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Automatic Writing? A Note on W. B. Yeats and His Aborted Lectureship at Keio University, 1920¹⁾

William Snell

I wish I had found my way to your country a year or so ago and were still there, for my own remains uncomfortable as I dreaded that it would.

Letter from Yeats to Yone Noguchi,
27 June, 1921, Oxford, England²⁾

That the doyen of the Irish Literary Revival and Nobel laureate, poet and dramatist W. B. (William Butler) Yeats (1865–1939) was invited to lecture in Japan, at Keio University, in 1920 is well recorded. Initially he accepted with enthusiasm. But why he later changed his mind and declined remains unclear. According to his correspondent and friend Shotaro Oshima (1899–1980), it was Yone Noguchi who first approached Yeats. Noguchi (1875–1947), himself a poet, essayist and professor at Keio, met with Yeats in 1904 and again in 1920. His book, *Japanese Hokkus* (Boston, 1920) was dedicated to the author: “Thus the two poets had a deep affection for each other.”³⁾ Yeats had long been interested in Japanese aesthetics and dramatic forms, having been first introduced to Noh drama by Ezra Pound, whom he met in 1913.⁴⁾ Noguchi had lectured on Noh in London in the Spring of 1914.⁵⁾

However, there were other connections between Keio and Yeats; namely the fact that an old acquaintance and adversary, James Cousins, was already visiting lecturer in English Literature there. Yeats had ruthlessly ousted Cousins from the Irish National Theatre movement in Dublin back in 1904.

Until now it has been generally held that Yeats's proposed visit to, and stay in, Japan was curtailed due to details surrounding the financing of the trip. I believe that on closer inspection, we can rather posit a complex confluence of reasons—some spiritual, others relating to health, others yet more personal—that, together with financial considerations, coalesced to prevent the Irish poet's journey to the East.

By 14 July [1919] he [Yeats] had rejoined his wife and daughter at Ballylee, bringing with him on the one o'clock train an exciting invitation to spend two years at Keio Gejuken [sic.] University in Tokyo as a lecturer on English literature... but much depended on "what Ameritus thinks."⁶⁾

Yeats's most recent biographer, Roy Foster, states that on receiving an official letter from "Keio Gijuko" [sic.] on 9th July 1919 offering a two-year lectureship with accommodation provided, he was "at once drawn to the idea; by July it was being generally canvassed" and by the end of that month "plans had solidified."⁷⁾ On 9th August, the poet "firmly" told his friend and patron, the American lawyer John Quinn (1870–1924), that he had "accepted subject to reasonable terms."⁸⁾ According to Yeats's sister Lily,⁹⁾ the plan entailed that the poet, his wife, and their young newborn daughter would travel on to Tokyo after a planned American lecture-tour in the early spring. However, by August Yeats was re-thinking and "by the end of September Lily reported that the project would probably be dropped because of the

climate and the general disruption involved.” Nevertheless, he was still mentioning the possibility to the publisher, A. H. Bullen, in November of the same year.¹⁰⁾ Not until the end of the year did he give up the idea of “some forgotten city, where the streets are full of grass, except for a little track in the centre made by pilgrims to some budhist shrine; & where there is no sound but that of some temple bell.”¹¹⁾

Yeats had good reason for wishing to be far from Ireland in 1919, where the political situation was looking more and more unstable. He wrote: “It would be pleasant to go away until the tumult of the [Irish civil] war had died down... But would one ever come back?—would one find some grass-grown city, scarce inhabited since the tenth century, where one seemed surpassing rich on a few hundred a year?”¹²⁾ Yeats was, however, worried about his “Tower”: Thoor Ballylee castle, a medieval tower-house which he had purchased in 1819 for his extending family. “I think my chief difficulty in accepting will be my tower, which needs another year’s work under my own eyes before it is a fitting monument and symbol...”¹³⁾ And yet Yeats continued to vacillate, telling Ezra Pound of the sheer joy of “escaping from my country for two years, during which it may not be at its best.”¹⁴⁾ Pound was one of those who cautioned him against going to Japan.¹⁵⁾ It was “Ameritus”, a presumed spirit who communicated with Yeats through his wife’s automatic writing,¹⁶⁾ that most strongly counseled against going and is evidence that George was having second thoughts; then by December 1919 Yeats was writing to John Quinn that “I think Japan has faded. My own work has grown more engrossing and Europe less unendurable.”¹⁷⁾ As Ann Saddlemeier comments: “One adventure at a time was enough” for a young daughter and a wife.¹⁸⁾ It can only be concluded that what with the unfinished renovation of their home, and a newborn child, his wife George must have

been disinclined to travel to, let alone live in, such a distant and arcane country as Japan, and so she availed herself of the “powers wielded by the advisory voices speaking through her.”¹⁹⁾ Foster comments that “George remained reticent about her mediumship... but she did say that she began automatic writing as a diversion, even a stratagem, and was surprised to find herself the bearer of messages from a variety of ‘Controls’ and ‘Instructors’.”²⁰⁾ [emphasis mine] Also Saddlemeier notes that George’s “running words together” and her use of punctuation and capitalization “might suggest that if not completely conscious she was allowing her personality and opinions to intrude more and more openly.”²¹⁾

Yet that was not the only reason for Yeats’s pulling out. There was a financial obstacle (perhaps the “reasonable terms” already referred to). Evidently the salary proposed by Keio was not deemed enough: “We are not going to Japan. At least not for the present” Yeats wrote from America on 22nd March; “the expense of living is immense. We should be bankrupt before we reached Tokyo.”²²⁾ He was waiting for word from Noguchi, and the plan seemed to dwindle in possibility. Noguchi thought he had found a solution to the problem of money through the *Asahi Shinbun* in Osaka, which was willing to co-sponsor Yeats’s visit by paying half his expenses. “But arrangements between the university administration and the newspaper proved complicated, and before they could be resolved, Yeats wrote [to Noguchi], saying he was obliged to return to Ireland for certain reasons. He and his wife departed for London at the end of May.”²³⁾

In his book *W. B. Yeats and Japan* Shotaro Oshima recounts a party in June 1927 given to mark the publication of his book *Ietsu kenkyu* (*W. B. Yeats: A Study*) at which Noguchi “gave an interesting speech about his impressions of Yeats at the time when he met him in New York eight years

before.”

He talked about the great yearning that Yeats had for Japan, and also about the reason why Yeats’s visit to Japan, which had been so much looked forward to in Japan, was not realized. What he said was roughly as follows. When he met Yeats in New York, he asked him if he had the intention of coming to Japan. Yeats answered, “Yes!” Soon after that he returned to Japan and talked with the administrative authorities of Keio University over inviting Yeats to Japan. They willingly consented to the plan and promised to pay half of his necessary expenses, but it was left to him to raise the other half. He could not raise the money so easily, and the plan was put off from day to day, while Yeats was waiting for Noguchi’s letter in America. Meanwhile Noguchi happened to go to Osaka and there told the plan to a certain newspaper company in that city. They readily offered to bear the other half of the expenses necessary for inviting Yeats to Japan. Thus the plan seemed to be realized at last. But arrangements could not be made so easily between Keio University and the newspaper company [*Asahi Shinbun*]. Besides there were other circumstances preventing the prompt realization of the plan.²⁴⁾

But might there have been another reason for Yeats’s declining the post at Keio? It has been suggested that when Noguchi returned to Japan from America in mid-March of 1920, Keio “was prepared to handle its end of the bargain, and Keio’s present visiting lecturer, the Irish Theosophist-poet James Cousins, was shipped out, despite his hopes of staying longer, on 22 March.”²⁵⁾ According to Cousins himself, however, he had received a cable from India recalling him to the Theosophical College at Mandanapalle,

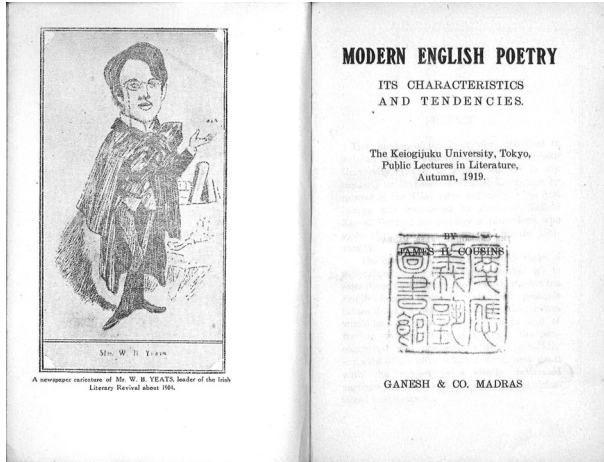
which he had been appointed principle of in 1918 and where his wife was acting in his stead.²⁶⁾ Was Cousins pushed, or did he jump? And can we attribute any possible feeling of guilt to Yeats for his former treatment of Cousins?

James H. Cousins was born in Belfast in 1873 and went to Dublin in 1873. As a young man working as a ledger clerk in a coal and shipping office there, in his spare time he was already helping to form an Irish national theater.²⁷⁾ Cousins produced several books of poetry whilst in Ireland and some of his plays were produced at the Abbey Theatre. However, after a dispute with Yeats, a rift formed in the movement with two-thirds of the actors and writers siding with Cousins against Yeats. As Yeats became more popular he seemingly pushed Cousins aside: writing to George Russell (*AE*) around 20 June 1903 he stated his blunt opinion that “Cousins has no originality as a writer— so far as I can judge. His material is always old, his sentiment always conventional... Every encouragement we give him as a writer will only bring trouble on us in the future.”²⁸⁾ Earlier he had written to Lady Gregory (December, 1902) that “Cousins is evidently hopeless and the sooner that I have him as an enemy the better.”²⁹⁾ As Paul Stephenson and Margie Waters observe, “Part of the problem may have been that James sometimes – especially in his verse – sounds like a bad version of Yeats himself. In his brief satirical verse “To a Poet, who would have me Praise certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine,” which was almost certainly written with Cousins as a target, Yeats asks, “Was there ever a dog that praised his fleas?”³⁰⁾

Like Cousins, Yeats had a longstanding interest in mysticism, spiritualism, occultism and astrology. Through George Russell, he came under the influence of the spiritualist Madame Blavatsky and her basic work,

The Secret Doctrine (published as two volumes in 1888). He read extensively on the subjects throughout his life, became a member of the paranormal research organization “The Ghost Club” (in 1911), and was especially influenced by the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg. As early as 1892, Yeats wrote: “If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen*³¹⁾ ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.”³²⁾ His mystical interests—also inspired by a study of Hinduism, under the Theosophist Mohini Chatterjee, and the occult—formed much of the basis of Yeats’s late poetry. That this interest was shared by Cousins and his wife is evident from the fact that “In Dublin between 26 and 30 October [1912] [Yeats] sat for four séances at Cousins’ house with the medium Alfred Vont Peters.”³³⁾ (See Appendix).

In October 1917, Yeats had married Bertha Georgie Yeats, née Hyde Leer, known as “George”. During the first years of his marriage, he and George engaged in a form of automatic writing, which involved George contacting a variety of spirits and guides, which they termed “Instructors”. The spirits communicated a complex and esoteric system of characters and history which they developed during experiments with the circumstances of trance and the “exposition of phases, cones, and gyres.”³⁴⁾ Cousins’s wife Margaret also began to function as a medium around this time. They attended séances together with Yeats and Maud Gonne, the famous Irish revolutionary and beauty, and Yeats’s long-term paramour. Cousins had met Yeats in 1901, and had been appointed by him to the commission of the third season of the Irish Literary Theatre, founded by Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and William Butler Yeats in 1899. In the following year, though, he “snuffed out” Cousins, the result of an acrimonious split which may have involved an inevitable clash of egos. Cousins’s writings and his Theosophical



Frontispiece and title page of James H. Cousins, *Modern English Poetry: its Characteristics and Tendencies* (Madras: Ganesh & Co. 1921)

beliefs merged “and he saw – like Yeats – a somewhat priestly mission for himself as an Irish author.”³⁵⁾ The excuse for their final falling out was *Sold: A Comedy of Real Life in Two Acts*, a play by Cousins (1902) which Yeats described as “rubbish, and vulgar rubbish.”³⁶⁾ In the same letter in which this criticism was expressed, he added that “Cousins is evidently hopeless and the sooner I have him as an enemy the better.” When Yeats blocked a performance of the drama, despite the fact that Cousins had support from amongst the Society’s membership, a splinter group was set up, of which Cousins became treasurer and which became the Theatre of Ireland.³⁷⁾

Cousins lectured at Keio from April 1919 to March 1920. He had been appointed principle of the Theosophical College at Madanapalle in 1918, but the following year came the proposal to teach at Keio, which can be linked to the recent unexpected death during a trip to Atami of the Canadian, Alfred William Playfair (1870–1917), professor at Keio from 1906.³⁸⁾ Cousins later

published his lectures at Keio as *Modern English Poetry: its Characteristics and Tendencies* in 1921. In it he extolls Yeats's work as follows: "Yeats's poetry stands as a great stained glass window... between us and the inner Light, and throws a richness of design and colour across our imagination."³⁹) But Cousins reserves his most lavish praise for his revered friend Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941):

It is impossible to think back on the history of English literature without Tagore as without Tennyson or Pope or Chaucer... we sometimes start and wonder how English literature managed to get on without Tagore.⁴⁰)

Cousins's book is testament to his consistent enthusiasm and admiration for the Bengali poet, writer and lecturer,⁴¹) who also had visited Keio in 1916; whereas Yeats – as many others had done following his Nobel laureateship – held him in disdain. He rejected Tagore on grounds of sentimentality and commented, in terms that might also have applied to Noguchi, that "Nobody can write with music and style in a language not learned in childhood and ever since the language of his thought."⁴²) Cousins also takes the opportunity in his book to recall the disdain that had been heaped upon his own writing in the past:

There was something... in my poetry that was looked on with suspicion, and was finally characterised by one of my Ulster comrades in an earlier literary revival, in Belfast, as "the cloven hoof of moral purpose which is obnoxious to all decorative art."⁴³)

Cousins adds, sardonically: "I remain hopelessly obnoxious." Noguchi, it must be noted, does not feature in the book.

“Tower this year – I said no Japan next year.”

From a session of automatic writing, 17 November 1919⁴⁴⁾

In a 1964 interview with Junzo Sato, an admirer of Yeats who famously presented him with a Japanese sword in Seattle, and to whom the latter dedicated his short Noh drama “The Resurrection” (published in 1927), Oshima intimates that he was aware of the possibility that “George” Yeats was responsible for the writer declining to come to Japan:

OHSHIMA --- About the time the poet Yone Noguchi tried to invite Yeats to Japan, but he did not come. Was his wife against his coming to Japan?

SATO --- No, I think that is not the case. According to Tokuboku Hirata’s article⁴⁵⁾ written in January 1920, Tokyo and Keio Universities tried to invite him as a lecturer about that time. But as he was on a lecture tour in America just then, it was very difficult to negotiate with him in the matter. This is possibly the reason Yeats’ visit to Japan was not realized.⁴⁶⁾

However, in 1929 the lure of Japan returned. To former lover, life-long friend and novelist Olivia Shakespeare, Yeats wrote (31st July, 1929) of a second offer of a professorship in ‘Japan’, although actually in Japanese-occupied Formosa. In 1926, Yeats wrote to a professor at the Taihoku Imperial University in Taipei (now National Taiwan University, established in 1928), Kazumi Yano,⁴⁷⁾ “expressing a great temptation to visit Japan” and assuring him that the “best things that he wanted to see with his own eyes were all in Japan.”⁴⁸⁾ He discusses details of the invitation—it is for one

year, eight hours a week, £1000, and includes a residence and travelling expenses; he is “tempted” to accept, in part because of a three-month summer holiday in Japan proper: “If my health is good enough it would be new life. 3 months . . . wandering around Japanese temples among the hills—all the best Chinese art is in Japan. What an adventure for old age—probably some new impulse to put in verse.”⁴⁹⁾

However, yet again the opposition came from his wife, ostensibly on the grounds of his son Michael’s health; but it was Yeats’s health that was of more concern to others.⁵⁰⁾ Oliver St. John Gogarty (1878–1959) gave his professional advice, as a long-time, erstwhile friend and otolaryngologist, against the journey on medical grounds.⁵¹⁾

Thus, as we have seen, numerous forces (financial, spiritual, personal and medical) were at play in turning Yeats’ mind against his once enthusiastic hope to visit Japan. In the end Yeats never did get to visit the country, which may have been for the best as he would surely have been disappointed. As has been observed: “Yeats’s image of Japan was an artistic construct that had little to do with Japanese reality. An actual visit to Japan might have served as a valuable corrective and lead to a more balanced view.” For Yeats, Japan was ultimately “less a place or a nation than it was *a style*, or a state of mind.”⁵²⁾

Appendix

Letter from James H. Cousins to W. B. Yeats, Dublin, 5 September 1912.⁵³⁾

Dear Mr. Yeats,

I received your contribution to the Peters⁵⁴⁾ visit, for which I was obliged. It enabled me to pay him a decent amount for his work in addition to his travelling expenses.

I trust you will be able some time soon to make a report of your deductions, and shall be happy to add my observations, or help to strengthen your own in any way I can.

I had an interesting test in Belfast on Sunday last. I was speaking for the Spiritualists in a public hall, and during the course of my address I used a phrase which came into my head. It was germane to my topic, but quite unanticipated, and formed no part of my notes or my thoughts in preparation, and had not occurred to me since I first heard it used. That is the first point. The second point is that, as Mrs. Cousins sat in the audience, she felt the presence of her sister, Mrs. Pielou,⁵⁵⁾ who said: "I can hear through your mind all that Jim is saying, and I am going to try and impress something on him." Almost immediately I used the phrase referred to, and Mrs. Cousins recognized it as one used by her sister, and took it as a fulfillment of the effort to impress me. I, of course, did not know this till the end. The third point is that, at the end of the meeting, a lady who had never met my wife before, but who knew she was Mrs. Cousins, came over to her and told her that, being a clairvoyant, she had seen both beside and on the platform, and in the seat, a lady somewhat like her, but taller and darker. The clairvoyant knew nothing of Mrs. Pielou, and the description is correct although very broad. At the evening meeting the lady told me that she forgot in the morning to say that the figure showed the letter 'A'. I did not care to ask her directly

if in the meantime she had heard the name. At night she said the figure was again with me on the platform and held over my head a gold circle into which was inserted through the top part of the ring an elongated diamond. I know of no connection. The person indicated has been apparently active, as she spoke thro' Peters, and has written thro' Mrs. C., but I would not think of her actively as a source of inspiration on the metaphysical side of things as she was not subtle in mind. The curious thing about the phrase used by me, as apparently a result of her suggestion, is that is [sic.] was not used by her in earthly life, but was said by her thro' Peters a year ago. It was, "I did not think it was easy to die." I had never thought of it since, until it occurred to me on the platform.

When you are in town, I shall be glad if you will come out for tea and an evening's chat, or at any time convenient after school. There are other experiences which I would like to tell you.

Yours faithfully,

JAMES H. COUSINS

Notes

- 1) I am extremely grateful for comments on, and corrections to, this paper by my friend and colleague Nick Henck.
- 2) Shotaro Oshima, *W. B. Yeats and Japan*. (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1965), p. 21. Oshima became a Japanese authority on Yeats, and was professor at Waseda University.
- 3) Oshima, note to p. 20.
- 4) Although Yeats may have been introduced much earlier to Japanese culture: see John de Gruchy, "An Ireland of the East: W. B. Yeats's Japan," *Bulletin of Kagoshima Immaculate Heart College*, no. 37 (2007): 189–199.
- 5) R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol II: The Arch-Poet* (Oxford; New York: Oxford

- University Press, 1997), p. 35.
- 6) Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs W.B. Yeats* (Oxford, 2002) p. 223. She quotes from a letter from Yeats to his wife dated 10th (–11th?) July, 1919.
 - 7) Foster, p. 146.
 - 8) Foster, p. 145.
 - 9) Susan Mary “Lily” Yeats (1866–1949).
 - 10) Foster, pp. 145–46.
 - 11) Tuohy pp. 171–172.
 - 12) Quoted in Foster, p. 145.
 - 13) Yeats to John Quinn, 11th July 1919. See Allan Wade ed. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Hart-Davies, 1954), pp. 658–59.
 - 14) Yeats to Ezra Pound 16 July, 1919, quoted in Saddlemyer, p. 223.
 - 15) Saddlemyer, p. 224.
 - 16) See Brenda Maddox, *Yeats’s Ghosts: the secret life of W.B. Yeats* (NY: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 153.
 - 17) Saddlemyer, p. 234.
 - 18) Saddlemyer, p. 238.
 - 19) Foster, p. 146.
 - 20) Foster, p. 106.
 - 21) Saddlemyer, p. 218.
 - 22) See Edward Marx, “No Dancing: Yone Noguchi in Yeats’s Japan.” *Yeats Annual 17*, Influence and Confluence, ed. Warwick Gould. (London: Macmillan, 2007): 51–87; p. 75.
 - 23) Oshima, p. 5, note 2 and p. 18, note 1.
 - 24) Oshima, p. 5 note 2.
 - 25) Marx, p. 75.
 - 26) William Snell, “James Cousins and Sherard Vines at Keio University: 1919–20; 1923–28 Part One,” *The Hiyoshi Review of English Studies* No. 49 (2006): 129–146; 144.
 - 27) Paul Stephenson and Margie Waters, “‘We Two’ and the Lost Angel: The Cousins of Sandymount and James Joyce,” in *James Joyce Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1/2, *Dublin and the Dubliners* (Fall, 1999–Winter, 2000), pp. 167–182; 169.

- 28) John Kelly and Ronald Suchard eds. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* Vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994): 386–87.
- 29) *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* Vol. 3:285.
- 30) “You say, as I have often given tongue
In praise of what another’s said or sung,
‘Twere politic to do the like by these;
But was there ever dog that praised his fleas?”
The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan Publishers, 1952; 1963),
p. 105.
- 31) Yeats’s first full-length play, circa 1892.
- 32) Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: Macmillan, 1948) p.
94.
- 33) Foster, p. 467.
- 34) Foster, p. 105; 383.
- 35) William A. Dumbleton, *James Cousins* (Twayne Publishing, 1980). p. 18.
- 36) Letter to Lady Gregory, 26 Dec., 1902, in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats* Vol.
3:285 “Faced by WBY’s outspoken condemnation of his new plays *Sold* and *The
Sword of Dermot*, Cousins left.” (Foster, p. 281)
- 37) Adrian Frazier, *Behind the Scenes: Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey
Theatre* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), p. 114.
- 38) Snell, p. 132.
- 39) James H. Cousins, *Modern English Poetry: its Characteristics and Tendencies*
(Madras: Ganesh & Co. 1921), p. 102.
- 40) Cousins, pp. 118–119.
- 41) Tagore won the Noble Prize in Literature in 1913; ironically Yeats was an early
champion of his work, writing the Introduction to his collection of English poems
Gitanjali (London, 1913) which Yeats helped to make.
- 42) Frank Tuohy, *Yeats* (London; New York: Macmillan, 1976), p. 201.
- 43) Cousins, pp. 107–108.
- 44) Maddox, p. 153.
- 45) Tokuboku [Kiichi] Hirata. ‘Raicho sentosuru Yeats no fūkaku’ (Profile of Yeats,
who is coming to Japan). *Eigo bungaku* 4/1 (1920). Hirata (1873–1943), a baptized

- Christian and student at Oxford from 1903–1906, later became a translator of works such as *Vanity Fair* (1914–1915) and *David Copperfield* (1925–1928).
- 46) Oshima, p. 127.
- 47) Kazumi (or Hojin) Yano (1893–1988) a prolific author and scholar who translated T. S. Eliot, Pope, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Fitzgerald, Yeats and Lady Gregory into Japanese.
- 48) Oshima, *Yeats and Japan*, p. 23.
- 49) See Wade, pp. 765–766 and Tuohy, pp. 201–202.
- 50) Tuohy, p. 201.
- 51) Tuohy, p.179.
- 52) de Gruchy, p. 198.
- 53) Richard J. Finneran, George Mills Harper, William M. Murphy eds., with the assistance of Alan B. Humber. *Letters to W.B. Yeats Vol. I* (London: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 256–57.
- 54) *Letters to W.B. Yeats Vol. I*, note to p. 257: Alfred Vout Peters [1867–1934], well-known clairvoyant and trance medium, became famous through the accounts of his communications with the dead son of Sir Oliver Lodge recorded in *Raymond* [or *Life & Death*] (1916). Cousins made a sketch of the ring with an elongated diamond in the margin.
- 55) Cousins's brother-in-law Pierce Leslie Pielou, who was a keen amateur archaeologist and astrologer. See Stephenson and Waters, p. 172.