



L-R: Nattanya Hewitt, Eithne (host for the evening) & Tony Dunbar and the Museum's Amy Whitehorne Mackie; Doris and Natalie frame one of the Yeats panels

WILDE ABOUT YEATS

By Russ Disotell

No, that's not a spelling error in the title, it's meant to be Wilde with an "e", as in Oscar Wilde. This is a story about the importance of dialogue, community building, convoluted paths, and, oh yes, how an Oscar Wilde project morphed into a celebration of WB Yeats. In the interest of full disclosure, I was involved in this enterprise.

Last December at a lecture sponsored by the Brockville Irish Cultural Society a discussion took place about promoting the idea of an Oscar Wilde Theatre Festival for Brockville. There is a connection between the celebrated Irish playwright and Brockville. In a nutshell, the connection is that Frances Richards, a Brockville native, and talented portrait artist, painted Wilde's portrait in 1887. The sitting inspired Wilde to write *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde's only novel. As a result of the talk it was decided to meet in the New Year and commence the promotion.

By the time of this first meeting, the group consisted of members of the executive of the Brockville Irish Cultural Society and several unaffiliated members of the public. One suggestion put forward was that since Wilde was Irish, the Embassy of Ireland in Ottawa should be approached for their assistance. An immediate response to the suggestion was, "What do we want from them?" Good question! A let's wait and see attitude was adopted. You don't know what

you want until you see what they have. Here comes the first turn in the road.

Elizabeth Keogh, Second Secretary of the Embassy, became our contact person, and eventually our leading benefactor. The Embassy was very interested in assisting wherever possible and they did have four travelling government literary exhibits, but unfortunately Wilde wasn't one of them. Would there be interest in looking at them anyway? Of course! She mentioned that the WB Yeats exhibit might be very timely as 2015 was the 150th anniversary of his birth and was being celebrated as the year of Yeats. For those unfamiliar with Yeats, he is considered one of the leading literary figures of the 20th century, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923, and is a beloved poet worldwide and in particular to the Irish.

It was decided to accept the offer of the Yeats exhibit, thus encountering the second turn in the road. The problem was finding a venue. Or rather, as it was quaintly put by one of the group, "We don't have a Museum, but I know where we can find one!" Enter the Brockville Museum. Curator Natalie Wood was approached and indeed they would be happy to host the exhibit and just happened to have space for the month of August. It would be a reflection, and celebration of the rich Irish heritage of the area.

The Brockville Museum was one of a select number of stops for the exhibition in this

Year of Yeats; as such it was a coup for them. The Yeats exhibition was curated in 2011 by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Ireland, using material from the Yeats exhibition featured in the National Library in Dublin. The exhibition consists of 13 panels telling the story of Yeats' life and work.

The exhibit was previewed on July 29th with a program blending readings, music, an exploration of Yeats' life and works. Brockville Councillor Phil Deery, the city's representative on the Museum's Board of Directors, spoke about being the son of Irish immigrants and growing up reading Yeats' collection of fairy tales. He also commented how wonderful it was to hear Gaelic again, as it was used as part of his wedding ceremony.

On August 18th a Read Your Favourite Yeats event was held in the afternoon. It served as an opportunity for the public to share their love of Yeats, read their favourite Yeats poem or just enjoy the recitations of others. Once again, there was a blend of readings, commentary and music, as some of the area's wealth of talented Celtic musicians showed up to add to the festive atmosphere.

So now where to for the Wilde/Yeats committee? Expect more on the Wilde Theatre Festival idea, but between here and there, be prepared for a twist or two, as they remain committed to taking full advantage of every opportunity that comes their way.

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