

Yeats William Butler

# The Wild Swans at Coole



William Butler Yeats  
**The Wild Swans at Coole**

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# Yeats W. B. William Butler

## The Wild Swans at Coole

### PREFACE

This book is, in part, a reprint of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, printed a year ago on my sister's hand-press at Dundrum, Co. Dublin. I have not, however, reprinted a play which may be a part of a book of new plays suggested by the dance plays of Japan, and I have added a number of new poems. Michael Robartes and John Aherne, whose names occur in one or other of these, are characters in some stories I wrote years ago, who have once again become a part of the phantasmagoria through which I can alone express my convictions about the world. I have the fancy that I read the name John Aherne among those of men prosecuted for making a disturbance at the first production of "The Play Boy," which may account for his animosity to myself.

W. B. Y.

Ballylee, Co. Galway,  
*September 1918.*

## THE WILD SWANS AT COOLE

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine and fifty swans.

The nineteenth Autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold,  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?

## IN MEMORY OF MAJOR ROBERT GREGORY

### 1

Now that we're almost settled in our house  
I'll name the friends that cannot sup with us  
Beside a fire of turf in the ancient tower,  
And having talked to some late hour  
Climb up the narrow winding stair to bed:  
Discoverers of forgotten truth  
Or mere companions of my youth,  
All, all are in my thoughts to-night, being dead.

### 2

Always we'd have the new friend meet the old,  
And we are hurt if either friend seem cold,  
And there is salt to lengthen out the smart  
In the affections of our heart,  
And quarrels are blown up upon that head;  
But not a friend that I would bring  
This night can set us quarrelling,  
For all that come into my mind are dead.

### 3

Lionel Johnson comes the first to mind,  
That loved his learning better than mankind,  
Though courteous to the worst; much falling he  
Brooded upon sanctity  
Till all his Greek and Latin learning seemed  
A long blast upon the horn that brought  
A little nearer to his thought  
A measureless consummation that he dreamed.

### 4

And that enquiring man John Synge comes next,  
That dying chose the living world for text  
And never could have rested in the tomb  
But that, long travelling, he had come  
Towards nightfall upon certain set apart  
In a most desolate stony place,  
Towards nightfall upon a race  
Passionate and simple like his heart.

5

And then I think of old George Pollexfen,  
In muscular youth well known to Mayo men  
For horsemanship at meets or at race-courses,  
That could have shown how purebred horses  
And solid men, for all their passion, live  
But as the outrageous stars incline  
By opposition, square and trine;  
Having grown sluggish and contemplative.

6

They were my close companions many a year,  
A portion of my mind and life, as it were,  
And now their breathless faces seem to look  
Out of some old picture-book;  
I am accustomed to their lack of breath,  
But not that my dear friend's dear son,  
Our Sidney and our perfect man,  
Could share in that discourtesy of death.

7

For all things the delighted eye now sees  
Were loved by him; the old storm-broken trees  
That cast their shadows upon road and bridge;  
The tower set on the stream's edge;  
The ford where drinking cattle make a stir  
Nightly, and startled by that sound  
The water-hen must change her ground;  
He might have been your heartiest welcomer.

**8**

When with the Galway foxhounds he would ride  
From Castle Taylor to the Roxborough side  
Or Esserkelly plain, few kept his pace;  
At Mooneen he had leaped a place  
So perilous that half the astonished meet  
Had shut their eyes, and where was it  
He rode a race without a bit?  
And yet his mind outran the horses' feet.

**9**

We dreamed that a great painter had been born  
To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn,  
To that stern colour and that delicate line  
That are our secret discipline  
Wherein the gazing heart doubles her might.  
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,  
And yet he had the intensity  
To have published all to be a world's delight.

**10**

What other could so well have counselled us  
In all lovely intricacies of a house  
As he that practised or that understood  
All work in metal or in wood,  
In moulded plaster or in carven stone?  
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,  
And all he did done perfectly  
As though he had but that one trade alone.

**11**

Some burn damp fagots, others may consume  
The entire combustible world in one small room  
As though dried straw, and if we turn about  
The bare chimney is gone black out  
Because the work had finished in that flare.

Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,  
As 'twere all life's epitome.  
What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?

**12**

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind  
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind  
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved,  
Or boyish intellect approved,  
With some appropriate commentary on each;  
Until imagination brought  
A fitter welcome; but a thought  
Of that late death took all my heart for speech.

## **AN IRISH AIRMAN FORESEES HIS DEATH**

I know that I shall meet my fate  
Somewhere among the clouds above;  
Those that I fight I do not hate  
Those that I guard I do not love;  
My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
No likely end could bring them loss  
Or leave them happier than before.  
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public man, nor angry crowds,  
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.

## MEN IMPROVE WITH THE YEARS

I am worn out with dreams;  
A weather-worn, marble triton  
Among the streams;  
And all day long I look  
Upon this lady's beauty  
As though I had found in book  
A pictured beauty,  
Pleased to have filled the eyes  
Or the discerning ears,  
Delighted to be but wise,  
For men improve with the years;  
And yet and yet  
Is this my dream, or the truth?  
O would that we had met  
When I had my burning youth;  
But I grow old among dreams,  
A weather-worn, marble triton  
Among the streams.

## THE COLLAR-BONE OF A HARE

Would I could cast a sail on the water  
Where many a king has gone  
And many a king's daughter,  
And alight at the comely trees and the lawn,  
The playing upon pipes and the dancing,  
And learn that the best thing is  
To change my loves while dancing  
And pay but a kiss for a kiss.

I would find by the edge of that water  
The collar-bone of a hare  
Worn thin by the lapping of water,  
And pierce it through with a gimlet and stare  
At the old bitter world where they marry in churches,  
And laugh over the untroubled water  
At all who marry in churches,  
Through the white thin bone of a hare.

## UNDER THE ROUND TOWER

'Although I'd lie lapped up in linen  
A deal I'd sweat and little earn  
If I should live as live the neighbours,'  
Cried the beggar, Billy Byrne;  
'Stretch bones till the daylight come  
On great-grandfather's battered tomb.'

Upon a grey old battered tombstone  
In Glendalough beside the stream,  
Where the O'Byrnes and Byrnes are buried,  
He stretched his bones and fell in a dream  
Of sun and moon that a good hour  
Bellowed and pranced in the round tower;  
Of golden king and silver lady,  
Bellowing up and bellowing round,  
Till toes mastered a sweet measure,  
Mouth mastered a sweet sound,  
Prancing round and prancing up  
Until they pranced upon the top.

That golden king and that wild lady  
Sang till stars began to fade,  
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,  
Hair spread on the wind they made;  
That lady and that golden king  
Could like a brace of blackbirds sing.

'It's certain that my luck is broken,'  
That rambling jailbird Billy said;  
'Before nightfall I'll pick a pocket  
And snug it in a feather-bed,  
I cannot find the peace of home  
On great-grandfather's battered tomb.'

## SOLOMON TO SHEBA

Sang Solomon to Sheba,  
And kissed her dusky face,  
'All day long from mid-day  
We have talked in the one place,  
All day long from shadowless noon  
We have gone round and round  
In the narrow theme of love  
Like an old horse in a pound.'

To Solomon sang Sheba,  
Planted on his knees,  
'If you had broached a matter  
That might the learned please,  
You had before the sun had thrown  
Our shadows on the ground  
Discovered that my thoughts, not it,  
Are but a narrow pound.'

Sang Solomon to Sheba,  
And kissed her Arab eyes,  
'There's not a man or woman  
Born under the skies  
Dare match in learning with us two,  
And all day long we have found  
There's not a thing but love can make  
The world a narrow pound.'

## THE LIVING BEAUTY

I'll say and maybe dream I have drawn content —  
Seeing that time has frozen up the blood,  
The wick of youth being burned and the oil spent —  
From beauty that is cast out of a mould  
In bronze, or that in dazzling marble appears,  
Appears, and when we have gone is gone again,  
Being more indifferent to our solitude  
Than 'twere an apparition. O heart, we are old,  
The living beauty is for younger men,  
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.

## A SONG

I thought no more was needed  
Youth to prolong  
Than dumb-bell and foil  
To keep the body young.  
Oh, who could have foretold  
That the heart grows old?

Though I have many words,  
What woman's satisfied,  
I am no longer faint  
Because at her side?  
Oh, who could have foretold  
That the heart grows old?

I have not lost desire  
But the heart that I had,  
I thought 'twould burn my body  
Laid on the death-bed.  
But who could have foretold  
That the heart grows old?

## TO A YOUNG BEAUTY

Dear fellow-artist, why so free  
With every sort of company,  
With every Jack and Jill?  
Choose your companions from the best;  
Who draws a bucket with the rest  
Soon topples down the hill.

You may, that mirror for a school,  
Be passionate, not bountiful  
As common beauties may,  
Who were not born to keep in trim  
With old Ezekiel's cherubim  
But those of Beaujolet.

I know what wages beauty gives,  
How hard a life her servant lives,  
Yet praise the winters gone;  
There is not a fool can call me friend,  
And I may dine at journey's end  
With Landor and with Donne.

## TO A YOUNG GIRL

My dear, my dear, I know  
More than another  
What makes your heart beat so;  
Not even your own mother  
Can know it as I know,  
Who broke my heart for her  
When the wild thought,  
That she denies  
And has forgot,  
Set all her blood astir  
And glittered in her eyes.

## THE SCHOLARS

Bald heads forgetful of their sins,  
Old, learned, respectable bald heads  
Edit and annotate the lines  
That young men, tossing on their beds,  
Rhymed out in love's despair  
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

They'll cough in the ink to the world's end;  
Wear out the carpet with their shoes  
Earning respect; have no strange friend;  
If they have sinned nobody knows.  
Lord, what would they say  
Should their Catullus walk that way?

## TOM O'ROUGHLEY

'Though logic choppers rule the town,  
And every man and maid and boy  
Has marked a distant object down,  
An aimless joy is a pure joy,'  
Or so did Tom O'Roughley say  
That saw the surges running by,  
'And wisdom is a butterfly  
And not a gloomy bird of prey.

'If little planned is little sinned  
But little need the grave distress.  
What's dying but a second wind?  
How but in zigzag wantonness  
Could trumpeter Michael be so brave?'  
Or something of that sort he said,  
'And if my dearest friend were dead  
I'd dance a measure on his grave.'

## THE SAD SHEPHERD

### Shepherd

That cry's from the first cuckoo of the year  
I wished before it ceased.

### Goatherd

Nor bird nor beast  
Could make me wish for anything this day,  
Being old, but that the old alone might die,  
And that would be against God's Providence.  
Let the young wish. But what has brought you here?  
Never until this moment have we met  
Where my goats browse on the scarce grass or leap  
From stone to stone.

### Shepherd

I am looking for strayed sheep;  
Something has troubled me and in my trouble  
I let them stray. I thought of rhyme alone,  
For rhyme can beat a measure out of trouble  
And make the daylight sweet once more; but when  
I had driven every rhyme into its place  
The sheep had gone from theirs.

### Goatherd

I know right well

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