

Further Reading

Alice Milligan: Republican Tableaux and the Revival, by Catherine Morris (essay published in Field Day Review, Issue 6, 2010).

Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival, by Catherine Morris (exhibition booklet published by National Library of Ireland, 2010).

Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival, by Catherine Morris (Four Courts Press, 2013). Available to purchase at the IMMA Bookshop.

Talks & Events Programme

Lecture + Roundtable Discussion

Saturday 17 October, 3 – 5.30pm, Lecture Room, IMMA

On the closing weekend of *El Lissitzky: The Artist and the State*, Catherine Morris presents a lecture on her research into the work and ideas of the key revolutionary figure of Alice Milligan in the early years of the 20th century. This will be followed by a discussion addressing Lissitzky's enthusiasm for the revolution and the relevance of his ideas for contemporary artists and society, as Ireland approaches the centenary of 1916. Participants include: Rossella Biscotti, Núria Güell, Sarah Pierce, Annie Fletcher, Sarah Glennie and discussion moderator, Mick Wilson (Researcher, Valand Academy, the University of Gothenburg). A closing reception follows this event.

Booking is essential for all talks.

For a full programme of talks and free tickets visit www.imma.ie

For further information contact Sophie Byrne, Assistant Curator, Talks and Lectures, IMMA. email: sophie.byrne@imma.ie; Tel: + 353 (0)1 6229913.

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Image credit: Maeve of Connaught and her Daughter Finbarr (Elise McGown and Kathleen Davidson). One of the four surviving photographs of Irish Tableaux staged by the Belfast Gaelic League during the Irish cultural revival. Published in *The Gentlewoman* London: June 1898. Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.



ALICE MILLIGAN



EL LISSITZKY: THE ARTIST AND THE STATE

WITH ROSSELLA BISCOTTI, MAUD GONNE,
NÚRIA GÜELL, ALICE MILLIGAN,
SARAH PIERCE & HITO STEYERL

IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
GARDEN GALLERIES
30 JULY – 18 OCTOBER 2015

“Alice Milligan’s life-long project, in novels, poems, plays, journalism and tableaux, was to liberate the still-unused energies buried in the Irish past and to demonstrate their rich potential for her generation... Milligan was a gifted woman who was arguably one of the greatest of all inventors of modern Ireland.”
Declan Kiberd, 2012

Cultural activist, writer and arts practitioner, Alice Milligan (1866-1953) was a pioneer in the formation of Irish National Theatre. She ‘began to have premonitions of a dramatic movement’ as early as 1897 when she started to bring theatre to diverse communities across Ireland and its diaspora, in places that lacked resources and dedicated venues. She staged plays and *tableaux vivants* with groups in theatre venues, school halls, on city streets and in fields (where people watched sitting on benches carved out of felled trees.) Milligan always worked collaboratively, never alone. On a break from his human rights work in the Congo, her close friend Roger Casement joined her in Antrim where they cleared fields and constructed stage sets for local Irish tableaux and drama shows. Audiences attending her performances were not passive, ticket buying, anonymous consumers but active participants in the creation of national theatre and cultural independence. Those who built the stages made the costumes; those who performed the shows sourced the props and invented stage effects out of local materials. Looking back during the Civil War at the intervention that Alice Milligan made in imagining a cultural republic, Susan Mitchell reflected that she was ‘the most successful producer of plays before the Abbey Theatre started on its triumphant way’.

Contemporaries of Milligan remember how she travelled extensively to community, school and theatre groups with ‘a bag crammed with fragments of tapestry’ that was used on the actors in order

‘to create the illusion of a richly-robed ancient Irish romance’. One of her letters to a newspaper editor gives a fascinating insight into her direct action approach to finding cheap and fast ways to distribute play scripts: “This scene I could get up very quickly... The delay would be in copying out the play and actors’ parts. If it was in Saturday’s *Express* I could get a number of copies and distribute among my actors to learn at once as I am to see them all on Saturday afternoon.... we could have the play ready in three weeks. I trust to you to do what you can for me in the matter.”

Insistent that a lack of resources should not impede theatre production, Milligan suggested that “costumes may be made more cheaply and suitably than hired ones, and need not be elaborate.” Sunburn is created by mixing ochre with Vaseline, tan coloured tape stands in for genuine leather: “To complete your weapons you will require a set of lustre paints. Ristona lustre, which is made by M’Caw, Stevenson, and Orr, of Belfast, is supplied in several tints... Gold tissue gauze necessary for gold ornaments is purchasable at Liberty’s agencies in Belfast and Dublin.”

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.

Besides writing plays, she designed and made costumes, constructed theatrical sets and props, published and distributed scripts through newspapers, and even acted. 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.

Alice Milligan’s plays and *tableaux* shows operated as a link between ideas of national theatre and the cultural regeneration of the Irish language as a spoken medium. But they had other elective affinities too. Drama, photography and the magic lantern were the most immediately obvious of these; but cinema and art installation are also recognizably among them. During the 1897 royal visit to Dublin, Alice Milligan, James Connolly and Maud Gonne were among a group of artist activists who projected from magic lanterns onto Dublin city walls, photographs of extreme deprivation witnessed in the west of Ireland. Another example of their agitprop mode of theatre took place in front of the General Post Office on O’Connell Street in Dublin when they performed living pictures enacting scene by scene public nationalist protest against the English administration’s ban on Irish language postal addresses.

Maud Gonne had been deeply impressed by Milligan’s feminist *tableaux vivants* shows that she attended in Belfast during 1898 in which Irish women took a significant cultural platform in protest against the way that they had been historically marginalised in public life. Gonne later invited Milligan to direct similar theatre shows with the feminist political organization *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) that she had founded in Dublin. Outlining some

ideas for living pictures in a letter to Alice Milligan, Gonne wrote: “Without your help we feel very much afraid of trying them as none of us have had much experience in *tableaux*. I feel sure in as far as attracting a large audience they are quite sure to be successful, everyone in Dublin seems anxious for them ... you are so clever and have such a genius for dramatic effects that if you came we are certain of a magnificent success.”

Milligan was delighted to be invited and in 1901 together with *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* she staged performances in Dublin during Easter and again in August as protests during Horse Show Week, an event that was then considered by some to be a sporting showcase for the colonial elite. The success of these tableaux shows was reflected in the enthusiastic audience responses captured in the Irish nationalist presses, including Arthur Griffith’s United Irishman.

One of the most popular *tableaux* by the women was that of ‘Erin Fettered, Erin Free’ in which the women reactivated familiar codes that were already in circulation in Irish melodrama, costumes pageants and street parades, in theatre posters and in the illustrations in the republican presses. People at the time understood such images; they knew how to interpret them: the Weekly Freeman, for instance, carried glossy, pull-out, colour supplements illustrating images (usually female) of Ireland struggling against her colonial oppressor. Her ankles or wrists are chained; sometimes she is gagged, usually depicted in a doorway, entering or pointing to a far off horizon of freedom. These images were very similar to the *tableaux* that Milligan staged in which the physical body was also a symbolic representation that generated broader political and cultural possibilities. Arthur Griffith reported in the United Irishman how the audience appealed to the women to re-enact the series of *tableaux* several times:

“Maeve, greatest of Ireland’s heroines, Grania Mhaol visiting Elizabeth and pulverising the virgin monarch, who strove to impress the splendid Irishwoman; St. Brigid, the Inghean Dubh, Red Hugh’s mother; Sarah Curran and Anne Devlin, the betrothed and faithful servant of Emmet. Ireland fettered and crouching over her unstrung harp at the base of the Celtic cross, and then Ireland Free, erect against the cross, her harp now strung at her feet, her green robe flowing round her, the cap of liberty on her head, and in her hand a shining sword. This *tableau* evoked a tremendous outburst of enthusiasm and shouts of ‘Aris! Aris!’ caused its repetition again and again.”

Those, like Maud Gonne, who worked with Milligan, recorded: ‘so great is the power of mind, her audiences saw the plays as she intended them’. 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 cultural participation in the national theatre. Yeats’s poem The Circus Animal’s Desertion captures what the collective performance of tableaux meant during the Irish Cultural Revival period and what the recollection of the tableaux came to mean in the years that followed Partition: ‘Character isolated by a deed / To engross the present and dominate memory.’

Text by Dr Catherine Morris

Biography

Alice Milligan (1866-1953) was a cultural and political activist who, for over six decades, published her work in a range of genres including poetry, short stories, novels, travelogues, biography, plays, journalism, letters, and memoirs. Her engagement with community drama and the Gaelic League provided a new resonance to the connection between Irish visual culture and language. Milligan played a significant role in the cultural and political independence movement in Ireland. From 1891 right through to the early 1950s she founded a series of cultural, feminist, commemorative and political organizations that put the North on the map of the Irish Cultural Revival. In the 1890s, for instance, she founded the Irish Women’s Association, a feminist organisation of which she was the first president; at the same time she set-up and co-edited with Anna Johnstone (Ethna Carbery) two northern cultural nationalist newspapers The Northern Patriot and The Shan Van Vocht. While she worked closely with many of Ireland’s most famous figures such as Maud Gonne, James Connolly, Douglas Hyde, William Butler Yeats and Roger Casement, Milligan’s life’s work provides key insights into unjustly forgotten Irish cultural and political activists during this foundational era in modern Ireland. Described by Declan Kiberd as ‘the inventor of Modern Ireland’, Alice Milligan’s practice provides new ways of interpreting the Irish Cultural Revival itself.