

New College's Irish Airman

To be not once, not twice, but four times memorialised by a great poet—such an honour is granted to few, and among New College alumni it is possible that Robert Gregory (1881–1918) was unique. Born in Galway in 1881 to Sir William and Lady Augusta Gregory, he attended New College from 1899 to 1903. He joined the Connaught Rangers in 1915, transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in January 1916, won the Military Cross and French Legion d'Honneur, and subsequently died as a squadron commander in his aeroplane on the Italian Front in January 1918, although the exact manner of his death has never been established.¹

His name is on the war memorial in our chapel. However, he is best known to millions as the unidentified subject of W. B. Yeats's 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death'. This is the best-known of four poems Yeats wrote about Gregory, the others being 'Shepherd and Goatherd', 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' and 'Reprisals' (which was originally suppressed).

Given that, somewhat unusually, Gregory is most famous as a subject of poetry, I shall start by saying something about the origin of this poetry. From the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth, Ireland was consciously rediscovering, reaffirming and reinventing its Celtic identity. This was the period of the establishment of cultural organisations such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (in 1884), Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League, in 1893) and An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelacha (the Irish Dance association, in 1927), as well as the political ferment of Easter Rising of 1916, followed by the Irish Civil War and the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. It was also the period of the Irish Literary Revival, which is strongly associated with Yeats and his patron Lady Gregory. Indeed its spiritual home could be said to be Coole Park, where Robert Gregory grew up. Lady Gregory was more than simply a patron—for example, her translation and 1902 publication of 'Cuchulain of Muirthemne', a retelling of Irish language myth into English.² This is the cultural milieu against which Yeats's poetry has to be read—certainly including his poems about Gregory, the son of his patron.

What do the poems themselves say?

My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring then loss
Nor leave them richer than before.

The lines conjure up the image of one of many poor sons of the Irish peat, having to earn his bread through a grudging employment in HM Forces, in service of a cause and empire he held no affection for:

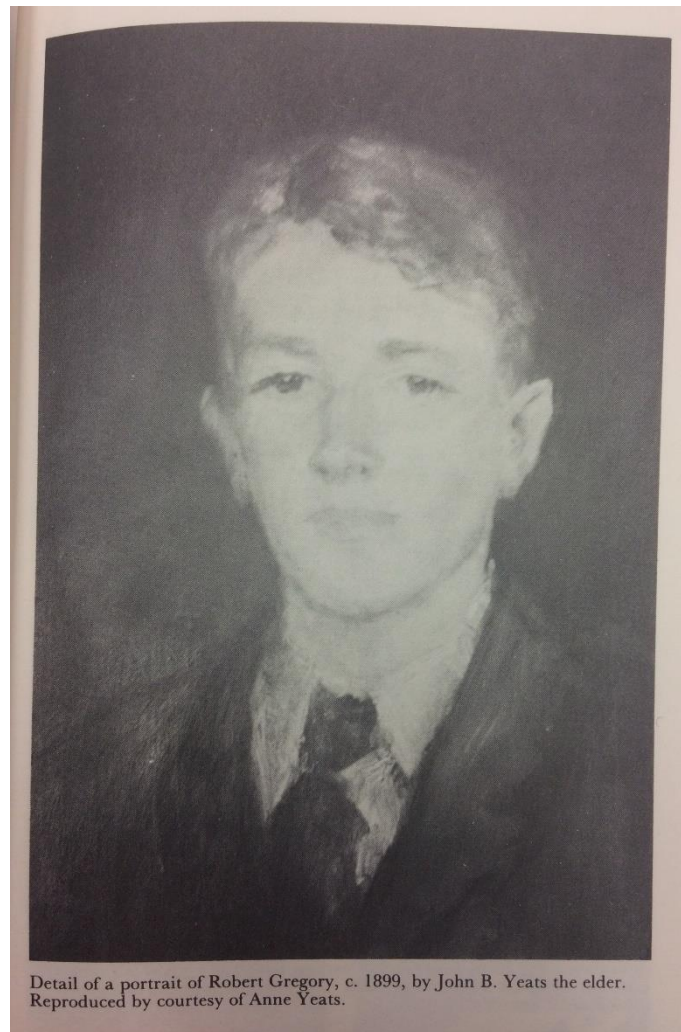
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.

¹ I thank the Archivist, Jennifer Thorp, for providing details of Robert Gregory's New College career. Issue 35 of the *Dublin Review* (summer 2009) contains an article by James Pethica which describes the details of Gregory's affair with Nora Summers. The snippet about Yeats in Oxford appears in Robert Foster's *Life of Yeats*. I have also used the 1981 centenary tribute to Gregory which is in the Bodleian (the portrait of Gregory is taken from here, and it also contains many of his art works), and the cricketing biography of Gregory on <www.cricketeurope.com>.

² Although not developed here, there must be a remarkable story and personality behind this aristocratic Anglo-Irish Lady crossing all social barriers to learn the language of her tenant farmers, and then devoting herself to translating and publishing the old Irish myths.

However, in truth these lines contain much poetic licence. Although some Victorian predecessor of POLAR may have noted little tradition of higher education in Kiltartan, Robert Gregory was in no sense an access candidate. His secondary school was Harrow and his was not a family filled with Patricks and Brigids and (Hail) Marys. Although his mother did become, at least culturally, an Irish nationalist, Gregory was—like Edmund Burke and Arthur Wellesley—born into the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy that then dominated Ireland in terms of land, language, and political power. Although this class is now gone the way of Queenstown and world maps daubed with great splashes of pink, it was the social class he remained in throughout his life. He may have been popular with his Catholic tenants—Lady Gregory reports them crying outside Mass on the Sunday after the news of his death—but the social hierarchy was clear. The First World War was the war of his friends, his class, and his social peers from both school and university. They freely went and freely died. Given his background, it is no surprise that he also did the same.

Gregory's education was conventionally English. He attended Elstree prep school in London, followed by Harrow, and then arrived at New College in 1899. The portrait below³ shows him as he would have appeared as a fresher:



John B. Yeats, Portrait of Robert Gregory [detail], c. 1899

³ Reproduced from: *Robert Gregory 1881–1918: A Centenary Tribute with a Foreword by his Children*, ed. Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1981).

He played cricket, taking six wickets in 1901 for the New College Nomads against Blenheim Park. He tried out for the university XI, but was not quite good enough. He also boxed, and is reported to have boxed for the university. From his letters home we also owe to Robert Gregory a brief snapshot image of Yeats at Oxford. Promoting his Abbey theatre project, Yeats had visited Oxford in May 1902, addressing about thirty students at the St John's College Essay Society. Robert Gregory wrote home that 'his visit and lecture were I think a great success, although a large part of the audience at the latter were rather unappreciative, and the dons who asked questions were terrors.' Plus ça change!

He studied at the Slade School of Art in London, and in 1907 married a fellow student, Margaret Parry, with Augustus John as best man, going on to have three children with her. He studied art in Paris and had two exhibitions of his work in London. The family estate was Coole Park in Galway, but he also maintained a house in Chelsea and an apartment in Paris.

He continued to play cricket and was good enough to play one first-class match—taking the splendid figures of 8 for 80 for Ireland against Scotland in 1912. Playing cricket for Ireland may not in itself seem any sort of political indicator. However it is worth noting that at this time the policy of the Gaelic Athletic Association was to expel members found not just playing, but even spectating at, non-Irish (i.e. English) sports (this was no empty threat—the GAA would later expel the President of Ireland himself (Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League) for attending a soccer match).

Yeats's poetry—in particular 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'—offers an idealised version of Robert Gregory, 'our Sidney and our perfect man'. There is the horseman, who rode with the Galway foxhounds and leapt great gates. There is the scholar, whose 'mind outran the horses' feet', and the artist:

We dreamed that a great painter had been born
To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn.

However, we should remember that this was a eulogy written for Yeats's patron about her deceased only child. Despite the fond portraiture, in life there appears to have been some tension between the two men over the extensive hospitality offered to Yeats at Coole Park. How could it have been otherwise? Gregory was an only child whose father died when he was ten. It would have been less than human not to feel some resentment at the man absorbing much of his mother's attention while sleeping in his late father's bedroom and drinking his late father's wine. Yeats was not at this point the distinguished 'sixty-year-old smiling public man', a senator of the Irish Free State with a Nobel Prize for Literature, washed with the universal cleansing respect of history. He was a middle-aged bachelor poet and at this point as solvent as poets normally are—and Lady Gregory's friend rather than Robert Gregory's friend. We can perhaps conjure up the image of a Fellow-Commoner in Creative Arts with the gift of the gab and a taste for the best SCR claret.

The Gregory of Yeats's poetry is a man with his talents elevated and his faults dissolved. Yeats wrote:

Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
And all he did done perfectly
As though he had but that one trade alone.

I know little of either soldiering or horsemanship, but let it be recorded that Robert Gregory passed Classical Moderations in 1901 only at the second attempt, with third class honours, before graduating in 1903 with a Third in *Literae Humaniores*.

Gregory's career as an artist was also one only at the fringes of real success—he had talent, but not enough, and perhaps too much money and leisured opportunity to enforce the necessary intensity of focus. Yeats delicately acknowledged this in his first, prose, appreciation of Gregory soon after his death, saying that ‘To me he will always remain a great painter in the immaturity of his youth, he himself the personification of handsome youth.’

Gregory did truly have a diversity of interests and skills—just not to the level displayed in his eulogies. The *Observer*, reviewing Yeats's poem on Gregory, said ‘All who remember Gregory, a man so much the artist that he was never of pains to seem one, so much the man that the unobservant might never guess he was an artist, will love the epitaph his friend had written.’

However, in recent years another, less creditable, side of Robert Gregory has appeared. After being hidden for ninety years, the diaries of his wife Margaret have now been made public. We now know that Robert Gregory cheated on his wife repeatedly in the autumn of 1914 and spring of 1915, with another 23-year old artist, Nora Summers. His wife knew. Nora Summers's husband knew (at one point the two men came to blows). Lady Gregory knew, saying ‘That I should have lived to know my son was a cad.’ Gregory was, apparently, indifferent to the grievous harm and pain he was inflicting on his wife. And Yeats also knew, and knew as he gave us these poems.

This knowledge casts a different perspective on Robert Gregory and his death. Whatever the public face of the marriage, a private catastrophe was brewing (though it is fair to acknowledge that he was by no means the first aristocrat to regard the seventh commandment as strictly optional for the upper classes). The decision of Robert Gregory to join the forces in autumn 1915 and his subsequent death in 1918 meant there was no ultimate denouement, no ultimate resolution, and the affair could remain a buried secret for almost a century.

Undoubtedly, though, he was a brave soldier. He could have had few illusions about the probable end of his career in the Royal Flying Corps, joining at a time when the life expectancy for a scout pilot was as short as a few weeks. His flying log reveals that even in training he had an aircraft wrecked, presumably in a botched landing. When George Bernard Shaw visited him, he found a man with a face recovering from frostbite but who told him that ‘the six months he had been there had been the happiest of his life’.

The ‘nineteen German planes, they say / You had brought down before you died’ of ‘Reprisals’ may have been an exaggeration, but he certainly killed other men in the air and is credited with shooting down eight enemy aircraft. He was awarded the Military Cross and the French Legion d'Honneur. It is a world that is hard to penetrate—few, if any, alive today can have much of a sense of how it feels to duel to the death two miles up in scraps of canvas held together with chicken wire.

However, the tangled personal life surely gives added meaning and poignancy to the well-known lines:

A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Robert Gregory crashed and died on 23 January 1918 and was buried in the cemetery in Padua. It is unknown whether this was caused by friendly fire, a structural failure of the aeroplane, or some sort of pilot error. Many letters of condolence came in to Lady Gregory after his death, ranging from his nurse and the local Kiltartan schoolmaster to the Warden of New College.⁴ Lady Gregory also records the oral tributes of some of his tenants, capturing an authentic Irish diction, 'Why wouldn't he be happy, being laid in the Holy Ground of Padua where Saint Anthony was a great Saint, and the only one that got leave to help in the nursing of our Lord.'

Robert Gregory was survived by his wife Margaret and three children, Richard, Augusta (de Winton) and Catherine (Kennedy). Richard would fight in (but survive) the Second World War.

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⁴ Did the Warden write to every family whose name is on the war memorial? Do any of these letters survive?