

# Yeats and Bender: A Time of Gifts

AUDREY WHITTY investigates the history of a newly discovered sketchbook by Yeats given to philanthropist and collector Albert Bender in 1934

While researching the life and work of Albert M Bender (1866-1941) at Mills College, California earlier this year, the writer came across a previously unrecorded sketchbook by Jack B Yeats from his first trip to the Aran Islands in 1899. Yeats had presented the sketchbook to Bender in 1934. Albert Bender was born in Dublin in 1866, the son of Rabbi Philip Bender who was one of the principal ministers in the city during the mid to late 19th century. In the late 1870s

Bender left Ireland for San Francisco where he became a very successful insurance broker. Even though he had four siblings they too left Ireland, leaving no immediate family in the country. His primary significance for the National Museum lies in the fact that in the 1930s he donated a major collection of Asian art of Chinese, Japanese and

Tibetan origin, comprising approximately 260 objects. It was at that time, and still remains, the most generous and important donation in the history of the National Museum. Bender's munificence was recognised by the State when the then Taoiseach, Eamonn DeValera opened an exhibition based on the collection in June 1934. Bender was a trustee of Mills College, California and a patron of several avant-garde artists, amongst whom were Diego Rivera, Ansel Adams, Consuela Kananga, Roi Partridge, Joseph Raphael, Ralph Stackpole and Beniamino Benevenuto Bufano (Fig 2). In addition he was one of the most important bibliophiles on the west coast of the United States, and his contacts with Irishmen and women of the Celtic Literary Revival are of

some importance. They include the entire Yeats family, Oliver St John Gogarty, Walter Starkie, Ella Young and Kathleen O'Brennan amongst others. Bender chose Walter Starkie to initiate contact between himself and Dr Adolf Mahr (then director of the National Museum) in 1931 to implement the series of donations in honour of his mother, Augusta Bender.

Bender was aware that the acquisition of Asian applied arts by the National Museum of Ireland had been somewhat haphazard. For this reason he donated his private collection of Asian art to the museum. However, the Japanese woodblock prints were specifically chosen for dispatch to Dublin. It was also at this time that he began a series of donations of American rare books to Trinity College Library in honour of his father, Rabbi Philip Bender. In November 2004, parts of the Bender collection were made publicly accessible in the visible storage facility – 'What's In Store.' at the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks. This facilitated the display (rather than traditional exhibition context) of the objets d'art: pewter, statuary and some ceramics, but crucially does not include the Tibetan-Chinese tangka paintings of the Arhats of Buddha, Chinese and Japanese textiles and Japanese woodblock prints. While the Bender collection has not been exhibited in its entirety since the 1970s, these most artistically valuable artefacts from the collection will be displayed in a new exhibition planned for 2008.

The Jack B Yeats sketchbook given to Bender thirty-five years after its execution is of importance in tracing the artist's development, in particular regarding his contemporary illustrations and later work accompanying articles by J M Synge in 1905 for the *Manchester Guardian* as well as Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907). The sketchbook is filled with representations of local Aran people, antiquities, monuments and day-to-day rural activities. Correspondence between the two men continued from 1934 until Bender's death in 1941. In May 1937 Yeats wrote to Bender thanking him for his gift of



1 Landscape with drystone wall and dolmen (sketch number nineteen), Albert Bender sketchbook', 1899, watercolour Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

2 Albert Bender (second from left, in front) with Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (third and fourth from right), Virginia Adams (Mrs Ansel Adams) is at far right. The Albert M Bender Papers, Special Collections, FW Olin Library, Mills College, California. ©2007 The Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust

3 Man on horse (sketch number twenty-eight), Albert Bender sketchbook Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

the 'Psalm of David', and in February 1938, replying to a question posed by Bender in relation to the Royal Irish Academy, Yeats wrote: 'It is supported by the government with a grant and in other ways. Irish historical matters are, I understand, left in the Academy hands. They still have their fine old building, with the broad long rooms in Dawson Street. I send now two pamphlets. One of 1936-37, the other

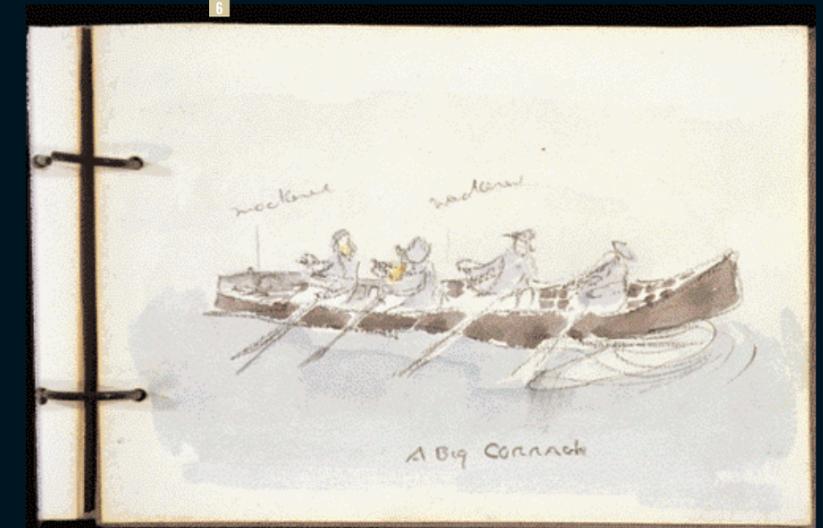
historical...'.<sup>1</sup> So cordial and familiar did the correspondence between the two men become, that on Bender's death Yeats wrote the following touching note to a friend of the deceased: 'I never met Mr. Bender, but I heard from him at intervals, and had always a feeling that there was gentleness and kindness about himself and his thoughts.'<sup>2</sup> The 1899 Aran Island sketchbook, given to Bender, is typical of those



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used by Yeats, being pocket-book size and a patent ring-bound cartridge. All thirty-six sketches are watercolour and ink-based. Significantly, the last page inscribed 'Co. Galway 1899 Isle of Aran' bears a hand-painted '4', implying that this was his fourth sketchbook compiled that summer. Interestingly, a companion to this example is in the collection of the late noted republican Ernie O'Malley. It is inscribed with the number '5' and like the Bender example depicts the people, activities and monuments of the 'Isle of Aran'. The O'Malley sketchbook is significant for its portrayal of Dun Aengus, whereas the Bender sketchbook is more ethnological in emphasis. Indeed Bender also knew Ernie O'Malley, as the latter is likely to have visited him in San Francisco during O'Malley's trip to America in 1929. Bender was also informed of O'Malley's 1935 marriage to the American Helen Hooker in a letter from Kathleen O'Brennan.<sup>3</sup>

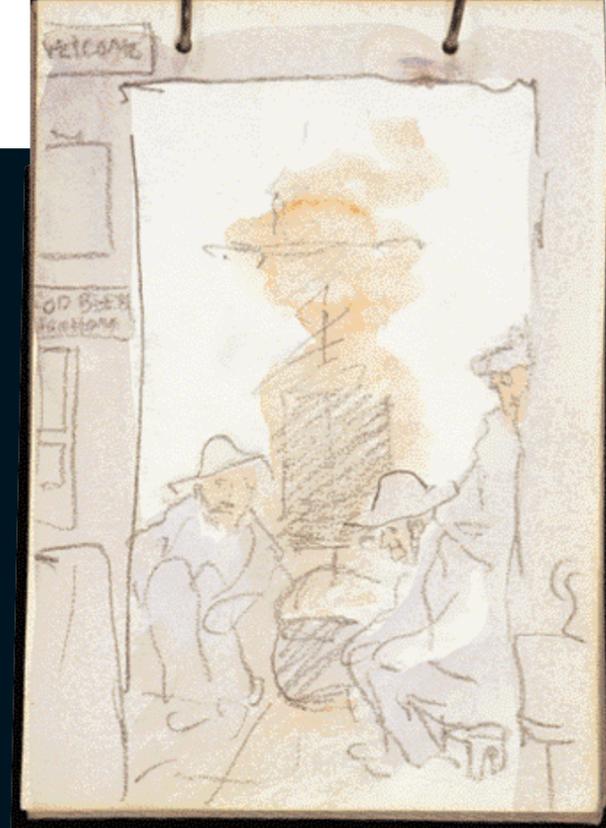
In terms of landscape the second sketch in the Bender-owned sketchbook is remarkable for its accurate simplicity. It illustrates a thatched cottage in the left foreground (Fig 5) This is the same concise architectural shape which would be used not only in Yeats' later oil paintings, but also during the 1930s in the work of artists such as Sean Keating. The title *Breakers on Middle Island in Distance*, underlines the artist's efforts to record all aspects of the visual landscape, including the minutest of details in the background.

*Seaweed Drying On Road* provides an insight into how Yeats used the Aran Islands as inspiration for his 1905 illus-

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trations for Sygne's articles in the *Manchester Guardian* on life in the West of Ireland. The sketch depicts two men, one on the left placing the seaweed flat down, the arc of his back implying the sheer labour-intensive act that such a part of daily survival in the West entailed (Fig 4). The sketch is remarkably simple, yet effective: the curved sweep of a boundary wall to the left of the road and the illusion of open space indicated with a sparseness of means. In terms of design there is some similarity with Yeats' illustration for 'Among the Relief Works', which accompanied a 1905 article by Sygne, in its curving sweep of the road focusing the viewer's attention on the central activity.

In terms of archaeological observation the Bender sketchbook includes several interesting examples which are subsequently developed in the O'Malley equivalent. Sketch number 19 of Bender's depicts a hill (Fig 1), containing a number of architectural features, from dry-stone walling across the middle plane, to portal tombs (dolmens) on the hill's summit. Yeats would have been familiar with portal-tombs having encountered them often during his youth in Co



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Sligo as there is a preponderance of megalithic court-tombs throughout the Northwest region. Green wash is used to mark the layout of the drawing, with some grey to lead the eye to the top of the hill in a winding path.

There are a further three sketches, which specifically depict field monuments. One illustrates four large burial monuments across the centre on an oblique line, another the remains of a medieval/early modern period church. The third sketch in this category is entitled 'Little Monuments', which depicts what appears to be two piles of rectilinear stone of what is possibly *chevaux de frise* – a defensive technique of sharpened stakes that helps prevent attack by cavalry, and which is found in the vicinity of Dun Aengus. However, it is in the subsequent O'Malley sketchbook that Yeats gives particular attention to Dun Aengus. The example entitled *Dun Angus showing three tier in step up wall* (Fig 8) is again evident of Yeats' acute observation of structural detail.

Sketch number twenty-three is important in tracing a link with later published illustrations by Yeats for Sygne's *The Aran Islands* (1907). The scene – a public house – shows three people inside the door of an interior, huddled beside an open fire – two men to either side of a skillet pot, the third person, a woman, just inside the doorway on the right. The wide-brimmed hats of the two men are sharply drawn, and there is a direct link here with the *Porter* illustration in *The Aran Islands* (1907). The same attention to detail such as the crepie stool, which the man sits on in both sketches and in front of an open fire, is apparent (Fig 7).

The most successful composition of the Bender sketchbook illustrates a man on horseback. More use of line is deployed here than on the other pages, particularly in the description of the horse's bridle, the shape of the flank, tail and legs. One cannot make out the specific features of the rider and the

emphatic use of royal blue directs the viewer's attention to the horse. This image is perhaps the most striking of the entire sketch book and is more vividly depicted than its equivalent in *The Merry-go-Round Man's Horse* (c.1900) from roughly the same time. The Aran Island sketchbook example is an equally remarkable study of a horse in movement. Other examples of Yeats' ability to portray the majesty of the horse can be seen in *The Squireen* (c.1899) and *Galloping Horses* (c.1899), both of which are watercolours. Details such as the man's clothing, hat and physical dimensions were reused later in the illustrations for *The Aran Islands*

While Yeats continued to radically develop his approach to colour and composition after his 1899 trip to the Aran Islands, the fact remains that he was sufficiently confident to offer this sketchbook to a potential Irish-American patron. Considering the enormous impact the Irish-American lawyer, John Quinn, had on the career of Yeats for over three decades, it is reasonable to suppose that Yeats chose an enticing and commendable example of his work to send to the Irish-born doyen of the arts. Indeed, it is not too far fetched to suppose that had Albert Bender lived beyond 1941 he may have become one of Yeats' main patrons. ■

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An exhibition of the Albert Bender donations of Asian art will take place at Collins Barracks in 2008

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- 1 Yeats to Bender, 5 February 1938. File 1.10.792, Bender Archive, Mills College
- 2 Yeats to June Richardson Lucas, 26 March 1941. File 1.10.792, Bender Archive, Mills College
- 3 O'Brennan to Bender, 13 December 1935. File 1.7.539, Bender Archive, Mills College: 'I believe her father did not approve as 'he was a papist and had the head of a revolutionary'.

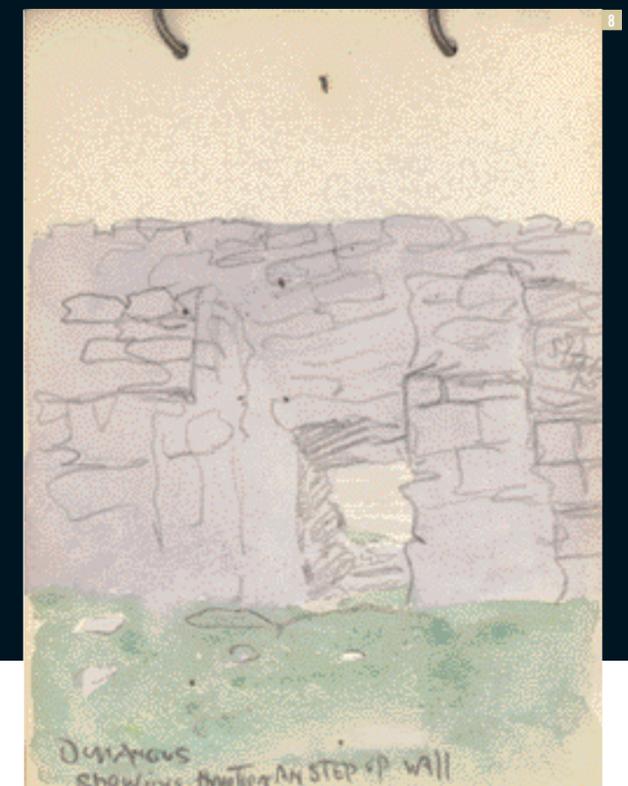
4 *Seaweed Drying On Road*, (sketch number 14), Albert Bender sketchbook, 1899, watercolour Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

5 *Breakers on Middle Island in Distance* (sketch number 2), Albert Bender sketchbook, 1899, watercolour Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

6 *A Big Corrach* (sketch number 29) Albert Bender sketchbook, 1899, watercolour Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

7 *Public House* (sketch number twenty-three), Albert Bender sketchbook, 1899, watercolour Bender Archive, Mills College, California. ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007

8 *Dun Angus*, (sketch number 12), Estate of Ernie O'Malley sketchbook, 1899, watercolour. Courtesy National Gallery of Ireland ©Estate of Jack B Yeats/DACS 2007



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