

W. B. Yeats, Preface to Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902)

[Full title: *Cuchulain of Muirtheme: The story of the men of the Red Branch of Ulster* / Arranged and put into English by Lady Gregory With a preface by W.B. Yeats (London: J. Murray 1902).]

I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world--and it tells them perfectly for the first time. Translators from the Irish have hitherto retold one story or the other from some one version, and not often with any fine understanding of English, of those changes of rhythm for instance that are changes of the sense. They have translated the best and fullest manuscripts they knew, as accurately as they could, and that is all we have the right to expect from the first translators of a difficult and old literature. But few of the stories really begin to exist as great works of imagination until somebody has taken the best bits out of many manuscripts. Sometimes, as in Lady Gregory's version of *Deirdre*, a dozen manuscripts have to give their best before the beads are ready for the necklace. It has been necessary also to leave out as to add, for generations of copyists, who had often but little sympathy with the stories they copied, have mixed versions together in a clumsy fashion, often repeating one incident several times, and every century has ornamented what was once a simple story with its own often extravagant ornament. We do not perhaps exaggerate when we say that no story has come down to us in the form it had when the storyteller told it in the winter evenings. Lady Gregory has done her work of compression and selection at once so firmly and so reverently that I cannot believe that anybody, except now and then for a scientific purpose, will need another text than this, or than the version of it the Gaelic League is about to publish in Modern Irish. When she has added her translations from other cycles, she will have given Ireland its *Mabinogion*, its *Morte d'Arthur*, its *Nibelungenlied*. She has already put a great mass of stories, in which the ancient heart of Ireland still lives, into a shape at once harmonious and characteristic; and without writing more than a very few sentences of her own to link together incidents or thoughts taken from different manuscripts, without adding more indeed than the story-teller must often have added to amend the hesitation of a moment. Perhaps more than all she has discovered a fitting dialect to tell them in. Some years ago I wrote some stories of mediaeval Irish life, and as I wrote I was sometimes made wretched by the thought that I knew of no kind of English that fitted them as the language of Morris's prose stories--the most beautiful language I had ever read--fitted his journeys to woods and wells beyond the world. I knew of no language to write about Ireland in but raw modern English; but now Lady Gregory has discovered a speech as beautiful as that of Morris, and a living speech into the bargain. As she moved about among her people she learned to love the beautiful speech of those who think in Irish, and to understand that it is as true a dialect of English as the dialect that Burns wrote in. It is some hundreds of years old, and age gives a language authority. We find in it the vocabulary of the translators of the Bible, joined to an idiom which makes it tender, compassionate, and complaisant, like the Irish language itself. It is certainly well suited to clothe a literature which never ceased to be folk-lore even when it was recited in the Courts of Kings.

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Lady Gregory could with less trouble have made a book that would have better pleased the hasty reader. She could have plucked away details, smoothed out characteristics till she had left nothing but the bare stories; but a book of that kind would never have called up the past, or stirred the imagination of a painter or a poet, and would be as little thought of in a few years as if it had been a popular novel.

The abundance of what may seem at first irrelevant invention in a story like the death of Conaire, is essential if we are to recall a time when people were in love with a story, and gave themselves up to imagination as if to a lover. We may think there are too many lyrical outbursts, or too many enigmatical symbols here and there in some other story, but delight will always overtake us in the end. We come to accept without reserve an art that is half epical, half lyrical, like that of the historical parts of the Bible,

the art of a time when perhaps men passed more readily than they do now from one mood to another, and found it harder than we do to keep to the mood in which we tot up figures or banter a friend.

[...]

V

We find, as we expect, in the work of men who were not troubled about any probabilities or necessities but those of emotion itself, an immense variety of incident and character and of ways of expressing emotion. Cuchulain fights man after man during the quest of the Brown Bull, and not one of those fights is like another, and not one is lacking in emotion or strangeness; and when we think imagination can do no more, the story of the Two Bulls, emblematic of all contests, suddenly lifts romance into prophecy. The characters too have a distinctness we do not find among the people of the Mabinogion, perhaps not even among the people of the Morte d'Arthur. We know we shall be long forgetting Cuchulain, whose life is vehement and full of pleasure, as though he always remembered that it was to be soon over; or the dreamy Fergus who betrays the sons of Usnach for a feast, without ceasing to be noble; or Conall who is fierce and friendly and trustworthy, but has not the sap of divinity that makes Cuchulain mysterious to men, and beloved of women. Women indeed, with their lamentations for lovers and husbands and sons, and for fallen rooftrees and lost wealth, give the stories their most beautiful sentences; and, after Cuchulain, we think most of certain great queens--of angry, amorous Maeve, with her long pale face; of Findabair, her daughter, who dies of shame and of pity; of Deirdre who might be some mild modern housewife but for her prophetic wisdom. If we do not set Deirdre's lamentations among the greatest lyric poems of the world, I think we may be certain that the wine-press of the poets has been trodden for us in vain; and yet I think it may be proud Emer, Cuchulain's fitting wife, who will linger longest in the memory. What a pure flame burns in her always, whether she is the newly married wife fighting for precedence, fierce as some beautiful bird, or the confident housewife, who would awaken her husband from his magic sleep with mocking words; or the great queen who would get him out of the tightening net of his doom, by sending him into the Valley of the Dead, with Niamh, his mistress, because he will be more obedient to her; or the woman whom sorrow has sent with Helen and Iseult and Brunnhilda, and Deirdre, to share their immortality in the rosary of the poets.

“And oh! my love!” she said, “we were often in one another's company, and it was happy for us; for if the world had been searched from the rising of the sun to sunset, the like would never have been found in one place, of the Black Sainglain and the Grey of Macha, and Laeg the chariot-driver, and myself and Cuchulain.”

“And after that Emer bade Conall to make a wide, very deep grave for Cuchulain; and she laid herself down beside her gentle comrade, and she put her mouth to his mouth, and she said: Love of my life, my friend, my sweetheart, my one choice of the men of the earth, many is the women, wed or unwed, envied me until today; and now I will not stay living after you.”

VI

We Irish should keep these personages much in our hearts, for they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadows upon our doors at evening. If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills!

W. B. YEATS
March 1902