ALICE MILLIGAN
and the Irish Cultural Revival
This essay, written by Dr Catherine Morris, accompanies the exhibition Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival, running at the National Library of Ireland from November 2010 to February 2011. It is part of a broader multimedia exhibition, Discover Your National Library, which highlights treasures from the Library’s collections, and features temporary exhibitions on different figures and themes.

CONTENTS

03
Introduction

05
Alice Milligan’s Early Career

07
The Irish Cultural Revival

11
A Forgotten Cultural Legacy

15
Promoting the Irish Language

19
Drama and Tableaux: Towards an Irish National Theatre

25
Wars of Independence, 1916 – 1953

29
Conclusion

30
Chronology & Footnotes

32
Biography & Acknowledgements
Alice Milligan (1866-1953) put culture and the arts at the very centre of the civic society that she wanted to create. This exhibition aims not simply to reclaim an unjustly forgotten Irish cultural and political activist during this foundational era in modern Ireland, but to provide new ways of interpreting the Irish Cultural Revival itself. Milligan’s work reveals the rich cultural legacy of the northern Irish counties, as well as her extraordinary global reach in connecting the Irish diaspora to the national movement for the development and promotion of Irish arts and culture. Milligan’s vision for a communitarian, de-centred national theatre movement was critical in creating the cultural conditions that would give the beleaguered Irish language new social contexts of meaning. From 1891, Milligan mobilised visual culture to aid the national movement for the regeneration of the Irish language. A pioneer of early photography and the social value of visual culture, Milligan reclaimed public space for Irish communities: she travelled extensively to project images of Gaelic League workers and scenes from Irish life using magic lanterns and theatre shows.

In this exhibition you can witness the extraordinary range of archives at the National Library of Ireland that feature Milligan’s prolific output. Her cultural and artistic practice was a deeply political response to the disempowered conditions of Irish communities. Women, the north of Ireland, national theatre, the Irish language and human rights are at the centre of everything she did, everything she wrote, all the organisations she founded and the causes she promoted. Milligan rarely worked alone and all of her achievements were also the achievements of the colleagues who inspired her. The development of a confident, articulate national Irish culture in Irish communities at home and abroad was undoubtedly one of the most revolutionary interventions of modern history. During the peak years of the Irish Cultural Revival, unnamed workers, writers, artists, political activists and cultural practitioners acted together and alone in challenging the undemocratic status quo. Milligan’s collectivist approach to the promotion of Irish culture and the arts is reflected in her impressive network of colleagues and by the vast range of archives that her life story connects. As one obituary noted in 1953:

“The radius of her friendship was an index of her quality. WB Yeats, Standish O’Grady, Arthur Griffith, John O’Leary – these are only a handful of the names which add up to a roll call of modern Irish history.”

The essence of Alice Milligan’s cultural intervention into Irish history resided not only in her published books; her essence lay in the context in which these books had been produced. Her artistic practice was global as well as local, rural as well as urban. She promoted Irish culture within a context of anti-sectarian activism that was communitarian and that developed out of a feminist and modernist consciousness. In 1919 Susan Mitchell argued for the inscription of the critical part played by women in Irish history:

“The story of the men who loved Ireland has often been told, and I, with other Irish women, rejoice to do them honour, but I am a little jealous that of Irishwomen the hero tale has not been told, for they too love their country and work for it, and it is time their candle was taken out of its bushel and set upon a candlestick to give light to the dwellers in this our house.”

The extensive archival journey required to bring Milligan’s story to light is a reflection of the complexity of one of Ireland’s most intriguing and politically engaged cultural practitioners; in retracing this journey at the National Library of Ireland Milligan can be relocated within the continuum of Irish culture, politics and history.
Alice Milligan was born in September 1866 in a village outside Omagh in County Tyrone. She was one of 13 children born to Seaton Milligan and Charlotte Burns. In the 1870s, the family moved to Belfast where Alice Milligan and her siblings were educated at Methodist College. She completed her formal education studying English literature and English history at King’s College London. On her return to Belfast she began training as a teacher and taught Latin in schools in Derry and Belfast. Milligan reflected that during the years of her Anglo-centric formal education she “learned nothing of Ireland”. Between 1888 and 1890, Milligan published a travelogue with her father called *Glimpses of Erin* and her first novel, *A Royal Democrat*. These fascinating early publications, marketed to an English readership, reflect the constructive unionist cultural landscape and politics of her social environment and upbringing.

Yet even at this stage in her career, Milligan’s writing demonstrates an intense intellectual engagement with Irish cultural and political history. The roots of Alice Milligan’s artistic practice, and her unique mobilisation of visual culture, in the Revival movement actually had its origins in Belfast’s learned Protestant Unionist community. In the 1880s, she and her father were members of the Belfast Naturalist Field Club and the Ulster Archaeological Society. It was on educational field trips with these pioneering organisations that Alice Milligan learned so much about early photography and how to transfer images of Irish landscapes and people onto glass slides for public projection. In the late 1880s, she gave talks to archaeology groups during which she projected pictures onto walls using gas-powered magic lanterns. These were methods and technologies of communication that she later radicalised in the context of an emergent Irish national culture. As part of her work for the Irish Cultural Revival, Milligan not only projected images representing Irish Ireland into public spaces, she also devised a theatre movement in which people themselves embodied the pictures that they projected back into their own communities.
The year 1891 changed Alice Milligan’s destiny and transformed the history of Ireland. This turning point in her own life is absolutely bound up with the transformations in Irish culture and politics. After 1891, Alice Milligan’s private and public worlds would be utterly fused. Her journey into this brave new world began when she chose not to follow her sisters into the musical conservatories of Europe. Instead, she went to Dublin to continue her teacher training and to embark on a personal re-education programme that included taking Irish language lessons at the Royal Irish Academy and reading Irish literature at the National Library of Ireland. The diary she kept from 1891 to 1893 is a wonderfully illustrated document in which we can ‘hear’ her interior voice responding for the first time to Dublin and the people she meets there such as Michael Davitt and William Butler Yeats: “My first memories of Yeats marked a turning point in my own literary development for I had been educated without any reference to Irish History or Culture.”

It wasn’t just studying Irish literature and history in the National Library that changed her perceptions. Contemporary Irish nationalist politics knocked Milligan’s world into a new realm. In May 1891 she wrote in her diary: “While in the tram going up O’Connell St I turned into a Parnellite. The conversion was sudden and almost unaccountable – perhaps it won’t last.” But it did last and Milligan became utterly spellbound by the drama surrounding Charles Stewart Parnell’s political fortunes. She literally followed his campaign trail around the city, avidly believing, “if I could just see his face, I’d know whether to trust him.” When she did finally set eyes on him at Harcourt Street station she waved her handkerchief at him in joy but was shocked to see his “sad downcast expression...the ghostly pallor of his face.”

When Alice Milligan returned to Belfast later that year she had not been totally convinced by Irish nationalist politics or by Parnell. But news of his sudden and unexpected death in October 1891 converted doubt into commitment, as Milligan immediately propelled herself into the new community of Irish literary, cultural and political activists that was beginning to emerge. Parnell’s death signalled the end of an era in Irish nationalism that had centred its fortunes around Westminster. Alice Milligan later observed how constitutional politics depended on the undemocratic exclusion of women who “were not called upon to have any opinion whatsoever” about the destiny of their country.

For Alice Milligan, the impact of Parnell’s death was far reaching. On the night of his funeral she found herself stranded in the midst of northern unionism with a family who didn’t share her emotional sense of political loss. As the Ulster

Opposite: By 1898, Milligan was active in commemorating nationalist figures like Wolfe Tone.
Herald later noted: “The Milligan family afforded the not unusual example in the Ulster of the time of political divisions among its members. Alice was ardently nationalist. Others of the family were staunch unionists, and some were prominent in the anti-Home Rule cause.” After the family had attended a Gilbert and Sullivan show on the day of Parnell’s burial, Alice Milligan wrote privately about her new feelings of alienation: “I am in the enemy’s camp. If I had but the money I would go to Dublin to be with people who feel as I feel.”

Ultimately, Alice Milligan decided not to go to Dublin to join with people who were already sympathetic to the promotion of Irish national culture. Instead, she took the harder road and began her new life as an Irish cultural practitioner in the very place where she perceived anti-Irish feeling to be strongest: the northern Irish counties became the most radical space for Milligan’s greatest achievements because she helped to create a cultural legacy that would open up possibilities for the (future) regeneration of community. Milligan publicly announced in the Irish newspapers that she, and the colleagues she sought out, would make every effort “to lighten the darkness which prevails to such an extent in this province about Irish literature, history and music.”

The writer James Cousins recalled how her decision to stay meant that she was singled out as a “red headed nationalist” and regarded by many as “a black mark” on her family’s reputation. And it wasn’t just parts of the unionist community that vocally opposed Milligan’s Irish cultural activities. From 1891, every organisation she founded and every cultural event she organised caused a stir of controversy from many quarters. She exposed the gender discrimination she often encountered (even from committees that she had been democratically elected to serve on) in the international cultural journal that she founded and co-edited with another remarkable woman, Anna Johnston:

“...At the outset my presence was objected to: ‘This is a meeting of the Election Committee. We do not expect ladies...’ I claimed to be present either as a member of the Executive of Ireland or a representative of the press. In spite of objections from some of the most prominent local politicians present, a courteous hearing was claimed for me by the majority of the audience...”

Significantly, Alice Milligan stopped writing a private diary in 1893 when she chose to voice her ideas almost exclusively in the pages of the daily press. Her writings map recurring Irish historical narratives of familial displacement and longing in multiple literary and theatrical genres: she writes about land wars, evictions, the 1641 massacres, the seventeenth-century plantations, emotional dispossession, the denial of language and native cultural identity, state executions, imprisonment, escapes and rebellions, war and Partition. After the death of Parnell, Irish culture and the arts became the daily news and it is in this vast archive that we find most of Alice Milligan’s writings. Newspapers were like the large number of letters that Milligan sent. They were personal and directly addressed the communities she wanted to reach and to hear from. They were also a cheap and effective way to distribute play scripts to community theatre groups.

Right through to the early 1950s, Milligan published her poems, short stories, plays, essays, association minutes, Gaelic League reports, trave- logues, memoirs, letters, journalism, reviews and opinions in the unindexed pages of over 60 Irish national and international newspapers and journals. It is little wonder that it took many years to trace Milligan’s vast literary and polemical output and to uncover the buried narrative of her activities. Throughout his life, Yeats also published his cultural ideas and poetry in the pages of the Irish newspapers. Newspapers connected a broad readership through Ireland’s excellent local and international transport links: along with the six daily postal deliveries, newspapers were the engine that fired the Irish Cultural Revival. They gave Milligan, like so many of her contemporaries, a voice and an audience.
Alice Milligan put the northern Irish counties on the map of the Irish Cultural Revival, a legacy that was subsequently obscured. She helped to create events (such as the Centenary commemoration of 1798) and set up organisations that were cultural, literary, educational and feminist. These included a Derry branch of the Irish Industries Association, the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society and the Women’s Centenary Union. As early as 1894, Milligan launched three branches of the Irish Women’s Association in Portadown, Moneyreagh and Belfast. The women (whose members included poet Mary Hobson and novelist Moira Pender) added a new twist to the meaning of ‘Home Rule’ when they announced their intention to take a new public role in Irish life:

“It is the duty of every woman to take an interest in the country in which she lived, to know something of its history, past and present, and, if in the conditions under which she and her sisters are placed are likely to lead to a fair development, she should be prepared with the experience she has gained through many years to extend her help and sympathy outside her own home.”

The Irish Women’s Association membership card and manifesto stated that the organisation was non-political, welcoming women from all religious and social backgrounds. They came together under difficult circumstances to give talks, hold reading clubs, and educate themselves further in areas of Irish cultural history. They also produced and performed their own literature and music. Alice Milligan publicised these new northern cultural organisations regularly in newspaper columns until there simply wasn’t enough space to cover the sheer number of events and initiatives that were beginning to take place.

In 1895 she and Anna Johnston (whose pen name was ‘Ethna Carbery’) established and co-edited The Northern Patriot and The Shan Van Vocht, two unique groundbreaking journals in Belfast. The second journal, The Shan Van Vocht, was undoubtedly the most important of these publications and it ran for three years from 1896. The journal’s title was the phonetic spelling of the well known eighteenth century Irish revolutionary song in which Ireland is personified as ‘An tSean-bhean Bhocht’, ‘The poor old woman’. The journal was vital in giving a voice to the Irish culture in the north; it was essential also in establishing the broader Revival as a coherent movement. The women published their own literature and introduced readers to new voices on the Irish scene. James Connolly, for instance, was given his first space in Irish print when Alice Milligan commissioned him to write four articles for The Shan Van Vocht. His ideas about socialism, nationalism and...
cultural revival read like a first draft of the 1916 Declaration of the Republic of Ireland. The editors also invited people to challenge official documents of colonial history by making a new history from oral testimony, “before the few old people who are still living and who remember…pass away…We invite our friends throughout the country who are acquainted with unpublished traditions of the times, to communicate them to us. It is the sacred duty of all who are in sympathy with the cause of Irish freedom, to revive the memory of the humbler and almost forgotten heroes…”

The Shan Van Vocht was all about giving space to the marginalised voices of women, of people who expressed new opinions, of those who were not represented in the official narratives of the state. They circulated historical archives that had been long out of print and published stories from Ireland’s (oral) past in newly commissioned fiction, poetry and song.

Milligan and Johnston only stopped publishing the journal when a raft of other new Irish publications and initiatives could do the cultural work that they had started. It is remarkable how two northern women (of different religious faiths) rose above public opposition and with little finance created a prolific journal that circulated new literature and promoted new cultural initiatives. As the Irish American writer Seumas MacManus recalled:

“For three and a half years these two girls edited the magazine, and managed it. They themselves wrote almost all of the magazine…. They read the proofs. They kept the books. They sent the bills. They wrote the letters. With their own hands they folded and addressed every copy that was to go out, and licked every stamp…. Many and many a weary day they spent drudging in the office – and on many and many a weary evening they trudged home to Ethna Carbery’s father’s house in Donegall Park (on the outskirts of Belfast), there to swallow their supper, and…sit down on opposite sides of the table, turning out story and poem for the next issue.”

This journal, written from the kitchen table in Anna Johnston’s family home in Belfast had a local, national and international readership. The women were completely aware that Irish culture and the arts could only be regenerated by the support, involvement and contribution of Irish communities everywhere. During the peak years of the Irish Cultural Revival over five million people emigrated from Ireland. Milligan and her colleagues were determined that these generations (many of whom were women and Irish language speakers) should not be lost to a future Ireland. From 1896, the women set up an office in New York so that their journal could reach the vast Irish diaspora in America; they also built up extensive subscription lists in Argentina, Europe and Africa as well as in Britain and Scotland. In 1899, Milligan and Johnston gifted their impressive national and global subscription lists to Arthur Griffith to help establish his new journal, The United Irishman.
Milligan and her colleagues expressed great urgency into their attempts to save the Irish language (and Irish culture) from marginalisation and extinction. In 1897 Milligan warned: “It is in this generation the Irish language will be lost or saved.” This cultural and linguistic crisis had been brought closer by centuries of colonial suppression of the native language and by the historical reduction of Irish language speaking populations. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, people were still being arrested for publicly advertising their businesses in Irish script, bank accounts of the Irish language organisation, the Gaelic League, were systematically shut down, and post offices were ordered to destroy private letters that carried addresses written in Irish. Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston led the way in promoting an Irish language readership and in creating a national and international communications network for the Gaelic League. In 1896, Milligan wrote to the co-founder of the Gaelic League, Eoin MacNeill:

OPPOSITE: The Irish language in The Shan Van Vocht

BELOW: Irish Unionist Alliance pamphlet, hostile to the Gaelic League activity which Milligan promoted.

THE GAELIC LEAGUE—WHAT ARE ITS OBJECTS?

A New Separatist Movement.
“I am going to try to have in the Shan a brief leader in Irish every month after the new year. It is for the news most people buy newspapers & it is the news of the day should be put into Irish. I would like to see all the paragraphs about the progress of the language given in Irish with the English side by side.”

The Irish language was at the centre of the cultural initiatives that she helped to generate. Given that Milligan did not come from an Irish language-speaking background, her commitment to Irish represented an act of imagination and a complex political affiliation with otherness. Her first memories of trying to learn Irish in 1890 highlight the different levels of learning that existed in Ireland at the time. Some people could read but not write Irish, while others could speak but not write or read the language. Teaching herself from early Irish grammar books (the same textbooks that the playwright John Millington Synge would also use to learn Irish), Milligan soon discovered that she had no social context for speaking the language. She therefore put an advertisement in the local paper asking for help with her spoken Irish. Her experiences reveal how learning and teaching Irish generated forms of co-operative negotiation in Irish communities everywhere:

“I advertised in a local paper for an Irish teacher, and in response to an advert went to an address which I found to be a neat little tobacconist’s shop kept by a Donegal man. He offered...without any fee to give me as much Irish as I wanted, if I could come on Sunday afternoons to the sitting room of his house, where they had a weekly assembly of Irish speakers, singing and talk...They had no books and he could not read a line of Irish. I had gone through the first two primers of the Preservation Society, and was armed with Joyce’s Grammar, O’Curry’s MSS. Materials, O’Reilly’s Dictionary, and Irish copybooks. I said that if I could teach him spelling and writing and his party taught me conversation and pronunciation, we would have an excellent class.”

When Alice Milligan began to learn Irish only 900 people were registered as Irish language speakers in Belfast; within ten years this figure had risen to almost 4000. This increase is almost certainly due to the cultural work that Milligan and her colleagues got under way. They set up Irish language classes from 1892 in the Ulster Museum and later in an attic room above a linen warehouse on the Belfast quays. She and her colleagues also promoted community Irish drama festivals, they raised significant funds to help establish Gaelic League branches and set up teacher training colleges. Given her northern Protestant Anglicised educational upbringing, learning and promoting the Irish language was clearly not an obvious choice for Milligan. It is therefore all the more extraordinary to realise how early she understood that the Irish language was vital to the survival of Irish culture, to the emergence of a new modern cultural movement, and to her own identity as an Irish woman and as an artist.
One of Milligan’s most remarkable achievements was the connection she made between national theatre and the Irish language. Her career is a portal to the earliest days of the Irish national theatre movement and marks the beginning of Irish amateur and youth drama. From the 1890s, Milligan was ready with a set of Irish plays and collaborative theatre shows. These productions inspired a confidence in others to write new plays and to stage their own productions of Irish drama. She was one of the first to use Irish instead of English actors in her plays; she often broke through the ‘fourth wall’ of theatre by inviting iconic figures like John O’Leary and Douglas Hyde onto the stage as contemporary living pictures in the revival of national culture. The stillness of her living pictures radiated into the famous ‘Abbey style’ of acting; many of her plays included spoken Irish and the stories accompanying her tableaux vivants were often narrated in both languages. The autobiographies of Milligan’s contemporaries such as Yeats, George Russell, Maud Gonne and Padraic Colum testify how she was indeed: “the most successful producer of plays before the Abbey Theatre started on its triumphant way.”

It is through Milligan’s scattered papers that we glimpse the involvement of a whole raft of unnamed workers in the Revival movement. We suddenly discover that Ireland’s national theatre was not just the extraordinary story of the Abbey Theatre, it was a movement experienced and envisaged by schoolteachers, women’s alliances, Gaelic League workers, community groups, children, emerging actresses, new playwrights and directors. Milligan’s ideas for national theatre emanated from within the actual moment of conception and realisation, in the dialogue of planning, in the community of performance and production. Her plays and tableaux were staged in school halls, on city streets, and in fields where they were watched by audiences on benches carved out of felled trees.

In 1916 Milligan recalled how her Gaelic League colleague, Roger Casement, on a break from his human rights work in the Congo, had cleared a field in Antrim for a stage to be built.Audiences attending performances were not passive, ticket-buying, anonymous people but active participants in the creation of theatre. Those who built the stages, made the costumes; those who performed the shows also sourced the props and invented stage effects out of local materials.

Milligan’s conception of an Irish national theatre was not confined to a single group, place or building. She argued instead for a healthy pluralism, in which numerous literary and political organisations would collaborate in the production of Irish plays. Her main aim was to bring theatre to diverse communities across Ireland, in places that lacked dedicated venues, and to this end she worked in conjunction with all groups engaged
in the Revival project. Milligan was therefore not simply a playwright but a total woman of the theatre who, from 1898, involved herself in every aspect of stage production. Besides writing plays, she designed and made costumes, constructed theatrical sets and props, published and distributed scripts through newspapers, and even acted (once with celebrated Abbey actress Molly Allgood). She developed an enigmatic form of theatrical story telling called tableaux vivants (living pictures) in which performers enacted scenes drawn from melodrama, the nationalist presses, songs, stories, contemporary political protests, legends or social life. These ‘living pictures’ were a very popular entertainment, in which performers would strike a pose representing a scene from a story, or depicting an image taken from a famous picture. The actors would remain frozen in character for a number of minutes, while the story of the picture was explained to the audience by an offstage narrator, sometimes accompanied by a live orchestra.

Tableaux were accessible not only in terms of their ease of engagement but also because groups with limited funding and modest dramatic skills could produce them. Thus local communities, language groups and small-scale political and cultural organisations were able to participate directly in the theatrical memorialisation of national identity. There are other accounts written by those who witnessed the tableaux shows. Padraic Colum recalled that the April 1901 show, organised by Milligan in Dublin, included scenes from Thomas Moore’s Irish Melodies that he defined as “living pictures that were carried along by the music”, and described being “in an audience of some hall devoted to nationalism and Gaelicism when I saw the tableau of ‘Silent O Moyle be the Roar of thy Waters’ and watched the enchantment of the children of Lir.”

Tableaux had a particular resonance in the Irish cultural movement because it was a theatrical form that had developed out of state censorship of
spoken language in drama. At issue in the debates about native language and national theatre in the Revival period was the question of who had the right to speak for the Irish nation and how that nation could be spoken for. For Milligan, the Gaelic League wasn’t just about reinstating the Irish language: it was about creating the cultural conditions that would give that language meaning.

In this anti-colonial context of protest and solidarity, tableaux were a symbol of the body awaiting speech. At the turn of the century these living picture shows were crucial for the huge numbers of people who didn’t have Irish but who wanted to participate in the formation of ‘national’ theatre. Tableaux were vital in forging communities, for women in gaining space in the public life of the nation and for connecting people in difficult political contexts. They were critical for people at different levels of Irish language learning and for the inclusion of northern Protestants such as Alice Milligan whose upbringing led them to believe Irish was not their native language or their national culture. In 1898, for instance, Alice Milligan worked with artist Rosamond Prager (a staunch unionist) to design the sets for tableaux in Belfast that were performed by radical nationalists such as Anna Johnston. Silence represented a halfway headquarters well-designed costumes, simple machinery or unaffordable elaborate costumes. Milligan’s idea for a travelling library appears not to have secured support and she was still calling for such a scheme in 1913. In a letter to the Weekly Freeman entitled ‘National Drama for Country Districts’, Milligan designated responsibility for organising the library scheme to the language movement: “I am strongly of the opinion that the Gaelic League should prepare and hire out from headquarters well-designed costumes, simple scenery, and properties.”22 Several of her contemporaries suggest that Milligan herself fulfilled this role around the turn of the century. In 1926 George Russell recalled in the Irish Statesman how she moved through the country with “a bag crammed with fragments of tapestry to be used on the actors in order to create the illusion of a richly robed ancient Irish romance.”24

“The dramas that Milligan staged were articulated in people’s own words, their own voices, the inflections of their own accents, the gestures of their own bodies: no longer would the Irish stage be inflections of their own accents, the gestures of their own bodies: no longer would the Irish stage be dominated by the colonial (imported) spectacular: her theatre practice forged connections between people and developed a sense of history through contemporary political activism. Milligan was determined that Irish communities should not feel disempowered by lack of resources or buildings or scripts or trained actors or spectacular stage machinery or unaffordable elaborate costumes. One of her principal recommendations was for a theatre library, stocked with scripts and costumes that could be transported across the country for use by dramatic groups:

“...I have in serious contemplation to start a dramatic bureau, publishing small plays, or supplying type-written copies of them, with sketches of requisite costumes... Everywhere through Ireland there are small amateur companies ready to act.”22

Milligan’s view, the greatest step towards forging a community that could create an independent nation state. Political transformation and cultural decolonisation could be achieved by Irish communities everywhere: “in the Gaelic movement, everyone is a worker.”28

The creation of an Irish national theatre, for Milligan, anticipated Brecht in its rejection of the colonial (imported) spectacular; her theatre practice forged connections between people and developed a sense of history through contemporary political activism. Milligan was determined that Irish communities should not feel disempowered by lack of resources or buildings or scripts or trained actors or spectacular stage machinery or unaffordable elaborate costumes. One of her principal recommendations was for a theatre library, stocked with scripts and costumes that could be transported across the country for use by dramatic groups:

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“If we ever write the history of [the Gaelic League in Castlecomer] we can tell of how you came to the rescue in the days when every man’s hand was against us.”27

Belief in the past was connected radically to belief in the future: both intersected the Revival. It was through the ‘power of the mind’ - the collective imagination - that decolonisation was first achieved. In the years following 1916, Milligan received letters from Irish political prisoners who recalled how their own national consciousness had been awakened by these early local experiences of national theatre. One Irish Volunteer who had escaped imprisonment in 1917 wrote:

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Freedom is as yet to all appearances a far off thing; yet must we who desire it work for it as ardently and as joyously as if we had good hope that our own eyes should behold it.”

Alice Milligan, Belfast 1896

The Irish Cultural Revival is usually considered to have come to an end with the founding of the Irish Free State. But the aims of this movement remained an ongoing unfinished project for those who continued to live in Northern Ireland after Partition. After 1916 through to the 1940s Alice Milligan became engrossed in human rights work in a context in which her own human rights were increasingly marginalised. From 1912, as the only unmarried daughter living at ‘home’, she found herself called upon to look after sick relatives, care for her aging parents and assist with the upbringing of siblings’ children (in Ireland and Britain). By the time her colleagues were executed for their roles in the 1916 Easter Rising, Milligan was already dressed in mourning for her parents and her sister Charlotte, who had all passed away just weeks before the insurrection.

Milligan campaigned to the Home Office after the Rising for a reprieve for Roger Casement in 1916 and attended every day of his trial. She published articles and poems about his international human rights work and about how Casement had helped her organise and fundraise for the Gaelic League at the turn of the century. After the trial was over she visited other Irish political prisoners who were being held in English prisons and she publicised their plight in poetry, articles and plays that she circulated in the national press. While the fight for Irish independence continued, Alice Milligan fought her own private war of independence as she tried to make a break for freedom to live her own life. In 1917 she invested in an Irish bookshop in Dublin to raise funds for prisoners’ families and to help sustain herself:

“I am quite without means of subsistence except in a dependent position with relatives better off than myself & bitterly opposed to my political views and activities. I am in fact and have been for some time practically interned – The sale of these documents would be helpful in an effort I am making towards independence.”

Her plans for her own future were brought to a dramatic halt when the IRA threatened to assassinate her demobilised British Army brother who was an alcoholic and for whom she was caring. Charles Milligan later remembered how his brother William was given “24 hours notice to get out or he would be shot. My sister packed up with him to England.”

From Bath they moved to the newly founded state of Northern Ireland where there was better hope of a job for William. Milligan promoted her brother’s writing career and helped him set up a home for his family in a village outside Omagh. She remained a fulltime carer for her brother who died in 1937, his son who died of paralytic stroke.

OPPOSITE: Irish nationalist Sir Roger Casement; Milligan campaigned unsuccessfully for his reprieve in 1916
in 1935, and his wife who also suffered illness and died in 1941. All three members of this family were staunch Unionists and opposed Alice Milligan’s cultural and political views and activities. “I’m sort of an interned prisoner for 19 years”,” she told friends in Dublin. Furthermore, her association with Roger Casement cost her dearly; “except I send a letter 40 miles from here to be posted, it doesn’t get through.”

Milligan continued to write, lecture and organise despite (and because of) the familial and state censorship she encountered and the economic hardship and social isolation that she endured. From the 1920s, she once again used newspapers as a central means to engender collectivism. She not only imagined communities through the daily papers, she used the press to awaken the memories of a rich cultural legacy of Ireland that she had helped to initiate. In the 1930s she republished extracts from the Revival archives in Northern papers and translated into Irish the poetry of her colleagues such as Douglas Hyde. She connected with Irish communities in America by sending over poetry about 1916 and Roger Casement’s trial. In 1934, she was elected to the editorial board of Joseph Campbell’s New York Irish Review and invited to contribute regular ‘Notes from the North’. One of her most important interventions in the late 1920s was the founding of the Anti-Partition Union and she articulated her political position in several pamphlets published by the National Unity Council. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Milligan also delivered numerous radio broadcasts publicising the earlier work undertaken to promote Irish arts by the cultural activists of her generation. She lectured in both the Irish Free State and in Northern Ireland about the value and meaning of Irish cultural history. In the decades after Partition, tableaux once again became a central component in the building of solidarity for republican and nationalist Northern communities who felt silence to be a most articulate form of protest.

OPOSITE: Alice Milligan in later life (image courtesy Moya Cannon)
In July 1941, Éamonn De Valera awarded Alice Milligan an Honorary Doctorate on behalf of the National University of Ireland. Denis Coffey, the President of University College Dublin, gave an address in which he reflected on Milligan’s important intervention in the early Revival movement:

“She was a pioneer in many fields, tireless in energy, and absorbed in the love of Ireland. She worked for years, both in prose and verse in the widely read journals of Arthur Griffith. At the outset of the Irish dramatic revival, she wrote several plays including *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, which were staged by the National Literary Theatre, the forerunner of the Abbey Theatre. She gave exceptional work to the Gaelic League, lecturing under the auspices of the League throughout Ireland on Irish history, and her Lantern Talks and Tableaux Vivants are well remembered in aiding the movement for national culture. While inspired by her ideals to associate with the political movements of the time in Ireland, it can be truly said her propagandist efforts were devoid of bitterness and the partisan spirit. No future record of the relations of Irish literature with the history of Ireland in those fifty years can fail to commemorate the poetry of this distinguished Ulster lady.”

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Irish artists and cultural practitioners began to make a radical intervention into the public spaces that had for so long been the reserve of official politics. Ireland’s Cultural Ambassador, Gabriel Byrne recently suggested that “culture can transform a political structure when a political structure cannot change itself.” His words have a particular resonance for the historical as well as the contemporary regenerative powers of the arts and humanities. The political and social landscape of Ireland was “changed utterly” in the 1890s when new generations of artists and activists placed Irish culture at the centre of a new national and international discourse. In recalling the non-sectarian Republican principles of their United Irish predecessors, Milligan and her comrades were making a political intervention. They articulated their ideals through street parades, exhibitions, and photography; by collecting oral histories, publishing small biographies and pamphlets, and travelling with lectures, theatre productions and magic lantern shows. They created community by setting up printing presses, establishing new journals and by founding multiple cultural organisations. By identifying unmarked graves and by holding their meetings in symbolic places such as Cave Hill, they forged connections with a political and cultural history embedded within the architecture and landscape of Ireland. Their actions released a national and international connection not just with the political and cultural ideals expressed by their historic predecessors but with the future Republic they hoped to achieve. This exhibition aims to revive Alice Milligan’s reputation as a major Irish cultural and political activist and to promote a new set of perspectives on the turbulent period of Irish history through which she lived.
1866. Alice Leticia Milligan born in September outside Omagh, County Tyrone.

1876-1880. Educated in Methodist College Belfast and studies English literature and history at King's College, London.


1891. Undergoes radical political conversion to Parnellism in Dublin.

1892. Joins Belfast Irish Language Group and meets future colleagues such as Francis Joseph Biggar and Anna Johnston. Writes historical novel set in 1798.


1894-1898. Seven years devoted to Irish nationalist politics. The Life of Wolfe Tone is published. She uses her work such as Sheila MacAleer, Benedict Kiely, and the Irish Educational Company collects some of her historical ballads from the 1890s for a poetry volume. Helps her brother and his family set up home in Northern Ireland, and acts as his literary agent.

1895. Publishes four historical plays performed by Gaelic League groups across Ireland, in addition to regular articles and literary works in Irish journals and newspapers.

1895-1898. Appointed travelling teacher by the Gaelic League to help promote the language and fundraising. Stages community theatre shows and magic lantern lectures for Irish communities in Ireland and Britain. In 1908 George Russell publishes Hero Lays, a collection of her poems taken from Irish newspapers and journals.

1901-1910. Helps her father to organise the Ferguson Centenary in Belfast and writes a poem for this celebration. Collects and publishes Irish folk songs from County Tyrone with her sisters Edith Wheeler and Charlotte Milligan Fox, and helps Charlotte with research on Annals of the Irish Harpers.

1901-1902. Withdraws from much of her Irish cultural activity to care for family members. In 1914 co-writes with her brother William, Sons of the Sea Kings, a children’s adventure novel based on the Icelandic Norse Sagas.

1916. Her parents and sister Charlotte die in the first three months of the year. After the Easter Rising in Dublin many of Milligan’s colleagues and friends are executed and imprisoned. Travels to London to attend Roger Casement’s trial and embarks on a prison visit to Irish political prisoners in England.

1917-1921. Publishes regular (censored) poems and articles in Irish newspapers. Invests her parents’ bequest in a Dublin bookshop, trying to support herself while raising funds for Irish political prisoners and their families. From 1918 tries unsuccessfully to publish occult visionary writings about 1916. Eventually forced to flee Dublin with her brother William after Irish republicans threaten to assassinate him for his role in the British Army.

1920. Bulmer Hobson publishes book version of her Cromwellian drama The Daughter of Donagh, and she and Irish Educational Company collects some of her historical ballads from the 1890s for a poetry volume. Helps her brother and his family set up home in Northern Ireland, and acts as his literary agent.

1920-1953. Full time carer for her brother and his family, while also helping to found the Anti-Partition Union and publishing new poems about contemporary political struggle in newspapers. Lectures, writes and broadcasts as a form of political and cultural protest against Partition and the marginalisation of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. Because of her Republican politics and ongoing public commemorations of Roger Casement, her mail is heavily censored.

1940. Sets up home with friends in County Antrim after the death of her sister-in-law in 1941, and awarded honorary doctorate on behalf of the National University of Ireland in July. Becomes active in local election campaigns, fund raises for Indian famine relief, and continues to write radio scripts based on her knowledge of Irish historical figures. Her Ossianic Trilogy (first staged in 1898) is translated into Irish in 1944. During the last two decades of her life Milligan is visited by admirers of her work such as Sheila MacAleer, Benedict Kiely, Joseph McGrattan and Padraic Colum.

1953. Dies in April in County Tyrone just a couple of miles from where she was born.

**FOOTNOTES**


2. The Shamrock 1 March 1949, p. 2.

3. Alice Milligan, a memoir for radio broadcast in NLI Aine Ceannt Papers.

4. NLI, Acc. 1835, Folder 1, p. 4.

5. Alice Milligan’s diary was gifted to the National Library of Ireland in 2010 by John Wilson of Belfast.


8. NLI Alice Milligan Diary. October 1893.


10. We Two Together by JH and ME Cousins (Madoas: Ganesh & Co, 1950), p. 11.

11. Shan Van Vocht September 1897.


13. Irish News, 8 March 1895.

14. Irish News, 7 June 1895 and then Shan Van Vocht 6 September 1897.


16. Fätume An Lár 5 March 1886.

17. Alice Milligan Papers, Allen Library.


22. Sinn Fein 26 June 1909.

23. Irish Weekly Freeman 7 June 1912, p. 5.


27. Alice Milligan Papers, Allen Library.

28. NLI Eoin MacNeill Papers, Ms.10, 874.


31. NLI Ceantamh Hungarian Papers Ms.41, 492 / 3.

32. NLI Ceantamh Hungarian Papers Ms.41, 492 / 3.

33. NLI Ceantamh Hungarian Papers, MS. 41, 492 / 4.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This exhibition project has been created by a collective team at the National Library of Ireland. It is my privilege and pleasure as the guest curator to thank everyone who has been involved in putting the exhibition together and all those who have helped shape my ideas about Alice Milligan for the exhibition. My work on this exhibition was made possible by the Postdoctoral Fellowship I was awarded by the John Hume Global Irish Institute at UCD. During my time there, Declan Kiberd and I met each month to discuss the progress of the book I was writing and also my Milligan exhibition project. Declan is generous and inspiring and this exhibition project would very likely not have happened without the confidence and rigour he inspired in me. I am extremely grateful to Brian Jackson, the Director of the Global Irish Institute, for all his assistance and support, and would also like to thank Mary Daly, Siobhan Byrne, Aoibhin De Burca and all my colleagues at the GII for their dialogue and enthusiasm.

The Director of the NLI, Fiona Ross, approached this exhibition with fantastic enthusiasm and commitment and it is a privilege to now call myself her colleague. Tom Desmond at the NLI has been a major figure in my research into Alice Milligan – not only has he pointed out key collections of papers for me to explore but he also encouraged me to put forward my ideas for an exhibition to his colleagues at the library. For their assistance with my research, and this exhibition, I would like to thank many other staff of the National Library, including Catherine Fahy, Elizabeth Kirwan, Honora Paul, Joanna Finegan, Sarah Shiel, Katherine McSharry, Louise O’Connor, Matthew Cairns, Fran Carroll, James Harte, Gerry Kavanagh, Henry Lee, Kieran McGee, Liam Murphy, Sophia O’Brien, John O’Sullivan, Paul Bobotan, Martin Donnelly, and also the exhibition designers Martello Media.

I would like to sincerely thank my parents and all who have helped me think through this project, particularly: Luke Gibbons, Maeve Connolly, Val Connor, Patrick Murphy, Jane O’Hlmeyer, Seamus Deane, Gabriel Byrne, Joan Melia, Lawrence Wilde, Anthony Glavin, Diane Negra, Dermot Bolger, Ivy Wilson, Aurelian Fromont, Dolores Gibbons, Moya Cannon, Dennis McNulty, Stephen Rea, Joe Cleary, Jesse Jones, Adrienne Fleming, Terry Eagleton, Luca Crispi, David Lloyd, Ida Daly, Jerome O’Driscoll, Helen Carey, PJ Matthews, Tessa Giblin, Simon Williams, Emer Nolan, Gillian Beer, Francis Krutnik and Helen Carey, Declan McGonagle, Kevin Kavanagh, Maire Mac Conghail, Wills Murphy, Jaqueline Davis, Jonathan Cummins and Oonagh Young. I am grateful to all of Alice Milligan’s descendants for their support of my research, and to those who have shared information and material, in particular the Allen Library.

I dedicate my work on this exhibition to three greats of the Liverpool Irish diaspora who never fail to inspire and delight me – Jessica Morris, Frances Catherine Wilde and John Lennon.

Catherine Morris, November 2010

Let us realise our responsibility at this crisis in our country’s history and act up to it, so that when the time comes for judging the work of this generation it may be said of us: ‘They saved the Gaelic race from expatriation, and the Gaelic language from extinction.’

Alice Milligan, Shan Van Vocht, 1898.

BIography: Catherine Morris is the Cultural Coordinator for Trinity College Dublin and the National Library of Ireland. She was invited to guest curate this Discover exhibition about Alice Milligan while she was a postdoctoral research fellow at University College Dublin and Writer-in-Residence at the Dublin Writers’ Centre. Catherine Morris’s book Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival will be published in 2011, and her article “Alice Milligan and Republican Tableaux” will appear in the Field Day Review in December 2010. She has published on literature and culture in Irish journals and was an assistant editor and researcher on two volumes of Letters of WB Yeats at the University of Oxford. She is co-editor of the James Connolly Special Issue of Interventions: an international postcolonial journal, which will soon be launched as a book containing the first publication of James Connolly’s lost manuscript play Under Which Flag?, a historical drama set during the Fenian insurrection of 1867. The play was first performed by members of the Irish Citizen Army at Liberty Hall just three weeks before the Easter Rising of 1916.

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Free admission

Exhibition runs November 2010 – February 2011 at 2/3 Kildare Street and online at www.nli.ie/discover

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Monday - Wednesday: 9.30am - 9pm
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Saturday: 9.30am - 4.30pm

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