



# Cluicóouí·na·

SECOND PERFORMANCES OF THE SEASON

**THE ROTUNDA (Large Concert Hall),**

**Thursday, Friday & Saturday, March 21, 22 & 23,**

**At 8.15 p.m. Admission 2/-, 1/- & 6d.**

The Cast

Honor La

Goggin, P

Thomas R



SEASAR MAC LABRADAII

# h-Éireann

includes Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh,  
avelle, Eibhlin O'Doherty, Joseph  
roinsias Mac Siubhlaigh, E. Keegan,  
R. Madden, Fred A. Macdonald, etc.

Wood engraving: Cluithcheoirí  
na hÉireann, Postcard, 1907.  
Holloway Collection, National  
Library of Ireland.

## Alice Milligan: Republican Tableaux and the Revival

Catherine Morris

*Alice Milligan (1866–1953) was a cultural and political activist who rejected the unionist politics that sustained Ireland's place within empire to become an internationalist republican. She was a key figure in the formation of the anti-colonial movement from the 1890s and a founding member of the Anti-Partition Council from the 1930s. A prolific writer for over six decades, she published her work in a range of genres (including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, journalism, letters and memoirs). From 1891 to the 1940s, she founded a series of cultural, feminist and political organizations that not only put the North on the map of the Irish Literary Revival but also gave a new resonance to Irish visual culture. Her work shows her commitment to the human*



Alice Milligan. 1896. Photo: Seamus MacManus. Courtesy of Moya Cannon

*rights of political prisoners and of women. She used visual and performance arts to create the cultural conditions that would give the Irish language contemporary meaning.*

*Everything Milligan wrote was published in the unindexed pages of now obscure national newspapers. As a*

*northern Protestant who had relinquished the unionism of her background, her identity was never easy to 'translate' within a sectarian society. Her legacy was not celebrated by the Northern Ireland state, nor was it accorded an important part in the official narrative of the*

- 1 Ireland: Weekly Bulletin of the Department of External Affairs No. 183, Dublin, 20 April 1953, 7.
- 2 Death notice of Angela Doyle (1907–25), (who died of anorexia nervosa), *Cumann na mBan*, September 1925
- 3 University College Dublin: Visual Cultures postdoctoral fellowships proposal outline, 2006.

*Irish Literary Revival. After her death, one obituary noted: ‘the radius of her friendship was an index of her quality. W. B. 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’.*<sup>1</sup>

\*\*\*

Those who were in B Wing, Kilmainham, during the summer of 1923 will ever remember Angela Doyle as Robert Emmet ... Angela chose Robert Emmet and to all of us who had ever visioned Emmet, Angela seemed to embody every idea of ours. Young, pale, fair, tall, with an earnest sad expression in her eyes, she seemed the ghost of the hero of 1803.<sup>2</sup>

In 1923 Irish women prisoners on hunger strike in A Wing of Kilmainham Jail staged for their comrades in B Wing a series of costumed *tableaux vivants* that evoked their republican heroes Robert Emmet and Anne Devlin. With its roots in English and French state-censorship of spoken language in theatre, the voiceless form of *tableau vivant* also proved, because of the suppression of Irish, to have a special potency in the colonial (and immediately post-colonial) context of Ireland. The women who staged these *tableaux* in 1923 were responding to their memory of how ‘living pictures’ had been radicalized during the Irish Literary Revival by Alice Milligan. In fact, many of the prisoners had been trained in the making of *tableaux* by Milligan through her association with the Gaelic League and Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland). ‘Living pictures’ was a particularly appropriate theatrical mode for these women prisoners to display their allegiance to historical forebears whose legacy was, like their own experience, one of disempowerment, bodily torture and silence. Their enactment of these *tableaux* in such circumstances is an example of what

Declan Kiberd has called ‘an attempt to release the still-unused potential buried in past moments’.<sup>3</sup>

*Tableau vivant* is a hybrid of theatre and pictorial art; its political implications can only be fully recognized in relation to other pictorial representations. The 1923 performance enabled the confined prisoners to transform themselves into a community. This was characteristic of the Irish Revival in general; its aim was to produce a communal consciousness by creating the ‘past’ through street parades, collecting folklore, staging and publishing Irish legends and histories, initiating art and museum exhibitions, by travelling with theatre productions and magic lantern shows. Milligan was concerned essentially with how this emergent nationalist culture depicted itself in public space as both an act of, and a search for, self-representation. In particular, her theatre work explored how the body itself became the subject of repressed history in nationalist iconography and commemoration. Visual culture in this period of radical transformation offered a site for the rehearsal and performance of possible identities. Irish public space was reclaimed and redefined in print culture, in performances enacted on official and unofficial stages, in the opening up of theatres, galleries and cinemas. The unwritten story of Milligan’s political mobilization of visual culture is located in a wide range of archival materials, such as photographs (nicknamed ‘the mirror with a memory’ in the 1890s), magic lantern slides and travelling lantern shows, illustrated fiction, theatre posters, newspapers and journals, *tableaux vivants* (also known as ‘living pictures’ and ‘poses plastiques’), representing scenes from well-known Irish melodramas, public commemorations, costumed pageants, banners carried at public demonstrations, murals, paintings and public monuments, street theatre, sculpture and film reels.

In this essay I want to investigate a whole series of questions and contexts that

will help us better understand the latent visual community dynamics that fired Ireland's national theatre and Irish language movement. What were *tableaux*? Where did this silent form of drama come from? What made it so popular in Europe, America and England at the turn of the twentieth century? Milligan's first *tableau* show was actually planned with the help of members of the Anglo-Irish colonial establishment for performance at the Chicago World Fair in 1893. It is worth asking how she began to transform this theatrical genre into a powerful expression of the Revival's most radical ideas.

### The Irish Village and the Chicago World Fair

Look how well we've captured these unhappy ridiculous people aching for an impossible escape! We feel we have a special hold upon them because we have had, for what it is worth, possession of the future for which they yearn.

Thomas Kilroy, *The Seagull: after Chekhov* (1993)

Six months before it became 'the Irish cultural event of the decade',<sup>4</sup> Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen* was performed as a series of living pictures at the Chief Secretary's Lodge in Phoenix Park on 24 and 25 January 1899. It is a piquant irony that the lords and ladies of the British establishment in Ireland first enacted this particular story, for its dramatized version would soon launch the Irish Literary Theatre. Nicknamed 'the pet of the Castle' by Edward Martyn for this initiative, Yeats nevertheless agreed not only to the production of his play at the chief secretary's official residence, but also to rehearsing a cast that included Lady Balfour, Lady Fingall, George Coffey and members of Margaret Stokes's family. In the play, an aristocratic heroine sacrifices her soul to the devil in order to save the Irish peasantry from famine. Adrian Frazier

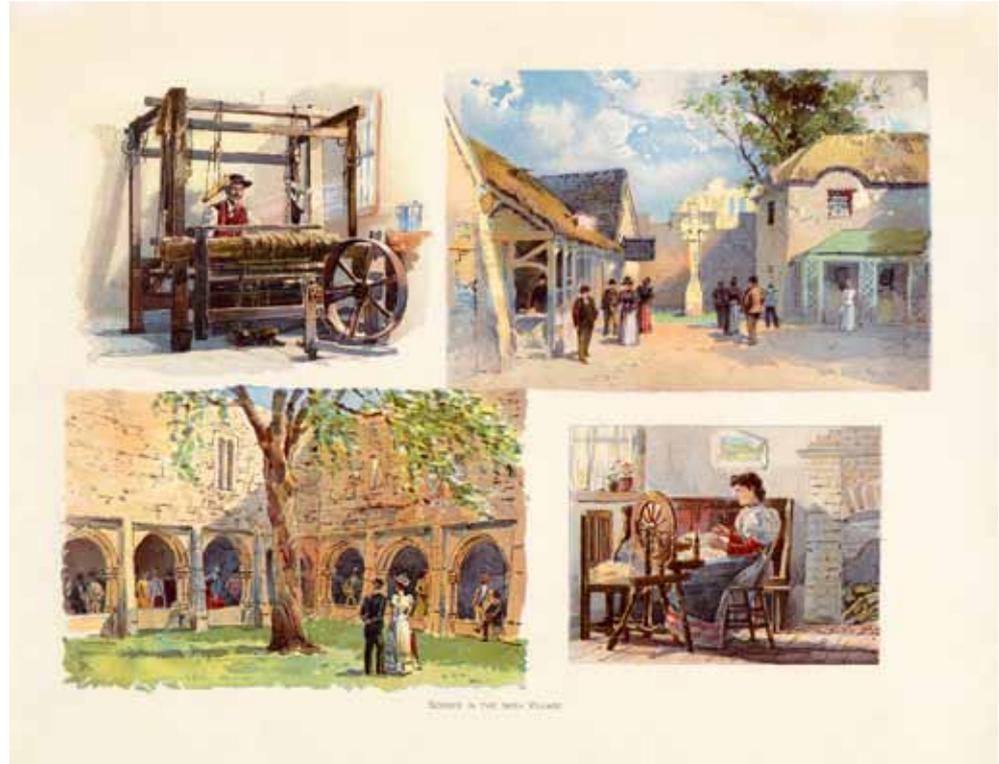
explains how it would have appealed so directly to Ireland's ruling elite:

The picture of the countess was so flattering, and that of the peasants so amusing, that the ladies of the Chief Secretary's Lodge — Lady Balfour, the countess of Fingall, and others — begged Yeats to let them perform the work as nine *tableaux vivants* six months before the performance scheduled for the Ancient Concert Rooms ... Their performance was a complete success: it was such fun for the gentry to act the peasants, who must have seemed like fabulous talking beasts out of Grimm ... Certainly, the chief virtue in the ethical scheme of the play is generosity, a quality most accessible to the rich. The main virtue to which the poor may aspire is gratitude.<sup>5</sup>

In her autobiography, Lady Fingall observed that the Anglo-Irish lived in 'a world of their own with Ireland outside the gates'.<sup>6</sup> This is a useful description of how the 'Countess Cathleen' *tableau* (and other unionist appropriations of this dramatic mode) functioned in Ireland before 1916. As a private entertainment, the *tableau* offered Ireland's ruling elite an opportunity to rescript themselves as benevolent heroes of the Great Famine. The rightness of empire, with its reliance upon rigid class distinctions, was reconfirmed in the frozen pictures mounted at the Lodge: 'The chief secretary, Arthur Balfour ... found a pleasant satisfaction in the graceful way the countess of Fingall, as Countess Cathleen, died to save the peasants who could not save themselves.'<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that the play was set during a famine, the Chief Secretary's wife spared no expense on the lavish costumes, designed from sketches commissioned from George Russell (*Æ*); she pulled rank to decorate her pictures with authentic 'Celtic' jewels and ornaments borrowed from Ireland's National Museum. John Kelly notes that although Yeats

- 4 Adrian Frazier, *Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre* (Berkeley, 1990), 1.
- 5 Pamela Hinkson, *Seventy Years Young: Memories of Elizabeth Countess of Fingall* (London, 1937), 235.
- 6 Cited in Peter Somerville Large, *The Irish Country House* (London, 1995), 355.

'Scenes In The Irish Village. On the Midway Plaisance'. Color plate by Charles S. Graham from 'The World's Fair in Water Colors', June 1, 1893. Photo: © Field Museum Library / Getty Images

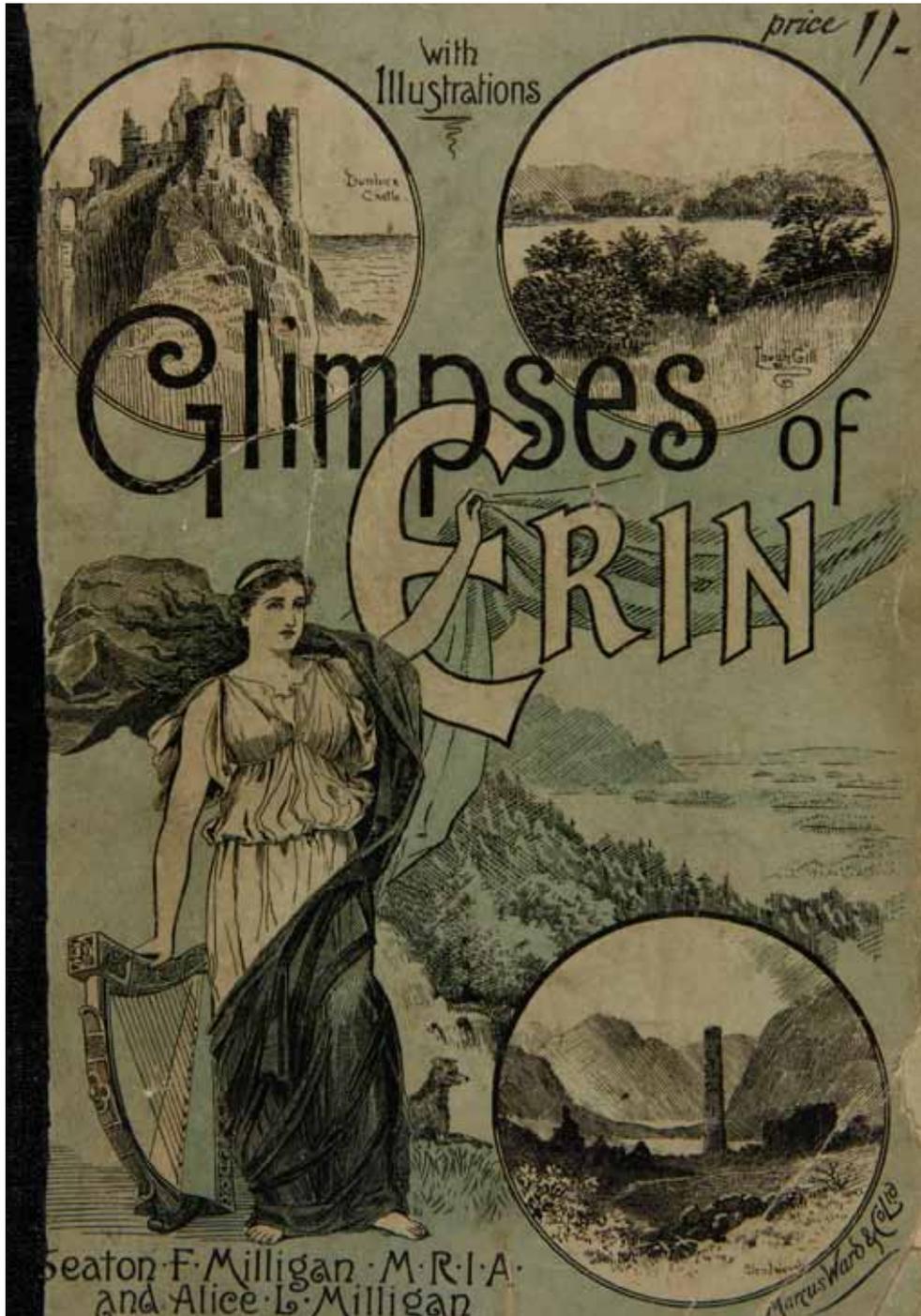


- 7 Frazier, *Yeats, Horniman, and the Struggle for the Abbey Theatre*, 10.
- 8 The programme for the Countess Cathleen *tableau* was republished in Warwick Gould, John Kelly, eds., *Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats II: 1896–1900* (Oxford, 1998), 327.
- 9 Seaton Forrest Milligan and Alice Milligan, *Glimpses of Erin: Containing an Account of the Ancient Civilisation, Manners, Customs, and Antiquities of Ireland* (Belfast, 1888), 19, 183.

rehearsed the show at the Chief Secretary's Lodge, he could not be seen on the opening night: 'No self-respecting nationalist could go to the Chief Secretary's Lodge, the locus of English rule, and WBY did not attend the *tableaux*.'<sup>8</sup> Milligan's early involvement in the *tableau* form developed within her own early unionist familial connections to the colonial administration. In a chapter entitled 'Sketches of Country Life', published in *Glimpses of Erin*, the political travelogue she wrote with her father, Seaton Forrest Milligan, in 1888, there is an attempt to capture the flavour of native Ireland for English readers: 'Here an old woman presides, comforting herself, as she waits for customers, with a short cutty pipe which she puffs vigorously.' In the milliner's shop, the reader is invited to 'look on' as 'Biddy is trying on a hat before a glass, turning her head this way and that, whilst the smart shop girl induces her to buy'. Although the reader is told that 'It would be impossible [in a single

photograph] ... to give a picture of the average Irishman',<sup>9</sup> these descriptions are in themselves a kind of *tableau*: they are still pictures that the English reader as potential tourist is invited to view. *Tableaux* were often designed as a shop-window display to sell goods, and Milligan first designed scenes of Irish *tableaux* for the Chicago World Fair in 1893. She became involved in the Irish exhibit through working with Lady Aberdeen in the Irish Industries Association that same year. Seaton Milligan was on the board; he arranged Lady Aberdeen's first meeting with Alice. Extensive records of the Chicago World Fair and of Lady Aberdeen's trip around Ireland are stored in numerous volumes of press cuttings. These documents help us to understand the extreme departure Milligan made in the mid 1890s when she began to use *tableaux* as a key element in the cultural repertoire of the emergent independence movement.

The poet Alfred Percival Graves praised Milligan's intriguing plans for a



Milligan: Cover of *Glimpses of Erin*, 1888. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

*tableau* show, because they fitted in so completely with those of the London-based literary committee that was part of the Irish Industries Association: 'Your

admirable letter on the subject of suitable entertainments at the Irish Village at Chicago promoted by Lady Aberdeen has been before our committee.' In the

- 10 Alice Milligan Papers, Brother Allen Library, O'Connell School, Richmond Road, Dublin (hereafter, Milligan Papers, Allen Library).
- 11 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimble, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley and London, 1998), 96–97.
- 12 William R. Leach, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum* (Belmont, CA, 1991), 163–64.
- 13 Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (London, 1984), 39, 64. It was 'white' also because it was illuminated by electric light. See also the description of the Chicago World Fair in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day* (2006).
- 14 Rydell, *All the World's a Fair*, 67.
- 15 Julius Ralph, *Harper's Chicago and the World Fair* (New York, 1893), 187.
- 16 James Gilbert, *Perfect Cities: Chicago's Utopias of 1893* (Chicago, 1991), 78.

same letter Graves informed Milligan that the *tableau* was a genre that could both enlighten audiences and re-enact scenes from Irish history: 'We favour a costume concert or rather *Tableaux* concert ... to illuminate three periods 1. The Ancient Irish 2. The Elizabethan & Jacobite 3. The Modern period before the Famine.' Graves promoted images of a pre-Famine era as appropriate for contemporary Ireland. Like Milligan, he also recognized the practical advantage of staging early histories or scenes from rural life because they required less technically achieved costumes: 'Songs of life, sport and occupation such as Lullabies, loobeens, smith spinning wheel, fishing, hunting songs etc. would be suitable to the modern village and would not need such elaborate costume as the ancient period requires.' When Lady Aberdeen unexpectedly visited Derry in November 1892, Milligan gave her a preview of her 'living picture show', even though Aberdeen had been sceptical about Milligan's ability to organize a preview of this 'semi-dramatic performance' at such short notice.<sup>10</sup>

The Chicago World Fair was a commercial exposition in which countries competed for international markets by promoting national produce. It aimed to surpass the Paris Exposition of 1889 by more successfully commodifying 'authenticity', linking commercial products with their place of origin. The directors created a theme park that included Turkish, Persian, Egyptian, Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian 'villages'. 'Live ethnographic displays were a featured attraction at international expositions in Europe and America where entire environments were re-created complete with inhabitants.'<sup>11</sup> L. Frank Baum was there; his *Wizard of Oz* (1900), remade as a film in 1939, reflected the commercial fantasies activated by this new type of urban commerce. Writing about Baum, William Leach commented: 'These urban fairs ... helped form in the popular mind a sanitised myth of complete urban abundance in which everyone gets

what they want and experiences only pleasure and happiness. Baum tapped into this myth. Indeed, he too was deeply influenced by the Chicago exposition.'<sup>12</sup>

Transformed into 'a neo-classical wonderland', Jackson Park was appropriately renamed the 'White City' — for, according to contemporary reports, the exposition was designed on the basis of 'racial compartmentalism'.<sup>13</sup> At the centre stood grand palaces and mansions to display art masterpieces, advanced technologies, transport systems and architectural splendours; these had been erected by the French, American and British as a showcase of colonial power, wealth and modernity. The 'savage races' (non-white peoples, and the Irish) were situated on the Midway, at a distance from the exposition's imperial splendour. Robert Rydell argues that the reason for this racial classification was to prove how close the American dream was to completion: 'The Midway made the dream of the future seem all the brighter and the present civilisation all the more progressive.'<sup>14</sup> The Midway also hosted 'curious exhibitions' of 'peasant life', like Ireland's two 'villages'.<sup>15</sup> James Gilbert argues that 'these ersatz communities were touristic dioramas, a pageantry of verisimilitude' that offered 'romanticised versions' of home for, among others, the Irish, one of the largest groups of foreign-born immigrants in the city.<sup>16</sup> The first village was a simulation of a working Donegal village, devised by the American Mrs. Ernest Hart. The other, more extravagant village was built under the tutelage of Lady Aberdeen, and was located near the fairground.

With its ornate reproductions of Irish costume and native life, Lady Aberdeen's Irish village operated as a large scale *tableau vivant*. Her plans were reported in detail by the *Chicago Sunday Post*:

The village is to be quadrangular in form, to be entered by a doorway taken from Cashel, through the cloisters to Muckcross.

In all we shall have seventeen cottages. We shall have weaving from Donegal and spinning from the north, and we shall have a dairy with some Kerry cows — and better still, some pretty Munster dairy girls to milk them ... We shall have an Irish piper [Torlach MacSuibhne of Donegal] and an Irish songster, Irish jigs will be danced and Irish entertainments of all sorts given every night. In Blarney castle our girls will be lodged so as to make them more Irish than they were when they went out.<sup>17</sup>

Lady Aberdeen took responsibility for organizing the ‘official’ Irish contribution to the World Fair. In the early months of 1893, she conducted a tour of Ireland in search of genuine Irish peasants who could personify her ‘cabin idea’.<sup>18</sup> She then transplanted these workers more or less as commercial products. According to her daughter, Lady Aberdeen ‘visited workers in the farthest corners of Kerry, Connemara and Donegal, chose the girls who were to spin, sing, make butter and dance jigs; promised parents to take care of them’.<sup>19</sup> The journalist Teresa Dean collected criticism of Lady Aberdeen’s Irish village from workers in the ‘Donegal Village’:

A Donegal villager, asked the difference between Mrs Hart’s enterprise and Lady Aberdeen’s, replied succinctly that the difference was ‘the devilish poor imitation they aire ov us’. ‘Lady Aberdeen may be a bonny lady, and may want to help the poor of Ireland,’ commented another, ‘but it’s not the true industries of Ireland, the real workers, that she has here’.<sup>20</sup>

Standard ‘aesthetic’ representations rather than practical knowledge informed Lady Aberdeen’s conception of Ireland. The *Daily Free Press*, for example, praised the way her ‘touching reference to the life of the Irish peasant ... had been so faithfully mirrored in Miss Barlow’s *Irish Idylls*’,<sup>21</sup>

an allusion to the writer Jane Barlow, who had accompanied Lady Aberdeen on her 1893 tour of the country. Even Graves’s costume design, an important feature of the village *tableau*, drew extensively upon an earlier textual source; he acknowledged his prime influence to be a 1788 essay by Joseph Walker entitled ‘Ancient and Modern Dress of the Irish’.<sup>22</sup> Graves recommended this book to Milligan as a source of Irish costume design suitable for *tableaux vivants* because it provided rare visual documentation about early Irish social life.

As in the Milligans’ earlier *Glimpses of Erin*, the Irish ‘village’ was a touristic advertisement. In the midst of the aggressively mercantile centre of American modernism, the patrons of the World Fair could witness traditional folk crafts of Ireland and then purchase the wares they saw manufactured. Gilbert describes the status of Chicago in the early 1890s as ‘a commercial centre of unbounded energy. This was the grandest city in the Midwest, the second in the nation, and the seventh in the world.’<sup>23</sup> Mindful of the marketability of rural nostalgia, Lady Aberdeen promised readers of the *Chicago Sunday Post* that she would ‘make one cottage a thoroughly home cottage, and by the fireside have an old woman knitting’.<sup>24</sup> In this theme-park experience of simulated hyper-Irishness, the Irish-American delighted at how audiences could walk into cottages in which ‘half a dozen pretty Irish girls in cool-looking prints were busied with embroidery and knitting’.<sup>25</sup> The framing of Irish identity within a commercial enterprise moved Andrew Carnegie to describe the central exhibition piece as ‘a facsimile cottage’;<sup>26</sup> Carnegie, one of the village’s main sponsors, attempted to dissuade Lady Aberdeen from investing her own money in a scheme to reconstruct Irish cottages.

The main opposition to the representation of the Irish at the Chicago World Fair came from the north of Ireland and from the extremes of Protestant unionism. Although Lady Aberdeen’s trip

- 17 *Chicago Sunday Post*, 12 March 1893.
- 18 Marjorie Pentland, *A Bonnie Fechter: The Life of Isobel Marjoribanks Marchioness of Aberdeen and Temair 1857–1939* (London, 1952), 98–99.
- 19 Pentland, *A Bonnie Fechter*, 98.
- 20 Quoted in Neil Harris, ‘Selling National Culture: Ireland at the World’s Columbian Exposition’, in T. J. Edelstein, ed., *Imagining an Irish Past: The Celtic Revival 1840–1940* (Chicago, 1992), 96.
- 21 *Daily Free Press*, 5 March 1893.
- 22 Milligan Papers, Allen Library.

- 23 Gilbert, *Perfect Cities*, 26.  
 24 *Chicago Sunday Post*, 12 March 1893.  
 25 *Irish-American Newspaper*, 6 May 1893.  
 26 Lady Aberdeen Papers, Haddo House Estate.  
 27 *Evening News* (Belfast), 4 August 1893.  
 28 A 'Rev. Kane', in *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 August 1893.  
 29 *Shan Van Vocht*, 7 June 1897.  
 30 *Shan Van Vocht*, 7 June 1898.  
 31 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.

was well accepted in the south of Ireland, the Orange Order prevented a visit she had planned to Belfast. Describing her Irish village as 'sentimental charity',<sup>27</sup> the Order objected to the way Ireland was depicted as the 'beggar nation of the world'.<sup>28</sup> This was exactly the political line that Milligan herself would later take against the colonial administration in Ireland, after she became a radical nationalist. However, unlike the Orange Order or other northern unionists (such as her own father), ultimately believed that Ireland would not be strengthened within the Union. After 1894, she began to argue that Ireland should empower itself from within and that culture was a crucial decolonizing agency. In the Chicago village, the Irish women were merely stereotypes. Yet, while Milligan later came to reject Lady Aberdeen's work in Ireland as a dangerous example of English philanthropy acting 'under royal, vice-regal, and aristocratic patronage',<sup>29</sup> she often used the same conventional images of Ireland and the Irish to her own different purposes.

The iconography of the nationalist *tableaux* Milligan produced after 1898 is strikingly reminiscent of that of the World Fair she had contributed to five years earlier. But the difference was that these *tableaux* were performed in Irish communities by Irish people as part of a movement to regenerate national theatre and national language. The show Milligan devised at Belfast's Exhibition Hall in May 1898, for example, deployed 'scenes from peasant life' and 'lovely red-cloaked colleens'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the *poses plastiques* she mounted in conjunction with Inghinidhe na hÉireann in April 1901 drew upon the familiar repertoire of domesticated female images that Lady Aberdeen had also staged in Chicago; in one scene, an 'old woman working the spinning wheel' was juxtaposed with 'the young one rocking her baby'.<sup>31</sup> These examples imply that the process of cultural revivalism relied not so much on the replacement as on the redeployment of a unionist iconography. Where Lady Aberdeen

exploited *tableaux* of peasant life to support a colonial myth of Irish backwardness, Milligan and her comrades produced living pictures of a dynamic culture.

Brenna Katz Clarke suggests that the ceilidh staged by Milligan and Inghinidhe na hÉireann at the turn of the century provided the inspiration for the influential 'peasant plays' of James Cousins, Pádraic Colum and John Millington Synge. She claimed that these *tableaux* scenes offered a kind of cathartic recognition for the urban bourgeoisie: 'Dubliners, a generation removed from the land, took great delight in viewing a slice of rural life, the exact replicas of western cottages, and the traditional singing and dancing of their parents' generation.'<sup>32</sup> Synge worked very hard to replicate on stage, in plays such as *Riders to the Sea* (1904), the costume as well as the vocal intonations of the people he had lived with (and photographed) on the Aran Islands. Such physical 'realism' disconcerted audiences, who were expecting and seeking social and psychological realism, but not in that setting. Neil Corcoran argues that these theatrical productions 'providing an image of rural life — particularly of life in the West', were a crucial project of the Irish Literary Revival: 'The rural image would represent a tested, endured solitude and the generous supportiveness of community; the patient effort of labour and the nobility of suffering; the ideal of dedication and the reward of courage.'<sup>33</sup> According to the *United Irishman*, the highlight of the April 1901 show in Dublin was 'the introduction for the first time in the metropolis of a cottage *céilidh* scene representing the actual everyday life — the amusements and occupations of the people of the Irish-speaking districts'.<sup>34</sup> The response to the scene by theatre critic and architect Joseph Holloway in his famous diary reveals the radical nature of the new Irish theatre in which the rural worker and the urban bourgeoisie sat side by side. The man sitting next to Holloway, for instance, was so

engaged with the theatrical performance of a scene from rural life that he commented upon minor discrepancies in its realism:

The *céilidh* (caly) or Irish social gathering round the fireside in the cabin was well carried out, (though a countryman beside me said that the woman who rocked the cradle should have done so with the foot instead of her hand if she were an industrious girl & also that countrymen never light their pipe with matches but with a lighted coal or bit of turf).<sup>35</sup>

It was precisely these aspects of Irish public and private social life, which would have been excluded from the ‘facsimile’ cottages built by Lady Aberdeen, that were given a prominent visual part in the new Irish national theatre. In his introduction to *Songs of Old Ireland*, Graves argued that Irish music represents the ‘various characteristics of the people, from which they sprung. Thus, glimpses into the lives of the Irish peasant, fisherman, and mechanic are given through the Lullabies, the Love Songs, the Lays of Sport and Occupation, and the Lamentation for the Dead.’<sup>36</sup> A *tableau* reconstruction of the killing of Brian Boru provided Milligan with the opportunity to stage the first actual performance of the *caoine*, or keen, the collective female vocal lament for the dead. The *United Irishman* reported:

The rendering by the choir of that beautiful old Irish tune, ‘The Return from Fingall’, in which the fierce cry of victory and the wild wail of sorrow for the slain monarch so wonderfully mingle, was excellent ... The mournful strains of the Irish caoine, which followed the death of Brian, was weirdly impressive.

The *tableaux* performed scenes not usually witnessed in public; events that were familiar and domestic yet culturally hidden aspects of Ireland were shared collectively

for the first time as national. Milligan also helped to introduce the language movement as radical anti-illusionist theatre. In 1901 she arranged for a special appearance of the Gaelic League’s co-founder, Douglas Hyde, on the stage where a *tableau* was being performed. Hyde was ‘recognised’ in the audience by the ‘cottagers’ on stage. His movement from one space (in the theatre audience) into the imagined cottage scene (on stage) connected both: ‘As the man of the house looked out through his door who did he see coming up the road but An Craoibhin, and when Douglas Hyde appeared on the stage with his big Irish frieze coat and with a fine Irish blackthorn in his fist the audience cheered him enthusiastically.’<sup>37</sup> In May 1905 Milligan depicted the significant role taken by women in the language movement in a *tableau*, ‘The Gaelic League (Miss Hanna Cotter) instructing the youth of Ireland’, in St. Mary’s Hall, Cork.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between the actualities of Irish life and the stylized rituals of the *tableau* was being reconfigured.

\*\*\*

Community Drama, the most immediately powerful form of literature, the most vivid image of life.

W. B. Yeats, *United Ireland* (1903)

Milligan and her associates seized upon the popular *tableau* form to re-animate a history that had been buried and suppressed. Their *tableaux* offered a counter-narrative to officially sanctioned cultural entertainment. ‘England is monopolising the eye of our public’, claimed the *United Irishman*, and it was only by taking control of visual culture that ‘the character of the country will be altered’.<sup>39</sup> As early as 1843, Thomas Davis had stressed the importance of visual culture for the formation of national identity in Ireland. He believed that the pictorial arts had an instructional and commemorative

- 32 Brenna Katz Clarke, *The Emergence of the Irish Peasant Play at the Abbey Theatre* (Michigan, 1982), 17.
- 33 Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (London, 1997), 57.
- 34 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.
- 35 National Library of Ireland (hereafter, NLI), Holloway Diaries, MS. 1798/1799; April 1901; Microfilm: P 8517 Reel 4, 103.
- 36 A. P. Graves, *Songs of Old Ireland: A Collection of Fifty Irish Melodies Unknown in England* (London, 1882), 1.
- 37 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.
- 38 *Cork Examiner*, 20 May 1905.
- 39 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.

- 40 Thomas Davis, 'Hints from Irish Historical Painting', reprinted from *The Nation* (July 1843) in *Thomas Davis: Essays and Poems with a Centenary Memoir 1845–1945* (Dublin, 1945).
- 41 *Shan Van Vocht*, 4 September 1898.
- 42 *United Irishman*, 7 July 1901.
- 43 *Irish Weekly Independent*, 6 December 1894.
- 44 'Cois Na Tineadh', in 'Newspaper Cuttings of Alice Milligan', Francis Joseph Biggar Papers, Belfast Central Library, MS. A86.

duty: 'art is biography, history, and topography, taught through the eye'.<sup>40</sup> Like Davis, Milligan stressed the capacity of the pictorial arts to re-imagine the 'illustrated history'<sup>41</sup> of a people whose contested past was not officially recorded or taught. Milligan's complaint in 1901 that 'there was no Irish art worth speaking of'<sup>42</sup> echoed an appeal she had made some years earlier for Irish artists to depict and popularize Ireland's nationalist history in painting.<sup>43</sup>

For its part, the colonial administration organised *tableaux* as part of the Lord Lieutenant's public parades, in which the streets were taken over and militarized in official public commemorations and affirmations of the Empire and the Union. Unionist *tableaux vivants* were disseminated in print form through magazines such as *The Illustograph*, which showed images of the Irish as bucolic, non-political creatures. In fact, these pictures were, in their attempts to depoliticize, deeply political. Milligan was consistently drawn towards visual forms of cultural production — magic lantern shows, photography, *tableaux* and melodrama — because they enabled her to reach a wide range of audiences, while sidestepping the thorny issue of spoken language. Her commitment to the educational efficacy of *tableaux vivants* was encouraged by her earlier experiences of delivering magic lantern slide lectures; indeed, lantern slides and *tableaux* were combined on many occasions. For example, in April 1901 she used lanterns to generate atmosphere and lighting for a *tableau*:

I returned from Dublin where Ethna Carbery ... Anna Johnston ... and I had been helping at the historical *tableaux* in the Ancient Concert Rooms, with Brendan Rogers conducting a grand choir befitting the scenes, and a limelight operator throwing blue and white and red radiance from in front ... My most successful *tableaux* in Dublin had told the story of the children of Lir, and the

wicked step-mother scene had a light of poetry and legend about it.<sup>44</sup>

A member of the Belfast Naturalists' Field Club and the Antiquarian Society from the 1880s, Milligan photographed many Irish historical sites. She then transferred these images onto glass slides, which were projected onto a wall by a magic lantern.

Under the auspices of the Gaelic League, which she joined in 1895, she presented numerous lantern lectures in Ireland and Britain. Initially, she relied on a hired gas lantern and operator; in 1898 she complained that her lecture tour of Donegal had been seriously impeded by the lack of a mobile magic lantern:

It is not possible to get a lantern for a lecture in Donegal without entailing the expense of hiring one and paying an operator from a distance. Lecturing in Letterkenny in January I met with this difficulty. A man had actually to be brought from Belfast to operate it. I would like to establish a good lecture lantern and set of slides in the control of some energetic Gaelic worker in Donegal. The explanation of the slides could be supplied in Irish, and it would not take an orator or a Gaelic linguist to give an interesting Gaelic lecture. You would attract the young people in crowds to such an entertainment. The sum of £3 10s. would, I understand, purchase a first class lantern working by oil light, an instrument which in the average schoolroom would show slides as well as needs be.<sup>45</sup>

In 1898, she convinced an American sponsor to donate a portable oil lantern to the Gaelic League, which was itself sometimes called 'the Shan Van Vocht' as a salute to Milligan and Anna Johnston's newspaper of that name. The *Derry Journal* reported how Gaelic League workers donated magic lantern slides that could be used for educational lectures, as well as for local fund-raising events. The mobility and

independence of the lecturers was a critical factor in Milligan's plan to do away with the type of magic lanterns that depended on hired gas cylinders:

At Mountcharles that evening a case was opened containing a splendid magic lantern, presented by a friend of the cause to the Shan Van Vocht, Belfast. This lantern is to be used at meetings and entertainments through Donegal, where the lecture and description of slides is given in Irish. Mr Patrick McManus presented a beautiful collection of slides, collected during his travels round the world and these include views of Rome, Paris, India and Japan, as well as views of Ireland. Miss Milligan presented a set of historical slides dealing with the lives of Red Hugh O'Donnell and Hugh O'Neill. It had been intended to use the lamp in Glenties the following evening, but as the case was only opened now for the first time no one had time to learn to operate with sufficient dexterity. It has, however, been promised to that town for an early date to be exhibited at an entertainment on behalf of the Cathedral building fund.<sup>46</sup>

When she was officially employed as a travelling lecturer by the Gaelic League in October 1904, Milligan began to travel across Ireland with her own portable magic lantern and a camera that she used to collect pictures for slides. These pictures were both projected and accompanied by storytelling, public talks or music. Milligan also then worked with local communities to re-embodiment the pictures as theatre and devise new pictures for the stage from local folklore, the cultural life of the community and from Irish songs and legends. Her formal appointment as a lecturer indicated a recognition by the League of the structural reality of the local economic and cultural practices (such as magic lantern and theatre shows) that she had already been developing unofficially for over a decade. Writing in

the *United Irishman* in 1900, Milligan made a forthright case for the suitability of magic lantern and *tableaux* shows for the advancement of the Revival's educational and nationalist agenda. She stressed the necessity of entertaining in order to instruct audiences. Moreover, she argued, theatrical and lantern images could be used effectively to draw in revenue for the language movement:

Magic lanterns and *tableaux* could be pressed into service for teaching history, and even if these attractions cost something, they will be found to be self-supporting and frequently profitable, whereas the lecture on the ordinary lines is purely a source of expense. People are rarely charged for entrance, and in some cases it would look as if they expected to be paid for coming.<sup>47</sup>

After the April 1901 performances in Dublin, Arthur Griffith acknowledged how useful the *tableaux* were in conveying narrative without language. The bilingual programme and offstage orator meant that it was possible for people to have an experience of Irish and be inspired to learn more: 'The performances this week have done splendid service to the national cause. People who never studied a line of Ireland's history in their lives and who thought nothing about their native language went away from the Ancient Concert Rooms determined to study both.'<sup>48</sup> Holloway's commentary on one particularly poor performance at the April 1901 show in Dublin indicates how central the orator was to the success of Milligan's magic lantern and *tableaux* entertainments:

Mr Wyse Power in the character of 'showman' was a hopeless failure as he barked out his remarks in an unintelligible way which could not be followed, he might as well have spoken in Chinese for all I understood of his subject matter relative to the *tableaux*.

45 *Shan Van Vocht*, 6 June 1898.

46 *Derry Journal*, 12 September 1898.

47 *United Irishman*, 7 July 1900.

- 48 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.
- 49 NLI, Holloway Diaries, April 1901 MS. 1798/1799.
- 50 Milligan was asked by the IRB activist Mark Ryan to give a talk entitled 'In the Gaelic Speaking Country' at the Bloomsbury Hall. *An Claidheamb Soluis* published a report of the 'illustrated' lecture, 10 February 1900.

Certainly he takes the cake for indistinct public speaking!<sup>49</sup>

In the 1890s, Milligan took photographs of Gaelic League workers and projected them as magic lantern slides to Irish communities abroad. She displayed and further enriched the new context of the Revival by connecting emigrant Irish communities (most often in places such as Scotland, Liverpool and London) with those involved in the revival of language and culture 'at home'. It was essential that the audience recognized the figures they saw on screen. The power of the image was critically important in the formation of a community that was based on the complex dynamics of recognition.

The Gaelic League paper *An Claidheamb Soluis* (*The Sword of Light*) published a report of one of Milligan's lectures, delivered in London, called 'In the Gaelic Speaking Country'. The magic lantern show was very similar to the structure of a *tableau* performance: the images that were projected onto a screen for people to see were accompanied by stories provided by an offstage narrator (in this case Milligan herself). Live Irish music was also an important component of these shows. On this occasion, Milligan's sister, Charlotte Milligan Fox (founder of the London Irish Folk Song Society), provided post-slide-show music, but live music and singing from the audience also often accompanied the pictures as they were projected from the magic lantern or performed as *tableaux* on stage:

Every available seat was occupied, and many were unfortunately unable to obtain admission. ... Miss Milligan, who received a great ovation, immediately began her lecture, which she delivered in a chatty, pleasant, and very interesting manner. She had a magnificent set of views shown by the magic lantern as the groundwork of the lecture ... Photos of Gaelic League gatherings, groups of Irish speaking people and of prominent Gaelic workers, beauty spots in the Gaelic

country, old seats of piety, power and learning, were flashed on the screen, each being appropriately referred to, and the whole so skilfully blended and interwoven as to make the subject interesting to all, and to bring the members of the league in London into still closer touch with their friends in the movement at home. Each picture on being recognised was greeted with enthusiasm, and often with an Irish blessing ... A picture of Thomas Concannon received a very hearty greeting ... The vote of thanks to the lecturer was proposed by Father O'Sullivan of Hounslow, seconded by W. B. Yeats, and supported by F. Hugh O'Donnell. After Miss Milligan had suitably replied a selection of Irish airs was exquisitely played ... Miss Charlotte Milligan Fox next played on the piano her own beautiful arrangement of the grand old war song, 'Cath Ceim an Fheidh' and also of a charming Jacobite ballad.<sup>50</sup>

Fund-raising was a key part of this cultural project. In October 1904, Milligan herself was appointed by the League to present slides and living pictures of 'Irish historic and literary subjects' in order to 'propagate the cause and get in funds'.<sup>51</sup> Michael Booth notes that the 'sheer spectacular effect' exhibited by many of the British living pictures relied upon copious financial resources: 'A great deal of money could be and frequently was spent on costumes and properties for the *tableau vivant*'.<sup>52</sup> Whereas *tableaux* in America and Britain were often extremely expensive, Milligan's living pictures were performed as fund-raisers for Irish cultural and political groups with limited resources. For example, some of the money raised by Inghinidhe na hÉireann's *tableaux* show in April 1901 funded the publication of *Poems and Ballads* (1902) by their comrade William Rooney (1873–1901). Money collected by Milligan on her touring *tableaux* shows was 'sent forward to the language fund'.<sup>53</sup> Milligan organized the Gaelic League in

and around Cork with Thomas MacDonagh and helped set up League branches and raise funds in the North with Roger Casement. With Ada MacNeill, she toured Donegal and the Glens of Antrim in 1906 to raise money for the establishment of an Irish college in County Donegal.<sup>54</sup> The college was opened in October of the same year. At this occasion it was reported that ‘Eilis Ni Mhaeagain [Alice Milligan] delights students, visitors and country people with *tableaux vivants* illustrating Irish history’.<sup>55</sup> As late as 1910 Milligan informed Mary Hutton that she had once again assisted in the production of *tableaux vivants* to raise ‘some money for the building fund’.<sup>56</sup>

### Living Pictures, Living History

Fintan O’Toole: Doesn’t the whole Field Day project then depend on political nationalism and on the achievement of a united Ireland?

Brian Friel: I don’t think it should be read in those terms. I think it should lead to a cultural state, not a political state. And I think out of that cultural state, a possibility of a political state follows.

Interview with Brian Friel, *In Dublin*,  
28 October 1982

Milligan radicalized Thomas Davis’s ideas about visual culture in her work with a broad range of Irish cultural activists in Ireland and abroad and in making theatre in local communities. Her theatrical pictures were not just about teaching ‘through the eye’; they were participatory, communitarian and localized. By creating for the stage pictures in which people embodied representations of Irish history, she helped to release this history from the frozen official narrative. Milligan was aware of the broad contemporary international context for the *tableau* form, but she was also looking back to the late eighteenth century when a re-animated Irish national identity was contesting public space. Scenes

from Ireland’s pre-colonial past were at that time already a common feature of the historical Irish stage. For example, processional stage displays that ‘appealed to the incipient nationalism’ of some theatre spectators achieved great popularity in late eighteenth-century Ireland. Richard Sheridan’s farce *St. Patrick’s Day* was introduced and concluded by the first ‘patriotic extravaganzas’ to resemble a series of Gaelic *tableaux vivants*. Staged in Cork in August 1776, ‘colourful pageantry’ framed the drama:

A long and motley procession of ‘Hibernians’, including ‘Irish Kings, Milesians, druids, bards, Dermot Roderick O’Connor, Bryan Borro, Sitric O’Neill, Strongbow, O’Neal, Earl of Pembroke’, opened the performance, and a musical number ‘Carolan the Irish Bard’ by ‘the full grand chorus of all the characters’ concluded it.<sup>57</sup>

Robert Owenson’s 1777 entertainment, *The Shamrock; or, St. Patrick’s Day*, has been described by Luke Gibbons as a ‘Celtic Disneyland’ that similarly resembled living picture shows.<sup>58</sup> Owenson (1744–1812) was the father of the novelist Lady Morgan. His production of Sheridan was of a piece with those of the ‘National Theatre’ he later opened in Ireland. The performances included music that drew the audience in for the stage productions:

In 1784 he leased the Fishamble Theatre in Dublin ... to mount a ‘National Theatre’ with the support of the patriot aristocracy ... Besides the anthem of the Irish Volunteers, songs in Irish were regularly sung in his theatre, with harp accompaniment by his daughter Sydney, who deemed it ‘*very Irish*’ in her *Memoirs*.<sup>59</sup>

Milligan’s own ideas about *tableaux* seemed to have developed from her participation in the unofficial cultural activities conducted

51 *The Leader* (San Francisco), 10 January 1905.

52 Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850–1910* (London, 1981), 18.

53 *An Claidheamb Soluis*, 15 April 1905.

54 *An Claidheamb Soluis*, 31 March 1906.

55 *An Claidheamb Soluis*, 6 October 1906.

56 NLI, Mary Hutton Papers, MS. 8611 (13).

57 William Smith Clark, *The Irish Stage in the County Towns 1720–1800* (Oxford, 1965), 105.

- 58 Luke Gibbons, 'From Ossian to O'Carolan', in Fiona Stafford and Howard Gaskill, eds., *From Gaelic to Romantic: Ossianic Translations* (Amsterdam, 1998), 229.
- 59 Robert Welch and Bruce Stewart, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford, 1996), 463; Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan's Memoirs; Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1863), vol. 1, 17.
- 60 *Shan Van Vocht*, 2 September 1898.
- 61 Timothy G. McMahon, *Grand Opportunity: The Gaelic Revival and Irish Society 1893–1910* (Syracuse, 2008), 210.
- 62 *Irish News*, 17 March 1902.

for the 1798 centenary. Street parades and other public events constituted a form of radicalized commemorative art. She declared in the *Shan Van Vocht* that decorated banners were infinitely more effective for young people in conveying national history and forging anti-colonial resistance than any textbook. In a report on the Wolfe Tone procession held in Dublin, she commended participants from the north for their 'magnificent banners' portraying the United Irishmen. She asserted that the pictures of 'Wolfe Tone and his comrades on Cave Hill; McCracken at Antrim's fight; Tone's interview with Napoleon; McCracken's execution' would act as 'illustrated history lessons to the young people in the black north'.<sup>60</sup> As a member of the Gaelic League's Tableaux Committee from 1902, Milligan also co-ordinated costume pageants of Irish history for the annual Irish Language Week parades in Dublin's city centre. Timothy McMahon describes the appeal of these pageants and processions:

As long as they remained a viable means of public appeal, the language processions provided revivalists with a unique way to bring their cause into the streets of the capital. By drawing on traditions of civic pageantry, the League addressed Dubliners through a familiar medium that allowed unions and trade societies, temperance organisations, friendly societies, and other advocacy groups to align themselves opportunistically with the language cause. In practice, therefore, pre-existing associational networks, the socioeconomic conditions of the city, the condition of the League as an organisation, and the spectacle of the processions themselves all combined to affect how people interpreted and internalised the League's linguistic nationalism.<sup>61</sup>

The 1902 language demonstration included 'picturesque' and 'emblematic *tableaux*'

paraded through the streets of Dublin.<sup>62</sup> In 1907, *An Claidheamb Soluis* reported how the festival was an integral part of developing the revival of the language as a living movement. Costumed representations of Ireland's historical and mythical past were an intrinsic part of this project. Groups participating in the language parade were invited to choose a scene and perform this as a *tableau* on the day, while moving through the city streets:

The results of the activity of the *Tableaux* sub-committee promise to be of the happiest. A list of the incidents illustrative of the Irish history from the beginning, and divided into periods, was drawn up and from this each Craobh [branch] was invited to select one or more *tableaux* already selected: (1) Mythological or Tuatha Dé Danann Period — Mananan Mac Lir bringing the Arts back to Eire (2) Red Branch or Cuchulainn Period — Oilioll and Meadh comparing their possessions (3) Fenian or Ossianic Period — Oisín and Niamh in Tír na nÓg (4) Christian Period — dialogue between Oisín and St. Patrick (5) Danish Period — Brian of Banba meets Mathghamhain, his brother (6) Norman Period — Lorcán Ó Tuathail appealing to the chiefs for unity against foreign invader; Marriage of Eva to Strongbow (7) O'Neill and O'Donnell Period — Reception of Red Hugh at Gleann Maoiliughra (8) Confederation Period.<sup>63</sup>

### Image, Vision, Culture

My notion of an Irish National Theatre is that it ought to be the nursery of an Irish dramatic literature which, while making a worldwide appeal, would see life through Irish eyes. For myself, I must say that I cannot conceive it possible to achieve this except through the medium of the Irish language ... English as spoken by educated Englishmen differs from that

spoken by Irishmen ... the subtle Gaelic mind struggling for expression through an unsympathetic medium.

Frank Fay, *United Irishman*,  
1 May, 1901

In 1938 Milligan was invited to judge the *tableaux* presented at the *feis* in Omagh, County Tyrone. She readily accepted the offer because of her extensive ‘experience in organising *tableaux* in places as far apart as Carndonagh and Skibbereen, in Dublin and in Belfast, in spacious premises like the Antient Concert Rooms and the Ulster Hall and often in tents at Feiseanna and little country school-houses’.<sup>64</sup> In the late 1890s and early 1900s, *tableaux* had been crucial to her political activities. Following a highly successful exhibition of living pictures in Belfast in May 1898, staged in conjunction with the city’s Gaelic League and Arts Society, she was inspired to mount further shows in Derry (1899), Belfast (1900) and Dublin (April and August 1901). She subsequently took *poses plastiques* to schools and Gaelic League branches across Ireland, tailoring her visualizations of national history to suit the demands of local constituencies. *Tableaux* were accessible in two senses; they readily engaged their audiences and they could be produced by groups with limited funding and modest dramatic skills. Thus local communities, language groups and small scale political and cultural organizations were able to participate directly in the theatrical memorialization of national identity. Accounts written by those who witnessed the *tableaux* shows include Pádraic Colum, who recalled that the April 1901 show, organized by Milligan in Dublin, included scenes from Thomas Moore’s *Irish Melodies*, which he defined as

living pictures that were carried along by the music ... [for instance] ‘Avenging and Bright Falls the Swift Sword of Erin’ in which the audience would see an

appealing Deirdre, a frowning King and stalwart young heroes who would stand for no betrayals. I was 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.<sup>65</sup>

Milligan staged ‘Avenging and Bright’ several times as a *tableau vivant*. Writing in 1938, she described the disasters that had befallen the League when it held a *feis* in Carnlough, County Antrim, in 1904:

*Tableaux* were shown at a hall and Deirdre was very ambitiously proposed to me as a subject of local interest. We were to show her with the sons of Uisineach riding in the chariot and pointing towards the red cloud of ill omen over Emania, while a choir sang ‘Avenging and Bright. ... We just gave the hindquarters of the horse, suggested by a deerskin flung over a bolster which was lashed to a high music stand. A brown sweeping horse tail projected between the chariot shafts and Naoisi leaned forward holding the reins ... Alas, before the curtain rose the music stand began to lower itself; our horse was sinking to diminutive proportions. ‘Never mind,’ said Louis Walsh consolingly, ‘they are used to Cushendal ponies here.’<sup>66</sup>

The actress Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh also remembered living pictures directed by Milligan that re-enacted scenes from history or legend: ‘William Rooney’s “Dear Dark Head”, or, perhaps, something out of Moore’s “Rich and Rare” in which would appear a lady, richly bejewelled and garbed in silks, wooed by a glittering Sir Knight to the accompaniment of appropriate choral music’.<sup>67</sup>

In 1949, Colum recalled more precisely how the living picture shows were a hybrid of music and narrative in which ‘statuesque groups [were] introduced by some familiar

63 *An Claidheamb Soluis*, 17 May 1907.

64 *Derry Journal*, 27 May 1938.

65 Pádraic Colum, ‘The Early Days of the Irish Theatre’, *Dublin Magazine* (October/December 1949), 14.

- 66 *Derry Journal*, 27 May 1938.
- 67 Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years: Recollections as Told to Edward Kenny* (Dublin, 1955), 2–3.
- 68 Colum, ‘The Early Days of the Irish Theatre’, 14.
- 69 J. L. Molloy, *Songs of Ireland: Including the Most Favourite of Moore’s Irish Melodies* (London, 1873), 1.
- 70 *Irish News*, 7 May 1898.
- 71 *Irish News*, 28 April 1909.
- 72 *United Irishman*, 15 March 1913.

piece of music ... holding their pose for some minutes — an elementary show in which costume, music, and striking appearance were ingredients’.<sup>68</sup> Thomas Moore was integral to Milligan’s own project because he was taken to be one of the principal advocates of the United Irishmen in popular Irish culture. His *Irish Melodies* were based on airs transcribed at the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792 by the musician Edward Bunting (1773–1843), who lived with the McCracken family in Belfast. In 1911 Charlotte Milligan Fox and Alice Milligan wrote a history of the Harp Festival, *Annals of the Irish Harpers*, based on lost Bunting manuscripts that had been found by Charlotte and which Alice bequeathed to Queen’s University, Belfast, in 1916. Music operated as a key part of the *tableau* show in the same way as it did in the late plays of Sean O’Casey: in both contexts, Irish music and song evoke a strong connection between audience and players. As with the instance of Douglas Hyde walking onto the stage out of the audience, music that was both familiar and revered could break the separation between those who watched and those who performed.

In his collection *Songs of Ireland* (1873), J. L. Molloy had suggested that music was the key to the Irish ‘national character’ and that songs were the surest representation of the ‘popular mind’.<sup>69</sup> The connection between pictures and music was overtly introduced in May 1898 when a series of ‘legendary and historic *tableaux*’ were considered an appropriate conclusion to the Gaelic League’s week-long music festival, held in Belfast. In order to make sure people from different communities could attend, the League negotiated with the railways to put on extra services. The *Irish News* carried a report that ‘in May 1898, the Feis Ceoil held its meeting in Belfast, and the local Gaelic League determined to have an innings’.<sup>70</sup> In 1909 Milligan recalled how the Gaelic League orchestrated the show ‘with the assistance of members of the Art Society’.<sup>71</sup> Milligan’s *tableaux vivants* were

accompanied by Irish airs, many composed by her sister Charlotte. An unseen chorus sang along with the *tableaux* from behind the stage curtain. The *United Irishman* noted that the invisible source of the music during *tableaux* in Dublin added to its ethereal presence: ‘strains of melody’ from an ‘unseen harpist ... accorded perfectly with the pictures’.<sup>72</sup>

Milligan herself expressly conceived of the *tableau vivant* as a vehicle for communal and national unification. Her recollection in 1913 of a show that she had helped to organize in west Cork underscores the collective nature of the enterprise:

Some nine or ten years ago I visited Macroom as envoy of the Gaelic League, and organised a historical *tableau* in the Market House. I found myself supported on all sides by the clan O’Leary. One stalwart Gael of that name impersonated Brian Boru in his death struggle with the Danes; another gave in Irish a recital, describing the pictures as the uprolling curtain disclosed them to view, whilst a third O’Leary manipulated the lighting apparatus — and there were, I know not how many, juveniles of the name among the *dramatis personae*, singers and dancers.<sup>73</sup>

Milligan and Ada McNeill worked together during the 1906 *feis* in Cushendall, County Antrim. This was the occasion when Casement took the initiative to clear a disused overgrown field after a unionist landowner refused the League access to a site on his land. Milligan choreographed ‘The Mask of the Nine Glens’, which was both a *tableau vivant* and a procession that formed ‘a unique open-air spectacle ... headed by the Irish War Pipes and by the artistic banners’. The music was provided by Francis Joseph Bigger’s Belfast Pipe Band. The ceremonial, processional pageantry, which involved music and Irish language recitation, became Milligan’s trademark in the Gaelic League movement.<sup>74</sup>

*Tableaux vivants* became the central focus of her work with amateur groups because they were easier to stage than dramas; as Kirsten Gram Holstrom observes, living pictures did not make ‘excessive claims on the talents of the participants’.<sup>75</sup> An especially illuminating insight into Milligan’s nurturing role for amateur theatre groups is provided by the letters she received in 1899 from Mary Spring Rice (1880–1924), president of the Foynes Branch of the Gaelic League. Spring Rice later organized the Howth gunrunning in 1914. She was heavily involved in the Gaelic League movement and Milligan’s theatre practice seemed to her vital in creating and stimulating the language community. Because her language group was eager to stage living pictures, Spring Rice wrote to Milligan requesting assistance with costumes and scenery:

I think they would hardly be up to acting The Last Feast of the Fianna but we had thought of having *tableaux* [drawn] from the Fianna, one of the murder of Brian Boru, one of Malachi and the collar of gold, the last two the same as the ones they had in Belfast in May. I wonder could you lend us any of the costumes for these? It would be a great help if you could, and we would, of course, take great care of them. The people here are getting so keen about the Irish that they would be very much interested in anything of the kind.<sup>76</sup>

Milligan suggested that it would be possible to devise a coherent series of *tableaux* centred upon the Brian Boru narrative. This manuscript is the only surviving example of a *tableau vivant* script by her. She redesigned his death scene to include a retrospect of his successful reign in Ireland. The first scene is based on the story from which Moore’s poem ‘Rich and Rare’ is derived; a ‘young maiden of great beauty adorned with jewels’ walks alone ‘from end to end of Erin without fear of danger and

robbery’. The manuscript indicates how the visual action of the various *tableaux* should be staged. The numbers in the following extract indicate key moments announced to the audience, rather than to the number of *tableaux* performed:

8. The Danes were at last routed.  
Though Murrogh fell in the front of the fight the power of the foreigner was broken forever. As Brian knelt at evening prayer there came two Danes that were flying from the battle & they looked at him through the trees — (curtain rises)  
It is the king said one — no said the other it is only the priest. No said the other it is Brian the high king himself let us kill him as he kneels.
9. They fell upon Brian and a great struggle followed.  
He seized his sword — fought them bravely.
10. And though they killed him his soldiers returning found him lying victorious in death upon the bodies of the foreign foemen.

In response, Spring Rice explained:

I do quite agree that Brian Boru would be so much better in a series than isolated and we all think your plan most effective. But I’m afraid we have no one good enough for Brian and we should like to see your plan for Oisín before deciding. You say Oisín is simpler. Perhaps we could attempt Brian next year ... of course I see it would be so much better to have several *tableaux* on the same subject, just changing the pose and position; besides being more historically instructive to the audience than several of different ages and periods altogether.<sup>77</sup>

The overarching consideration, as Spring Rice makes clear, was to ensure that the presentation was ‘historically instructive’.

- 73 Quoted in Seamus Clarke, *Feis na nGleann: A History of the Festival of the Glens* (Holywood, 1990), 17.
- 74 Clarke, *Feis na nGleann*, 18.
- 75 Kirsten Gram Holstrom, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770–1815* (Stockholm, 1967), 229.
- 76 Milligan Papers, Allen Library.

- 77 Milligan Papers, Allen Library.
- 78 Katherine Mullen, “Typhoid Turnips and Crooked Cucumbers”: Theosophy in *Ulysses*, *Modernism/Modernity*, 8, 1 (2001), 77–97. 77.
- 79 Mary Chapman, “Living Pictures”: Women and *Tableaux Vivants* in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction and Culture’, *Wide Angle*, 18 (1996), 22–50, 29–30.
- 80 *Shan Van Vocht*, 4 October 1897.

### Women and Nation

Katherine Mullen explores the (un)conscious presence of sexual visual culture in James Joyce’s Ireland: ‘Joyce places on show what commonly issued from the spirit cabinet; scantily clad “ghosts”, who disconcertingly resembled the smutty postcards, indecent stereoscopes, and *tableaux vivants* of popular erotic entertainments.’<sup>78</sup> Milligan, in contrast, accorded Irish women more dynamic roles, in public space, on stage and behind the scenes. Mary Chapman observes that women in America gravitated towards staging *tableaux* because of the genre’s elements of participatory democracy:

The performers and producers of *tableaux vivants* were predominantly women ... In Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and Alcott’s *Behind the Mask*, for example, young unmarried women perform lead roles, while men observe. Married women serve as hostesses or stage managers. The manuals support this division of roles. There are on average more than fifty percent more roles for adult women than for adult men in all the manuals I examined.<sup>79</sup>

Women in Milligan’s *tableaux* were not identified by their sexual relationship to men. It is important that these shows were performed in public space rather than in elite drawing rooms and by women who often identified themselves as part of a cultural or political collective. The silence of the *tableaux* was in itself a politics. Women, Milligan had complained, ‘were not called upon to have any opinion whatsoever in constitutional politics’.<sup>80</sup> Their silence, when staged, became a form of speaking back. Milligan produced *tableaux* with women who were artists, educators, community, cultural and political activists. The Gaelic League included many women. The very first major show of *tableaux* Milligan helped produce in Belfast took place in 1898 at Belfast’s Exhibition Hall,

with leading cultural activists such as Anna Johnston, Mary Hutton, Edith McCann and Rosamund Praeger taking part. Yet a major cultural genre that was led by and included so many women has been ignored in the standard histories of Ireland’s anti-colonial struggle.

The silence of these shows was important in opening up a radical inclusive space, particularly in contested areas such as Belfast. Women could work together on the production of *tableaux* despite holding (and indeed, sometimes, because they held) opposing political views. *Tableaux* made it possible for a radical nationalist such as Anna Johnston to work alongside the staunch unionist sculptor Rosamund Praeger. Praeger designed the sets for the 1898 show that Johnston performed in and Milligan directed. Women contributed to such events without defined titles as ‘director’ and ‘stage designer’; they produced and performed in unscripted shows in which they remained largely unnamed, where their roles were contributions to a whole. It was, in essence, a collective ‘event’. At issue in the debates about native language and national theatre was the question of who had the right to speak for the Irish nation and how that nation could be spoken for. The Gaelic League was not just about reinstating the Irish language; it was part of the Revival project to create the cultural conditions that would give the Irish language and national theatre meaning. In this context, the *tableau* was a symbol of the national body awaiting speech. At the turn of the century these living picture shows were crucial for the huge numbers of people who did not 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, for connecting people in difficult political contexts, for learners at different levels of Irish-language training, for the inclusion of northern Protestants, like Alice Milligan herself, whose upbringing led them



Weekly Freeman cartoon: 'Rejoice Oh! Greatly': Free supplement with Weekly Freeman, 4 June 1887. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

- 81 *United Irishman*, 4 January 1902.  
 82 12 July 1901; Clontarf branch: C[rime] S[pecial] B[ranch]. 1901 24060/S.  
 83 NLI, Alice Milligan Papers, MS. 5048 (36).

to believe that Irish was not their native language or part of their national culture. Silence represented a halfway house, a space, a means of crossing borders and transgressing the barriers erected by years of colonial occupation.

In addition, *tableau vivant* shows were clearly significant in providing a cultural platform for women, who were often banned from nationalist political organizations. Milligan aligned her work with Irish feminist organizations such as Inghinidhe na hÉireann, which had been founded by Maud Gonne in April 1900. Griffith declared: ‘The starting of Cumann na nGaedheal called into existence another body, composed of Irishwomen, called Inghinidhe na hÉireann, and whatever the men might do in forming the Irish national character it rested principally with the women of Ireland to form it.’<sup>81</sup> The Crime Special Branch reports reveal how the colonial administration in Ireland viewed this organization:

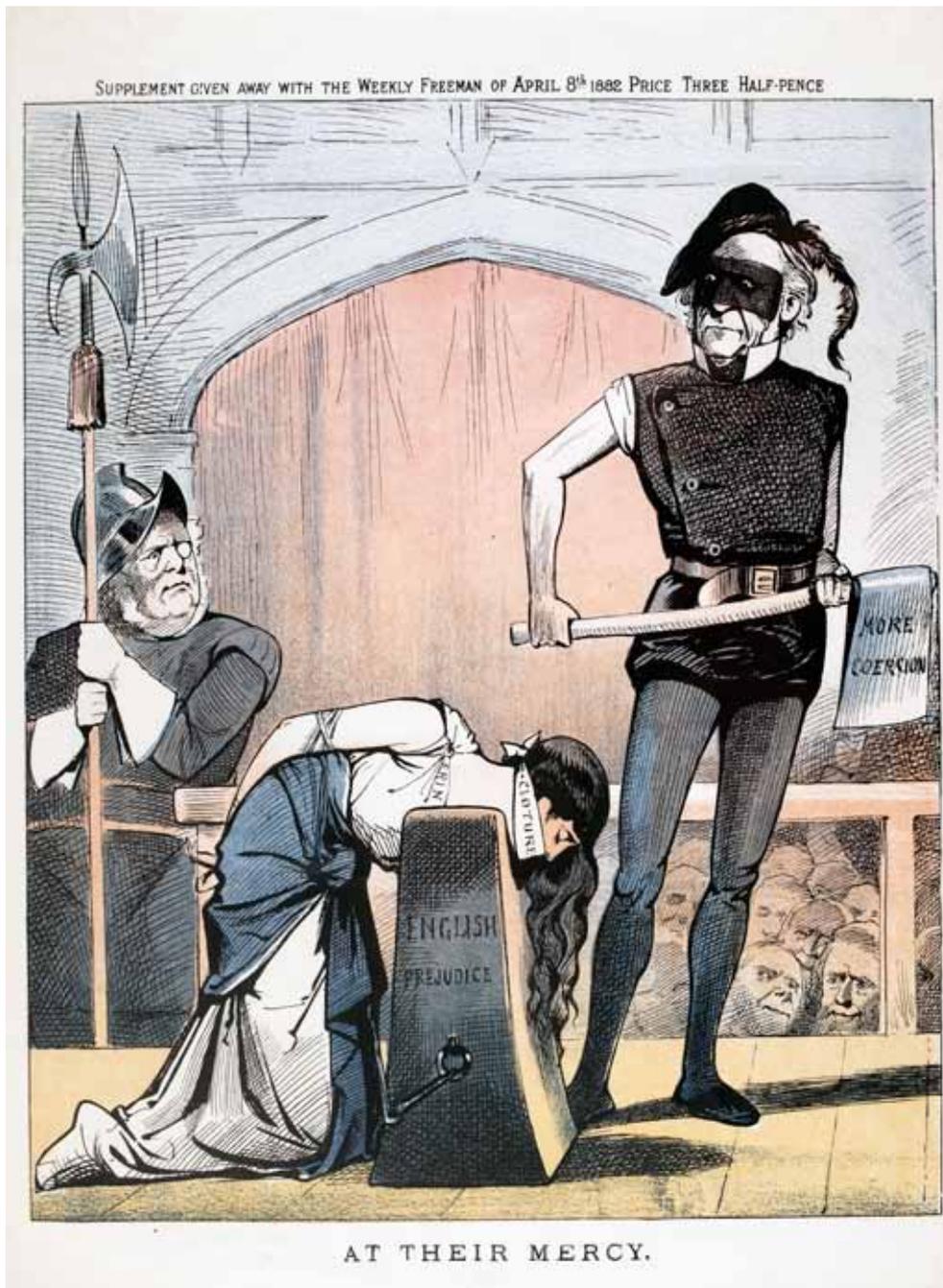
This society was formed in Dublin towards the end of the year 1900, and has its offices at Lower Abbey Street. It consists of a central branch in Dublin with as many branches as can be promoted in the different other counties of Ireland & Gt. Britain. The central branch has Miss Maud Gonne for President ... It will be observed that this Society and the Confederation of the Gael Society are almost similar in their constitution, Rules and Objectives, and that the distinction between these consists almost entirely in the fact that the one society is composed entirely by women, whilst the other is composed of nearly all men.<sup>82</sup>

The *tableau* had already proved a major attraction for the Irish Women’s Association in Belfast. After witnessing the 1900 series of *tableaux* in Belfast, Maud Gonne sought Milligan’s aid for a show she was planning for Dublin with Inghinidhe na hÉireann:

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.<sup>83</sup>

Milligan and Johnston joined Inghinidhe na hÉireann and helped with the organization’s drama classes. In 1901, along with the Fay brothers, they staged two shows: the first took place in April, the second, as a protest during Horse Show Week in August. The performances included short plays by Milligan, as well as several different ‘types’ of *tableau*: some conveyed stories, others enacted narratives from music; pictures were enacted by the women almost like the pageants that would characterize the later Gaelic League language demonstrations. The construction of the *tableau* shows exemplified the material skills of local production. Great care and attention were devoted to making the clothes, to the designs for the costumes, and to sourcing the materials in Ireland. The *United Irishman* commended the organization’s work: ‘We have heard nothing but praise on every side of the *tableaux*, and the Inghinidhe na hÉireann are deserving of all praise.’<sup>84</sup> Despite the popularity of the event, however, Holloway felt that an atmosphere of ‘funereal gloom & melancholy’ marred the *tableaux*:

Can’t one be cheerful & Irish at the same time? ... The scenes of *tableaux* illustrative of the events in the story of ‘The Pursuit of Diarmuid & Grainne’ were sometimes effective & the choral music — though ever doleful — was capitally sung by the invisible choir. This part of the show was drearily produced ... The *tableaux* of ‘The Children of Lir’ was effective & pretty, but I did not think much of the ‘Red Hugh



Weekly Freeman cartoon: 'At Their Mercy': Free supplement with Weekly Freeman, 8 April 1882. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

O'Donnell' series.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most often performed *tableaux* in pre- and post-partition Ireland was that of 'Erin Fettered, Erin Free'.

Maud Gonne described how the children's *matinée* in August 1901, staged by Milligan and Inghinidhe na hÉireann, repeated the *tableau* of Ireland as a woman eventually liberated:

- 84 *United Irishman*, 3 April 1901.  
 85 NLI, Holloway Diaries, April 1901 MS. 1798/1799.  
 86 *United Irishman*, 7 September 1901.  
 87 *Derry Journal*, 27 May 1938.  
 88 Chapman, ““Living Pictures””, 26.

As the curtain rose on the last *tableaux* of Erin Fettered and Erin Free, and Erin as a beautiful girl with broken chains falling from her and a drawn sword in her hand appeared, the little children rose to their feet and their voices joined sweetly and shrilly in the chorus of ‘A Nation Once Again’.<sup>86</sup>

Milligan witnessed an identical living picture during a post-partition *tableau* show held in the grounds of the Loreto Convent in Omagh. She reported the event for the press. People, she declared, did not need to hear the orator because ‘everyone knew what the pictures meant’:

At the outset three figures faced the attentive multitude at the front of the platform. Pale, downcast, mournful, a figure in white, veiled to the knee in transparent black, wearing heavy fetters. Behind her at the back of the stage an empty throne. Every individual in the audience knows at a glance it is Eire, our Motherland ... Justice at length advances, the fetters are removed and fall with a clang. The Green and gold cloak is placed around Eire. She is led to the empty throne to the air of ‘A Nation Once Again’ and the white-robed figure, symbolising the faith she has defended, sets the crown of independent nationhood on her brow.<sup>87</sup>

People were familiar with the images and knew how to interpret them, largely because they had appeared regularly in the Irish nationalist presses since the late nineteenth century. Both the *Weekly Freeman* and *United Ireland* carried a regular, glossy, pull-out, colour supplement 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 prison cell. Such sketches were always accompanied by captions relating what ‘Erin’ was thinking

or saying’. They are very similar to the *tableaux* that Milligan staged, in which the physical body was also a symbolic representation that generated broader political and cultural meaning. In *tableaux*, then, Milligan 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 nationalist press.

In the American women’s movement, similar living pictures were used as part of public processions. In 1913, for example, members of the National American Women’s Suffrage Association marched to the Treasury Building in Washington, DC, ‘to present a series of *tableaux* representing Justice, Plenty, Columbia, Peace, Charity, and Liberty to campaign for the woman’s vote’.<sup>88</sup> The 1925 International Council of Women was also held in Washington and opened with an ‘Allegorical *tableau*’ that portrayed an image of the conference’s agenda.<sup>89</sup> The Inghinidhe na hÉireann event of April 1901 concluded with a *tableau* that ‘represented the Boer fight for freedom’, an anti-colonial struggle that served as a rallying point for Irish nationalists.<sup>90</sup> The *United Irishman* reported how the audience at this show appealed for the women to re-enact the series of *tableaux* several times. Indeed, it was in this very show that many of the later prisoners of 1923 gained their first experience of performing *tableaux*:

Maeve, greatest of Ireland’s heroines, Grania Mhaol visiting Elizabeth and pulverising the virgin monarch, who strove to impress the splendid Irishwomen; St. Brigid, the Inghéan 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.<sup>91</sup>

Gibbons writes of Anne Devlin’s unwillingness to betray Robert Emmet to the British in the face of torture as an ‘act of intransigence’, suggesting that ‘Anne’s silence is similar to her domestic or maternal persona. It is not a submissive silence, standing outside signification and, by extension, language, power and representation.’<sup>92</sup> The pictorial stillness of Pat Murphy’s 1984 film *Anne Devlin* is visually similar to the *tableau* versions performed by Irish women earlier in the century. It was the memory of this silence as an act of resistance that the women prisoners of 1923 re-animated when they restaged Devlin and Emmet. Such silence under torture was protest. Silence after death was power. Just as Emmet’s speech from the dock projected the republican struggle into the future, the pictures by the women hunger strikers of 1923 also projected, through silence, a future beyond the moment of their production. Alice Milligan played a key part in finding and developing the form for this utopian vision.

### The Radical Modernism of Ireland’s Cultural Revival

MICHAEL: But there is one memory of that Lughnasa time that visits me most often; and what fascinates me about that memory is that it owes nothing to fact. In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory ... Dancing with eyes half-closed because to open them would be to break the spell. Dancing as if language had surrendered to movement — as if ritual, this wordless ceremony, was now the way to speak, to whisper private and sacred things, to be in touch with some otherness. Dancing as if the very heart of life and all its hopes

might be found in those assuaging notes and those hushed rhythms and in those silent and hypnotic movements. Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary ...

Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1991)

Milligan’s dramas relied on a kind of performance practice that makes their value and meaning almost inaccessible to us now; it is as though they are written in a language that is not English or Irish, but something in between. Can what was released to audiences then, be rereleased to us now? Anna Johnston, as the waiting maid, forever pours the sleeping potion into a silver pot held by Princess Grania, who was played by Edith McCann in 1898 in the Ulster Hall at the Gaelic League music festival. Queen Maeve looks out at us directly, clasping her spear and shield. This is the only known image of Elise McGown. No records in the official archives chart her life. Resting on her shoulder, in a white gown, hands clasped together, hair falling around a half secret smile, is ‘Miss Davidson’, alias Finbarr, daughter of Maeve.

These are two of four surviving photographic images of Milligan’s theatre practice. Three of them were probably not taken in context. The lighting suggests that they were restaged under the glass roof of photographic studios in Belfast and Letterkenny. Writing in 1931 of such nineteenth-century studio photographs, Walter Benjamin observed: ‘Everything about these early pictures was built to last ... the very creases in people’s clothes have an air of permanence.’<sup>93</sup> Yet although these pictures are taken in a studio, they are meant to represent and convey ‘live’ performance. The theatre show is a display of stillness, yet the photograph cannot capture the ‘aura’ of that stillness. These pictures do not have the same unification, the same confidence in ‘permanence’. They are part of a cultural movement to transform the static, to alter the un-

89 Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women’s Movement* (New Jersey, 1997), 56.

90 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.

91 *United Irishman*, 13 April 1901.

92 Luke Gibbons, ‘The Politics of Silence: Anne Devlin, Women and Irish Cinema’, in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), 114.

'Maeve of Connaught and her Daughter Finbarr (Miss Elise McGown and Miss Davidson). Gaelic Tableaux at Belfast', June 1898. *The Gentlewoman* (London). Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



Queen Maeve of Connaught and her Daughter Finbarr (Miss Elise McGown and Miss Davidson).  
**Gaelic Tableaux at Belfast.**

democracy that has been permanent. These are anonymous costumed performers. They are not people photographed for themselves or because of who they are. They are photographed for the roles they perform. The women photographed in 1898 perform

within a movement. Writing of the French photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927), Benjamin observed that he had achieved 'the emancipation of the image from aura'. Atget 'looked for what was unremarkable, forgotten, cast adrift'.<sup>94</sup>

It is perhaps in Benjamin's description of Atget that we get close to the significance of the *tableaux* images and the community theatre practice they played a crucial role in forming. These extraordinary pictures are from *The Gentlewoman*, a London magazine devoted to illustrated images of empire — the travels of the English monarchy, the decadent pastimes of the aristocracy. The Irish *tableaux* in June 1898 were an amusing addition to their column about the successful music festivals of the 'Celtic fringe'. In this journal, these costumed images of 'yesteryear', from the loyalist bastion of Belfast, were of nothing more than quaint 'gentle' women doing their bit to celebrate traditions that did not threaten empire, but instead enhanced its cultural texture. They were performing local, familiar, parlour games in ambitious home-made native costume.

But the potion that Johnston was pouring in 1898 was anything but a drug to induce sleep. This was not the moment at which Oisín was about to leave Ireland for the land of forgetfulness. Milligan's Ossianic trilogy, staged by the Irish Literary Theatre in 1900, explored the moment of his return.<sup>95</sup> In her plays, audiences witness the moment that Oisín wakes up and touches a new Ireland, reactivating its political consciousness. The audience and St. Patrick watch as Oisín's re-found memories are enacted as *tableaux* on an inner stage; the personal is shared as the historically national. The *caoine* enacted at the end of the 'Brian of Banba *tableaux* series' demonstrated how the living in 1901 were alive to the possibilities of the undead; Queen Maeve and Elise McGown simultaneously look out at us in battle gear. A picture of a mythical struggle, it is also a struggle taking shape in Belfast in 1898. These pictures remain a memory of the beginning of re-memory. They depict radical cultural and language activists who were concerned with all that had been 'unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift' by the economic, social, political and cultural

devaluation of Ireland under British colonial rule. These were people intent on exploring utopia. For Milligan, '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.'<sup>96</sup> These women developed a powerful theatrical genre that was able to generate a communal sense in a country (and in a city) where community was sectarianized, where women were denied votes, jobs and education and where Irish national history and language were outlawed.

The silence of the *tableau* was not a silence of submission. It was political. *Tableaux* operated through code. The women prisoners in A Wing of Kilmainham in 1923 did not need to tell the prisoners in B Wing what they were performing. The people at the back of the field in Omagh in 1938 did not need to hear an orator describe the *tableaux* on stage. They recognized what they were seeing; they understood the context and the iconography. What these audiences were seeing was not simply what was being performed in front of their eyes. The 'captions' to the images are implied and therefore endlessly 'open'. A photograph such as that of Milligan's tableau of Oisín leaving Tír na nÓg is perhaps an example of what Andrew MacNamara calls a 'contra picture', in which primitivism and modernity are fused.<sup>97</sup> *Tableaux* were modernist because they displayed a hyper-primitivism: they were a very self-aware part of a highly sophisticated visual culture. Their stillness and costumed reference to legend and pre-colonial Ireland (even in photographs) were not antiquated or anti-modern. In a period when Ireland was considered 'visually illiterate',<sup>98</sup> visual culture was vital in reclaiming public space and in capturing the public imagination. The idea that modernism was something that happened abroad (such as the Chicago World Fair) ignores the radical modern technologies and culturally nuanced activism that was at the heart of the Revival.

93 Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, 1927-1934* (London, 1999), 514.

94 Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography', 518.

95 The trilogy published in the *Daily Express* in 1899 — *The Last Feast of the Fianna* (September), *Oisín in Tír na nÓg* (October) and *Oisín and Pádraic* (November) — organized Oisín's exploits as a linear and chronological narrative: Oisín leaves the Fianna, travels to Tír na nÓg and returns to Ireland after four hundred years. In contrast, *tableaux* enabled Milligan to produce a more complex narrative on stage — one in which memory and identity are visually present. It is through an inner stage of performed living pictures that Oisín reviews, remembers and re-envisions Ireland's heritage and his own past. The trilogy was first performed as *tableaux* in 1898 by Gaelic League branches in Belfast, Derry and Letterkenny.

96 Alice Milligan, Editorial, *Shan Van Vocht*, 7 February 1896.

- 97 Andrew MacNamara], 'Early Photographs in Ireland'; talk delivered at Roundtable 'Modernism, Visual Culture and Ireland', NLI, 25 September 2009.
- 98 MacNamara, 'Early Photographs in Ireland'.
- 99 NLI, Piaras Béaslaí Papers, 33, 952 (15).

The communities Milligan was involved with had formed numerous organizations: people were members of more than one of these various groups and alliances, such as the local co-operative societies, Gaelic League branches, women's associations, socialist republican party branches, and literary societies that were being formed in Irish communities in and outside Ireland. The image we have now is not 'the' event, no more than is the posed gesture of a *tableau*. This is what makes Milligan's plays and *tableaux* so difficult to comprehend. They cannot be reproduced. Archival traces, such as the photographs reproduced here, give a glimpse of a national theatre practice that was linked with the movement to regenerate the Irish language. Community was at the heart of this project.

A photograph of 'St Patrick at Tara' was sent by Milligan to *An Claidheamh Soluis* in 1913. She wanted it to be published as a reminder that the north had been an integral part of the early national theatre movement and to remind readers that the Irish language had been a priority for the earliest cultural activists. Photographs and newspapers were critical aids in disseminating that memory. *St Patrick at Tara* was the first recorded example of a drama performed in the Irish language and was a mixture of *tableaux* and spoken drama. As such, the show was a forerunner of the way in which the Ossianic trilogy was theatrically realized as a fusion of dramatic form. Staged on 23 November 1898 at Letterkenny by members of the local Donegal and Belfast Gaelic League, the play was in part performed in Irish and in part through *tableaux*. Milligan helped organize cultural events for the Gaelic League in a number of Irish communities, including Liverpool, where she worked with Piaras Béaslaí. He agreed with her that drama helped to create a cultural community:

Since the inception of the language movement more plays have been written in Irish than any other kinds of creative

work ... the reason ... they find drama the easiest way of reaching the public ... It is far easier to induce 300 people to come to a hall and witness a play in Irish than it is to induce 300 people to purchase and read a book in Irish. Even persons who do not understand a word of Irish can come to a play in that language ... while those large numbers of English speakers who cannot read their own language can only be reached by the medium of drama.<sup>99</sup>

As Béaslaí suggests, the audience could follow the action and understand the Irish through interpreting the staged gestures and *tableaux*. The pictures illustrate the words in the same way as the personified body of Ireland often expressed meaning in the pull-out colour illustrations of the nationalist newspapers. These illustrations were accompanied by text: both dialogue with each other in much the same way as graphic novels use images to communicate narrative.

The photograph Milligan published in 1913 gives us a rare opportunity to see the faces of key figures of the language movement in the North, including Anna Johnston, her sister Maggie, and the short-story writer Pádraic O'Shea (alias 'Conan Maol'). The cast wear the costumes and headdress of the ancient Irish; one character strums an Irish harp; another carries the weapons that Queen Maeve (Elise McGown) held in Belfast a couple of months previously. Her shield made its way to the Gaiety in Dublin for the old Fenian John O'Leary to hold when he played a warrior in Milligan's *Last Feast of the Fianna* in February 1900.<sup>100</sup> Prisoners wrote to Milligan after 1916 saying that their moment of political consciousness came when they participated with her in forging local theatrical and cultural events. A letter from one Irish Volunteer in 1917 concluded: 'If we ever write the history of [the language movement in Castlecomer] we can tell of how you came to the rescue in the days when every man's hand was against us.'<sup>101</sup>



Weekly Freeman cartoon: "To the Rescue!" Free supplement with Weekly Freeman, 4 April 1891. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

- 100 It hung on the walls of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast until 1989; it was then stored in the garage of Mary O'Malley, the theatre's co-founder, in Dublin.
- 101 Milligan Papers, Allen Library.
- 102 George Russell, *Irish Statesman*, 2 January 1926.
- 103 Susan Mitchell, *The Shamrock*, 22 February, 1919.
- 104 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972), 3.
- 105 W. B. Yeats, 'Plans and Methods', *Beltaine*, 2 (February, 1900), 5.
- 106 W. B. Yeats, 'The Reform of the Theatre', *Samhain*, (September, 1903).

Cultural activists understood (in the midst of civil war and after partition) the political resonance of Milligan's theatre practice. In 1926, four years after she left Dublin to become a full-time carer in the north (for her brother and his family) and a founder of the Anti-Partition Council, Russell recalled her as 'a girl of genius', who, in the 1890s, 'began to have premonitions of a dramatic movement'. Milligan, he argued, wrote and produced 'little plays' specifically 'to help the infant Gaelic League'. Her 'bag crammed with fragments of tapestry' was, Russell explained, 'used on the actors in order to create the illusion of a richly-robed ancient Irish romance'.<sup>102</sup> Susan Mitchell had argued in 1919 that Milligan was 'the most successful producer of plays before the Abbey Theatre started on its triumphant way'. Even though she made ancient Irish chariots out of rocking chairs or Gaelic crosses out of brown paper, Mitchell recalled that 'so great is the power of mind, her audiences saw the plays as she intended them'.<sup>103</sup> John Berger wrote that 'Images were first made to conjure up the appearance of something that was absent'.<sup>104</sup> What was absent in Ireland was an empowered public visual art that portrayed national history and Irish life. It was these images that Milligan wanted to conjure up.

There was a lasting structural legacy too in the monologue, the storytelling and the musical performance that often accompanied the living picture. Its most striking features — the frozen moment, the suspension of action, the strangeness of breathing bodies held motionless, waiting, being heard in voices articulated by others offstage — had a profound impact on Irish theatre. Theatrical silence was key to the development of the Irish modernist aesthetic. Milligan's influential early *tableaux* shows were watched and admired by Yeats and by many others who went on to participate in Irish theatre. Yeats's 'Abbey style' was defined by stillness. In 1900, he argued in *Beltaine* that the aim

of an Irish national theatre was to make 'literary drama permanent in Ireland during our time, and give the Irish nation a new method of expression'.<sup>105</sup> He placed the emphasis of this 'new method of expression' on language. He told readers of *Samhain* in 1903 that a national theatre must 'restore words to their sovereignty ... we must make speech even more important than gesture upon the stage ... We must get rid of everything that is restless, everything that draws the attention away from the sound of the voice'.<sup>106</sup> Yeats fined his Abbey actors for moving too much and for letting the books fall from their heads during rehearsal.

The Irish National Theatre movement is famous for its reliance on language to provoke a communal consciousness.<sup>107</sup> But for Milligan, gesture was perhaps even more important than the spoken word. Yet a sense of communal identity was hard to achieve with people who did not share language and traditions, in a colonized country where words were censored, the experience of women suppressed, private letters blacked out, flags banned, meetings infiltrated; where sexuality was forced to operate in coded gesture; and where, as the vast archive of police records shows, spoken words in public were recorded by government colonial officials in disguise. It was out of the unofficial codes of visual culture that Milligan first became aware of 'otherness', of what defined her as a northern Protestant from a unionist tradition:

The first time the words 'Home Rule' came under my notice, I was a small girl in the county Tyrone, riding a shaggy pony along a country road. A hired boy who rejoiced in the name 'Roddy' held the rein. He was the first native Irishman I remember to have conversed with, and he was a veritable Rory of the Hills. As we went along he discoursed treason in fascinating style, and when we came to a quiet and suitable corner, he danced jig-steps to his own whistling. It was he who



From *Shan Van Vocht*, 'Notes and News' page, with line drawings of Finn Mac Cumhail and Diarmuid by Alice Milligan, June 1898. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

NOTES AND NEWS.

"How is Old Ireland, and how does she stand?"

THE OIREACHTAS.

The Oireachtas, which took place in the Rotunda, Dublin, on 24th May, was a distinct success, and was even more strongly supported than last year.

In regard to the prize awards, we would point to the fact that the men of Munster, and especially of Co. Kerry, have carried all before them.

The Munster roll of honours includes — P. J. O'Shea (Belfast Gaelic League), a prize for original stories; J. J. Doyle (late Glasgow, now Belfast Gaelic League), prize for humorous tale; James Fenlon, prize for story and special prize for folk-lore; Dermot Foley (Newry), prize for essay on St. Columba; Michael Martin (Dingle, Co. Kerry), prize for folk-lore; Jas. Fenlon, prize for folk-songs. All these prize-winners hail from Co. Kerry. Mr. Denis Fleming, prize historical essay; Tully O'Donoghue (Dublin) and Denis Reen, prizes for unpublished songs; John O'Leary (Cork) dancing prize; and John O'Leary (Mallow), recitation prize, hail from Co. Cork; but possibly they, too, are Kerry men.

Now it is plainly time for the other provinces of Ireland to waken up.

Mr. P. T. McGinley (winning a £4 prize for original story) and Cornelius Boyle, of Donohag, Co. Donegal, saved the credit of Ulster. There is going to be a Gaelic festival for Donegal alone in September, and we trust it will bring to the front a host of talent which can be drilled in encounter the overweening Munster men before next May. Mr. T. Ward, of Belfast G.L., is, so far as we know, the only Connaught prize-winner in the composition section, but we are glad to see a few Connaught teachers on the list of those gaining the Cleaves' prizes. Kerry men, however, headed the list—Patrick Murphy, of Ballyniskiller, Cahircrossen, holding the William O'Brien Silver Cup, and John Hickson, Linguee, and E. O'Sullivan, Castletrunk, coming second and third respectively.

The festival was followed by a conference of Gaelic League branches on Wednesday, 24th, and a public meeting in the Mansion House on the same evening.

THE FEIS CEOL IN BELFAST.

Mr. O'Neill Russell contributes a special article on this subject. The feature which interested us most was the reception of the Scotch, Welsh, and Breton delegates, whose presence proved to the good

people of Belfast that the Gaelic race is still a power in the world. Much regret was felt at the absence of both Dr. Douglas Hyde and Dr. Sigerson, the most distinguished representatives of the Irish Gaelic movement. The death of Mrs. Sigerson, which occurred not much more than a month before the May festival, was the regrettable cause of Dr. Sigerson's absence from the Feis and Oireachtas, in both of which he takes an ardent and active interest. We especially regret that Dr. Sigerson was unable to attend the Belfast gathering, where his presence might have reminded the people of Ulster that their province has at least one acknowledged poet to boast of.

Gaelic Tableaux in Belfast.

On the last night of the Feis Ceoil week a unique entertainment was given under the auspices of the local Gaelic League in Belfast—namely, a series of living pictures representing scenes from the Red Branch and Fenian tales. We give to our readers the programme in Irish, and it will be seen that Queen Meave, Fenliu and Cuchulainn, Finn McCool and his knights, and the lovers, Diarmuid and Grania, were brought upon the stage. An ambitious venture you will say, and yet the unanimous opinion was that no more lovely pictures had ever been represented in Belfast. We were fortunate in securing a Queen Meave, who was stately and proud and fair; a sleek, graceful Grania, athletic, bushy-headed young man to personate the warrior, and for Angus Og, a tall and slender youth, who personated the supernatural guardian of the lovers tenderly.

Coming to more modern subjects, we showed the visit of Grannalle to the Court of Elizabeth. The English Queen, radiant with jewels, in all the majesty of her royal robes and ermine formed an admirable contrast to the simply clad Queen of Connaught. Then came the scene in which the Earl of Huesh's son is carried off by Gallowglass in revenge for his disobedience. Dark Highland appeared next, a personification of Erin, leaning on her harp and wreathed with roses.

Scenes from peasant life, in which figured lovely red-cloaked children, were given last of all, and a stirp dance, to the tune of the pipes, ended the entertainment.

The following members of the Belfast Art Society helped to organize the tableaux:—Miss J. Douglas, Miss Eilish McCann, Miss Rosemund S. Frazer, Mr. John Casey, and Mr. Hubert May (who undertook the part of announcer and director). Miss Arthur Harton acted with Miss Alice Milligan, Miss Dinmore, Miss Johnston, Miss Frazer, Miss Moore, and others in preparing the dresses.

Mr. McFerran, Mr. McCowan, and Mr. Carey were the final managers of the performance. The Gaelic League, at a recent committee meeting, passed a hearty resolution of thanks to all these helpers. The programme of the ancient pictures are as follows (in Irish):—

interpreted for me the words 'Home Rule for Ireland', which appeared in white painted letters on a grey stone wall, and why the harp rudely shaped was there without a crown.<sup>108</sup>

This is Milligan's earliest recorded memory in which she identifies her own otherness, her sense of not belonging as a true 'native' in the country of her birth.

In August 1898, she and her comrades transported 'the foundation stone' for Wolfe

107 Bernadette Sweeney, *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* (London, 2008), 194–95.

- 108 Milligan Papers, Allen Library.
- 109 *Weekly Freeman*, 18 March 1905. The new machines used for sorting mail at the GPO cannot recognize or 'read' Irish script. Irish-language mail has to be taken out of the machine, read by a person (who hopefully can read Irish) and then placed in the correct sorting slot. All this has to take place within fifteen seconds. If there is not someone present who can read Irish, the mail is delayed. I am thankful to Angus Laverty of the GPO for this fascinating insight into how Irish was not just impeded by a colonial system, but is also not accommodated by the modern technology of the Post Office in the Irish Republic.

Tone's statue from Cave Hill in Belfast to Dublin. For her, there was no boundary between disseminating ideas and protest on streets and performing images from Irish history and culture on official stages. Nor was there any 'official' Irish theatre stage until the Revivalists opened their own Irish National Theatre in 1904. The *tableaux* produced on formal stages (such as the Gaiety, the Rotunda and the Father Mathew Hall) often resembled public demonstrations and the heavily costumed pageants orchestrated for the Gaelic League. *Tableaux* took multiple forms. A good example of their agitprop mode of theatre took place in front of the General Post Office on Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street), Dublin, in 1905. The Gaelic League Committee, headed by Milligan, used living pictures to protest against the Civil Service boycott of Irish language postal addresses. At this time the Irish language was under increasing official pressure to disappear. Gaelic League bank accounts were being closed down by the British government; anyone who displayed public commercial signs in Irish was arrested; and post that was written in Irish to Irish-language addresses was systematically destroyed. The *Weekly Freeman* reported how crowds gathered to watch a silent mime of this dispute when the parade reached the General Post Office. The crowd was invited to bear witness to the colonial state's discrimination:

The platform itself represented in a concentrated form the G.P.O. with all its works and pomp. There is a counter — the inevitable counter. At one side stood an Irishman in typical Gaelic costume offering a parcel addressed in Irish to the affable clerk at the other side ... but as the packages were handed over to him, he, in the most deprecatory way, firmly, but surely sent them back.<sup>109</sup>

In a correspondence, such as that between Milligan and Spring Rice, it becomes clearer how *tableaux* 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. Theatre, photography and the magic lantern were the most immediately obvious of these; but cinema and art installation are by now also recognizably among them.

The moving cinematic image is in fact a series of still pictures speeded up to give the effect of movement. But even in the era of the early silent film, directors often suspended action to jolt the viewer into another interpretative realm. During the 1897 royal visit to Dublin, James Connolly and Maud Gonne used a magic lantern to project onto Dublin's city walls photographs of famine that they had witnessed in the west of Ireland. The Land League in the 1880s similarly photographed scenes of Irish distress and evictions; they often restaged evictions in cities and towns where they also projected photographs to rally support and raise funds.

As silent films became more popular in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century they were called 'living pictures', the name also used to describe *tableaux*. The Rotunda was showing living pictures the day that Parnell's statue was finally unveiled in 1910. Parnell, the figure who had haunted the Irish public consciousness is here about to be given a public body — a lasting *tableau* — a voiceless bronze effigy in the middle of the street. In the same street in the 1890s, seven years after Parnell's death, Áine Ceannt (then Áine O'Brennan) first waved across to Alice Milligan who was then a stranger to her. By the 1930s Milligan considered Áine Ceannt and Lily O'Brennan's Dublin house her 'political headquarters'; the three women forged intimate cultural and political friendships that lasted their whole lives. In a 1939 unpublished memoir, Ceannt remembered her affection for Milligan as initially inspired by their mutual veneration for *tableaux*:





Jack B. Yeats, 'Communicating with Prisoners' c. 1924. Oil on canvas, 46 × 21 cm. Courtesy of The Model, home of the Niland Collection. © Estate of Jack B. Yeats. All rights reserved, DACS 2010.

When did I first meet her? I was coming down O'Connell Street near the pillar ... we had been to a Gaelic League class — a young woman with bright red hair, a hat ... was in a hurry going towards Henry Street. My companion said excitedly: There is Alice Milligan. I looked towards the gleaming head with interest — I had heard of her wonderful Gaelic pageants — I had never seen them. I was not long out of school. But I loved pageants. They had fascinated me during my schooldays — those readings from Tennyson with the coloured magic lantern slides. Well, to me they were just exquisite. And this Alice Milligan loved similar scenes. She had done them for the Gaelic League — So across the bustle of the streets a sympathetic wave from me swept towards her. Yet it was not until 1916 that she and I were to know each other well, and to begin a friendship which never broke. Her dreams, her poems, her intimate thoughts, her worries, her beliefs, she poured them out to me, and I say with truth she loved me.<sup>110</sup>

Ceannt's sister Lily O'Brennan was one of the women who staged *tableaux* while incarcerated in Kilmainham in the early 1920s. Jack B. Yeats's 1923 painting *Communicating with Prisoners* depicts women on the outside waving across to the women prisoners inside. By staging *tableaux* of Emmet and Devlin to their comrades in Kilmainham, the women hunger strikers of 1923 made symbols of their bodies. Discussing the hunger strike of 1981, Maud Ellmann suggests: 'By starving, the protestors transform their bodies into the "quotations" of their forebears and reinscribe the cause of Irish nationalism in the spectacle of starving flesh.'<sup>111</sup> The 1923 *tableaux* performance demonstrates how the meaning of these theatrical pictures could not be confined within the moment of their production. By embodying the past in living pictures, the prisoners were able simultaneously to envision a future.

110 NLI, Áine Ceannt Papers, MS 41, 492 (4).

111 Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London, 1993), 14.