

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

A NEW YEATS COLLECTION

By Norreys Jephson O'Connor

OF modern writers in English, perhaps none has so frequently revised and reissued his work as William Butler Yeats. In his "Later Poems" and "Plays in Prose and Verse", a collection made from his previous writings, it is interesting to see what he has omitted and what he has included — among the poems, "The Wanderings of Oisín" has been sacrificed; among the plays, "The Countess Cathleen". That a poem and a play which did so much to establish the author's reputation should thus be abandoned is a sign that Mr. Yeats has the artist's divine discontent; he is ever catching new glimpses of beauty and enlarging the boundaries of his art. This is what makes him one of the outstanding figures in contemporary letters, a leader of his generation and one who has best expressed its aspirations. He has developed the haunting irregular cadences of "The Wind Among the Reeds" into the free rhythms of "The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Michael Robartes and the Dancer", thus keeping pace with the gradual change from the æstheticism of the Eighteen Nineties to the verse experimentation and the objective point of view of the poets of the last decade. In his dramatic writing the powerful but somewhat conventional "Cathleen ni Houlihan" has been succeeded by the extravagant farce, "The Player Queen", which is entirely modern in temper; Decima has the independence and directness of a modern girl.

To the reader who knows something of the scope and the content of Gaelic

literature, it will seem a paradox that Mr. Yeats, titular leader of the Celtic renaissance, has really made little use of the traditional stories of his country; he has introduced into his work many of the persons from the old sagas — Cúchulain, Gúaire, Laegaire — but the half barbaric splendor, the virile romanticism, of the early stories, are changed; we are not carried back into early Irish civilization; rather we gaze into a crystal where we find the color and a mere suggestion of the grandeur of the ancient figures. This is not to deny beauty to the poet's work with Irish themes, but the beauty is created by his own distinct personality and owes comparatively little to the national literature from which the original inspiration was derived. By a wave of his enchanter's wand, the Celtic gift for style, he has completely transformed old themes into modern instances.

One of the surest indications of Mr. Yeats's genius is that, with the enlargement of his metrical bounds, he has not lost the power to write simple lyrics, such as originally charmed the readers of the late Eighteen Nineties. Nothing from his pen is more direct than the songs from "The Player Queen", or than "The Rose Tree", from the last section of "Later Poems". He has fused the appeal of tradition with the strength and the freshness of experimentation; he is

Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.

Later Poems. By W. B. Yeats. The Macmillan Co.

Plays in Prose and Verse, written for an Irish theatre. By W. B. Yeats. The Macmillan Co.