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Dating "Easter, 1916"

Matthew Campbell

"Easter, 1916" is a poem about a date and a poem around which many other dates have clustered. The first is manifest most obviously in its title—in either of its iterations through its publishing history—"Easter, 1916," as it was called by Yeats in manuscript and printed versions between 1917 and his death in 1939, or "Easter 1916" as it subsequently became known in Macmillan editions from 1949 to 1984. These are treacherous bibliographical waters, but just to say briefly here, given that the author was dead ten years before the two volume *Poems of W. B. Yeats* (the so-called "Definitive Edition") was published by Macmillan in 1949, from which the comma was deleted, most recent editors have quietly returned it.[1] The revision may have implemented the Macmillan house style, but whether it be Yeats's or not, it lost the fine sense of the specific in the general which is offered by the pause after "Easter," a date which is both connected with a single year, 1916, but also a moveable feast sounded across Christian time and intended to be remembered in the posterity of poem and event. There is another date and poem in play, as recorded in the title of the poem "September 1913." After its first publication in the *Irish Times*, on 8 September 1913—called "Romance in Ireland"— the retitled "September, 1913" was then published twice with a comma, the last time by the Cuala Press in 1914, before the comma was removed by Macmillan in 1916 (*VP* 289). Punctuation history aside, as Nicholas Grene says, "Easter, 1916" "talked back to 'September 1913' […] With Yeats's passion for historical periodization and his meticulous concern for the detailed presentation of his texts, we cannot assume that any dates within his canon are merely adventitious matter of record."[2]

Other dates are both directly and implicitly written into the texts of "Easter, 1916." One is "*September 25, 1916*," the appended date of its composition or completion which still remains (now and again in italics, with a comma usually in place, and sometimes a full stop[3]) in most printings. And the secret or symbolist date, as it were, is told in the numbers of the lines of its great stanzas: four of them, two of sixteen and two of twenty-four lines, telling the date of the first day of the Easter Rising against British rule in Dublin on the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month of the sixteenth year of the twentieth century: that is, 24 April 1916. Helen Vendler has ascribed "an element of Yeatsian magic" to this "unusual form of extreme numerological control," a way in which the formal properties of the poem seek out the historical forming of human time by

dating: "if technique were to make something happen on the page, it had to be intimately linked, by some means, to the originating cause."[4]

Other critics of Yeats have frequently invoked other dates associated with the poem's textual history, in particular the poem's first public printing—as "Easter, 1916," along with other poems of the Rising and its aftermath—in *The New Statesman*, published in London on October 23 1920. The broadest significance of this date of publication was first drawn by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his celebrated (some might say notorious) 1965 essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats": "To publish these poems in the context [the war of Independence, 1920] was a political act, and a bold one: probably the boldest of Yeats's career."[5] Subsequently, the most precise etching of the date into event has been offered by Tom Paulin, in an essay called "Yeats's Hunger-Strike Poem" where he reads the *New Statesman* publication as a deliberate act, calculated to influence public opinion at the time of the hunger strike of Terence McSwiney. McSwiney died two days later on 25 October 1920. Paulin argues that, "What seems clear is that Yeats's poem cannot be isolated from the public events of the summer and autumn of 1920 and that we need to consider the poem in relation to those events *and* to its first audience. Poems, like plays, are inspired by and for audiences."[6] So, in this account "Easter, 1916" becomes "October, 1920," a poem published to influence public opinion and state policy.

Further dates are in play. One is the date of publication of an undated pamphlet which has as its title on the cover, *Easter, 1916 by W. B. Yeats*. Inside the back cover it reads (in italic font), "*Of this poem twenty-five copies only have been privately printed by Clement Shorter for distribution among his friends*." The editor, publisher and friend of Yeats, and a man of left-leaning instincts, Shorter cultivated his friendships among authors (and his powers over them as publisher) to enable a lucrative trade in private editions. In the statement on this pamphlet "his friends" here refers to Shorter's friends since he, not Yeats, has signed these pamphlets.

A number of bibliographers and critics (and indeed some catalogues of the collections lucky enough to possess this exceedingly rare publication) place its publication in 1916. Paulin, for instance, thought it was printed in Autumn 1916, just after Yeats wrote it, and for Paulin, it thus amounts to a "dissident, underground or samizdat text."[7] However, the pamphlet didn't see print until Easter of 1917. Far from risking imprisonment for his dissident writing, Yeats was worried that if Shorter published the poem at the wrong time, he might ruin one of the early episodes in what has become a century-long quest in Irish curatorial history, the return of Hugh Lane's collection of modern art to Dublin. Pursuing the Irish claim for the paintings, Yeats and Augusta Gregory got as far as lunch at 10 Downing Street with the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith on 1 December 1916, though the occasion was apparently soured by Yeats's

mention of the rising and Asquith's tart response.[8] (It was not a particularly opportune time for politicking: Asquith was to be ousted by Lloyd George, six days later.) On 28 March 1917, Yeats wrote to Shorter, "Please be very careful with the Rebellion poem. Lady Gregory asked me not to send it you until we had finished our dispute with the authorities about the Lane pictures. She was afraid of it getting about & damaging us & she is not timid."[9] If the last line of this letter is oft-quoted about the mooted radicalism of Gregory and Yeats after Easter week, the context—the Lane pictures controversy—is at quite a remove from the other, rather larger, historical event. Shorter subsequently printed the poem and copies ended up "getting about," if slowly. For example, on 17 March 1919, fully nineteen months before *The New Statesman*, a short-lived publication called the *Irish Commonwealth* published sixteen lines of "Easter, 1916." The pamphlet published at Easter 1917 was the source.

Easter, 1916 was only one of a number of Shorter's limited edition private printings about the events of April to August 1916. They addressed not just Easter week, but the subsequent executions, the trial and hanging of Roger Casement, and even events in France—the Somme offensive, in which many thousands of Irish died, began on 2 July. Neither Shorter nor the authors of the texts he printed were "very careful" with these "rebellion poems." It may be that Shorter's wife, the Irish poet Dora Sigerson—or Sigerson-Shorter, to use the name she published under after her marriage—was behind these publications. Inserted into twenty-five copies of Sigerson's December 1916 selected poems, *Love of Ireland* was a pamphlet, privately printed in Edinburgh, containing five *Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916*.[10] This pamphlet contains a poem titled "Sixteen Dead Men," published a year before Yeats wrote his poem of the same name.[11] Sigerson died in January 1918, and the poems were published in the posthumous collections, *The Sad Years* in Britain and *Sixteen Dead Men* in the United States. Yeats may not have read Sigerson's "Sixteen Dead Men" before he wrote his, since it was only on May 17 1918 that he wrote to Shorter stating his realisation that on reading Sigerson's "Rebellion poems," he would have to postpone a lecture he intended to give on "recent poetry and war poetry."[12] Having asked Shorter for permission to quote from unpublished work, reading it he found, "Your wifes [*sic*] poems would have been my chief effect; & times are too dangerous for me to encourage men to [take] risks I am not prepared to share or approve."[13]

A month after the publication of Sigerson's pamphlet, in January 1917, Shorter also printed in London twenty-five copies of George Russell's pamphlet, *Salutation: A Poem on the Rebellion of 1916*.[14] It contained five stanzas of a poem which adopted various forms in its subsequent publishing history. Like "Easter, 1916," it names names, including in its first iteration three which also appeared in Yeats's poem: Padraig Pearse, Thomas McDonagh and James

Connolly. Constance Markievicz, who is described but not mentioned by name in Yeats's poem, also originally got a stanza to herself. Russell's is also not much of an underground text, being published in full in the *Irish Times* the following 19 December 1917 at the end of a letter to the editor called "The New Nation." The poem was now titled, "To the Memory of Some I knew who are Dead and who loved Ireland," and lengthened to seven stanzas, its remembrance was eventually split equally between those who died at the front and those who died during and after the Rising. Given that she was still living, the Markievicz stanza was removed and three of the nationalist war dead (Alan Anderson, Willie Redmond, Thomas Kettle) joined the three who were executed after Easter week 1916.[15] The article and poem are on page 6 of that day's paper, occupying the column next to that week's "Roll of Honour." Russell's poem mentions six dead; the Roll of Honour lists seventy-three allied dead, one hundred and ten wounded and thirty-six missing in action.[16]

In the midst of these private—and then not-so-private—printings, I would like to introduce another date. That is "9 JN 1917" (June 9, 1917), the accession date recorded on the British Library's copy (No.17) of Shorter's *Easter, 1916 by W. B. Yeats*. The Library has no record of any interdiction being placed on this publication, and it does not seem to have been deposited to secure copyright: it has a yellow British museum stamp, meaning it was a donation. There is also no record of who donated it, but it is likely it was Shorter himself.[17] The British Library copy suggests that the full text of Yeats's poem was in the public domain—or at least was available to readers in the British Museum—three and a half years earlier than is usually thought.

Far from being a samizdat text, "Easter, 1916" was sitting in the British Museum all through the war years and the early years of the Irish war of independence. It was hidden in plain sight, if indeed it was hidden at all. Whether or not Yeats's poem was actually read in the Museum reading room before 1920, the library has no record. But the least we can say about it is that Yeats's poem is one of a number of publications printed in the aftermath of a significant historical date, a date which is remembered in its title. Initially at least, it was a poem printed to be read by a group of like-minded readers, the friends of Clement Shorter. Very shortly afterwards, it was available to be read by all who used the British Museum. Shorter's friends were others who also wrote about the events which occurred in Dublin, at Easter 1916, and some of their writings, like those of Sigerson and Russell, were printed in series, as it were, with "Easter, 1916." These texts all mentioned the date in their titles on first printing: *Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916*; […] *a poem on the Irish Rebellion of 1916*; *Easter, 1916*. And the poems they contained were either circumspect in their admiration of those who led the rising (Yeats, Russell) or strongly critical of British government policy (Sigerson).

Even private printing means that there is circulation. Deposit in the library invites a wide readership. And poems such as these took for theme the role of poetry written with the urgency of contemporaneity for a historical event from which the repercussions were yet to be fully discerned. It is, of course, the rhetorical power and political sophistication of Yeats's poem which has enabled it to influence many subsequent discussions not only about the historical impact of the deaths of the leaders of the Easter Rising, but also as an example of how the elegiac poem might be said to participate in the events which trouble the living stream of history. Whether its publication was used further to trouble that stream remains moot for many in the violent century which followed, especially those who have wondered at the limits of the historical agency of poetry (W. H. Auden's 1939 elegy for Yeats has become a critical cliché in this respect). In subsequent years its author certainly felt increasingly emboldened to state his position and test the ways in which poetry might make things happen. If no dissident, Yeats certainly knew the value of tactical publication, as did those around him, as publishers or fellow writers. The dates which cluster around the printing history of "Easter, 1916" show a merging of the world of the private printings of the British book trade with the address of poems to the limits of their political effectiveness, as a date came into print as historical event.

Notes

1. Richard Finneran returned the comma to *The Poems*, *CW1*. A. Norman Jeffares retained the revised title without a comma in *Yeats's Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Macmillan, Palgrave and Scribner (in the U.S.) have been publishing both versions of the title since 1984. It has also been returned in selected and collected editions edited by Finneran (1989), Albright (1990), Larrissey (1997) and Pethica (2000). Palgrave Macmillan currently uses the *Chicago Manual of Style*, which states: "In the day-month-year system—useful in material that requires many full dates (and standard in British English)—no commas are needed. Where month and year only are given, or a specific day (such as a holiday) with a year, neither system uses a comma."
2. Nicholas Grene, *Yeats's Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7 and chapter one, "Dates," 5–29.
3. See *VP* 394 and *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose*, ed. James Pethica (New York: Norton, 2000), 75.
4. Helen Vendler, "The Later Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, ed. *Marjorie Howes and Helen Vendler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 80.
5. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning and other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1988), 29.
6. Tom Paulin, "Yeats's Hunger-Strike Poem," in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber, 1992), 138. The fullest account of the poem's history as revolutionary events unravelled is given by Wayne K. Chapman, "Yeats's Dislocated Rebellion Poems and the Great War: The Case of *The Wild Swans of Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*," *Yeats Annual* 16, ed. Warwick Gould (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2005), 71–97.

7. Paulin, 138.
8. Gregory, journal entry 1 December 1916, quoted in David Pierce, *Yeats's Worlds: Ireland, England and the Poetic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 177.
9. 28 March 1917, *CL InteLex* #3204.
10. Dora Sigerson, *Love of Ireland: Poems and Ballads* (Dublin: Mansell, 1916). *With which is incorporated Poems of the Irish Rebellion 1916* (Edinburgh: Constable & Co, 1916). Twenty-five copies only of the insert were printed.
11. *Life 2* 112.
12. *CL InteLex* #3434 and #3441
13. 17 May 1918, *CL InteLex* #3441.
14. George Russell, *Salutation: a poem on the Irish rebellion of 1916* (London : Privately Printed by Clement Shorter), 1917.
15. For the textual and manuscript history of the poem, see David Leon Higdon, "A New Manuscript of AE's 'Salutation,'" *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 30.2 (1987), 133–139.
16. *Irish Times*, 17 December 1917; AE, "The New Nation," Letters to the Editor, *The Irish Times*, 19 December 1917. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Irish Times* and the *Weekly Irish Times*.
17. Author correspondence with British Library, October 2014.