



## Episode 1: Encounters with Jack B. Yeats

[Audio played from soundtrack to podcast series – ‘no man’s land’ composed by Karen Power]

**Isabel Claffey:** Hello, and welcome to The Model, home of the Niland Collection in Sligo, we’re delighted to present a new podcast series, ‘Encounters with Jack B. Yeats’ celebrating the life and work of the artist on this, the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. The podcast will feature a collection of music, conversation and even a ghost story, connecting Jack’s writings and paintings to the times he lived through, to the present day, and to the man, himself.

Jack B. Yeats was born in London on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1871 but spent the formative years when he was aged between eight and sixteen, living in Sligo. This podcast is presented as a series of encounters with the master and his work. In each of the six episodes, we will study this private and enigmatic artist and the radical changes that took place within his work during his long and artistically productive lifetime.

In this first episode we will hear a rare recording of an interview with Jack conducted by his close friend, Thomas MacGreevy, a constant advocate for the artist’s work.<sup>1</sup> Recorded in London in 1947 and broadcast the following year, the interview presents a seventy-six year

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<sup>1</sup> This archival audio recording is part of the Sound & Moving Image Catalogue in the British Library (T7655R/1 C1). Jack B. Yeats scholar and musicologist, Dr John W. Purser kindly helped with the rediscovery of this



old Yeats reflecting on his development as an artist and the special significance that Sligo held for this artist and his work.

**[Audio played of two segments from the archival audio recording of interview between Thomas MacGreevy and Jack B. Yeats - from the BBC Third Programme, broadcast on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1948]<sup>2</sup>**

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Jack Yeats' quality as an artist has been to an even greater degree been recognised, not only in his own country, but outside of Ireland too. I have mentioned that Yeats pictures belonging to English, French and American collectors were included in the Dublin exhibition. I remember that a year or two before that exhibition, Sir Kenneth Clark organised an exhibition of Mr. Yeats' pictures at the National Gallery here in London; and that last year a wonderful Yeats picture - a picture that seems to me to be a great masterpiece – 'The Two Travellers' - was acquired for the Tate Gallery.

It is clear, I think, that as an artist Jack Yeats belongs not only to Ireland, which is his country and mine, but to the whole world. Well now, here Mr. Yeats is himself in London, and I think I'll let him speak to you of his pictures, or London, as he wishes. Mr. Yeats.

**Jack B. Yeats:** ...the ...homage and affection, these two things are the foods on which the painter lives and the greatest of these is affection. Nobody could have enjoyed the loan exhibition of my pictures in Dublin more than I did, and, I believe, a great many people enjoyed them very much... but I enjoyed them most of all, and also the loan exhibition in London. I don't know what I should talk to you about now, except, er - why I

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archival audio recording for this podcast series. The original audio recording was about 24 minutes in length. For the full transcription of this interview see - Purser, John Whitley (1988) *The Literary Works of Jack B. Yeats*, PhD thesis, University of Glasgow.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

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paint - and no one can say why they paint - I'm the son of a painter, therefore, painting was made easy for me. My father believed that everyone should go to an art school whether, they were intending to be a painter or not, because it was a foundation of all education, he said. I don't know whether that particularly worked in my case, but it was easier for me to paint than a man whose father was not a painter, because paints were always to my hand. I never was an infant prodigy. I was an infant draughtsman of a kind. But I never posed as an infant prodigy, and I was never run as an infant prodigy. And I am not an infant at all, I can't tell you whether I am a prodigy or not. Though if I didn't think I was a prodigy I wouldn't paint at all, I don't think. But I think it would be better if Mr. MacGreevy, who knows more about painting than I do, were to ask me some question, and then I could give some sort of idea of an answer, because I can't keep on talking about myself, it would bore us both, and you all.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Well, I think that then, Mr. Yeats' talk about not being an infant prodigy . . .but I know that he . . . when he was on his way to school in Sligo, as a little boy, he used to stop and make pictures on the pavements, and, when he went for an examination that he finished his examination paper in far less than the time allowed, and then covered all his papers, and the table and everything else with drawings. Anyhow, that was Sligo, but here is London, and I think Mr. Yeats knows London - as well as the galleries in London - he has lived, to a certain extent, as a boy, the life of a young Londoner; He knows the London circus, the London music hall, the London theatre. He knows all about horses in London, and now he hasn't been in London for eleven years, and perhaps he could give impressions, as they strike him, of whether . . . the extent to which London is itself, and how it compares with that London that he knew long ago.

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**Jack B. Yeats:** Of course, the first thing that would strike anyone who visits London with long gaps in between, is the change in street traffic. When I came to London as a boy, and went to art schools, I'd left Sligo, which is in every way my jumping off place, and is my spiritual home always, and the foundation of everything I paint is Sligo, and Sligo, horses were the background to everything, everyone thought in terms of horses, except those that thought in terms of ships, and even the ship-men were – like all sailors ashore - liked to see themselves aloft on a horse.

Sligo was full of horses, and when I came to London, my chief delight was in the buses - the horse-buses. They ... to... get the seat of honour, on the box seat beside the coachman on an old-fashioned knife-board bus, was a tremendous thing for a small boy. The coachman would lean over to you, and hand you a big loop of leather to help yourself up by. You'd climb up and sit beside him, and if it was bad weather, he would tuck the great leather apron round you, and you could snuggle up close to him, and you thought that you were practically driving the bus.

But at the same time, I was always keeping in touch with the west of Ireland, because every year after my boyhood when I first came to London, every year I spent two months at least in the west, by the Atlantic where I took up again my childhood's days. And the...the longest time I was ever in London completely after that was only shorter spells compared to the long time I was here, when I was an art student. The Irish scene came as a refreshment and a change from the metropolitan old London scene.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** And you went home by ship in your uncle's boat from Liverpool, right round the north of Ireland to Sligo, isn't that right?

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**Jack B. Yeats:** Yes, we used to go round the north-west coast and along there to Sligo from Liverpool. And then it was very nice if the passage was good and if the passage wasn't so good, it wasn't always so nice, but my small stomach got harder with the years. And it was very pleasant to suddenly find the Atlantic motion completely subdued and altered and then you were sliding up to Sligo, passed the Rosses Point with its long low white houses, and a few bigger ones, all shiny in the morning sun.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Piloted by Michael Gillen, no?

**Jack B. Yeats:** By Michael Gillen and all the Gillens and all the Bruens and all the McGowans and all the historic names of that village.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Well then, were you painting and drawing while you were staying with your uncle in Sligo during the summers . . . you were painting and drawing?

**Jack B. Yeats:** Oh, I was painting and drawing every day and all the time, and if there were any little races in the neighbourhood. I would go to them and see them.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Oh yes.

**Jack B. Yeats:** They had a lot of little races there, run on the strand. They were called the "four-pound nineteens."

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**Thomas MacGreevy:** And the races were on the sands, were they?

**Jack B. Yeats:** On the sands, at low tide, when...then in low spring tide they would have them. There were some beautiful bays in the west, in Drumcliffe bay, there's a tremendous long stretch of sand and deep, deep - I mean between the shore and the edge of the receded tide – the flags were put up in the strand on poles and even the fences were laid on the strand, uprights and gorse bushes. They used to gallop round there - it was very exciting - and little whiskey tents and shooting galleries - it used to be very exciting. There were no bookmakers, there was no betting on the race unless there were private books made.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** Yes...

**[End of audio from the two segments played from the archival audio recording of interview between Thomas MacGreevy and Jack B. Yeats]**

**Isabel Claffey:** Some lovely vivid memories there. In the following segment from this interview Thomas McGreevy noted that the artist's wife had greatly enjoyed the opening night of Jack's play 'La La Noo' at the Abbey Theatre in 1942. Jack is momentarily caught off guard - the emotion is evident within his voice. In the same year of this interview- in the spring of 1947, his wife, Mary Cottenham Yeats or 'Cottie' as he affectionately called her, had passed away in Dublin's Portobello's Nursing Home. The couple had met in London as young artists and were married in 1894, when Jack was only twenty. In an article written years later, Jack's father, John Butler Yeats described their courtship.



*'No one knew what [Jack] did at art school in London but one day he surprised his father by telling him he was engaged to be married to a young lady, a very talented art student; and then he showed his moral fiber... It was winter time and every morning from six o'clock till late at night he worked in a fireless room producing black and white drawings for comic journals, etc. At the end of three years he had made enough money to marry the young lady and have a comfortable house very beautifully situated on the banks of Thames some miles from London.'*<sup>3</sup>

**[Audio played of a segment from the archival recording of interview between Thomas MacGreevy and Jack B. Yeats, from the BBC Third Programme, broadcast on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1948]**

**Thomas MacGreevy:** ...and suddenly about six or seven minutes before the end of the play the note of tragedy was struck: and it was sustained - infallibly - for the last seven or eight minutes of the play which lasted about an hour, and I think the audience were breathless. It isn't often you get that feeling of almost fear that it can't be held; but it was held, and it was a terrific evening. Mr. Yeats had a great triumph and Mrs. Yeats, who hadn't seen the play, was there ...

**Jack B. Yeats:** She hadn't read the play either.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** She hadn't even read it and...

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<sup>3</sup> 'The education of Jack B. Yeats,' by John Butler Yeats, in *Christian Science Monitor*, Boston, 2nd November 1920. See, *Jack B. Yeats, A Biography*, by Hilary Pyle, London, revised edition 1989, p.39.

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**Jack B. Yeats:** She wasn't . . . she never read any plays of mine that I've written. The other one that was played - the 'Harlequin's Positions' - she came with me to the first night and it was to my pleasure that she should have all the experiences of a first night and that it should come to her as a novelty. And the same with any books I wrote, she never saw the manuscript, when I got my copy from a publishers, she got a book put in her lap and could begin and read it right away. So, she had never had - no bothers of the pains and arguments that go on with oneself when one's trying to make a play or a book.

**Thomas MacGreevy:** She had a great night at the Abbey Theatre, that evening in 1942.

**Jack B. Yeats:** Well, I . . . you speak beautifully, and kindly, about my work, and I do believe, that a thing that I have always said when I say a thing, I always have a reservation that I might change my mind about it before morning - but I have always held that affection was the greatest attribute that any painter or writer can have. I'm not a writer in the ordinary sense, but when I write I have affection for the things I write about, and when I paint, I certainly have affection for everything I paint. I couldn't... I don't think I have ever painted horrors...

**[End of segment from the archival audio recording of interview between Thomas MacGreevy and Jack B. Yeats]**



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**Isabel Claffey:** Well, that was a real treat to hear Jack speaking, as there are only two surviving audio recordings of his voice in existence. This work was kindly funded by the Decade of Centenaries programme and supported by Sligo County Council. We will be back again next week, with an intriguing ghost story, created by the artists, Ruth Clinton and Niamh Moriarty, so until then, take care and thank you again for listening. For credits, bios, and further information, please see our website [www.themodel.ie](http://www.themodel.ie)

**[Audio played from soundtrack to podcast series – ‘no man’s land’ composed by Karen Power]**

**End of podcast**

**Running time: 15 minutes**

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## SHOW NOTES:

In this first episode from the series of podcasts, 'Encounters with Jack B. Yeats,' from The Model, home of the Niland in Sligo, you will hear a selection of segments from an archival recording of an interview with the artist, Jack B. Yeats (1871-1957). The seventy-six-year-old Jack flew to London in the winter of 1947. It was his first time on an airplane, as he was to record an interview with his friend, Thomas MacGreevy (1893-1967), for a BBC radio arts show called the Third Programme. This show was broadcast the following year in May 1948.

Curator and writer, Thomas MacGreevy was a pivotal figure within the Irish arts scene. He was the director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950 to 1963 and was a constant advocate for Jack's work. In this interview, broadcast over seventy years ago, Jack speaks about his development as an artist and the special significance that Sligo held for him.

This archival audio recording is part of the Sound & Moving Image Catalogue in the British Library (T7655R/1 C1). Jack B. Yeats scholar and musicologist, Dr John W. Purser kindly helped with the rediscovery of this archival audio recording for this podcast series, as there appears to be only one other recording of the artist's voice in existence, which we will hear in a later episode of this series.

The soundtrack for this series, 'no man's land' is composed by Karen Power, as a commission by The Model in 2020. This 8-channel sound installation is based on Power's field recordings, which uncovers and musically highlights the unique sonic profile of the Sligo seaboard.

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## **CREDITS:**

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