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Alice Milligan and Irish Nationalism

Carl Racine

The Harvard copy of Alice Milligan's one-act play *The Last Feast of the Fianna* (1900) is signed "Alice L. Milligan" and has a handwritten letter to her pasted inside the front cover.¹ Interestingly, the salutation is in Irish, and the letter is signed "An Craoibhín." This is the signature of Dr. Douglas Hyde, founder of the Gaelic League and translator of *The Love-Songs of Connaught*, who had written poetry in Irish under the pen name of "An Craoibhín Aoibhinn" (The Pleasant Little Branch). The letter is of some importance because in it Hyde writes of translating the play and, indeed, attempts a translation into Irish of the opening lines. The following transcription leaves unchanged the misspellings and awkward grammar.²

A Eilís dhileas ní Maoileagáin

I got your fine play on my return here. I have been so overcome with work heat & shooting I have not gone through it yet, but am keeping it for a liesure [sic] moment when I can enjoy it.

I have read enough of it however to see that you have given the very deamhan of a task to whoever you impose the translation on. Remember that (as is said of French) whatever is not clear is not Irish and if your translater [sic] in 7 or even 8-syllable quatrains, is to convey the flavour of your thoughts in their entirety it is simply impossible. In your 1st verse you have 41 syllables. The Irish should only contain 28 or 32. It might be translated thus

A ghráinne na ~~gruaige léithe~~ (or hath-ghruaige)
Beir ~~naim-se~~ an meadar sin,
Tá tart ar mo chroidhe go gcluinim
Abhrán Oisín an bhéil bhinn

But even this is not very good. There are no internal rhymes.

2^d verse

Is fuar mo chroidhe, ochón, och!
Ní theidhfídh deoch é go deó,
Acht ceól ag teacht on dtéad bí . . [illegible]
Is é sin is dúisiughadh dhó.

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¹ Alice Milligan, *The Last Feast of the Fianna: A Dramatic Legend* (London: David Nutt, 1900), now in Houghton Library. Harvard's copy was received by the library on 27 September 1917, source unknown (23699.2.31*).

² I am grateful to Professor Philip O'Leary of Boston

College's Irish Studies Program for help with transcribing the Irish. I have written out as an "h" the dot over consonants by which Dr. Hyde indicates lenition, and have expanded his contraction of "ñ" to "nn". The underlining is Dr. Hyde's, as are the crossed-out words.

That's a better verse. But I don't think your artist who will turn into good idiomatic & above all intelligible Irish all you have written, but anyhow I should not like to undertake it! Make Pai[drai?]g³ have a try at it. I'll send you the play promptly. Excuse my delay and excuse this red ink. You're a wonder and no mistake!

Beir buadh agus seacht gcéad beannacht.

An Craoibhín

The letter is on stationary engraved "Ratra, Frenchpark, Co. Roscommon." This was Dr. Hyde's summer residence, and though the letter is undated, it obviously was written in the summer.⁴ The question of which summer led me to a closer look at the play itself and its place at the beginnings of modern Irish theater.

As a writer during the Irish Literary Revival, Alice Milligan has been overshadowed by Yeats, Synge, Lady Gregory, and others, but she was well loved by her contemporaries, both for her plays and her poetry. In 1914, Thomas MacDonagh, the poet and literary critic who was executed in 1916 for his part in the Easter Rising, wrote an article calling her "the most Irish of living Irish poets, and therefore the best."⁵ MacDonagh especially valued Milligan's nationalist sentiment, and he was not alone in preferring Milligan's straightforward, unambiguous patriotism to the much more problematic attitudes of Yeats and Synge. Her tireless energies as a writer and editor were an important force in the cause of Irish cultural nationalism at the turn of the century.

Alice Milligan's nationalism was perhaps all the more fervent for her being a convert to the cause. She was born in 1866 in Omagh, Co. Tyrone, to an Ulster Methodist family and was educated at strictly Protestant Unionist schools. In her poem, "When I Was a Little Girl," she describes being raised with stories about a Protestant God thwarting the armies of Irish Papists, presumably those of the 1867 rebellion, and being taught along with her siblings to fear being caught after dark by the roving Fenians. Then she affirms her own independence of mind:

But one little rebel there,
Watching all with laughter,
Thought "When the Fenians come
I'll rise and go after."

Wished she had been a boy
And a good deal older—
Able to walk for miles
With a gun on her shoulder.

Her determination to fight side by side with men for Irish freedom never diminished.

This attraction to Irish nationalism was coupled with a deep love of the Irish language, which she had learned from a great-uncle. However, the weapons she chose to use were literary and journalistic. In the 1890s she toured Ireland lecturing

³ Part of this name is pasted over. Given the context, Hyde is probably referring to someone who was doing translation at the time for the Gaelic League.

⁴ Gareth Dunleavy, in *Douglas Hyde* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1974), pp. 51-52, says that "Hyde's summers from June through mid-September were spent

at 'Ratra' near Frenchpark, close by his father's church at Portahard....The routine at 'Ratra' was one of reading, transcribing, and translating tales; shooting the bogs for snipe, partridge, pheasant, and hares."

⁵ Thomas MacDonagh, "The Best Living Irish Poet," *The Irish Review* 4 (1914), 287.

I'll send you the play
 my property. Excuse
 my delay in
 excuse this
 post note.
 You're com-
 -den and no
 mistake!
 Best love
 Gaelic League
 beantair
 Dr. Douglas Hyde
 Frenchpark,
 Co. Roscommon
 A.L.S.
 Douglas Hyde.

I got your fine
 play on my return here.
 I have been so over-
 come with work here
 & shooting I have not
 done though it yet, but
 am keeping it for a
 day

First page of an undated letter from Dr. Douglas Hyde to Alice Milligan, tipped into Houghton Library's copy of *The Last Feast of the Fianna*. By permission of the Houghton Library.

on Irish history for the newly formed Gaelic League, and her friendship with Douglas Hyde must have originated in this period. From 1896 to 1899, she was founding editor in Belfast along with another Ulster poet, Ethna Carbery, of two early nationalist literary magazines, the *Northern Patriot* and *Shan Van Vocht*, both of which strongly influenced Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin movement.

More important for the Irish theater, however, was her involvement in the production in 1898 of what seems to be the first modern drama in the Irish language. On 18 November 1898 in the town of Letterkenny, Co. Donegal, a play called *The Passing of Conall* was performed, only one scene of which was actually in Irish.

In a letter to a Dublin newspaper of 21 January 1899, Alice Milligan explained the significance of that event:

The experiment was so successful that Dr. Douglas Hyde, Miss Norma Borthwick, and other leading members of the Gaelic League, present at the production, were convinced of the importance of using the stage to promote the revival of the native Irish language as a medium of literature and culture.⁶

For the next two decades, Milligan would use her skill and determination as a writer to encourage that revival.

In that same letter to the newspaper, she discusses what should be the basis for a truly Irish theater. "Ancient Irish legendary literature gives us in the Ossianic dialogues the nearest approach to drama in an ancient native literature."⁷ From those dialogues, Milligan drew material for her own trilogy, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, *Oisín in Tír-Nan-Oig*, and *Oisín and Padraic*. Only the first of these was ever produced, but that play has a significant historical place at the beginning of the modern Irish theater.

In 1899, Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn inaugurated the Irish Literary Theatre with two plays, Martyn's *The Heather Field* and Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*. The history of the controversy over Yeats's play is well known. For the second year, they chose *Maeve*, another play by Martyn which despite its title is set in modern times, and Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna*.⁸ It was the first play for what was to become the Abbey Theater that drew its characters and setting from the old Irish legendary materials. Other more well known dramas, also taken from those materials, were to follow, including the stories of Diarmuid and Gráinne, Deirdre, and Cuchullain. But it was Alice Milligan who led the way.

Significantly, for this play which she hoped would be a part of the Irish nationalist revival, she chose as a setting the moment of the dissolution of the original band of Fenians, the legendary Ulster warriors under the leadership of Fionn Mac Cumhal. The original production of the play in Dublin contained what is certainly an extraordinary uniting of past and present, legendary and historical, cultural and revolutionary nationalism. The aging Republican John O'Leary, a longtime friend of Milligan, took part in the play. *The Freeman's Journal* reported that O'Leary "favoured the authoress by appearing amongst the band of warriors feasting at the banquet board. His appearance in the robes of a warrior of the ancient Fianna was particularly striking and appropriate."⁹ It was especially appropriate because O'Leary had been one of the original leaders of that more recent band of nationalist warriors, also called Fenians, responsible for the unsuccessful insurrection in 1867 that had awakened young Alice Milligan's imagination. Here in the production of *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, her dream of marching side by side with the Fenians becomes a reality.

⁶ The whole letter is quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Literary Theater: 1899-1901* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1975), pp. 52-54. The scene in Irish, along with a partial English translation, is printed in an appendix to that book, pp. 137-144.

⁷ Quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, p. 53.

⁸ The two were performed together in Dublin on 19 February 1900, and have been reprinted together in the Irish

Drama Series with helpful introductory notes by editor William J. Feeney. For a clarification of the confusion in historical and critical sources about the dates of the performances that year, see the note by Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill in *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), pp. 273-274.

⁹ Quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, p. 152 n.19.

The play received mixed reviews, though in general it was favorably compared with the offerings of the previous year.¹⁰ It was criticized, and rightly so, for being undramatic, more of a poem than a play. Since the actors were mostly English, and often did not understand the significance of what they were saying, the effect of their performance was even less dramatic than it might have been. The theatergoers may not have entirely understood the literary setting. Alice Milligan herself indicated as much with some impatience when asked by Yeats to write an explanation of the legendary background of the play for *Beltaine*, his magazine about the new theater: "If it was to be produced before a company of Kerry peasants, a single note would not be needed. . . . But an 'educated' Dublin audience will need to be told who these people were."¹¹ Certainly it was the design of the Irish Literary Theatre to help restore to the Irish people that understanding of their cultural heritage.

Hyde echoed this comment of Milligan in a speech he gave at a luncheon for the members of the Irish Literary Theatre on 22 February 1900, three days after the first performance of her play. *The Freeman's Journal* summarized his remarks in an article the next day.

The first play they had the pleasure of seeing, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, (applause), was really only a first representation of the theme at which Irish writers and Gaelic speakers had been working for 1,200 years, and he was convinced that if the play had been played in Irish before an Irish-speaking audience it would come as something perfectly natural to them (applause).¹²

So it is not surprising to find that Milligan had sent her play to Hyde and inquired about the possibility of having it translated into Irish.¹³ She may well have hoped to have it performed in Irish the following year.

Yeats also wanted to see the play performed in Irish, because, along with Douglas Hyde and Alice Milligan, he saw it as continuing the broken natural development of old Irish drama. He comments: "But for the extreme difficulty of the metre of the dialogues we would have acted this play in Irish, but the translator gave up after a few verses."¹⁴ Although Yeats does not mention the name of the frustrated translator here, it is quite possible that he is referring to Douglas Hyde. Yeats may even be referring to Hyde's attempt in this letter to translate a few verses of the play.¹⁵

If so, then it is probable that Hyde's letter was written sometime in the summer of 1899, and that Milligan was trying to have the play translated for performance in Irish for the second season of the Irish Literary Theatre. The play itself was first published in the Dublin newspaper *The Daily Express* on 23 and 30 September 1899. Milligan must have sent her own copy of the play to Hyde, perhaps in typescript, for it seems unlikely that the 1900 edition of the play in which the letter was found was the copy she sent to him. By the time the play was published by David Nutt,

¹⁰ For extensive excerpts from the Dublin reviews, see Hogan and Kilroy, pp. 70-75.

¹¹ Alice Milligan, "The Last Feast of the Fianna," *Beltaine* 2 (Feb. 1900), 18.

¹² Quoted in Hogan and Kilroy, p. 80.

¹³ Milligan's epigraph for *The Last Feast of the Fianna* indicates that this was her original purpose: "To the Memory of Father Eugène O'Grauney who in the closing days of his life wrote a play for translation into Gaelic, this little play, written after his example, with the same aim, is

affectionately and sorrowfully dedicated."

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, "Plans and Methods," *Beltaine* 2 (Feb. 1900), 4. A translation of the play into Irish was not published for thirty more years: "Fiachra Éilgeach" [Risteárd O Foghludha], trans. *Naoi nGearra-chluichí*, ([Baile Átha Cliath]: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1930), pp. 5-17.

¹⁵ Perhaps this frustration even contributed to Hyde's efforts the following year to write *Casadh an tSugáin* (1901), the first play in Irish to be performed by the Irish Literary Theatre.

Hyde would have already been familiar with it, as his speech to the Irish Literary Theatre's luncheon makes clear. And surely he would not have been expected to return to her a gift copy of the book.

How then did the letter get into the book? The answer to that question came from an unexpected source. In 1941, Alice Milligan was presented by the National University of Ireland with an honorary doctorate of literature, and in recognition of that event, M. J. MacManus, literary editor of *The Irish Press*, wrote a tribute to her in which he comments:

I possess a copy of her play, "The Last Feast of the Fianna," in which she has written: "Acted at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, and produced by the Irish Literary Theatre, February, 1900." The date marks the virtual beginning of what was later to become the Abbey Theatre. Three letters are pasted in the volume—one from W. B. Yeats, one from George Russell, and one bearing the familiar signature "An Craobhin" [sic]. Dr. Hyde's letter concludes: "If I had more leisure it would be very tempting for me to try to enter into partnership with you and we might produce something between us that would be creditable to the Gael."¹⁶

From this it is clear that Alice Milligan had the habit of saving letters from well-known people and pasting them in her books, perhaps as a way of affirming the value of her work. Here is proof that she is marching alongside the men in the fight for Irish cultural independence.

For two more decades, Alice Milligan continued to write plays and poems in service to Irish nationalism. But when partial independence was achieved in the 1920s, she seems to have given up the effort and retreated after the brutal civil war back to her native Co. Tyrone, now partitioned off from the rest of Ireland, where she lived until her death in 1953. Benedict Kiely, the novelist and short story writer, who is also from Omagh, tells of a visit to see her in the spring of 1940. She was living in a dilapidated house surrounded by "unkempt lawns and shrubbery gone halfway to jungle" in the village of Mountfield, near Omagh. Kiely's description of his visit is memorable:

The door opened and the dear lady appeared, quite literally in wreaths of smoke. There was a jackdaw in the chimney, for whose invasion and occupancy she courteously apologized. We sat in the musty drawing room and listened to her telling us how she had once spent a wonderful day with Miss Gonne and Mr Bulfin (Mr Yeats couldn't make the trip) studying druidic remains in Glencolumcille. The smoke thickened and thickened until the poor old woman could only be seen fitfully. . . . [I]t was saddening to think that to be poor, lonely and smoke-dried should be the lot of a poet in the end of all.¹⁷

Perhaps this discovery of a letter to her from Douglas Hyde may serve to clear away a little of that smoke, and allow us to see her anew as a driving force in pioneering the use of Irish legend and language in the theater of twentieth-century Ireland.

¹⁶ M. J. MacM[anus], "Honouring an Ulsterwoman," *The Irish Press*, 10 July 1941, p. 2. This is obviously a different letter from Dr. Hyde.

¹⁷ Benedict Kiely, "The Whores on the Half-Doors; or, An

Image of the Irish Writer," in *Conor Cruise O'Brien Introduces Ireland*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), pp. 150-151.