CHAPTER 1

Off with the Fairies
Yeats, Ethnography, and Identifiction

Above all, [Yeats] was determined to present folk-stories as ‘an ancient system of belief,’ echoing the implications of anthropologists like E. B. Tylor and Frazer . . . WBY argued that psychical researchers and anthropologists were confronting the same reality.

— R. F. Foster, W. B. Yeats: A Life

It has gone without saying that W. B. Yeats was not a social scientist, at least not in the strict, disciplinary sense that literary critics have tended to assume must govern the modern social sciences. During a literary career that spanned over half a century, however, Yeats produced a great deal of commentary on Irish culture. Particularly since the beginning of the postcolonial theory boom in Irish Studies, Yeats’s views of Irish culture have frequently been characterized as anything from wishful thinking to deliberate distortions of reality, often with the explicit charge that Yeats effectively reinforced the logic of colonial domination by imaginatively substituting an Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy power structure in the place of the British colonial power structure. Applying the insights of contemporary ethnographic theory to Yeats’s work on Irish culture will help balance the record and will make it clear that Yeats’s approach to Irish cultural study resembles the prevailing ethnographic practices of his era far more than Yeats’s critics have recognized thus far.

In his essay “The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self,” Edward M. Bruner refers to Susan Rodgers’s statement that “many amateur ethnographers in many areas of the world are writing about their culture, and it would be useful for us ‘to begin to collect such texts, interview their authors, and analyze such folk sociologies.’” In his essay “A Tree That Stands Burning: Reclaiming a Point of View as from the Center,” Robin Ridington summarizes James
Clifford’s explanation of the difference between modern disciplinary ethnographic practices and earlier forms of ethnography: “By translating experience into textual form, Clifford wrote, ‘ethnographic writing enacts a specific strategy of authority.’ He suggested that ‘a rather different economy of ethnographic knowledge prevailed . . . before [the discipline] had successfully established the norm of the university trained scholar testing and deriving theory from first-hand research.’2

One can apply these remarks to Yeats’s career-long ethnographic work, and can do so from both sides, so to speak. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Yeats began what we may now recognize as fieldwork among the peasants of the west of Ireland, accompanying Lady Augusta Gregory on excursions to record folklore, songs, and accounts of Irish culture by visiting the cottages of the west’s rural residents. Insofar as Yeats and Gregory lacked any formal training, this was the sort of amateur ethnography Bruner and Rodgers discuss. Their view, however, extends only so much credit to amateur ethnographers. Bruner and Rodgers clearly regard amateur as the more important part of amateur ethnographers. Their view, bluntly put, is that real ethnographers (those with disciplinary know-how and appropriate credentials—identified as us) should interview these amateurs, subject them to professional scrutiny, and produce professional ethnographic accounts of the amateurs’ ethnographic efforts.

The perspective expressed by Ridington and Clifford is entirely different in that it legitimates what Bruner and Rodgers regard as an inferior form of ethnographic inquiry. Ridington and Clifford remind readers that ethnography’s current disciplinary requirements and practices are fairly recent inventions; that historically the boundaries separating ethnography from other forms of knowledge have been quite permeable when they have been there at all; and that “a rather different economy of ethnographic knowledge” did not exclude the findings and interpretations of amateur ethnographers or diminish them by treating them as mere native phenomena, fit objects for real (meaning professional) disciplinary inquiry.

In order to understand the importance of ethnographic elements in Yeats’s thought and work, it is first necessary to consider Yeats’s thought and work in more general terms. Derek Hand says of Yeats, “Oppositional readings of Yeats are a feature in almost all Yeatsian criticism, perhaps spurred on by the poet’s own desire to take up marginal positions in his creative writing . . . however, reading Yeats in this fashion produces, or reproduces, a critical dead end. Neither Yeats in the past, nor those reading him in the present, are capable of moving beyond the either/or structure of established positions.”3 Hand seems to misunderstand Yeats’s thought process (as well as the thought processes of a number of Yeats scholars) as a static opposition of binaries in which Yeats and his critics endlessly oppose irresistible intellectual forces with immovable