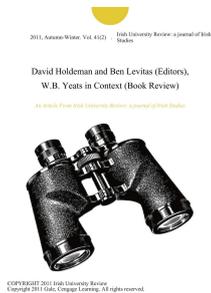


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## DAVID HOLDEMAN AND BEN LEVITAS EDITORS W B YEATS IN CONTEXT BOOK REVIEW EBOOKS 2019



Author: Irish University Review: a journal of Irish Studies

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David Holdeman and Ben Levitas (editors), W.B. Yeats in Context. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 439 pages. GBP 65.00. On perusing the contents of this voluminous collection, my first thought was that it could offer an extremely economical way, if read in its entirety, of mastering the current state of thinking on almost every aspect of Yeats's work. Certainly, the large number of excellent scholars and critics who have been brought together between these covers attests to the size of the academy's engagement with a poet, dramatist, and critic whose reputation seems to grow noticeably with every year that passes. There are, in fact, thirty-eight chapters, rather more than are the phases of the moon. I did entertain a second thought when I had read the book: there is not much room in this crowded place, and some of the essays are hardly more than four thousand words in length. The effect is that of reading an advanced encyclopedia, and not all of the contributors have been able to achieve depth and nuance as well as brevity. The title, Yeats in Context, is, like many titles, inadequate, since it hardly gives any idea of the extraordinary range of topics covered, and might lead one to expect only the kind of treatments of 'Yeats and the Irish Theatre' or 'Yeats and Symbolism' of which we have many examples already. Yet although such topics are, as one would hope, addressed, we also have here, to name but a few, chapters on 'The Irish Free State and the European Crisis,' on 'Ezra Pound', on Sligo, on 'Classical Philosophy', on 'Indian Thought', and on 'The English Romantic Symbolists'. One could cite many further examples of the breadth of understanding which this collection is intended to reflect and encourage. However, it is not a volume which displays the workings of critical and theoretical approaches, though it does offer chapters which give overviews of some of these: for example, of postcolonial theory, or of critical debate between 1939 and 1970. 'Context' is a word of broad application, and the editors have helpfully specified its uses here by sub-dividing the book into seven sections: 'Times', 'Places', 'Personalities', 'Themes', 'Philosophies', 'Arts', and 'Reception'. While the plural nouns might well make sense for most writers, they seem especially apt for Yeats, with his straddling of the different artistic cultures of two centuries, his migrations between London and Ireland, his intense imaginative engagement with certain individuals, and his eclectic but compelling occultist synthesis.

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