

Milligan, Alice Leticia

by Catherine Morris

Milligan, Alice Leticia (1866–1953), novelist, playwright, and political activist, was one of eleven children born to Charlotte (née Burns) and Seaton Milligan (1836–1916). From 1877 to 1887 she attended Methodist College, Belfast, where she wrote short stories for the school magazine, *Eos*. From 1887 to 1888 she studied English history and literature at King's College, London, and completed a teacher-training course in Belfast and Derry (1888–91). Alice Milligan and her father (an executive of the Bank Buildings, Belfast, antiquary, and member of the RIA) published a political travelogue of Ulster and Sligo, *Glimpses of Erin*, in 1888. Continuing the theme of travel, her first novel, *A royal democrat* (1890), tells of a disguised English king who ventures across Ireland to win home rule for the Irish while securing a greater English monarchical presence in Ireland. From January to August 1891 Milligan lived in Dublin, where she met the architects of the Irish cultural revival. After the unexpected death of Parnell (qv) in October 1891, she became an ardent nationalist and began a lifelong career writing for the Irish nationalist papers. In 1892 she formed a women's branch of the Irish Industries Association in Derry and contributed a series of *tableaux vivants* to Lady Aberdeen's (qv) 'Irish village' at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

Milligan's nationalist politics became more overt and radicalised when in November 1894 she and Jenny Armour founded branches of the Irish Women's Association in Belfast, Moneyreagh, and Portadown. As the IWA's first president, Milligan promoted the organisation as the northern voice of Irish female nationalism. In February 1895 she helped to establish the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society in Belfast and was elected its first vice-president. In October of the same year the McCracken Society founded its own Belfast-based journal, the *Northern Patriot*. Under the editorship of Alice Milligan and Anna Johnston (qv) ('Ethna Carbery') the paper was defined by a strongly regionalist agenda. The editors were dismissed in December 1895 after the paper's sponsors discovered that Anna Johnston's father, Robert (qv), was an active Fenian. In the midst of great controversy, the women launched their own 'national' literary journal, the *Shan Van Vocht* (1896–9). The paper supported Irish nationalist initiatives such as the '98 centenary, the amnesty movement, and the Gaelic League. In September 1897 Milligan was elected to three of the five subcommittees set up to bolster the effectiveness of the '98 centenary. While serving on the Dublin-based executive, she continued as secretary of the Belfast centenary committee, and was also elected the representative for Letterkenny's '98 centenary association. From 1898 her interests in the amateur theatre movement developed and she wrote eleven plays that were staged by the Irish Literary Theatre, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, and the Gaelic League (these included 'The green upon the cape' (1898), the 'Ossianic trilogy' (1899), and 'The escape of Red Hugh' (1901)). In November 1904 Milligan was appointed by the Gaelic League as a full-time travelling

lecturer. She toured the 'English-speaking districts of Ireland' raising funds by staging plays, magic-lantern shows, and *tableaux vivants* until 1909, when the care of her aging parents took priority. Along with Francis Joseph Bigger (qv), Milligan organised the 1910 Samuel Ferguson (qv) centenary in Belfast.

She was in London during the 1916 Easter rising – a year that also brought the death of her parents and her sister Charlotte Milligan Fox (1865–1916) (qv), founder of the Irish Folk Song Society. After attending the trial of Roger Casement (qv), she joined the fund-raising campaign in support of Irish political prisoners and their families. During this time she ran an Irish book shop in Dawson St., Dublin, and her poems relating the plight of Irish prisoners appeared in *New Ireland*. Milligan supported Éamon de Valera (qv) in his opposition to the treaty – a decision she believed was supernaturally made for her by the automatic writings of her brothers Ernest and William. After 1921 she and William (a member of the British army) went to live with relatives in Bath, England, later settling in the north with his wife and son. The family eventually settled at the rectory in Mountfield, Omagh, Co. Tyrone. Despite Milligan's social and political isolation (she complained in letters to friends that she was 'an interned prisoner', existing among family who opposed her views) she remained politically active and continued to write. In the 1930s she became a founding member of the Anti-Partition League and published articles and poetry in the *Derry Journal* and other northern nationalist and American newspapers. She died 13 April 1953 at the age of 87 in Tyrone, Co. Tyrone. Milligan's literary and political career has been excluded from all major accounts of the Irish cultural renaissance, her papers remain scattered and uncollected (letters are held in the NLI, TCD, UCD, and in private collections held by family in Scotland and Belfast), and until the 1990s very little had been written about her.

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Henry Mangan, introduction to *Poems by Alice Milligan* (1954); Sheila Turner Johnston, *Alice: a life* (1994); Brighd Mhic Sheain, 'Glimpses of Erin. Alice Milligan: poet, protestant, patriot', supplement to *Fortnight*, Apr. 1994; Catherine Morris, 'From the margins: Alice Milligan and the Irish cultural revival, 1888–1905' (Ph.D. thesis, Aberdeen, 1999)