

Driving Tour of Yeats' Country

Commentary by Damien Brennan

William Butler Yeats called Sligo 'The Land of Hearts Desire' and its beauty, archaeology and folklore filled his early poetry. Throughout his youth he returned from London for holidays with his maternal grandparents, the Pollexfens, and his Middleton cousins, from whose homes at Ballysadare, Rosses Point and Sligo Town itself he was free to roam and dream. Today, much of what inspired him remains and a day trip around Yeats' Country illuminates the poet's words while you discover just how powerfully those same words celebrate his beloved Sligo.

Approach to Lough Gill

Leaving Sligo Town by Pearse Road, turn left through the traffic lights at the GAA Sports Ground, then just beyond suburbia left again onto the Green Road 'Scenic Drive'. From the brow of the hill feast on the beauty of Lough Gill. From here you clearly see "*Where dips the rocky highland of Sleuth Wood in the lake, There lies a leafy island Where flapping herons wake the drowsy water-rats.*" This landscape was planted by the Wynne Family of Hazelwood in the 18th century, and was always a popular playground for the people of Sligo. "*I went out to the hazel wood, Because a fire was in my head,*" wrote Yeats and here you can understand the lure of Lough Gill for the dreamy young writer. Turn right now and stop at Tobernalt Holy Well, made sacred by generations of prayer.

Dooney

Keeping the lake on your left you soon reach Dooney Rock. This was a favourite spot for dancing and roaming and Yeats would have seen a blind fiddler who regularly played here on Sundays. "*When I play on my fiddle in Dooney, Folk dance like a wave of the sea.*" The panoramic views from the top of Dooney are well worth the stiff flight of steps, and show the magnificent prow of Benbulbin in the straight distance, and to the left, Knocknara. "*The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknara, And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.*"

Lough Gill & Innisfree

Further on the circuit of Lough Gill meander down country lanes to view the Lake Isle of Innisfree. Lonely in London and hearing water tinkling in a fountain, the poet vowed "*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made.*" Only when you have heard "*lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore*" in this quiet place can you appreciate just how powerfully Yeats used language.

Dromahair & Parkes Castle

"*He stood among a crowd at Dromahair; His heart hung all upon a silken dress*" This attractive village was once home to the hospitable O'Rourkes of Breffini and the remains of their Banqueting Hall can still be seen. A coffee stop here or at nearby Parkes Castle makes a good break in your exploration. The Castle, which has been beautifully restored, has a very interesting audio visual presentation on the entire heritage of the region and is well worth a visit.

Glencar

Continuing to the outskirts of Sligo Town, turn right onto the N16 towards Enniskillen. Towering landscapes gouged by glaciers 12,000 years ago epitomise Glencar Valley, and if recent rains fill the chasms then you may get to see Sruth in Aighd and Ghaoth (Stream in the face of the wind) – a thundering waterfall driven back into the air by the prevailing westerly winds...children often think the mountain on fire! Picnicking at Glencar Waterfall with aunts, Yeats wrote "*Where the wandering water gushes from the hills above Glencar, in pools among the rushes that scarce could bathe a star, we seek for slumbering trout and whisper in their ears give them unquiet dreams.*" Keep to the upper main road (N16) and just when you think you have gone too far, turn left down to the lakeshore and the Waterfall. Reached by a paved walk, it's easy for young and old.

Lissadell

With the lake on your left, keep right under the mountain and travel on to Drumcliffe and Lissadell House, home to the Gore Booths since 1834.

Yeats, an emerging, successful poet, met Eva and Constance, daughters of the house and was delighted to stay here in 1894. Eva was a poetess herself while Constance (later Countess Markievicz) was a leader in the Rebellion of 1916 and became an icon of revolutionary Ireland. Both sisters left their privileged upbringing and worked tirelessly for the poor in Dublin and Manchester. Many years later Yeats recollected his time there: "*The light of evening, Lissadell, Great windows, open to the south, two girls in silk kimonos, both beautiful, one in a gazelle.*" The house is open during the summer season.

Drumcliffe

At nearby Drumcliffe, St Columba founded a monastery in the 6th century. Today a magnificent 11th Century High Cross and the remains of a Round Tower still stand. Yeats' great-grandfather was Rector here and a memorial beside the altar in the restored church commemorates him. In one of his best known poems, Yeats made his final wishes known. "*Under bare Ben Bulbin's head in Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid. An ancestor was rector there long years ago, a church stands near, by the road an ancient cross. No marble, no conventional phrase; on limestone quarried near the spot. By his command these words are cut: Cast a cold eye On life, on death. Horseman, pass by!*"

Yeats, after a lengthy and celebrated infatuation with Maud Gonne, later married Georgina Hyde Lees. George, as she became known, revitalised his life and poetry and also gave him a son and a daughter. George too lies buried at Drumcliffe.

Rosses Point

We now pass through Rathcormac to Rosses Point. The Middleton cousins owned all of this peninsula and had holiday homes here. Grandfather Pollexfen owned a shipping company and so the seas, fisher folk and water lore were part of every visit to Sligo. Remembering his cousin, Yeats wrote: "*My name is Henry Middleton, I have a small demesne, a small house set on a storm bitten green.*" The remains of Elsinore Lodge (where the family claimed the ghosts of smugglers came tapping on the window panes at night!) are still to be seen, as is the Pilots Watch House, immortalised by the poet's brother, painter Jack B Yeats. The Metal Man Light points incoming ships away from Sruth na Mile(the thousand streams) and into the channel to Sligo. Oyster Island is parallel to the village and the larger Coney Island (which gave its name to the more famous one off New York) can be accessed by causeway from the Strandhill road during low tide. Yeats loved Rosses Point and first experimented with the paranormal here, encouraged by his cousin's housekeeper who had the 'second sight'. Today excellent restaurants and pubs meet all your needs – even if they can't predict your future!

Sligo Town

Yeats would still recognise much of Sligo Town. Ships no longer ply to Liverpool, Glasgow and the Americans, but some still unload at the docks here. The great black and white mansion in which Grandfather Pollexfen lived at the height of his career still overlooks the quays, while Merville, to which he retired, is now Nazareth Home for the elderly. He even built his own grave which can be seen just inside the gates of St John's Cathedral. On the corner of Wine Street and Adelaide Street the severe stone headquarters of the Pollexfen companies still stands, with its turreted watch tower from which incoming shipping could be viewed. On Hyde Bridge, the Yeats Society's Headquarters houses the offices of the International Summer School, the Sligo Art Gallery and a photographic exhibition on the Yeats Family and Sligo – all worth a visit. Just over the bridge, outside the Ulster Bank stands a striking contemporary sculpture by artist Rowan Gillespie of the poet 'wrapt in this words' erected by the people of the town to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his death in 1989. Accepting the Nobel Prize for literature from the Swedish King in 1924, Yeats remarked that the Italianate style Royal Palace in Stockholm reminded him of the Ulster Bank in Sligo – hence the position! Yeats' novel John Sherman tells of a lovesick young Sligo man living in a tall house on the Mall. Just opposite these houses stands The Model Arts and Niland Gallery, home to a collection of paintings by Jack Yeats and his contemporaries.

Knocknarea, Culleenamore and Ballysadare

Driving south from Sligo a trip around Knocknarea by Strandhill and Culleenamore is rewarding. "*The old brown thorn-trees break in two high over Cummen strand, under a bitter black wind that blows from the left hand.*"

If you are fit, a walk to the top of Knocknarea and the mythological burial cairn of Queen Maeve is comparatively easy and the whole of the Land of Heart's Desire is displayed below you.

At nearby Ballysadare village the Pollexfen Company had extensive milling interests and the poet often stayed at Avena House, off the main street. Salley rods were grown here, for basket making etc, and Yeats once heard a tinker woman sing the ballad he later reworded so delicately: "*Down by the Salley Gardens my love and I did meet; she passed the Salley Gardens with little snow white feet. She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the trees: But, I being young and foolish, with her would not agree.*"

As you leave Yeats Country take with you the beauty of the place so well immortalised by the Yeats Family.