

Gonne, Iseult

by Nicholas Allen

Gonne, Iseult (1894–1954), writer and muse, was born 6 August 1894 in Paris, daughter of Lucien Millevoye, French politician, lawyer, and journalist, and Maud Gonne (qv), Irish revolutionary nationalist. She was their second child and was conceived in the memorial chapel of their first, short-lived son, Georges. Publicly introduced as Maud Gonne's adopted child, she spent her childhood and early adulthood in France, although she did spend a period at Coulson Avenue, Dublin, in 1902. A boarding student at a Carmelite convent in Laval, she was upset by her mother's decision to marry John MacBride (qv) in 1903, a union that ended in divorce in 1905. Millevoye provided money for the purchase of Les Mouettes, Colleville-sur-mer, Normandy, the house inhabited by Iseult, her mother, and her half-brother, Seán MacBride (qv), by 1908. Spending the summer with her mother in the west of Ireland in 1908, she proposed marriage to W. B. Yeats (qv) in 1910 but was refused, apparently on the grounds that their horoscopes were incompatible. Beautiful, intelligent, and impatient, she travelled to Italy in April–May 1913. In November 1914 she nursed with her mother at the military hospital of Argèles and was given the rank of lieutenant in the French army. In 1915 she worked in a second hospital at Paris Plage in the Pas-de-Calais and in October gained a part-time position through Millevoye as secretary to an aviation society. She ceased nursing in 1916 and visited W. B. Yeats in London in July and August 1916, where she helped Yeats read from the French writers and acted as his secretary. He proposed marriage to her in early August 1917 after her mother first refused him. She gave no immediate reply but finally refused him when the Gonne family arrived in London in September. This did not affect their relationship, and he procured her a part-time post as assistant librarian to the School of Oriental Languages in the University of London. She was a common inspiration to his work of this period; *Per amica silentia lunae* (1918) is addressed to her as 'Maurice' and she is the basis for Eithne Inguba in *The only jealousy of Emer* (1919). She is also the subject of a number of Yeats's poems, for example 'To a child dancing in the wind' and 'Two years later'.

She published a poem and an essay in the *English Review* (April, June 1918) and worked that year as secretary to Ezra Pound, with whom she had an affair. She moved with her family to Dublin in winter 1918 and lived at 73 St Stephen's Green. She met the young writer Francis Stuart (qv) at the house of George Russell (qv) and subsequently eloped with him to London on 4 January 1920. They returned to Ireland (April) to marry in University Church, St Stephen's Green. They had a flat at 67 Fitzwilliam Square, where Yeats visited her in July 1920 to place her in the care of a gynaecologist, Dr Bethel Solomons (qv), in a nursing home. Her marriage to Francis Stuart was never happy and she travelled to London alone in September 1920, to return in February 1921. Their daughter Dolores was born in March 1921 but died that July. Maud Gonne took Seán MacBride and the recently married couple

to Europe (August), but on their return to Ireland, Stuart was arrested and interned for his republican sympathies until November 1923. From early 1924 he and Iseult lived at Glencree, Co. Wicklow. Their two children, Ian and Katherine, were born by 1929, when the family moved to Laragh castle, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. Yeats composed 'Stream and sun at Glendalough' after a visit to Laragh, and she typed the manuscript of her mother's memoir, *A servant of the queen* (1938). Stuart left her permanently for Germany in January 1940, and she was arrested by the Garda special branch in May 1944 when clothes purchased for a German liaison officer were traced to her; she was released in July. She died at home on 22 March 1954 of a coronary thrombosis and is buried in Glendalough cemetery. Yeats kept her mother's portrait of her on his desk until his death, and a portrait by George Russell is in unknown possession.

Maud Gonne MacBride, *A servant of the queen* (1938); A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats* (1949); *Ir. Times*, 24 Mar. 1954; John Unterecker, *A reader's guide to William Butler Yeats* (1959); Richard Ellmann, *Yeats* (1961); Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (1970); J. H. Natterstad, *Francis Stuart* (1974); Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne* (1977); Mary Lou Koufeldt, *Lady Gregory* (1985); John Tytell, *Ezra Pound* (1987); Humphrey Carpenter, *A serious character* (1988); Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne* (1990); Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares (ed.), *Always your friend: the Gonne-Yeats letters 1893–1938* (1992); Alasdair Macrae, *W. B. Yeats* (1995); A. A. Kelly (ed.), *The letters of Liam O'Flaherty* (1996); R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: a life. I: The apprentice mage 1865–1914* (1997); Deirdre Toomey (ed.), *Yeats and women* (1997)