

Yeats, (William) Michael Butler

by Helena King

Yeats, (William) Michael Butler (1921–2007), senator and MEP, was born on 22 August 1921 in Cuttlebrook House, Thame, Oxfordshire, younger child and only son of William Butler Yeats (qv), poet and dramatist, and Bertha Georgie ('George') Yeats (qv) (née Hyde-Lees), daughter of a British army officer. In early 1922 the family moved to Dublin, settling at 82 Merrion Square. Some months each year were spent at Ballylee Castle (Thoor Ballylee), a Norman tower close to the Coole Park estate in Co. Galway of Lady Gregory (qv).

Michael Yeats asserts in his autobiography, *Cast a cold eye* (1999), that he and his sister Anne (qv), an artist and stage designer, saw little of 'the poet' in their early years; George 'accepted that her mission in life was to ensure that nothing would interfere with the production of great poetry for the world'; the children 'were kept apart from the ordinary, day-to-day life of the family' (Yeats, 1). He appears to have taken this in his stride. He describes his father as 'formidable ... in a way, it was like living with a national monument', but insists that 'many of the depictions ... bear little relationship to the father we knew at home ... a photograph ... shows him, in old age, full of vivacity and humour. This is the Yeats that I remember' (Yeats, 24). By the time Michael was 10 and capable of having 'an intelligent interest in events', his father was 66 and in poor health; he died when Michael was 17, old enough to regret his passing just as they had begun to establish a closer relationship.

Michael suffered a bowel haemorrhage shortly after his birth and a month later underwent surgery for an infantile hernia. In 1927, suffering from a suspected tubercular infection, he was sent to 'L'Alpe Fleurie' boarding school at Villars-sur-Bex, Switzerland. Anne joined him some months later; they remained there until 1930, spending family Christmases in Rapallo, Italy. The language of the school was French and Michael became bilingual; returning to Dublin he knew more French than English. Through lack of practice he lost this proficiency, and although later in life he would again use French daily, he never regained the perfect accent of his childhood.

With the family now living in Fitzwilliam Square, Michael attended school in Palmerston Park, Ranelagh, for a year, before switching to Baymount boarding school in Dollymount. There his political sensibilities were awakened. The prevailing view among his schoolmates was that, to ensure the ties with Britain remaining in the aftermath of the 1921 Anglo–Irish treaty were preserved, Cumann na nGaedheal and W. T. Cosgrave (qv) must be supported. In the face of their trenchant opinions, rather than because of personal conviction, he left Baymount in 1935 'a committed de Valera republican'. That September he started at St Columba's College, close to the Yeatses' new home, Riversdale, in Rathfarnham. One of his closest friends at the school, and for several years thereafter, was Brian Faulkner (qv), the future

Stormont prime minister. In October 1939 Michael entered TCD, graduating in 1943 with a first-class degree in modern history and political science. He completed a BL degree at King's Inns in 1948, but never practised law.

He joined the College Historical Society at Trinity, believing that debating would help him overcome the shyness he had always suffered. He became its auditor, and in that capacity organised the inaugural meeting of the new session in November 1944. His topic was 'The small nations'; Taoiseach Éamon de Valera (qv) and Jan Masaryk, minister for foreign affairs in the Czechoslovakian government-in-exile in London, were his main speakers. Yeats had further involvement with the society in 1969, when it proposed admitting women members. The proposal passed by a single vote; having supported it, Yeats contended that had he stayed at home on the night of the vote the society would have remained all male.

At a meeting of Trinity's Cumann Gaelach (Gaelic Society), Yeats met Gráinne Dill Ní Éigeartaigh (O'Hegarty) (1925–2013), a harpist and singer, only daughter of Patrick Sarsfield O'Hegarty (qv), former IRB supreme council member and secretary of the Department of Post and Telegraphs, and Wilhelmina Rebecca Smyth (1890–1962), a Cumann na mBan veteran. Yeats and Gráinne married on 14 May 1949 and lived at Cliff House, Coliemore Road, Dalkey, Co. Dublin.

During the 1943 general election campaign, Yeats attended a Fianna Fáil public meeting organised by Sean MacEntee (qv) and offered his services. After the election he was invited to join the party and became a member of the Fintan Lalor cumann in Rathmines. He agreed to contest a Dáil Éireann seat in 1948 and was selected alongside MacEntee as a candidate in the three-seat Dublin South-East constituency. He came fourth, behind John A. Costello (qv), MacEntee and Noel Browne (qv). At the 1948 ard fheis he was elected to the Fianna Fáil national executive. He contested the 1951 dáil election, again finishing fourth. Fianna Fáil won the election, and de Valera appointed Yeats to the seventh Seanad Éireann. In this he followed his father, a member of the first Free State senate. After the 1952 budget, in which MacEntee had raised income tax by five per cent, Yeats, supported by a dáil colleague, drafted a motion criticising MacEntee's policies. It was debated, but eventually defeated.

In April 1953 Yeats was a delegate to the Council of Europe, serving on the committee for population and refugees; this awakened a life-long interest in European affairs. He contested the 1954 seanad election but lost his seat; he continued to attend Fianna Fáil national executive meetings in his capacity as publicity officer. Following de Valera's success in the presidential election of 1959, Yeats was responsible for writing and publishing the new president's election address.

Elected on the seanad labour panel in 1961, he was nominated by Seán Lemass (qv) to the eleventh seanad in 1965, elected on the cultural and educational panel in

1969 and 1973, and was a nominee of Jack Lynch (qv) in 1977 (he had run Lynch's general election campaign tour that year). During the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party debate on the 1968 referendum to abolish proportional representation, Yeats proposed an amendment that the single transferable vote be preserved in single-member constituencies, but it was rejected. He was one of seven parliamentary party members to vote against holding the referendum. Yeats was asked to run as cathaoirleach (chair) of the seanad in 1969. Neil Blaney (qv) attempted to block his selection, but Yeats secured the party nomination and ultimately was elected; Mary Robinson (b. 1944) and Owen Sheehy-Skeffington (qv) voted against him. He resigned as cathaoirleach on 1 January 1973, having been nominated as a Fianna Fáil member of the European parliament. Under the rules then applying, he was able to remain a senator, and was re-elected to the thirteenth seanad later in 1973.

Appointed a temporary member of the European parliament's governing body, he was asked on 16 January 1973 to make the opening speech on behalf of the Irish delegation. Because he had been cathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann – something he contended carried more weight with European colleagues than reflected the reality of the post – he believed he was often treated with a level of respect abroad that was not warranted. In 1975 he became a vice-president of the parliament, having failed to be elected president by one vote. As such, Yeats was again a member of the governing bureau and became involved in parliamentary administration. He served his final two years as MEP on the budget rules and procedures committee.

Ahead of the first direct European elections in 1979, the Fianna Fáil government established an independent commission to decide on Ireland's European constituency boundaries. Yeats's submission that they be based on the provincial boundaries was accepted. Within the parliament he was asked to draft a report on revising its rules of procedure. All of the changes proposed were accepted in plenary session. He contested the 1979 election for the Dublin constituency, but lost his seat to Síle de Valera (b. 1954). On 12 March 1980 Yeats resigned from the seanad, and in April became a director on the secretariat of the EEC Council of Ministers, a post he held until his retirement in 1986.

Yeats's career in public service might be said to have fulfilled a prophecy by his aunt Lily (Susan Mary Yeats (qv)) that he would be a diplomat. Despite pursuing a career at some remove from his family's literary and artistic background, however, he cared assiduously for the literary legacy for which he was responsible. He served as a patron of the Yeats International Summer School and variously as chair, secretary and director of the Cuala Press, which he and Anne revived in 1969 and ran for many years. He insisted that scholars have unrestricted access to his father's papers and often waived copyright fees. He donated 1,000 items of his father's writings to the NLI in 1985; in 2000 he donated the 'automatic writing' collection, and later W. B. Yeats's personal library, having turned down a seven-figure offer from a potential buyer.

He was a member of the LDF battalion attached to Portobello barracks, Rathmines, in the early 1940s; was conferred with an honorary doctorate of law in 1978 by Florida State University; was a governor of the Royal Irish Academy of Music; participated in the interdisciplinary Distinguished British and Irish Studies Series of lectures at Clemson University, South Carolina, in February 1993; and was made a freeman of Sligo Borough in May 2003. Michael Yeats died on 3 January 2007 in St Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin, and was buried at Shanganagh cemetery. He was survived by his wife, daughters Cairtriona Dill (b. 1951) and Siobhán Máire (b. 1953), and son Pádraig Butler (b. 1959). Another daughter, Síle Áine (b. 1955), also survived him but died in September 2007.

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Burke, *IFR* (1976), 1,233, 1,265; *ITWW*, 363; Maureen Cairnduff, *Who's who in Ireland: the influential 1,000* (1984); *Ir. Times*, 22, 26 Mar. 1997; 11 Jan. 2006; 6 Jan. 2007; 27 Apr. 2013; *Sunday Tribune*, 14 Mar. 1999; Michael B. Yeats, *Cast a cold eye: memories of a poet's son and politician* (1999); *Sligo Champion*, 16 May 2003; R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: a life*, ii: *The arch poet* (2003); *Times*, 10 Jan. 2007; *Independent* (London), 10 Jan. 2007; *Ir. Independent*, 3 Sept. 2007