CHAPTER 1

THE MAKING OF THE POET: POLITICAL INFLUENCES

The first all-Ireland movement against the British rule started, at the end of the eighteenth century, under the brilliant leadership of Lord Edward FitzGerald, R. Emmet, and Wolfe Tone. Though the rising became abortive, the fire of nationalism could not be put out as the new generation found a new leader in O'Connell who devised means of conducting an agitation for Catholic rights within the law. His agitation was so great that the Duke of Wellington, the British Prime Minister, feared war and forced George IV to sign the Catholic Emancipation Act 1829. Not satisfied with the concessions given by the British government, the Irish leaders continued their struggle for autonomy. The national movement inspired the Irish poets to write patriotic poems. Among them the most notable were Mary Shackleton, Weston Joyce, Thomas Osborne Davis, Thomas D'Arcy MacGee, Charles Gavan Duffy, Sir Samuel Ferguson, William Allingham and Aubrey de Vere. Thomas Osborne Davis, the poet, was the founder of the Young Ireland Party and he edited, with the assistance of Charles Gavan Duffy, the patriotic periodical 'The Nation'. Davis, Allingham and Ferguson composed poems that aroused nationalist feelings in the hearts of the rich
and the poor alike. W.B. Yeats must have owed a great deal to these poets who supplied him material to compose poems on Irish themes. The other outstanding writer to influence him was Standish O'Grady, the Prose-Homer of Ireland. Two other political organizations also influenced the poetry of Yeats. The first political organization was the group of Fenians who formed a secret organization in America after the fall of O'Connell. The Fenian Brotherhood was formed as a secret society in the U.S.A. in 1858 and it soon extended.

1. Yeats held these writers in high esteem and, founding the Irish Literary Society, he tried his best to convince the Irish people of the talents of Sir Ferguson and Standish O'Grady. "In 1891 I had founded in London the Irish Literary Society, joined by most London Journalists of Irish birth, a couple of years later in Dublin, the National Literary Society; these societies had given, as I intended, opportunity to a new generation of critics and writers to denounce the propagandist verse and prose that had gone by the name of Irish literature, and to substitute for it certain neglected writers: Sir Samuel Ferguson, a writer of ballads dry in their eighteenth century sincerity; Standish O'Grady, whose 'History of Ireland' retold the Irish heroic tales in romantic Carlylean prose; the Clarence Mangan of the 'Dark Rosaleen' and O'Hussey's 'Ode to the Maguire', our one poet raised to the first rank by intensity, and only that in these or perhaps in the second of these poems. Autobiographies, pp. 395-96.
to Great Britain and Ireland. Yeats met John O'Leary, one of the leaders of the Fenian Brotherhood, at the Contemporary Club. In O'Leary Yeats found an ideal man and throughout his life he remained his follower. O'Leary was the son of a small property-owner in Tipperary. While he was a student at Trinity College, Dublin, he read the poems of Davis published in the *Nation*, that made him a patriot. Stephens, the founder of the Fenian Brotherhood, found O'Leary at a shop of old books. With Stephens and Luby he formed the Triumvirate of the Fenian organization. For his subversive activities he was exiled from Ireland and he had to live in France for fifteen years. After his return to Dublin in 1885, he soon was surrounded by young men. Yeats under the influence of O'Leary joined the Fenian Brotherhood.  

1. Terence de Vere White writes in his book *Ireland*: "Though Fenianism seemed to have failed, the spirit of the movement was to remain alive and have lasting consequences. Many of its supporters were labourers in the country and Irish-minded people in the towns who wanted to fight for Ireland.

As a result of the Fenian revolts, there were a great many state prisoners, and the Protestant barrister Isaac Butt became a new national leader because of his efforts to obtain their release". *Ireland*, p. 43.

2. Patrick Mc Cartan writes: "More than once I heard on this side of the Atlantic that John O'Leary, when head of the Fenians, had sworn Yeats into the organization. During his visit to this country (U.S.A.) in 1933 I asked Yeats if this were true. He said he never took any oath but regarded himself as one of the party". *Yeats and Patrick Mc Cartan. A Fenian Friendship*, pp. 428-29.
love for aristocracy developed in the company of John O'Leary. "His ancestors had probably kept little shops, or managed little farms in county Tipperary, yet he hated democracy, though he never used the word for either praise or blame, with more than feudal hatred . . . " Yeats acknowledges his indebtedness to the political organizations of his time, the Irish poets and John O'Leary: "From these debates, from O'Leary's conversation and from the Irish books he lent or gave me has come all I have set my hand to since".

The Home Rule League and its leader, Charles Parnell, moulded the ideas of Yeats on the political issues of the time, especially on the relation between Ireland and England. In 1870 the Home Rule League was founded by Isaac Butt, an eminent Protestant Lawyer and an old friend of J.B. Yeats. His leadership, later on, was taken over by Charles Parnell who began to obstruct all Parliamentary business. In 1878 Parnell became the leader of the Irish Nationalist Party. Yeats had attended a branch of the Home Rule League before he joined the group of John O'Leary. However, he could not but praise the efforts of Parnell and tried to defend his case when Parnell's political career collapsed because of the divorce case filed by Captain O'Shea.

1. Autobiographies, p. 211.
2. Ibid., p. 101.
But we must be aware of the fact that Yeats was influenced by the contemporary scene and leaders because, from the very beginning of his life, he was brought up in the Irish tradition that helped him to receive all that was conducive to his thought and poetry. His family environment, tradition and experiences helped him to be firmly rooted to the soil of Ireland. His early life shows why he became a staunch nationalist, though he lived for a long time in England and his mother tongue was English.

He was born in a Protestant Anglo-Irish family which is different from the British family. In his Autobiographies he gives a detailed list of his ancestors. J. Hone and A. N. Jeffares have taken much pains in tracing out Yeats's family genealogy, sometimes correcting the errors of the poet. Among the ancestors of Yeats there was one Benjamin Yeats, a member of the Mercantile community which had accepted Dean Swift as its leader and struck the first note of Irish Protestant Nationalism. Rev. William Butler Yeats, the grandfather of the poet, was a friend of Isaac Butt and, with him, edited the Dublin University Magazine. Yeats heard much about him when he conversed with his father. At his mother's home he developed his love for the countryside and fairy tales that dominate his early poetry. His grandfather, William

1. J. Hone: W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) and A. N. Jeffares: W.B. Yeats: Man and the Poet.
2. Autobiographies, p. 34.
Pollexfen, was a kind and generous man who, like John O'Leary, avoided self-propaganda and he never told his wife of his bravery in winning the freedom of a Spanish city. The poet narrates one incident of his valiance: "He owned sailing-ships and once, when a captain just come to anchor at Rosses Point reported something wrong with the rudder, had sent a messenger to say, 'Send a man down to find out what's wrong'. 'The crew all refuse' was the answer, and to that my grandfather answered, 'Go down yourself', and not being obeyed, he dived from the main deck, all the neighbourhood lined along the pebbles of the shore. He came up with his skin torn but well informed about the rudder". He always kept a hatchet at his bedside for burglars. Yeats was so much impressed by him that he confused between the images of God and his grandfather. Yet Pollexfen never inspired awe to him because he was a gentle and affectionate man. It was because of his influence that a timid and physically weak boy like Yeats turned into a courageous boy. It is evident in his relations with Cyril Vasey, his classmate at Godolphin school, and in his adventure at night to bring a railway pass from Rosses Point. William Pollexfen, to later Yeats, had resemblance to Cuchulain and King Lear: "Even to-day when I

1. Autobiographies, p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
read *King Lear* his image is always before me, and I often wonder if the delight in passionate men in my plays and in my poetry is more than his memory". The life at Sligo was externally happy as the members of the Pollexfen family were kind and sympathetic to Yeats and if he remembered his "childhood but its pain", it was because of his own physical weakness that he felt himself inferior to the children of that family. At Sligo he came in contact with the Middletons, the partner and relative of the Pollexfens, and from them he learnt a number of ghost stories that were published, in revised form, in *The Celtic Twilight*. While Yeats was living with his father in England he remembered Sligo and its adjacent areas nostalgically. "Years afterwards when I was ten or twelve years old and in London, I would remember Sligo with tears, and when I began to write, it was there, I hoped to find my audience".2

Between Sligo and the Rosses Point there was the house of Mary, the poet's great aunt, on the top of a hill. She was full of family history. From her Yeats learnt how respectable his family was. Mary Yeats told him about the relations between his great-grandfathers and Goldsmith and Jonathan Swift.3

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1. *Autobiographies*, p. 22.
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. Ibid., p. 22.
Probably Yeats would not have nostalgic feelings for Sligo if he had happier experiences in London. The life in London was a sharp contrast to the life at Sligo; young Yeats and his brothers and sisters always longed for home which they visited occasionally. J.B. Yeats, despite his great talent, was not financially successful and, so, young Yeats was admitted to Godolphin, a school where students came from the low-income group of the professional class. The environment of the school, though congenial to the taste of young Yeats, aroused in his heart hatred for England because of the slurs cast on him by his school-mates, mainly English. One day he was surrounded by a number of boys who asked his father's name, profession and income. Before Yeats could answer the question, a boy passed an insulting remark on him which led him to fight with the boy. After that he was called names for being Irish. This type of fights continued, during these days he learnt that the English and the Irish must be differentiated.  

1. "I probably dared myself to other poets of a like sort, for I did not think English people intelligent or well-behaved unless they were artists. Everyone I knew well in Sligo despised Nationalists and Catholics, but all disliked England with a prejudice that had come down perhaps from the days of the Irish Parliament. I knew stories to the discredit of England, and took them all seriously". Autobiographies, pp. 33-34.
nation and never spared the English people or England whenever he mentioned them. Lady Dorothy Wellesley gives an account of his attack on England: "He seemed exhausted on arrival here at 5 O'clock. After tea (which he neither ate nor drank) he read me a new poem about which he had previously written, opening thus: 'You won't like this because it attacks King George V'. 'But I don't care two hoots about George V', I replied angrily realizing that this was his first inevitable attack upon the English which must continue for many days'. I listened while he read his poem.¹ He, like Jonathan Swift, could love the English people as individuals but hated the English as a class or a nation.

"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

Although Yeats admitted his indebtedness to the English poets, he felt proud of being an Irish.

The happiest moment in Yeats's childhood, during his stay in England, was the memory of Sligo, its people, its forests, its mountains and its surroundings; sometimes

the memory became so poignant that he wept. He remained indifferent to the Cressey, Agincourt and the Union Jack, of which the English boys were proud. He prided himself on the Land League, the landlords shot by the British army and his grandfather.

The last, but not the least, important influence on Yeats was that of his father who always encouraged him to write poetry. Himself a great artist and fine critic, J.B. Yeats moulded Yeats's taste in the appreciation of poetry. He recited important works of English poetry to the son and expressed his preference for Keats and his dislike for the abstract poets. He preferred Keats to Shelley because Shelley, to him, was more concerned with abstraction in his poetry. The regular discourses, on poetry and politics, sometimes hot, between the father and the son laid the

1. "A poignant memory" Yeats writes, "came upon me the other day while I was passing the drinking-fountain near Holland Park, for there I and my sister had spoken together of our longing for Sligo and our hatred of London. I know we were both very close to tears and remember with wonder, for I had never known anyone that cared for such momentoes, that I longed for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in my hand". Autobiographies, p. 31.
foundation of early Yeats's thought.¹

¹. Elizabeth's diary entry for 9 September 1888, when W.B. Yeats was twenty three, gives an account of his debate with his father:

"I can hear a murmur of talk from the dining-room where Papa and Willie are arguing something or other. Sometimes they raise their voices so high that a stranger might fancy that they were both in a rage, not at all, it is only their way of arguing because they are the natives of the Emerald Isle." "Quoted by A.N. Jeffares in "In Excited Reverie", (ed. A.N. Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross), p. 40.