

Reforming the Modern Stage

William Butler Yeats, Irish Poet, Creates a Sensation Among Lovers of Art in Canada

By AUGUSTUS BRIDLE

IN the gallery of a crowded hall on Friday evening last week a man went to sleep. His snores were unheeded by the odd-looking but distinguished lecturer on the platform; but an usher woke him up. When he came to, thinking he was somewhere else, he mumbled: "Gimme another beer, old chap."

That might have given the lecturer a theme for



The Apostle of Beauty as he appeared in Canada.

another poem. For W. B. Yeats, as he himself confessed to that audience of university people and members of the Gaelic League and lovers of art, often gets his subjects from such homely things.

The author of "Shadowy Waters" lectured last week to the Irish people in Montreal and the Gaelic League in Toronto. If his reception in Montreal was as much greater than his welcome in Toronto, as the Montreal Irish outnumber the Irish of Toronto, the Arena would have been almost too small to contain the crowd. The hall where Mr. Yeats spoke in Toronto was sold out for the lecture. Several good Irishmen were unable to get seats. And he said nothing about Home Rule, except when he was heckled. He did mention Jim Larkin, but not the strike; something Larkin and his strikers believed about art. For in Dublin there is a deal more art than we have in any Canadian city. Because it's but a wish of a train and the romp of a donkey to get from the heart of Dublin to the enchanted lake where the witch drowned, or the Island of Innisfree that Mr. Yeats confesses he wrote a poem about because in a London window when he was sick of the Strand he saw a little ball dancing atop of a jet of water, and the music of it made him yearn for what he didn't have; which he says is the reason why men write poetry.

Mr. Yeats lectured about Beauty and the Theatre. He is one man of a very few living, since John Keats is dead, who knows how to define beauty. His definition is hard to print. But beauty to his way of thinking can never be produced in art without some ecstasy born of a struggle, either from some "morbidity" in a man's soul, or some stress of circumstances outside of himself. Mr. Yeats is a more practical authority on the theatre because he is one of the founders of the National Theatre in Dublin.

He and the late lamented Synge and the present Lady Gregory and a few others are responsible for much that has been done to revive the true spirit of Irish poetry and to give Ireland a national theatre controlled by her poets as producers and with actors taken not so much from the professional ranks as from the plain people who act mainly the way they feel. He is supposed to be a mystic. He denies this. He says the Irish deal with facts while the English deal with illusions. He accuses the modern stage of being too realistic, because democracy has got hold of the stage through the modern producer of plays, and the jingle of the box office has superseded the music of poetry. He believes that art and the stage should be controlled by an aristocracy of good taste.

The friend of G. B. Shaw and of Maeterlinck, friendly critic of Chesterton; acquainted with all notable men of letters and of art in Great Britain

and many in Europe; himself a passionate and altogether peculiar poet, a man of sudden imaginistic sorrows and tumultuous joys, of ecstasies and outbursts of praise when he sings like a lark at sight or thought of something—he goes on the lecture platform where the common people should hear him gladly, but somehow don't.

Tall, angular and long of face, his thick and fluent black hair scarce tinged as yet with iron grey, a kindly twinkle in his blue eyes, he appears in a swallowtail somewhat prinked up and ill at ease. He looks as though he yearned to chuck them and clap on a loose peasant smock and muffler, ram his feet into a pair of thick leg boots and go out in the rain to hear some bird sing in some dead tree somewhere, and before he got back to the house sopping wet create a poem out of it. Yet he has the Irishman's genial adaptability.

You wonder—what this mystic, or seer, or whatever he may choose to call himself, should be doing on a lecture platform with a schedule of dates to fill and so many theories to put forward about art and beauty, and so many poems to read. But on the platform he is a huge and unmistakable joy. He should be known, however, to thousands in a place instead of to hundreds. Though he was entertained in Toronto by the Gaelic League, and was looked after chiefly by the University professors who regard him as a new sort of irritant, he would have been gladly heard by a large audience; if only Yeats could be persuaded that he has things to say that people of no particular culture would be glad to hear. If he would talk to collegians about beauty and the laws of art, and come out as rough-handed as Parnell with some plain message for the people.

There is always, of course, a paradox about Yeats and all his kind. He states paradoxes himself. He is not always consistent with himself and admits it. In his lecture on Beauty and the Theatre he tripped himself up more than once. He got out of the dilemma as glibly as an Irishman usually does. Meandering loosely over the whole of a good-sized stage, now and again from his heights of interpretation making a leisurely swoop down like a hawk upon a pack of manuscripts he had on a small desk; he succeeded in puzzling out a brilliant and fascinating discourse. But somehow he found by his watch that he had got through much too soon.

"I find," he said, with the sublime naivete of a child over a piece of cake, "that I have not delivered all my lecture. A chunk must have dropped out somewhere."

THEN he went reading his own poems and explaining how he wrote them. This was more convincing than some of his arguments, all of which were interesting. Evidently he has attempted to get his message across to a people almost as plain as the subjects of some of his poems or the poor Irish who pay a shilling a seat to hear his

Irish plays in the Abbey Theatre. Once his colleagues asked him for some plain poem that could be printed on a hand-bill and circulated on Dublin streets to be some stimulus to the folk that don't get many poems to read anyhow. They picked out one that seemed to Yeats perhaps about as simple as Tom Hood's "The Song of a Shirt," that went the rounds of London. Next day, after its appearance, a Dublin paper printed the poem and offered a reward to any who could tell what it meant.

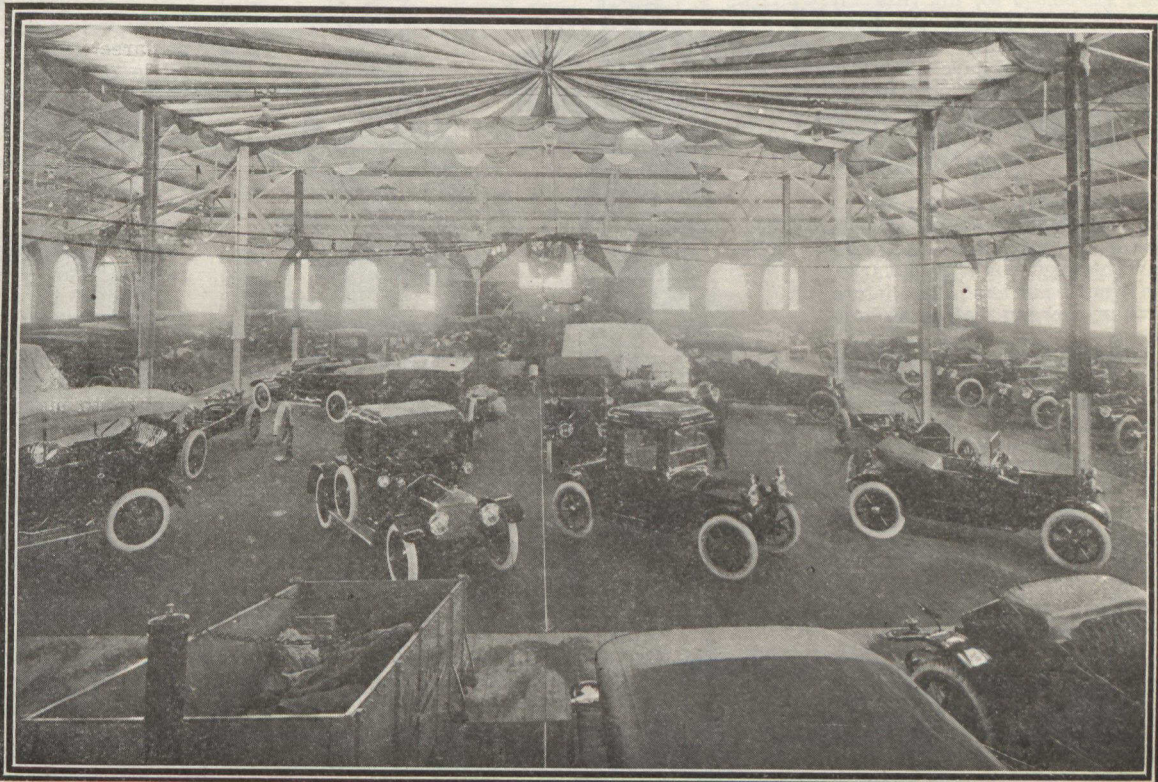
"Well, of course it meant nothing," confessed Yeats. "Why should it?"

He read the poem; and it seemed to bear out his description; though when Yeats ding-dongs his own poems in that eerie, high-key voice of his that never lights on the downward inflection, there is something in the music that seems quite sufficient.

After the lecture he invited a heckling. He got questions from professors and litterateurs enough to have staggered any but an Irishman. He met them all with magnificent wit and matchless repartee. He was happier in the heckling than ever he had been in the argument. Here he showed that an Irishman, whether he deals with the shillelah or a poem that may have a meaning in the hereafter by the swish of an infinite sounding sea under the glint of a magic moon, is always a fighter.

AND Yeats has spent much of his life fighting. He and the other poets that set out to give Ireland as national a drama as she had a national literature in the tongue of the ancient Gael, have had their troubles on behalf of the people. For in Ireland Yeats struggles on behalf of the people. He believes that the plain people should have good plays and fine music and great paintings to look at free of charge. He is much more bent on that than upon Home Rule. He believes that Ireland has a voice that should be heard and a message in the drama of beauty that should not be ignored if the world is to get out of life all that the Creator put into it for the enjoyment of man. He is himself a plain man. He could live on a pot of broth per diem, so long as he had his pen and his leisure to go out in the rain. He could worry along in a hut on the crag of a rock and fetch poems of magic out of the clouds and the deeps of the lakes. He could become a martyr for the good of Ireland, and at the same time do the rest of the world as much good as possible. Generous as an Irishman always is he would share his last crust or his old coat with some one in greater need than himself. When he is wound up on a conversation he becomes so fascinated by the brilliance of his own paradoxes that he forgets what he is eating, or what the clock may be doing, or whether he had any sleep last night. Leaving Toronto to catch a train for St. Catharines, he just about missed the train. A professor asked him if he remembered a certain night ten years ago when they two sat up till half-past two because Yeats was so wrapped up in an argument that he refused to go to bed. Yeats had forgotten the episode.

A Million Dollar Display of Motor Cars



On Saturday night last the Toronto Automobile Show was opened in two of the largest buildings in Exhibition Park. Limousines, Runabouts and Touring Cars rub shoulders with Electrics, Cyclecars and Motor-cycles. The display is unusually large.