings. The later generations of the Yeats, Pollexfens and Middletons of Sligo will be discussed in more detail in the following pages. The Corbet name was also to feature as a family name, much like the Butler name, because of the prestige of the family.



Despite being the largest and most wealthy business owners in Sligo, the Pollexfens, Middletons and Yeats families were still regarded as “in trade”, and were never invited onto important boards or committees, who effectively ran the town, such as the Board of Guardians. These groups were reserved for the “gentry”, or “county” people such as the Coopers of Markree Castle, the Wynnes of Hazelwood, the O’Haras of Annaghmore, or the Gore-Booths of Lissadell. W. B. Yeats was invited to Lissadell because of his growing artistic fame, and his friendship with the young Gore-Booth girls, on a few occasions between 1893-5, including for a few days in 1894. A glimpse of the young Constance and Eva Gore-Booth on the front lawn, inspired one of his most famous poems, and arguably put Lissadell on the world map.

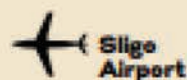
**The light of evening, Lissadell,**

**Great windows open to the south,**

**Two girls in silk kimonos, both**

**Beautiful, one a gazelle.**

Peter Tiernan, Chairman, Sligo Tidy Towns. April, 2019



Strandhill  
R291

Tracy  
Avenue

**The Showgrounds**  
Home of Sligo Rovers  
Football Club



Jinks  
Avenue

Church Hill

Merville

Dublin  
Galway  
Midlands

**N4**

Finiskin Road

Queen's Store

Lower Quay

Union St.

Quayside  
Shopping  
Centre

Train  
Station

Lord Edward St.

Bus  
Station

Knappagh Road

WB Yeats  
Mural

Pollexfen E

Adelaide Street

P

Walter Toms St.

Cathedral of the Immaculate  
Conception

Maud Gonne  
Mural

Wine St

Coast





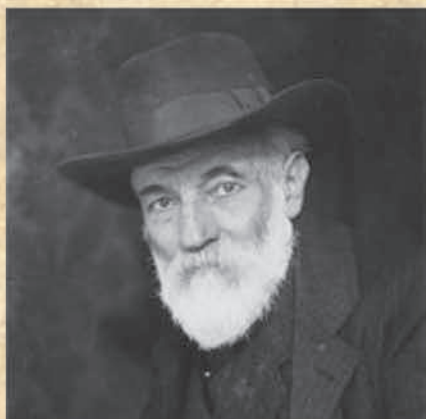
## W. B. Yeats Mural, Lord Edward Street

W. B. Yeats the world renowned poet, playwright and the first Irishman to receive the Nobel prize for literature in 1923, was born in Sandymount, Dublin in 1865, Later recipients were George Bernard Shaw, Samuel Beckett and Seamus Heaney. He died near Menton Southern France in 1939 and was buried there. He was re-interred in Drumcliffe Churchyard, Sligo in 1948, where his great grandfather Rev John Yeats had been a rector.(1811-1842). His mother was Susan Mary Pollexfen who was born in Sligo and his father was John Butler Yeats who was born in Co. Down. They were married in St John's Church of Ireland, Sligo in 1863. The couple had six children William Butler Yeats (W.B.), Susan Mary Yeats (Lily), Elizabeth Corbet Yeats (Lolly), John Butler Yeats (Jack B.) and two who died in infancy. Robert Corbet who died aged three when on holidays in Sligo, is buried in St John's Cemetery Sligo and Jane Grace who died in London aged nine months, is buried there. W. B. Yeats married Georgie Hyde - Lees in 1917 and they had two children Anne (1919 – 2001) and Michael (1921 -2007). More details of the wider Yeats family are to be found later in this publication.

W. B. Yeats was one of the foremost figures of twentieth century literature and was a driving force behind the Irish literary revival in the early part of that century. He also helped found the Abbey Theatre in Dublin with Lady Augusta Gregory from Galway, and others. He



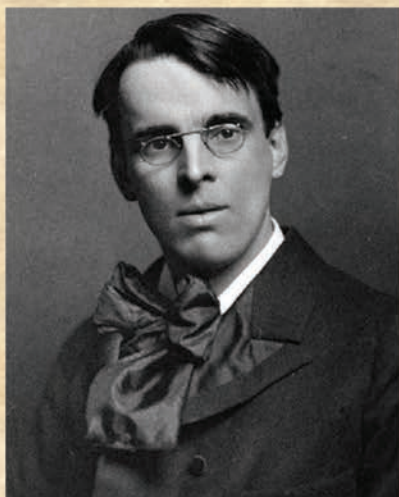
was a Free State Senator in the first Irish Government. This Brochure does not seek to outline the many literary or other achievements of W. B. Yeats (or indeed his painter brother Jack B. Yeats) or his other siblings, as their works and achievements appear in many other publications. Instead this Brochure is meant to illustrate the very close connections which the wider Yeats family had with Sligo town and the nearby Drumcliffe Churchyard.



*John Butler Yeats*



*Jack Butler Yeats*



*William Butler Yeats*



*Susan Mary Pollexfen*



## Maud Gonne Mural, Union Street

Maud Gonne was born in Surrey England in 1866, into a wealthy family. Her mother Edith Frith came from a well off business family and her father Thomas Gonne was an army captain. After her mother died, while Maud was still a child, her father sent her to France to be educated. In 1882 her father was posted to Dublin and Maud came with him and remained there until his death in 1886. She returned to France, where she met and had an affair with a right wing married writer, Lucien Millevoye. She soon returned to Ireland and became a radical fervent Irish Nationalist. In 1889 she first met W. B. Yeats in England, who fell in love with her, and pursued her relentlessly. In the years that followed Yeats proposed to Maud several times but was refused each time. In 1890 Maud Gonne returned to France where she once again met Millevoye and had a son with him who died aged about 18 months. In 1894 they had a daughter Iseult. At the age of twenty six Iseult married the Irish writer Francis Stuart. Maud Gonne married Mayo born Major John MacBride, a veteran of the Boer war, after she became a Catholic, in France in 1903, much to the dismay of Yeats. The couple had one son Seán MacBride, born in 1904, before the couple separated 2 years later. Major MacBride returned to Dublin and never saw his son again. He became involved in Revolution against British rule and was executed



for his part in the 1916 Rising on 5 May 1916, in Kilmainham Jail. Seán MacBride returned to Ireland where he qualified as a Barrister. He was Chief of Staff of the IRA from 1936 to 1939. He was a T.D. (member of the Irish Parliament) for ten years up to 1957 and a Government Minister from 1948 to 1951. He was co-founder of Amnesty International, and was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1974.

The story of Maud Gonne is interlocked with that of W. B. Yeats and much of his poetry was inspired by his enduring love for Maud. For this reason she is deserving of a place in any commentary of Yeats and Sligo. Maud died in Dublin in 1953 aged 86.



*Maud Gonne*



*Major John MacBride*



*Seán MacBride*

*Maud Gonne in old age, with her son Sean MacBride, and her grandson Tiernan MacBride*





## **The Pollexfen Building, Wine St.**

This impressive three story building, complete with a turret which allowed William Pollexfen to watch his ships come and go, was designed by John Lynn and erected in 1858. Intended mainly for the storage of imported goods it later became the headquarters for the Middleton and Pollexfen importing and exporting firm. The Middletons were from Dromahaire, Co Leitrim, while the Pollexfens came from the Devon and Cornwall area of England. They could trace their family origins on the maternal side back to County Wexford. Elizabeth Pollexfen was the daughter of Rev Charles Pollexfen, who was ministering in Jersey. It was there that she was discovered, courted and married shortly afterwards by William Middleton of Sligo, a ship's captain, who brought her back to Sligo. They had two children, before William Middleton died in the Cholera outbreak of 1832. 5,000 Irish people died in the epidemic.

William Pollexfen arrived in Sligo aboard his ship The Dasher some months later to visit his widowed cousin Elizabeth Middleton (nee Pollexfen). Born in Cornwall in 1811, Pollexfen was from a landed family and had a career at sea. He decided to settle in Sligo and assist Elizabeth in the running of her milling business, inherited from her late husband. William subsequently married her daughter Elizabeth Pollexfen and they had 12 children. William became a partner in the newly formed Middleton and Pollexfen firm, which included milling at Ballisodare and shipping from Sligo Port. In 1856 they were the largest shareholders in the Sligo Steam Navigation Company which ran steam passenger services to Liverpool and Glasgow, as well as goods ships sailing worldwide. They were soon the largest shippers, importers and agents in the Port of Sligo, and at their peak owned 25 ships. Two of their sons, Charles and George, attended Secondary School in the Isle of Man, where



John Butler Yeats, the poet's father, from County Down was also a student. George Pollexfen and John Butler Yeats became friends. In 1862 Yeats came to Sligo to visit George and his family. It was there he met George's sister, Susan Mary Pollexfen. Susan Mary and John Butler Yeats formed a relationship, and were married a year later in 1863, in St John's Church, Sligo. They were the parents of W. B. Yeats, Jack B. Yeats and their siblings. Thus the chance meeting up of the students from Down and Sligo on the Isle of Man brought the most famous branch of the Yeats Family to Sligo Town, a place with which they will be forever associated.

On the 11th June 2016 the poet's granddaughter Caitríona Yeats unveiled an artistic sculpture piece based on her interpretation of "He wishes for the cloths of heaven". The piece was created by Jane Murtagh. It was placed on the Pollexfen Building, and funded by Sligo Credit Union.



*Elizabeth Middleton*



*Pollexfen Building*



*William Pollexfen*



*Caitríona Yeats and Jane Murtagh*



## Merville, Sligo

William and Elizabeth Pollexfen, grandparents of W.B. Yeats and his siblings lived in Merville, a large eleven bedroom house with extensive outbuildings and 60 acres of land, from about 1867 to 1887. It is in the grounds of Nazareth House nursing home. The nuns now live in Merville. The Pollexfens later lived for a time in Charlemont, now Markievicz House, and moved again to Rathedmond House, Strandhill Road, where they died.

When John Butler Yeats married Susan Mary Pollexfen of Merville in 1863, he was a qualified lawyer with an inherited private income. The family moved to London in 1867. His wife Susan and their children came to Sligo at least once a year when John Butler Yeats gave up law and was struggling to sustain his family through his painting. It was only later that some of his paintings became valuable. Susan and her family lived with her parents in Sligo each year from Summer until the following January. Their longest stay in Sligo was from July 1872 to November 1874 when the poet W. B. was nine and half years old. Jack B. Yeats was born in London. He lived for almost a decade in Sligo, returning to his parents in London when he was 16. His siblings stayed in Merville for more than four years in all, and Sligo became the poet's spiritual home. The mountains of Knocknarea, Benbulbin and surrounding landscape



also inspired the paintings of his brother Jack B. Yeats. Between meal times the young poet Yeats was free to wander amongst the haunted cromlechs of Carrowmore. A Middleton cousin lived in Ballisodare where the poet heard a snatch of a song that became "Down by the Salley Gardens". Yeats had an outdoors childhood filled with boats and ponies, tall tales, fairy lore and heroic sagas from the local people who mainly worked for his relatives. His brother painter Jack B. was also inspired by the local scenery and declared that he never did a painting without putting in it a thought of Sligo.



*Merville, Sligo*



# St John's Cathedral Sligo

One of Sligo venerable buildings, St John's has graced John Street for at least 400 years.

In 1615 St John's apparently had become the parish church for the reformed Anglican faith, when Rev William Roycroft was listed as vicar. In the 1730's the renowned German architect Richard Cassels who designed Leinster House (Irish Houses of Parliament) and Hazelwood House, enlarged and significantly altered the church with the addition of an octagonal nave, while leaving the tall, possibly medieval tower intact. Further change took place in 1812, when the church was transformed by a gothic style makeover.

In 1961 St John's was raised to the status of Cathedral for the united diocese of Elphin, Ardagh and Kilmore and gained a new title "The Cathedral of St Mary the Virgin and St John the Baptist". It remains one of the Sligo architectural gems and a further reminder of our long history. For the period covered by this booklet, the name St John's Church was correct.

Susan Mary Pollexfen and John Butler Yeats parents of W.B., Jack B and their siblings were married in St John's in 1863. One of the siblings Robert Corbet who died aged three while on holiday in Sligo is buried in the cemetery there. The Headstone can be seen in the Middleton family section, at the back wall of the



Churchyard. William and Elizabeth Pollexfen are buried directly inside the Church gates, visible from the road. Susan Mary Yeats, wife of John Butler, has a bronze plaque in her memory erected inside the church.



*St John's Cathedral, Sligo*

# The Yeats Memorial Building

This distinctive Arts and Craft-style building, designed by Vincent Craig brother of Sir James Craig first PM of Northern Ireland was completed in 1899 as the new Sligo branch of the Belfast Banking company. This attractive brick building now home to the Yeats Society, was constructed on land left vacant following the construction of the new Victoria (Hyde) Bridge in 1846. Denis McLynn of Sligo built the bank, at a cost of £7,000. Following the establishment of The Irish Free State in 1922 the interests of the Belfast Banking company were sold to the Royal Bank of Ireland. The Royal Bank subsequently amalgamated with the Allied Irish Bank group in 1971. On the 16th of May 1973 AIB donated the building on a 250 year lease to Yeats Society sligo.

Yeats Society sligo was formed in 1958. The inaugural Yeats International Summer School took place in Sligo in 1960, with the 60th Anniversary of the Summer School taking place from July 25 – Aug 2, 2019. The Yeats Memorial Building features prominently in the cultural and artistic life of the town. It is home to The Hyde Bridge Art Gallery, and the Lily & Lolly Café.

In 2019, a newly discovered colour film has shed new light on the funeral of W. B. Yeats. The film was



discovered in a box of other films by Alan Aston, who lives in Co Galway. Alan had the film digitized, and when he discovered its significance, he donated the film to the Yeats Society. The film is now on permanent display in the Yeats Building, to be shared with all who wish to view it.



*The Yeats Memorial Building*

# The WB Yeats Sculpture

When on a visit to Sligo you can't miss the iconic and visually striking WB Yeats Sculpture outside the Ulster Bank, at the junction of Markievicz Road and Stephen Street. It was created in 1989 by Sculptor Rowan Gillespie to mark the 50th Anniversary of the poets' death in 1939. The Sculpture was unveiled by Senator Michael Yeats, son of the poet, in 1990. The cobble stones for the Plinth on which the Sculpture sits were taken from the Sligo Quays. The project was funded by the Ulster Bank and the local Community.



*The WB Yeats Sculpture*



The Sculpture is engraved with excerpts from many of Yeats' best known poems. The Sculpture is located outside the Ulster Bank because when WB accepted the Nobel Prize in Stockholm in 1923, he remarked that the Palace there reminded him, in its style and architecture, of the Ulster Bank in Sligo which he admired in his youth.



*Yeats Sculpture being unveiled by Michael Yeats, son of W. B. Yeats*



# The Model School

The Model, home of the Niland Collection of paintings, is Sligo's contemporary Arts Centre and gallery space, hosting regular musical, film and educational events. It was, however designed as a school for the National School system set up in 1831, funded by government. Its objective was to unite Christians of different creeds, in a non-denominational system, which soon came under pressure.

After several failed attempts, a Model School was built in Sligo and opened in September 1862. Unfortunately, its non-denominational culture did not survive, mirroring a national trend that had already developed throughout the country; by the mid-19th century only 4% of national schools were under mixed religion management.

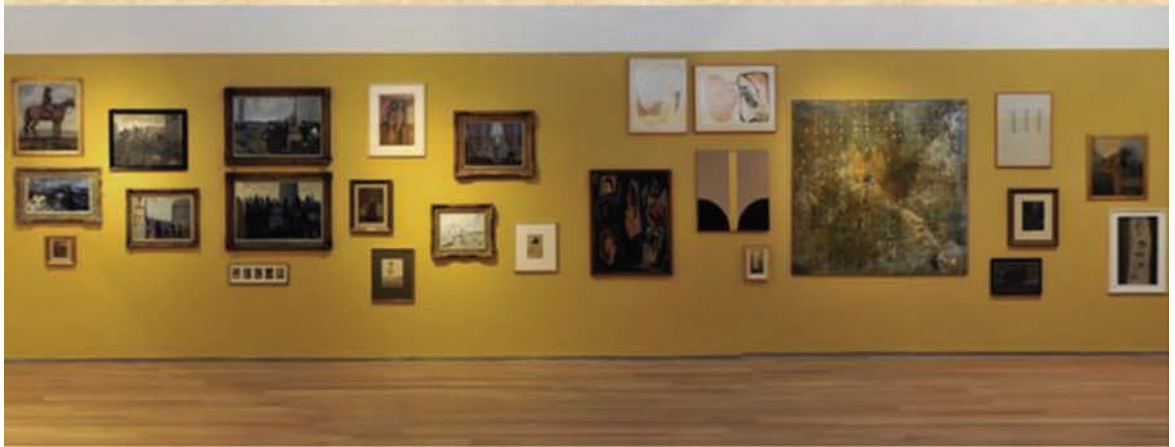
Built in a distinctive Italianate Palazzo style the Model was designed by James Higgins Owen, the Board of Education architect, and built by Sligo contractors, Messrs P. Keighron & Son for an eventual cost of £8,300.

Following more than a century of use as a primary school it was eventually vacated in 1977 when a new school was built on a nearby site. It was occupied by the Department of Agriculture for a time. In the 1990s it was purchased by Sligo County Council as a site for Sligo Museum and Library. Refurbished c.2000 and



further extended in 2010 it has developed as an art exhibition centre and performance and music festival space. A major attraction is its art collection by Irish Artists assembled by former County Librarian Nora Niland. The Niland Collection contains significant works by Sligo-inspired Jack B. Yeats-the poets' brother, John Butler Yeats, their father, as well as Paul Henry, Louis le Brocqy, Sean Keating, Norah McGuinness, Gerard Dillon and other 20th Century Irish artists. The Jack B. Yeats content is the largest public collection outside the National Gallery in Dublin.

This impressive Art Collection is on display in a modern high spec Gallery for all of 2019, with free admission. Thereafter at least 25% of the Collection will be on display at any one time, on a rotating basis.



*The Model Gallery*



## The Yeats Garden

The original “Yeats Garden of Sligo” was created by Lorely Forrester of Easkey, and won a Gold Medal at the Bloom Festival in Dublin in 2015. The garden was part of the official State celebrations of Yeats 150th birthday. The garden was donated to Sligo County Council and placed on a site adjacent to the Model Arts Centre, Sligo. The wild and watery garden is an ode to W. B. Yeats and his deep connection to Sligo. In particular it’s an evocation of his famous poem, Lake Isle of Innisfree, in which Yeats speaks with such yearning. Innisfree is one of the islands on Lough Gill, beside Sligo town, and the poem was written when Yeats lived in London “among the pavements grey”. Susan O’Keeffe, Director of the Sligo Yeats Society, writing in the Irish Independent in 2019, had this to say; “Innisfree is Yeats best known and loved poem, perhaps because of its clarity and simplicity. The idea of having space to listen to your own thoughts, of the need to be in touch with your ‘deep heart’s core’, of celebrating the small things in life – murmuring bees, water lapping, the shades of light. Yeats makes it clear too that a person can escape to that space just by imagining it, by tapping into the inner rhythms of your mind”.



**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.**



*The Yeats Garden*



## W. B. Yeats Grave



*W. B. Yeats Grave at Drumcliffe, Sligo. 6km from Sligo, on the N15, with Ben Bulbin in the background. His wife George is also buried there (photo: Val Robus).*

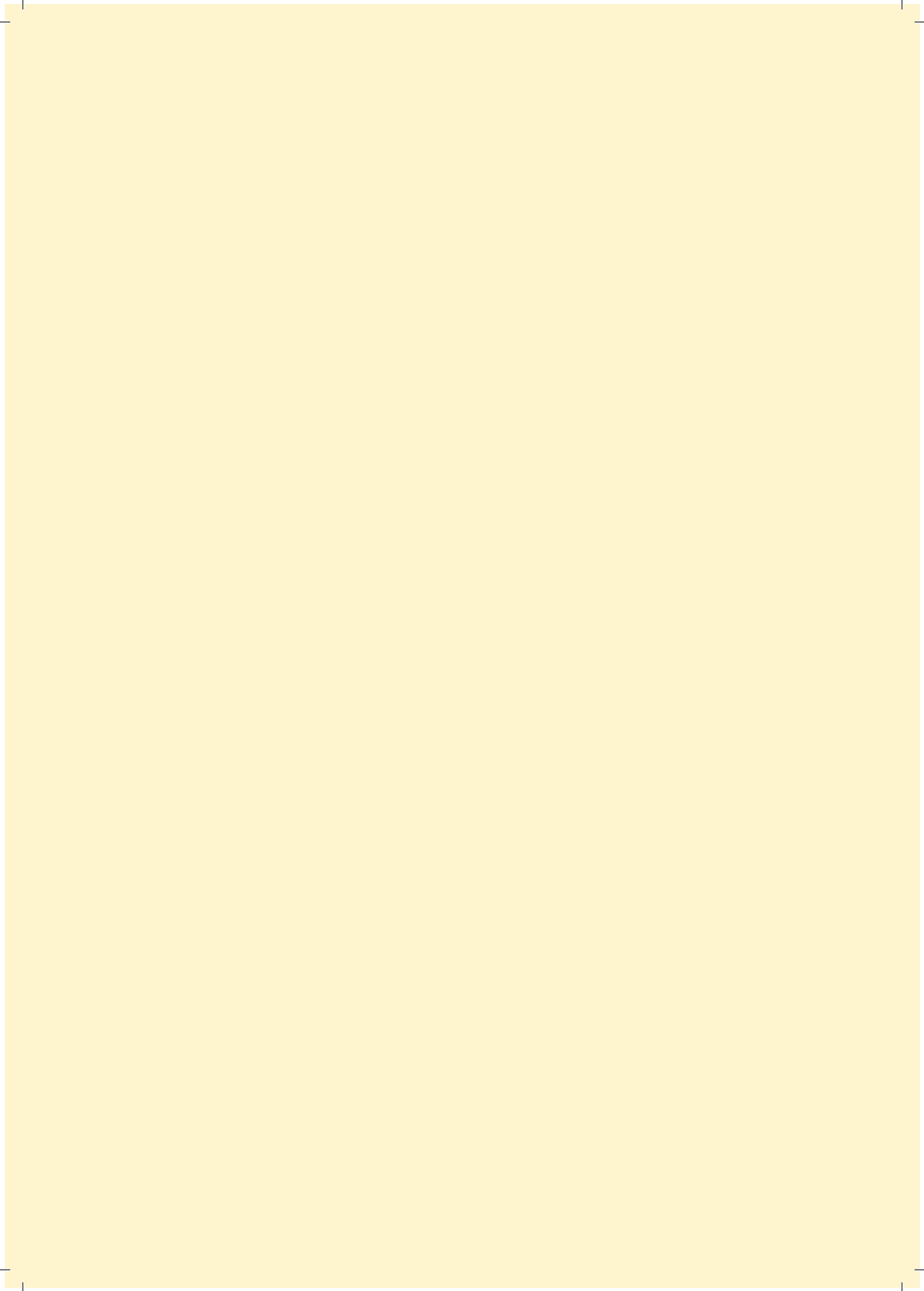
One of Yeats last poems, written less than a year before he died, was Under Ben Bulbin. It was his wish that the last 3 lines of this poem would be his epitaph.

**Cast a cold eye**

**On life, on death.**

**Horseman, pass by!**





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