Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

"We were the last romantics - chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness." 1

Throughout his career as a poet Yeats's conviction was that there was a deep interrelationship between his political experiences on the one hand and his poetry on the other. He appears to have been influenced by certain external factors in this. Nationalism in Ireland was closely connected with Irish literature. The literature excelled, sometimes even exalted in its political objectives and sentiments. Perhaps the reason lay in the harsh nature of British rule over Ireland. From the beginning of the English invasions Irish literature centred on the themes of conquest, political dependence and, over against them, exile and freedom. Another offshoot of British colonialism was the growth of an Anglo-Irish heritage in the social, political and cultural fields. From being totally influenced by British modes of thought and way of life the Anglo-Irish were slowly absorbed into the Irish nationalist mainstream and indeed came to identify themselves as Irishmen. Thus nationalism was a unifying

1. W.B. Yeats "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" Collected Poems, p. 276
force and most of the Irish writers, whether Protestant (most of the Anglo-Irish were Protestant) or Catholic, were drawn inevitably towards this goal of achieving Irish independence. Irish literature reflects these historic changes from conquest and colonialism to nationalism. At any rate the literature of the Young Irelanders was ideal in their assumptions of a unity of purpose in their dream of a united Ireland. These ideals found concrete outlets in countless rebellions which were doomed to failure and thus violence was one of the recurring features of Irish life and literature.

The Irish Literary Revival was inspired by the earlier example of Young Irelanders at about the same time as witnessed the failure of parliamentary politics and the fall of Parnell. This revival was mainly the result of Yeats's intense efforts to create a literature definitely nationalist in intent yet not sacrificing literary merit. For Yeats himself the themes and symbols of his poetry are steeped in Ireland's political, social and cultural history. He could not be Ireland's leading poet without being a nationalist first. The special interest of his work lies in this connection between his poetry and political and social realities and the triumph of his work lies in their transformation into art. In this study of Yeats as a poet, a political and social thinker the primary attempt is to define the nature of his ideas and to relate them to his Irish background while not losing sight of the Anglo-Irish
heritage and international events which were to have repercussions in Ireland. Of course it is not straightforward propaganda, nor simple statements. He has a complex attitude to the themes because he had a critical attitude to the character of the politics that dominated the Irish scene. His was not a blind patriotism. It was not enough to be just Irish. His enquiring mind led him to observe the reactions of the Irish as a people and not just as patriots. He detested the fanaticism and mob passions as well as the lack of standards characteristic of the urban people. At the same time he became aware of the immense passions and the moments of heroism and sacrifice in their struggle.

His early poetry leads up to this moment of heroism in the Easter 1916 rebellion. His poetry abounds in images of violence which are juxtaposed against symbols of peace. It springs from his aim of writing poetry close to its Irish roots. He develops the symbols of nature which have close links with others used in traditional Irish literature. In his later poetry he moves closer to his Anglo-Irish heritage, contrary to the conventional view that in his later poetry he turns more and more into Ireland's national poet. Yeats's close connections with his Anglo-Irish heritage are worth noting, though he is aware of the literary and cultural need to unify Gaelic and Anglo-Irish Ireland, the Catholic and the Protestant ways of life. This is the underlying root of his social and political preferences, revealing the romantic
nature of his conservatism. Most studies seem to consider
him firstly and only as Ireland's national poet without
analysing his own Anglo-Irish social and cultural milieu and
secondly, analyse his work in relation to his art and philosophy,
ignoring his political preferences. But as can be seen it is
of the utmost importance in understanding the poet and the man,
his friendships and his reaction to public events.

Yeats's reactions to public events were always in a
personal context. Therefore the Parnell crisis, the violent
disapproval of Synge's plays and the incident of the Hugh Lane
pictures only served to intensify his disdain for the mob.
Because of his dislike of the middle class we see a growing
and perhaps instinctive turning to authoritarian standards in
a way of life which would encompass his dream of a way of life
binding together the noble and the peasant. Bitterness and
rancour were the keynotes of the Civil War and revealed the
distrust between various classes in Irish society. All these
factors seemed to point in one direction. Against this
background of national and international politics the main
source of discontent was the widespread disillusionment with
democracy. This took the form of large-scale strikes,
economic stagnation and a rising unemployment problem. Added
to this was the fact that internal dissensions split the
parliamentary groups and the alternatives to democracy were
spear-headed by socialist and fascist political groups.
Democracy seemed to have failed. This resulted in ways of
thinking that were either conservative or Leftist in their view. The poets of the thirties write poetry committed to Leftist views. Other writers like Pound, Wyndham Lewis and others preferred a world-view that was authoritarian and conservative in outlook. Yeats's antipathy to democracy and its values lead him to assert, first the principle of authority, and secondly, the principle of a collective life. He found a model satisfying both the demands in traditional feudal order. More and more he began to identify himself with the institutions, values and symbols of the Protestant Ascendancy. Of course he realised that these things were dying, but he affirmed their transcendant validity with passionate intensity.

It is significant that he identifies himself totally with their way of life. The symbol of the tower in his poetry is both a personal and collective symbol associated with the nobility. His own house Thoor Ballylee assumes new dimensions in his poetry. It is a symbol of his Anglo-Irish background and his commitment to the nobility. Yet he is aware of the fragility of this life. Therefore he is all the more conscious and despondent at the way things are going. Irish nationalism seemed to release democratic forces which gave rise to new tensions within Irish society. The Civil War, thus, for Yeats is seen on two levels. Firstly the Civil War is seen as a result of the democratic forces which were released by Irish nationalism. Secondly the Civil War is seen as a rejection of the things he most values and reveres -
The Ascendancy Big House and its culture. This was most probably the result of the indiscriminate burning of many of the old mansions of the Protestant nobility. He is aware of the increasing isolation of his position. His love of the old feudal order becomes in a sense a refuge and his symbol of the tower is a defensive symbol implying the fragility of Life within that tower, representing the 'fine life'.

After the Civil War and the establishment of the Free State Yeats was elected Senator. Yet though he worked on a number of schemes he was aware of problems smouldering beneath the surface. The reactionary forces in Ireland decided to merge together and their general aims were similar to the fascist movements in Europe. Yeats's initial support and later rejection of it as a creed bring out his innate individualism. He at first thought Fascism meant a resurrection of the old feudal order, but later he found in it a suppression of individual liberty and this was something that he treasured most of all. Moreover, fascism was a passing phase, for Yeats felt that it had a lot in common with the blind passion of the democratic mob he hated so much.

At this juncture Yeats turned yet again to his own Anglo-Irish heritage symbolised in the figures of Berkeley, Swift, Goldsmith and Burke. He saw in their ideals a blend of conservative order and tradition and personal liberty. Turning away from the democratic wave in modern Ireland he preferred to uphold eighteenth-century Ireland and its values
which were more in keeping with his own.

Finally, Yeats's unique personal ideology turns out to be a blend of a romantic passion for nobility, vitality and heroism and a conservative fear of change, democracy and equality. Politically of little value, it served him well in his creation of a poetry rich in thought and emotion. But Yeats's poetry is not just a versified version of his ideology. It is not just a record of the political events of his time, nor is it just an extension of his romantic conservative ideology. Instead of suppressing the tensions and contradictions in the interests of ideology his best poetry brings it out in the open and dramatises them and that is how his poetry becomes more authentic and human. In the end Yeats found it hard to identify with any living and growing political force. Hence the tragic note which rises to a crescendo. Yet his poetry has value as a sensitive and intelligent witness to the events of his day. Political change and conflict is at the heart of Yeats - the poet and the man.

Out of Ireland have we come
Great hatred, little room,
Maimed us at the start.
I carry from my mother's womb
A fanatic heart.

2. W.B. Yeats "Remorse for Intemperate Speech" Collected Poems, p. 288