

Iseult *

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Abstract: *Who, you may well ask, was this woman who, within the three years between 1917 and 1920, had the experience of being proposed to by W. B. Yeats, seduced by Ezra Pound, pursued by Lennox Robinson and married to Francis Stuart? In the process of editing her letters to W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound with her granddaughter Christina Bridgwater and her mother's granddaughter Anna MacBride White, I have had to form a picture of her life for myself, not yet complete, for there is still much to read, to discover. This essay is, then, a progress report upon one aspect of her life, her relationship with W. B. Yeats, founded upon his letters, upon her letters to him, her journals in French and English and her literary work, published and unpublished. It will give an account of her childhood, her becoming a young woman, her two years in London, and the part Yeats played in the early days of her marriage.*

Iseult in France

Iseult's mother was Maud Gonne, famously celebrated in W. B. Yeats's poetry. He fell in love with her after their first meeting in 1889, they shared a desire for Ireland to be independent, his a cultural aim, hers a political. Whereas she was independent and well-to-do, he lived at home, had no money and was struggling to make his way in the literary world. Despite doubts as to the kind of wife she would make for a student, as he then saw himself, he plucked up the courage to propose to her in 1891. She refused him, as she did on later occasions, saying that they should remain friends and he would go on writing lovely poems to her. He did. And he went on doing so, even after he learned about the realities of her life in 1898, the year of their strange platonic mystic marriage.

He learned she had had two children by Lucien Millevoye, a well-connected French politician and journalist, with whom she shared a dislike of England. Their first child, a boy, Georges Sylvére, died of meningitis at the age of nineteen and half months in 1891, their second, Iseult, was conceived on his tomb in the mausoleum built in his memory at Samoï – Maud then believed in reincarnation – and was born in 1894.

Maud kept Iseult's existence well concealed, confined to France, where she lived in Maud's various homes. Maud did not acknowledge her as her daughter, calling her "a charming girl I had adopted" and later her "adopted niece" (she alluded to her

thus to me when Iseult was over 50). Iseult was not allowed to call Maud “mother” but addressed her as “Moura”.

The relationship between Maud and Millevoye if passionate was not easy. He reneged on his promise to divorce his wife (from whom he was separated) and marry Maud, possibly keeping his marriage in being for the sake of his legitimate son Henri. He infuriated Maud in 1890 by appearing in Donegal, where she was campaigning on behalf of evicted tenants, and falling ill there. Public knowledge of her liaison with a married man, her having an illegitimate child, would have destroyed her social position, especially her political career in Ireland. The affair ended in 1900 when she discovered that he had a new mistress, a café singer who shared his desire for the return of Alsace Lorraine to France. Maud’s political philosophy was fundamentally different from Millevoye’s; his French nationalism was counter-revolutionary, her Irish nationalism extremely revolutionary.

Her self-imposed political activity, her journalism and inflammatory oratory as well as secret work for the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) often kept Maud away from France and Iseult. She had little time for domestic life when her energies focussed on the plight of the evicted, the famine-struck, the imprisoned and the poor in Ireland. Iseult’s childhood was shaped by this, but it was not so different from Maud’s upbringing, for after their mother died Maud and her sister Kathleen were put in charge of a nurse and a series of governesses in Dublin, London and the south of France. Their lives were punctuated by visits from their father, a dashing soldier, who served in Ireland and twice in India, was an attaché in Vienna and in St. Petersburg before becoming Assistant Adjutant-General in Ireland, where he died of typhoid in 1886 at the age of 56. Once she inherited her money Maud travelled widely, renting an apartment in Paris.

She did not take Iseult with her on her travels. Scandal had to be avoided, but in view of her own unsettled upbringing Maud can hardly have considered Iseult unduly deprived of parental attention. She lived in Maud’s new residence in Paris, now in the Avenue d’Eylau and added to by a house in Semois-sur-Seine, the households put in charge of an elderly woman, Madame de Bourbonne.

In 1900 Iseult met her cousins, the children of Maud’s sister Kathleen Pilcher, in Brittany, and formed a close friendship with Thora. Maud wrote to Yeats the next year to say Iseult had “passed first in nearly every subject”. She had, however, overtaxed herself, and collapsed when Maud brought her to Switzerland. A visiting French doctor, pronouncing one of her lungs affected, and describing her as “fearfully delicate”, looked after her well there. But Iseult’s health continued to cause anxiety. Maud’s mother had died of tuberculosis; Maud’s potential career as an actress had been cut short by haemorrhaging of her lungs; and Millevoye also had weak lungs – he and Maud had met at Royat while recuperating.

In 1902, Eileen Wilson joined the family; she was 16, Maud’s half sister, an illegitimate daughter of Colonel Gonne born at the same time as his death. Maud respected her father’s dying wishes. Despite the objections of her guardian, she provided for Eileen’s

mother, subsequently finding her a post as governess with a Russian family, and placing Eileen in charge of "Bowie", Mary Anne Meredith, the nurse who had brought up Maud and Kathleen. Bowie's death was the reason for Eileen's arrival in France. Iseult did not get on well with her. The girls were now in charge of Iseult's godmother, Madame Suzanne Foccart, who, when the convent at Laval was secularised, founded an association for the nuns to specialise in embroidery. Iseult's private comments on Madame Foccart were sharp.

After Iseult's baptism in 1902 she had a holiday with one of Maud's friends, who persuaded Maud to buy a house at Colleville, "Les Mouettes", an ugly, but commodious house on the edge of the shore line. Iseult, back at Laval, was horrified when Maud announced her intention of marrying John MacBride. An Irish nationalist hero, he had fought against Britain in the Boer war in the Irish Brigade, and arrived in Paris, to avoid the likelihood of being arrested for treason if he returned to the United Kingdom. Maud had gone to help him in America where his lecture tour was going badly. He proposed to her there, she refused him, but now, the unexpected news of her sudden intention of marrying him caused consternation among her friends as well as his, and horrified his family. Yeats (who had himself proposed to her only recently) wrote her impassioned letters telling her not only would she destroy her own soul but would lose political credibility in Ireland, reminding her of their spiritual marriage. Iseult took the news badly, as Maud remembered 20 years later, giving a sad but somewhat insensitive account of this:

She was such a beautiful and such a strangely wise child. She had cried when I told her I was getting married to MacBride and said she hated MacBride. I told her I would send her lovely things from Spain where we were going for our honeymoon, but she was not consoled. Canon Dissard, of whom she was very fond, was delighted about my marriage and told her we would have a great time when I returned and he would give a banquet in our honour in his little house outside the convent gate and she would be dressed as a queen on our return. She had only cried the louder and clung to me, and Sister Catherine had to drag her away.

The story became sadder still once MacBride joined the family, his excessive drinking soon in evidence. Maud cut short their honeymoon in Spain, the location chosen to facilitate a daring plot to assassinate Edward VII on his visit to Gibraltar. Maud was acting as a decoy to draw off the secret service men who were trailing them, but the plan was abandoned at the time MacBride was meant to carry it out because of his drunkenness. Yeats, relaying rumours of MacBride's drinking to Lady Gregory, called this "the last touch of tragedy".

Worse was to come after the family spent their first holiday at Colleville, where Iseult "more beautiful and wild and fairylike than ever", would have fascinated Yeats, Maud told him, "by her wildness and originality, there is nothing banal about her". Maud had now found a house in Paris, 13 rue de Passy, where Jean Seaghan

(later known as Seán, which name will subsequently be used here) was born on 26 January 1904.

MacBride's behaviour became increasingly distressing. He terrorised the women in the house: he exposed himself to Iseult; his behaviour with Eileen Wilson was described as indecent. (He was accused of raping her). She was married to his brother Joseph on 3 August 1904. Maud, physically assaulted by him and continually horrified by his drunkenness, began divorce proceedings in February 1905. She managed to keep Iseult out of testifying, recording how "she used to wake at night screaming that MacBride 'with his eyes of an assassin' was running after her". Iseult was afraid to go upstairs alone after dark in case he was hiding and would pursue her. The divorce case dragged on till 1906, Maud realising on a visit to Ireland that year how true Yeats's prophecies had been when she was hissed at a performance in the Abbey Theatre.

After Seán's birth Iseult had become part of a unit, "the children". Once at the Lycée in Paris, however, she saw more of Maud, who had substituted painting for politics. Iseult lacked her mother's restless, often hectic energy (possibly owed to her tubercular constitution) often seeming lackadaisical, perhaps having outgrown her physical resilience.

Maud's letters to Yeats mention Iseult more frequently now. Her drawing of Iseult at eleven justifies her comments on her daughter's beauty; she praised her imagination, her appreciation of art, her blend of child and tomboy, but she worried about her laziness at the Lycée. Iseult hated, Maud said, the thought of working hard at anything and wouldn't learn what didn't interest her.

Iseult's own first letter to Yeats thanked him for a present of Andrew Lang's *Tales of Troy and Greece* (1907). Maud began to think Iseult might be a writer, telling Yeats that she was trying her hand at translating Ella Young's Irish legends into French. Iseult began a *Journal* in French in January 1911, which reveals something of her intellectual interests, her strong sense of being pulled between Christianity and paganism. (Maud had earlier told Yeats she knew the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* better than her prayer book.). Her attractive sense of humour emerges too in accounts of conversations with her cousin Thora, of flirtations, of kissing sessions with her cousin Toby, of teasing Madame Dangien (who was now running the house and helping Iseult with her school homework), Madame Foccart and Barry Delaney, a pious and bigoted Irish journalist who acted as Maud's secretary, with ideas on marriage and love that she knew would outrage them. She was reading a nicely balanced mixture of Plato and Pindar, Marcus Aurelius and St. John of the Cross. We know from her letters to Yeats that by 1917 her reading included Loyola, Sir Thomas Browne, Shelley, Keats, Walter Pater, Nietzsche, Voltaire, Huysmans, d'Annunzio, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Rudolf Steiner. The *Journal* contains various stories, dialogues, and "The Desire", a piece of "oily elucidations as Malya would say which I prefer to call philosophic study."

Iseult had proposed marriage to Yeats in a joking way when she was 15, to be rejected similarly on the grounds that there was too much Mars in her horoscope. Had

she realised the relationship between Yeats and her mother was reverting to their former friendship? Their “spiritual marriage” had been succeeded by a brief sexual relationship in 1908, Maud saying she belonged more to him in renunciation. (He began a primarily physical affair with Mabel Dickinson in 1908 that lasted until 1913). However, he went to Colleville in 1910 and 1912 and their correspondence continued, Maud telling him in 1912 that the thunderclap of Iseult’s growing up hadn’t yet arrived. She was wrong. Apart from the flirtation with Toby Pilcher which had caused family scenes when she was in London in 1913, in France there had been verses from M. Pelletier, and flattering attention from Jean Malya, whose *La Litterature Irlandaise* was published in 1913. More intense was a friendship with Divabrata Mukerjee, who had studied at Calcutta, Exeter and Cambridge, whose translation of Tagore’s *The Post Office* was staged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1913. That year Iseult visited her aunt Kathleen in London and Yeats introduced her to Tagore, advising her to learn Bengali. Other friends of his admired her beauty, Lady Cunard praising her complexion, Arthur Symons thinking her strangely exotic. Yeats still saw her avuncularly as a child, his earlier poems to her “To a Child Dancing in the Wind”, (written in 1910/ 12) and “Two Years Later” (written in December 1912 or 1913), based on his visits to Colleville, emphasising her unselfconscious innocence.

After the war broke out the Tagore translations were abandoned, Mukerjee, who had been teaching Bengali to Iseult and her friend Christiane Cherfils, going back to India, having fallen in love with Iseult (which, Maud commented, had complicated things a bit). Perhaps because of this news Yeats may have written “To a Young Girl”, in May 1915, which, in effect, suggests Iseult’s awakening into sexuality, though in “Presences”, written seven months later, she is still a child “That never looked upon man with desire”.

Iseult’s health continued to worry Maud, whose letters transmitted her anxieties to Yeats. Her heart had been pronounced weak, she had been told to give up smoking, eat meat and keep her windows open, “all of which she refuses to do”. From being a wartime nursing assistant she became a secretary to an aviation committee in Paris, a post found for her by her father. During a visit to Maud’s cousin May Bertie Clay in London in 1916 Yeats introduced her to Ezra and Dorothy Pound, brought her to Sir William Rothenstein to have her portrait painted, discussed literature with her, lent her books and talked about how her illegitimacy affected her. Though now known as Iseult Gonne, she did not want to have to supply details of her parentage for passport or other purposes, a matter she alluded in letters to him. She also told him that her father, whom she used to visit regularly to receive her “pocket money” had infuriated her by suggesting she should become an Aspasia, the cultured mistress of some important men. Yeats wrote wistfully to Lady Gregory that Iseult made him sad, for he thought that if his life had been normal, he might have had a daughter of her age. This meant, he supposed, that he was beginning to get old.

Iseult returned to France accompanied by Yeats, to whom she had brought Maud’s request for help in getting a passport to travel to Ireland. She had told him how Maud

was sleeping badly, was lonely and very upset. Yeats stayed at Colleville for the summer, writing "Easter 1916" there. As MacBride had been shot for his part in the Rising the way was clear for him to propose to Maud *comme d'habitude* and for her to refuse him in the usual terms. To her surprise he then asked for permission to propose to Iseult, which she gave, saying that the child would not consider it. He thought her "a tall beauty very mystic and subtle". She enjoyed flirting with her mother's admirer, who made her sit down "at that dreadful table with two hours of work in front of me and three cigarettes doled out with a grudging hand". He thought, he wrote to Lady Gregory, that he was managing Iseult very well: "The other night she made a prolonged appeal for another cigarette."

She translated the young French Catholic poets for him, Jammes Samain, Claudel and Péguy whose work she later wanted to translate into English, enlisting Yeats to find an English publisher, only to have Madame Péguy refuse permission for this. Yeats dictated part of the second volume of his *Autobiographies* to her, and she commented sagely that while he gave his memories a lasting life in the soul he also had to give the last death stroke to many old pathetic illusions.

Although flattered by Yeats's proposal, she wrote to her cousin Thora that thirty years difference was "a little too much", thinking he had proposed "out of his mad code politeness". As well as entering into serious discussions she was able to treat him with some teasing mockery. He wrote to Lady Gregory that "as father, but as father only, I have been a great success."

He left to spend the winter in London but returned to Colleville in 1917, dating the Prologue and Epilogue to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918) addressed to Iseult [as Maurice, a name she used] 11 May, 1917. Here he referred to one of their many walks the previous summer accompanied by her black Persian cat Minnaloushe, who later got his tribute in "The cat and the Moon", another poem written in Colleville in 1917. From there Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory, who favoured his marrying Iseult (who, unlike her mother, had no dangerous interest in politics), that Iseult was showing him many little signs of affection. He began, however, to despair of gaining her love, a realisation underlying "The Living Beauty":

O heart, we are old;
The living beauty is for younger men.
We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears.

Maud had had difficulty in getting permission to travel to England, but eventually this arrived and Yeats accompanied the family to London:

Poor Iseult was very depressed on the journey, and at Havre went off by herself and cried. Because she was so ashamed "at being so selfish in not wanting to marry me and so break her friendship with me." I need hardly say she had said nothing to me of "not wanting."

Once in London he delivered an ultimatum to Iseult. She would have to give him a definite answer in a week's time when she met him in an ABC teashop. If she would not marry him there was someone who would. When Iseult rejected him he married Georgie Hyde Lees, whom he had known since 1911, on 20 October, 1917.

Despite the comment of Arthur Symons that Maud had laughed at Yeats's marriage – “a good woman of 25 – rich of course – who has to look after him; she might either become his slave or run away from him after a certain length of time” – Maud and Iseult took the news of his marriage well. Maud had told him that she found his betrothed charming, “graceful and beautiful”, while Iseult liked her and wrote to him wishing him and Georgie great happiness and mutual understanding: “She is (it seems to me) one of those minds who can give generously and, which is even a finer quality, hold back more than they give, and I feel sure she will only increase our friendship.”

Iseult in London

Iseult had two crowded and stressful years in London. Yeats lived up to his promise to be her friend, getting her a post in the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) through Sir Denison Ross, the Director. After a week there Iseult found it “a delightful place”. Still bothered at having caused him unhappiness, she urged him to be happy; she would share his joy when he told her “All is well.”

Yeats, feeling guilty at having made three women – Maud, Iseult and his wife – unhappy, still hankered after Iseult, writing the two sections of “Owen Aherne and His Dancers” four and seven days after his marriage. The poem ended with a despairing cry, seeing that he could not persuade “the child” to mistake her childish gratitude for love: “O let her choose a young man now and all for his wild sake.” Not an auspicious beginning to a marriage. Symons's report of Maud's prediction might have come true, and Yeats's wife might have left him had it not been for her automatic writing that assured him “with the Bird [Iseult] all is well at heart”. The automatic writing captured his imagination, and occupied him in ordering and expanding the thought of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* into *A Vision* (1925), the scaffolding of his magnificent new poetry.

He found that Iseult and his wife became friends, first for his sake then for each other's, Iseult spending Christmas with them in Sussex and later visiting them in Oxford. In London she made other friends, among them T. Sturge Moore and Arthur Symons, who dedicated his *Colour Studies in Paris* (1918) to her and wrote her a poem, “Song for Iseult”. His poem “Deirdre” celebrated a dinner with her in a Café Royal, and she helped him with his translation of Baudelaire.

In January 1918 Maud, disregarding the authorities' prohibition of her travelling to Ireland, successfully disguised herself and arrived secretly in Dublin with Seán. Once there she began househunting and purchased 73 St. Stephen's Green (the house was to belong to Iseult).

By March the lease Maud had taken of the furnished flat in Chelsea, 265 King's Road, would lapse. Iris Barry, also working in SOAS, had been staying there with Iseult, and

the girls decided to take another flat in Chelsea, 54 Beaufort Mansions. They moved into it on 25 March, the day of Lucien Millevoeye's death. Iseult wrote to her mother in case the news had not reached her:

... my eyes are sore with weeping. One doesn't know how much affection one has for others till they die: then one remembers with distress all one could have done for them and all that one failed to do, and worst of all, the hard things one has thought, and this feels so unjust and cruel. I can't pray anymore, but you'll pray I'm sure.

In a letter telling Yeats that her father's death had upset her, she added that Ezra Pound had tried to kiss her. Pound had offered her a post as his secretary; but she told Yeats she agreed with his conclusion and decided to stay on at the School.

In May came the news of Maud's arrest in Dublin and transference to Holloway Prison at the time of the alleged German plot. Visits were not permitted and Iseult, now joined by Seán, did not get letters from Maud until June. They brought food to the prison every day.

Tension arose in the flat between Iris Barry and the homesick Josephine Pillon, the maid who had accompanied the family from her native Normandy. By June Iseult herself was no longer happy with Iris Barry's company, disliking her Bohemianism – she lived with Wyndham Lewis, by whom she had two children between 1918 and 1920 – and Yeats and his wife came to London from Galway and “separated” them. Mrs Yeats organised the removal of Iseult's things to Yeats's rooms in Woburn Buildings, where, he told Maud, Iseult could live without rent to pay as he and his wife were going to move to Oxford. Iseult had feared to be unkind to Iris Barry but was glad to be rid of her.

Yeats and several others persuaded the Chief Secretary for Ireland that Maud, the door of whose prison cell bore the label “unsentenced prisoner”, should be examined by a specialist who reported she was suffering from a recurrence of pulmonary tuberculosis. She was sent to a nursing home in late October, from which she quickly went to Woburn Place. She was renting 73 Stephen's Green to the Yeateses (for £2,10 a week) as Yeats wanted his first child to be born in Dublin.

Iseult had begun to work for Ezra Pound in July. Between then and September Yeats wrote “Two Songs of a Fool”, the first emphasising his responsibilities in looking after the speckled cat (Mrs Yeats) and a tame hare (Iseult), the second depicting a cat asleep on his knee but neither of them thinking where the hare might be.

That, now, it may be, has found
The horn's sweet note and the tooth of the hound.

Iseult liked the poem, but when she considered it as applied to her, thought she didn't belong to that order of things, the hare a symbol of a personality as helpless but more active than hers. And another poem written in the autumn, “To a Young Beauty”, conveys Yeats's dislike of the Bohemian company Iseult now seemed to be keeping in London, chiding his fellow artist.

Why so free
With every sort of company,
With every Jack and Jill?

“Michael Roberts and the Dancer”, the poem written to Iseult in 1918, echoes the mirror theme in “To a Young Beauty” (one to surface again in “A Prayer for my Daughter”). In the dialogue “He” queries book learning in favour of beauty, her lover’s wage “Is what your looking-glass can show”, a dictum queried by “She”, who ends the poem by remarking “They say such different things at school”. Yeats had probably been alarmed by Pound’s letter announcing he had taken Iseult on as his typist, not altogether liking to call her his secretary: “my poems are much too ithyphallic for any secretary of her years to be officially in my possession.” Ezra and Iseult fell in love and consummated their passion. She was “his great love”; he wanted to leave his wife (who said it wasn’t Iseult who broke up the marriage) for Iseult; but there was no question of his leaving Dorothy. After all, he depended upon her income. But he later wanted to christen his daughter Iseult, something vetoed by her mother, Olga Rudge. He wrote, pensively presumably, that Iseult misunderstood his reason for leaving her at the bus stop in Kensington High Street opposite Barker’s.

Iseult went to Dublin, when Maud Gonne, again disguising herself successfully, arrived there in the late November. Yeats fearing the effect of likely police raids upon his wife, who was seven months pregnant and gravely ill with pneumonia, refused to let Maud stay with them in 73 St. Stephen’s Green. Iseult’s racy account of this famous quarrel is worth quoting:

Strange rumours may reach you about Uncle W. [Yeats] and Moura’s fight. The truth is they have both behaved as badly as they could, so badly that I greatly fear they have this time quarrelled for good; and it is from an impartial point of view impossible to say which is most in the wrong, or which has been most tactless, or, rather, thinking it over, I should say Moura has been more tactless and Willy more in the wrong.

I have spent 3 days running from one to the other trying to soothe matters, but with little effect, and as profit have only been enforced in my conviction that there should be a law by which after 50, people should be placed under the tutelage of their juniors.

Meanwhile she and W. are the gossip of the city. They each go to their friends confiding their wrongs so that there is now the W. clan and the M. clan. Russell [George Russell, AE] and I are the only two who refuse to take sides with this only difference that Russell says they are both right and I maintain they are both wrong. The climax came the day before yesterday. They met in the Green, and there, among the nurses and the perambulators proceeded to have it out finally.

M.: If only you would stop lying!

W. (gesture of arms): I have never lied, my father never told a lie, my grandfather never told a lie.

M.: Now, Willy, you are really lying.

By Christmas Maud had her house back. Iseult's relationship with Maud had deepened and once the Colleville house was sold some of the money had bought Baravore, a small house at the head of the then remote Glenmalure Valley in County Wicklow where Iseult thought she would live as much as possible, the "worldly world" holding nothing for her. However, she began to know more people in Dublin now, among them Lennox Robinson. Yeats thought he would make her a suitable husband but the idea got short shrift: "How can you seriously think that I could marry him". In the same letter she tells him she has made great friends with a youth called Stuart, not yet nineteen, who has written poetry that even Yeats would like: "He has an adoration which amounts to religion for you, but he is very shy and I cannot get him to send you any of his work."

Iseult, still pursuing her interest on Eastern religions, was herself modest about her own writing. Her published work included "Silence", published in *The Guest* in 1919, which, like "The Poplar Road", which appeared in *Tomorrow* in 1924, is written in an English prose that flows easily and gracefully (despite her disclaimer to Yeats that English was, after all, only her second language), the style influenced, no doubt, by her earlier study of the symbolists. Several of her essays which remain in manuscript form, probably written before her marriage, convey her intense reactions to nature, recorded in the *Journals*, which were an integral part of her life. When Maud's old age was enlivened by frequent visits from her, "the same lovely wise thing as ever", Iseult used to tell her mother of her joy in the land and the mountains.

Iseult in Ireland

The story of Iseult's marriage has not yet been fully told; the accounts of Stuart's best novel *Blacklist, Section* (1971) and Geoffrey Elborn's *Francis Stuart: A Life* (1990) do not give an adequate picture of it. Here constraints of space compel concentration on Yeats's part in it. His views of Stuart fluctuated, but he praised his writing, thinking it "cold, strange, detonating." Iseult's critical views of his novels were often more searching.

In common with Iseult, Francis Stuart had experienced an often unsatisfactory childhood; like her he had a disregard which, at times, amounted in his case to an unawareness of convention. On leaving Rugby School in 1918 he decided he would be a poet; he was completely uninterested in working for Trinity Entrance, vaguely influenced by Russian novels, idle and self-indulgent, self-absorbed. He and Iseult ran off to London in January 1920 where they spent three months; they were married in Dublin before returning to London, Stuart sharing Iseult's capacity for boredom, alleviated by visits to the cinema. Then they returned to Ireland, living in Baravore in Glenmalure. They often quarrelled. The immature Stuart was unkind to her; on one occasion he set fire to the clothes in her wardrobe after she had broken a plaster cast of a heron he made at school. They had to walk about ten miles in the rain to Rathdrum station to get a train back to Dublin. Iseult was pregnant, a responsibility he could hardly face. Yeats, then living in Oxford, got a letter from Iseult which conveyed some of her despair. Maud gave him a more detailed account of Stuart's failings, followed

by a telegram asking him to come to Dublin. He found Stuart had taken a flat in Dublin, leaving Iseult in a wretched state in Glenmalur. Yeats arranged that she should go to a nursing home, appalled that no financial arrangements had been made for her support. He set about remedying the situation, devising tough measure for their reconciliation; and they subsequently tried to patch up the marriage, though, when their daughter Dolores Stuart was born in March 1921 Stuart typically chose not to attend the christening. He had been in London, where he fell in love with Karsavina, a Russian ballet dancer.

After Iseult's daughter, just a few months old, died of spinal meningitis, Iseult was desolate. Maud took the Stuarts on a European holiday, Seán accompanying them as far as Brussels to buy arms for the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Stuart persuaded Iseult to have a holiday from this holiday, and they went to Prague, where Karsavina was dancing. Returning from meeting her he was surprised, typically, to find Iseult sobbing in bed. The holiday ended in a farcical attempt to return in a dud secondhand Mercedes Stuart had bought. When they got back he took part in the Civil war and was interned at Maryborough (Portlaoise). There he shaped his ideas about the role of the writer. Iseult continued to see great promise in his writing. She told Yeats she had pondered what good she was doing in her life and thought she might as well spend the rest of it with Stuart. If, as his Northern Irish uncles maintained, he was mad (his father had committed suicide in a private asylum in Australia) then, she thought, he needed her more.

It is tempting to regard her marriage as a delayed rebound from the impossibility of her affair with Ezra Pound, with whom she kept up a correspondence. She seems to have needed literary mentors though her own critical judgements were both original and sound. Pound was a successor to Yeats; she had enjoyed her friendship with Arthur Symons and found Lennox Robinson's literary conversation interesting, and Stuart's career was something she could aid, and she did so effectively, arranging the publication of some of his poems in pamphlet form. It was probably her friendship with Pound that led to Stuart's winning a prize awarded by *Poetry* Chicago. And it was her friendship with Yeats that led to his aiding the young author. He wrote the first editorial for the short lived *Tomorrow*, giving the editors, Stuart and Cecil Salkeld his poem "Leda and the Swan". He praised the strange thought and beauty of metaphor he founded in the poems of *We Have Kept the Faith* (1923), crowning him with a laurel wreath when Stuart won a Royal Irish Academy award at the Tailtean Games in 1924.

Stuart then turned to writing novels, Iseult encouraging him by telling him Yeats considered him a genius, certainly a more enthusiastic view than Yeats had taken of him in 1920 when he considered him a sadist and then, more simply, as someone who had never grown up. Yeats, however, found the young man dull company because he always agreed with, or pretended to agree with the older famous man. Stuart disliked the somewhat detachedly whimsical, even teasing way both Iseult and Maud spoke of and to Yeats. (It was not unlike the tone that Ezra and his wife adopted when discussing Yeats, "the eagle"). It was a contrast to Mrs Yeats's devotion, yet when the Stuarts stayed with the Yeatses in Merrion Square in 1926, and Yeats embarked on a long disquisition it was Mrs Yeats who winked at

the young couple, something Iseult might well have done herself. Yeats pondered the strangeness of sexual selection:

Iseult picked this young man by what seemed half chance half a mere desire to escape from an impossible life and when he seemed almost imbecile to his relations. Now he is her very self made active and visible, her nobility walking and singing.

The Stuarts lived for a long time in a cottage near Enniskerry but when their son Ian was born in October 1926 this was too confined and Maud bought them Laragh Castle near Glendalough in County Wicklow where they established a poultry farm. They had another child, Catherine, known as Kay, born in 1931. Yeats visited them at Laragh, his poem "Stream and the Sun at Glendalough", written in June 1937 and prompted by the visit. Six months before this he had made in "Why should not Old Men be Mad?" a disillusioned comment on Iseult's marriage. One of the answers to the query of the poem's first line (used as the title) was that some had known

A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce.

The questions, of course, remain. What did Iseult want out of life? Was it, perhaps, personal peace? Yeats once asked her why she was so pale and she replied "Too much responsibility". Her insecurity is entirely understandable, given the situation at that time of her illegitimacy, but why did she remain a beautiful but peripheral figure whose talents were wasted? She was, after all, very well read, independent in thought, in command of writing skills in both English and French, sensitive and perceptive, at times sharply witty. Was her delicate physique not up to conquering her enjoyment of laziness, or did she lack the ruthless capacity for continuous and concentrated work a driving ambition might have supplied? Given the self-centred selfishness of her husband, given as he was not only to womanising, gambling, drinking and financial unreliability, she could probably hardly have done more, while also looking after her mother-in-law, than create a good life for her talented children (to whom she was in effect a single parent from the time of Stuart's going to Germany in 1940) in the countryside she loved and appreciated so intensely.

Note

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