

mas" was being fought in union halls and in state legislatures.

Ironically, efforts by reformers to "domesticate" Christmas, to make "keeping Christmas" something one did at home in the company of a few close friends and family members, or to accentuate the Nativity of Christ as the center of the festival (eventually displacing Easter as the central event of the Christian calendar and giving consumerism an advantage over Christianity), were themselves coopted by the new socioeconomic order. The emerging consumerism of the era undermined the exchange of good will and the affirmation of status through role reversal in the exchange between Santa Claus and child (gift and affection for good behavior, gratitude, and reciprocal love). As production was separated from the household, and goods, services, and a variety of foodstuffs became readily available to the expanding urban middle class in 19th-century America, the "specialness" of the Christmas gift was transformed into the frustrating search for the "right gift." The problem of what to give the man, woman, or child who "has everything"—and often appreciates nothing—was built into capitalism and the "domestic Christmas" from the beginning. "Affection's gift" had become a commercial present, aggressively marketed by commercial interests promoting the "domestic Christmas." "Christmas," writes Mr. Nissenbaum, "was consciously used by entrepreneurs as an agent of commercialization, an instrument with which to enmesh Americans in a web of consumer capitalism."

In this way the yearning for an unfulfilled domesticity, for the genuine affection and warmth so often subtly tied to mutual aid and reciprocity, contributed to the "accumulative, competitive" ideology that produces the familiar "Blue Christmas" mood. "The problems we associate with Christmas, in particular—the loss of authenticity, the decline of pure domestic felicity into an exhausting and often frustrating round of shopping for the perfect gifts—are the very problems we most easily associate with the facts of modern economic life, with advanced technologies of production and marketing." The intensity of feeling for the domestic Christmas traditions was itself indicative of the need to "keep hidden from view" the relationship between an eroded sense of community and commercialism, "to protect children (and adults, too) from understanding some-

thing troublesome about the world they were making." The secularized anti-Christian bias was present in embryonic form at the creation of industrial America, owing in part to consumerism and the rise of telescopic philanthropy, both of which are part of liberal capitalism's genetic code. In an era marked by the collapse of family life and community, such "protection [from the truth] may be an indulgence we can no longer afford." Putting Christ back into this Christmas may be the biggest battle of all.

*Wayne Allensworth writes from
Purcellville, Virginia.*

A Life in Themes *by Frank Brownlow*

**W.B. Yeats: A Life. Vol. I:
The Apprentice Mage, 1865-1914**
by R.F. Foster
Oxford and New York:
Oxford University Press;
704 pp., \$35.00



By any assessment, W.B. Yeats was an extraordinary man who led a more active and varied life than most poets. As R.F. Foster says, he was "a poetic genius who was also, both serially and simultaneously, a playwright, journalist, occultist, apprentice politician, revolutionary, stage-manager, diner-out, dedicated

friend, confidant and lover of some of the most interesting people of his day." He was also a gifted self-publicist who thrived on opposition and defiance. Such a life leaves behind a mass of material for a biographer to manage. There is a large cast of characters to be depicted. There are many settings to be described and understood, and many journeys to be traced. There are issues to be explained and quarrels to be adjudicated. Above all, there is justice to be done to the man himself, and to his achievement. Otherwise, why write another biography?—not a trivial question, as it turns out.

R.F. Foster is a successful Irish professor of history now teaching at Oxford, where he is Carroll Professor of Irish History and a fellow of Hertford College. This is the first volume of his biography of Yeats, taking Yeats from birth to the verge of World War I, when he was nearly 50 years old. Foster tells us in his introduction that he has written a historian's biography, not a literary critic's. The difference, as he explains it, is that a literary biographer would begin from Yeats's poetry and devote himself to looking for its causes and reflections in the poet's life, while the historian would simply begin at the beginning and work forward, treating the poetry as one of the many things Yeats did. Chronology is everything; and, as things turn out, the beauty of that principle from a critically-minded biographer's point of view is that it so effectively dismantles the poet's own carefully spliced and edited accounts of his life. To give an example everyone familiar with Yeats's poetry will recognize: Maud Gonne, as she appears in Yeats's

The Sage Hen *(for Katherine V. Murphy)*

by Timothy Murphy

To slake her fledglings' thirst
she dowsed her downy breast
and flew through blowing dust
from the river to her nest.

Now she is distressed,
always dreading the worst
for the flighty brood she nursed
because we do not nest.

writing, was a tragic beauty. Loving her reflected favorably on Yeats's own sensitivity, on his fineness of perception, and on his capacity for suffering and endurance. In contrast, Foster's chronologically described Conne is, not to mince words, an unstable crackpot whom only a rather peculiar man could have loved so ineffectively for so long.

In a book in which many people believe and do strange things, Maud Conne did some of the strangest of all. She attempted to reincarnate a dead child by coupling with her French lover on the dead child's grave. Later on, having long protested her dislike of sex to Yeats, she married a known Irish terrorist who abused her and her young daughter. Yeats, who knew nothing about the

French lover's existence, misread her completely. Lines from his early poems about her—"Tread softly, for you tread on my dreams"—hardly survive knowledge of the real Maud Conne.

Foster writes so demurely, in such a plain, almost colorless style, that it is hard to know (especially with a whole volume to come), whether the book's debunking effect is intentional or whether it simply goes with the approach. Whatever the cause, the effect is certainly there. Very little escapes. Yeats's maternal relations in Sligo, much romanticized in his own autobiographical writings, appear as a race of narrow-minded, provincial businessmen. What is more, they were English. His father's relatives are presented as seedy hangers-on of the governing ascendancy, a pattern continued in the life of Yeats senior—an unsuccessful artist with a gift for sponging.

As for Yeats himself, Foster shows him developing early on as a man with a foot in both Ireland and England, adept at playing off one against the other to develop his career. Yeats deployed the cosmopolitanism of London against the provincialism and back-biting of Ireland, the romance of Ireland against the prosaic modernity of England. To the English, he was an exotic outsider, bringing Celtic mystery to mundane London; to the Irish, he was the homeboy with overseas backing whom everyone could be proud of, and no one could quite trust.

Presented in this way, and despite Yeats's genius and obvious charm, his life is the story of a man not easy to like. Foster's Yeats was a self-dramatizing, ruthlessly effective snob, a manipulator of people and circumstances who continually revised and rewrote his work and his life to align both with changing assessments of his position. Not that the story is uninteresting. In the lives of Yeats and his friends, politics, nationalism, occultism, art, and sex combined in a pungent mixture, with results ranging from the appalling to the farcical. In that respect, Yeats's Anglo-Ireland was a microcosm of modern Europe and America, but as one reflects upon the sinister mixture of occultism and nationalism in Yeats's circle, there is no denying that Yeats's poetry begins to lose its authority.

Foster justifies his substitution of day-to-day chronological events for Yeats's carefully shaped retrospections by saying, "We do not, alas, live our lives in themes, but day by day." That is, to say the least, a debatable proposition. To be-

gin with, it is a false antithesis; some of us think we live our lives in themes, day by day. Some of us would even be prepared to say that, considered as an organizing principle, that sentence disqualifies one from writing any kind of biography, let alone a poet's.

Fortunately, and like many a writer, Foster does not believe in his own principle. He uses it to dismantle Yeats's patterns and themes but forgets it when he comes to assemble his own. His book has a narrative pattern; it treats Yeats as a generic Anglo-Irishman growing up, as Foster says repeatedly, in the decline of the Protestant ascendancy, driven to reimagine a version of Ireland that would accommodate him and his ambitions. Consequently, he turned to Irish nationalism, and to an idiosyncratic blend of Celticism and occultism, for the materials of stories in which he could play the characteristic ascendancy roles of hero, master, and sage.

This is where one hears, in the background of Foster's book, the faint sounds of an axe being ground. If Yeats's version of Ireland, which has proved so influential with readers of his work outside of Ireland, should prove to be an ascendancy myth in another key, then it has no more authority, as history, than his other personal inventions. And if that is so, then from an Irish point of view, Yeats's literary reputation must be at best an irrelevance, at worst a case of spectacular meddling in the national life. To see whether this is the drift of Professor Foster's book, we shall have to wait for the second volume, which will take Yeats through the 1916 rebellion, the civil war, and into the Irish senate.

In the meantime, this is a fascinating book. The story of how Augusta Gregory and Yeats used Annie Horniman's money to found the Abbey Theatre, and then got rid of her, is alone worth the price of admission. Inevitably, in such an exhaustive work, there are some weaknesses. Foster brings in too many inadequately described characters to populate the context or provide a quotation, and his index offers little help in identifying them. His grammar and syntax are not always correct, and there is no real bibliography, which one hopes will be supplied in the second volume.

Frank Brownlow teaches English at Mount Holyoke College. His most recent book is Robert Southwell (Twayne Publishers).

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Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

Nationalism, True and False

Ruling classes exercise power through combinations of coercion and manipulation—what Machiavelli called force and fraud, or the habits of the lion and the fox that he recommended to princes who wish to stay in power. Like most princes, most ruling classes tend to be better at one than the other, and depending on their talents, interests, and psychologies, they will habitually rely on one style of domination more than on its complement. In the 20th century, totalitarian regimes have rested their power on the use of force—to the point of what the Germans came to call *Schrecklichkeit*, or terror, pure and simple—but they did not fail to attend to the arts of manipulation as well. Communist brainwashing and the high science of propaganda that Joseph Goebbels perfected were perhaps as useful to their respective regimes and the ruling classes they served as the Cheka and the Gestapo.

Unlike European totalitarians, their American counterpart in this century has tended to rely on manipulation, which involves not only indoctrination through the mass media but also the whole battery of techniques by which the population is manipulated to think and act in the way that the managerial ruling class wants it to think and act. Those techniques include the bread and circuses of mass consumerism and the entertainment industry as well as the blunter ideological disciplining delivered every night on television and in most Hollywood films. Of the two styles of power, reliance on manipulation is probably more effective and certainly more economical than reliance on force. Every shepherd knows it's more expedient to train a sheep dog to keep the sheep in line than to run after every beast that strays from the fold himself, and every ruler or ruling class understands that the means of force are always finite while the means of manipulation are virtually inexhaustible.

The reliance of the American managerial class on manipulation rather than force explains why dissidents are not simply rounded up and imprisoned or shot

as they were in the sister regimes in Europe, as well as why the victory of the new elite in the middle of the century was so peaceful and virtually invisible to all but keen observers like James Burnham, C. Wright Mills, Garet Garrett, and a few others. Instead of being repressed, opponents of the revolution were either ignored and marginalized or, in some cases, rewarded and thereby digested within the belly of the beast. Even the harebrained bomb throwers of the New Left were not for the most part seriously subjected to coercive repression, except perhaps by local and state police agencies that had not yet been “sensitized” by the regime’s federal law enforcement apparatus, but rather were coddled, rebuked, and generally ignored until they grew up. Within a decade of their prediction of the storm of revolution that was about to descend on the ruling class, most of the more grotesque spokesmen of the Weather Underground had become dentists, insurance salesmen, and big-city lawyers, and the intelligence, security, and law enforcement branches of the regime never paid as much attention to the Weathermen, the Black Panthers, or the various Maoists, Guevarists, and Trotskyites as they are paying today to perfectly law-abiding and patriotic militias and grassroots activists of the right.

Today, the regime is paying attention to the right for one simple reason—the means of manipulation is beginning to crumble as the official ideology of the regime is discredited and rejected and as alternative means of communication become available that the ruling class is unable to control. Computers, faxes, the Internet, and other technologies allow dissident groups to flourish and to communicate with each other in ways that were not available to dissidents of an earlier day, and all of these technologies are (so far) virtually independent of both police power and the manipulative reach of the regime. Hence, incidents like Waco, Ruby Ridge, and similar acts of coercive repression become necessary to discipline the opposition (our very own form of *Schrecklichkeit*), and the emerging federal police state, with the help of semiprivate intelligence-gathering arms like the Anti-Defamation League and

the Southern Poverty Law Center, can be expected to use coercion at least as thoroughly as the secret police of the European dictators.

Nevertheless, the ruling class is not stupid, and it knows very well that it cannot sit on bayonets forever. Therefore, it is rather clumsily trying to patch together new means of manipulation before the whole society spins out of its control. President Clinton and the “New Democrats” are the left side of this effort, while what is generally known (at least among paleoconservatives) as “neoconservatism” is its right side. Both are essential to preserve the illusion of political and ideological alternatives and the shadow of freedom, but any close examination will show that there is about as much real difference between them as there was between the Dole-Kemp ticket last year and its rival.

The Clintonian effort at keeping the sheep of the left within the herd seems to have been successful, at least for now, but on the right there are problems. Unlike the left, the right has actually produced a real and politically significant alternative to neoconservatism in the Buchanan movement and in paleoconservatism and the “hard right” in general—ranging from this magazine and related groups like the John Randolph Club and a variety of grassroots activists to the militias and their constituencies. The problem for neoconservatism is that most Americans on the right don’t buy what it’s selling and do not look to it for political or ideological leadership.

What is to be done? If at first you don’t succeed, try again. In the last few months, the neoconservatives have been trying to set a new ideological line, one that might reasonably be expected to capture the populist right and prepare it for digestion by the regime, and thereby ensure that it does not eventually produce a movement or a leader that can seriously challenge its power.

The new mold in which neoconservatism is trying to cast itself is “nationalism,” and its guiding spirit is William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*. Nationalism, of course, also happens to be the theme of most of the populist right, whether it is directed against immigration, which threatens to extinguish the