An Irish Airman Foresees His Death
By William Butler Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,¹
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross;²
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

The Irish airman in this poem is Major Robert Gregory (1881-1918), only child of Yeats’s friend Lady Augusta Gregory. He was killed on the Italian front shot down in error by an Italian pilot. In eulogizing him, Yeats focuses on the “lonely impulse of delight” that drove him to enlist in the British Royal Flying Corps and distinguishes his heroic solitude from patriotic duty and other common motivations.

¹ Since Ireland was considered a part of The British Commonwealth, the Irish were expected to act for the good of the Mother Land. That also meant dying for the Mother Land. The Irish had no quarrel with anyone except their own rulers.
² The Kiltartan Cross was a group of Roman Catholics that were directly related to the Air Force. These people had their own tartan, or their own colors for their kilts that they wore. The different types of tartan colors signified different groups of people whether it be a clan of people or a military group. They are poor because they do not have their own country under British rule.