



# Words Alone: Yeats and His Inheritances

*R. F. Foster*

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Roy Foster's two-volume biography of Yeats was hailed in the *New York Review of Books* as "a triumph of scholarship, thought, and empathy such as one would hardly have thought possible in this age of disillusion." Now, Foster turns his focus to the largely unacknowledged influences that shaped the young W.B. Yeats. So dramatic and revolutionary was Yeats' impact on Irish literature that the writers and traditions that preceded him are often overlooked, just as his successors are often overshadowed by his achievement. In *Words Alone*, Roy Foster explores the Irish literary traditions that preceded Yeats, including romantic "national tales" in post-Union Ireland and Scotland, the nationalist poetry and polemic of the Young Ireland movement, the occult and supernatural fictions of Sheridan LeFanu, the "peasant fictions" of William Carleton, and the fairy-lore and folktale collections Yeats absorbed. As well as placing these nineteenth-century literary movements in a rich contemporary context of politics, polemic, and social tension, Foster discusses recent critical and interpretive approaches to these phenomena. But the unifying theme throughout the book is the self-conscious use Yeats made of his literary predecessors during his own apprenticeship, particularly in the construction of his path-breaking early work. T.S. Eliot famously observed that Yeats was "part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without him," and Foster shows the many ways that Yeats both shaped and was shaped by the age in which he lived, despite his attempts to construct his own literary pedigree and present himself as entirely original. Returning to the rich seed-bed of nineteenth-century Irish writing, *Words Alone* draws out themes which had particular resonance for Yeats, offering a new interpretation of the influences surrounding the young poet as he began to "hammer his thoughts into a unity."

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