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Reviewed work(s):
Published by: *Irish University Review*
Accessed: 05/02/2012 07:25

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Catherine Morris

Becoming Irish? Alice Milligan and the Revival

If the political history of the past twenty-five years in Ireland ever comes to be written by someone who studies other authorities than the newspapers, someone who has really an intimate knowledge of the personalities who were at the root of the biggest Irish political movement of today, they would discover, we believe, that the infant nurse who looked after it while it was yet inarticulate and who expressed its wants was Alice Milligan.

Susan Mitchell, Irish Homestead, 28 February 1920.

The Irish Revival has long been justifiably celebrated as a cultural and aesthetic watershed in Irish history. Traditional accounts praise the Revival period for its revivifications of language and national identity, and for its literary and dramatic accomplishments. The revivalist spirit is most often identified with such eminent figures as William Butler Yeats, Augusta Gregory, John Millington Synge, and Douglas Hyde, and with organizations and movements such as the Dublin and London Irish Literary Societies, the Gaelic League, and the Abbey Theatre. The familiar Revival narrative suppresses as much as it illuminates, however, because it has tended to bury numerous artists, activists, and initiatives beneath the sediment of accreted myths. This article examines one especially significant figure who has been marginalized within revivalist doctrine, despite her remarkable achievements as a nationalist propagandist and a creative practitioner. In her work, her career, and her life, Alice Milligan represented an alternative to the dominant currents that fed and defined the Irish Renaissance. By unearthing the roles she played in and for the Revival it is possible to plot a very different history of the period and its cultural priorities.

Milligan’s prolific and diverse activities from the 1890s to the 1930s reveal her abiding commitment to a politically grounded nationalist culture. She argued in 1893 that Irish art should exist not ‘in some quiet paradise apart’ but within the ‘noisy field of political warfare’. Two years later, evoking the romantic and militant nationalism of the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, Milligan criticized the ‘so called Irish Literary Revival’ because it had ‘proceeded on purely literary lines and lacked the national spirit which fired the country in ’48’. The fusing of art and politics in Milligan’s cultural practice is especially well
illustrated by the series of organizations she founded in Belfast. The Irish Women’s Association (1894), the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society (1895), and the Irish Women’s Centenary Union (1897) debated the history and the future of Ireland in the context of reading clubs, lectures, and literary recitations. Through such activities Milligan fought to counter Dublin’s exclusive claim to the Revival by promoting a specifically northern focus. In an outpouring of work for the nationalist cause, she published volumes of poetry, plays, and short stories in over fifty Irish newspapers. Milligan also wrote three novels, a travelogue, several pamphlets, numerous articles, and a short biography of Wolfe Tone. Eleven of her plays were staged by a range of companies across Ireland, including the Irish Literary Theatre, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, the Ulster Literary Theatre, and Cork’s National Players. Her theatrical skills proved useful to the Gaelic League, which in October 1904 formally employed her as a touring lantern lecturer and a co-ordinator of nationalist tableaux.

One of Milligan’s most influential contributions to the Revival derived from her collaboration with poet Anna Johnston (‘Ethna Carbery’). Together they produced and edited the two most important nationalist journals to emerge from the North in the 1890s. The first of these, The Northern Patriot (October to December 1895) promoted a regionalist agenda. Advertising the launch of the journal in the Dublin press Milligan argued that ‘there is an urgent necessity for the Northern Patriot to take the field, and to show you on the other side of the Boyne that it is the voice of many men in Ulster, who can justly lay claim to the title which has been adopted for their paper’. By contrast, the editors sought through the Shan Van Vocht (January 1896 to April 1899) to connect the North with broader revivalist initiatives in other parts of Ireland, Britain, and America. Milligan and Johnston dedicated themselves passionately to these publishing ventures, both of which ran uncompromisingly political editorials alongside short stories, serials, historical biographies, poems, and songs.

Although they did republish some material from such earlier Irish writers as Thomas Davis, the bulk of the material originated with or was commissioned by the editors. Among the contemporary figures represented in the pages of the journal were local historian and archaeologist Francis Joseph Bigger, socialist James Connolly, poet Nora Hopper, short-story writers Thomas Mayne and Seamus MacManus, and novelist Moira Pender. In a 1951 biography of Sinn Féin founder Arthur Griffith, Padraic Colum suggested that the Shan Van Vocht was so successful precisely because it was the product of a unique creative partnership between the ‘daughter of a Presbyterian business man’ (Milligan was, in fact, a Methodist) and an ‘Ulster Catholic’ woman (Anna Johnston). The combination of their diverse
backgrounds, Colum observed, resulted in a form of nationalism that tapped into a complex history:

With a freshness that came from its femininity, The Shan Van Vocht went back to a nationalism that had never been parliamentarian, the nationalism of Wolfe Tone and that idealistic band that had been largely recruited from the Ulster Presbyterians of Scottish descent, the United Irishmen.⁷

Colum was correct in identifying 1798 as a pivotal influence on Milligan's career. She championed northern Protestant involvement in the United Irish movement as an inspirational template for cultural revivalism in Ireland. If Milligan celebrated the coming together of Protestant and Catholic in 1790s Ireland, her work also tackled the colonial paradigm that predated the United Irish struggle and the sectarianism that followed in its wake. This article will focus upon one especially vital area of Milligan’s cultural practice: the relationship of Protestants to the intensified debates on becoming Irish in the Revival period. The Methodist traditions that structured Milligan’s lifelong educational and religious beliefs also held significant political connotations. Milligan’s identity as a highly educated Irish woman can, in part, be accounted for by the exceptionally privileged schooling she received at Methodist College, Belfast — an institution that from its foundation in 1868 set a precedent by welcoming male and female pupils.⁸

The educational radicalism of Irish Methodists, however, was tempered by their political conservatism. Milligan’s involvement in Ireland’s cultural revival made her something of an exception among the ranks of her fellow Methodists.⁹ Unlike so many of her Protestant contemporaries involved in the Revival’s commemoration of 1798, Milligan could not evoke a dissenter tradition as precedent for her actions or political beliefs. Historically, Irish Methodists followed a code of civil obedience and remained staunch supporters of the Union. Few, if any, championed the United Irishmen or participated in the insurrections of 1798.¹⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century the fifty-one thousand Methodists in Ireland strengthened their solidarity with Protestant unionism by opposing Gladstone’s Home Rule policy. They expressed their hostility to the first Home Rule Bill of 1886 in a pamphlet entitled Irish Public Opinion on Home Rule: ‘We would deplore any steps which might be taken, either by the government or by legislature, which would weaken the bonds which unite this country with Great Britain, and which would tend to the legislative independence of Ireland — a measure which, in our judgement, would be fraught with evil to the best interest of the United Kingdom.’¹¹
In a 1914 article on her poetry for the *Irish Review*, Thomas MacDonagh celebrated Milligan because her embodiment of Irishness denied the narrow strictures of doctrinaire nationalism:

It is meet that this Irish National poet should be a woman. It is meet that she, like so many of the Irish Volunteers, should be of North East Ulster. Alice Milligan, Ulster Protestant, Gaelic Leaguer, Fenian, friend of all Ireland, lover of Gaelic Catholic as of her own kith ... Alice Milligan is the most Irish of living poets and therefore the best.12

As MacDonagh suggests, Milligan’s work reveals her abiding commitment to a nationalist politque that could accommodate north and south, urban and rural, Protestants and Catholics, men and women, Irish speakers as well as English.

This very eclecticism provides the key to Milligan’s own history and to the political imperatives of the nationalist vision she served. Milligan’s output reveals a continual dialogue between self and nation that aims to overcome the divisions of sectarianism. From the 1890s, just as Ireland was itself experiencing an intense revival of nationalist identity so, too, Milligan herself experienced a remarkable political epiphany. In her diary in October 1891 she credited the death of Charles Stewart Parnell, the charismatic but discredited leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, with provoking a dramatic sea-change in her political consciousness that would permanently convert her to the nationalist cause — as I will discuss more fully below. She was convinced, moreover, that this moment of revelation was by no means an isolated or individual event because it connected her with the broader historical dialectics that shaped modern Ireland.

Milligan would later contextualize her Parnellite conversion as the culminating moment in a series of cultural and political border-crossings that would transform her from a unionist sympathizer to a nationalist radical. She described herself as the product of a ‘strictly Tory and Protestant’13 upbringing that had shielded her for some time from the history and culture of her native land. In an article in Dublin’s *Evening Telegraph* entitled ‘Ulster and Home Rule’, Milligan complained that her formal education blinded her to Irish literature and history: ‘Intermediate examinations and the glories of English and foreign literature absorbed my attention. I learned nothing of Ireland.’14 She was taught, for example, that the 1840s Famine had been ‘sent by God for the Irish people’s good as they were too poor and too many in the land of their birth’.15

Milligan repeatedly depicted her northern Protestant upbringing as a staunch indoctrination into sectarian unionist ideology. In a 1938 radio broadcast she reiterated that she had been ‘educated without any
reference to Irish history and culture. Even the music she heard was violently partisan: 'The songs and tunes I knew best were “The Protestant Boys”, “The Boyne Water”, and others of that sort breathing a feeling of murderous hate, and threatening to slit and slaughter Papists and roll them under Orange drums.'

To mark her seventy-fourth birthday in September 1940, Cormac MacAirt wrote a commemorative article entitled ‘Alice Milligan, poet and playwright’ for the Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner. He asked Milligan how 'a Tyrone woman, the child of a typical Ulster Methodist family, who was reared in the usual Ulster Protestant atmosphere of distrust of their own fellow-countrymen' had become such an ardent nationalist. 'Frankly, I don’t know,' she replied. 'Instinctively, since I was a child my heart went out to my own nation. In spite of all I heard, I knew that Ireland was my country and that its people were my people.' MacAirt suggests that despite never converting Milligan understood Catholic traditions implicitly: 'Though she never became a Catholic, Alice Milligan has interpreted the mind of Catholic Ireland better than any of our great poets.' This was not an opinion held by the Catholic priest who had earlier agreed to translate three of Alice Milligan’s plays into Irish. In 1901 Father Glendon informed Milligan that despite her best efforts she was 'not very well up on Catholic terminology.'

Elsewhere in her writings Milligan acknowledged the degree to which her mainstream Protestant education was countered by an alternative political vision she encountered through songs, servants, and graffiti. In an 1895 issue of the Irish Weekly Independent, Milligan claimed that the republican anthem 'The Wearing of the Green' ignited within her the spark of nationalist sentiment: 'This song was in earliest recollection the first that ever touched me with real Irish life and feeling.' Her 1898 play The Green upon the Cape would use this particular song as the code that enables disguised United Irishmen John Tennant (a Belfast Presbyterian) and Theobald Wolfe Tone to recognize one another as nationalist brethren. Áine Ceannt described in a 1935 radio broadcast how Irish labourers and domestic workers also provided Milligan with an alternative to her anglocentric education: 'Mixing among the country people in the fields and by the riversides and from the real servants in kitchen and nursery she learned other things.' The nature of these 'other things' was suggested by Milligan when she described her first meeting with a 'native Irishman':

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 ... It was he who 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.24

Two important issues are raised here. First, in describing ‘Roddy’ as ‘the first native Irishman’ she ever encountered, Milligan reveals that she did not consider herself as ‘native’ to the country of her birth. Second, the words and drawings on the wall are to her as incomprehensible as the script of a foreign language. The graffiti are only made meaningful by the presence of the ‘native Irishman’ who can decode the meaning of this nationalist iconography. Milligan’s fiction contains many similar examples of Protestant children who are educated into an anti-colonial view of Irish history by their Catholic servants. In the 1896 story The Captain’s Daughter, for instance, Millicent O’Brien is the child of a Protestant aristocratic family that owns a large estate in the South of Ireland. Bat Cronin and Denis Devane, workers on the estate, introduce Millicent to a nationalist understanding of Ireland’s past, which provides a counter-narrative to the anglocentric history she is taught at the private school she attends in London.25

Milligan’s 1908 poem ‘When I was a Little Girl’ focuses upon the perspective of a similar child. The poem deals with the young girl’s response to the Protestant nurse who scares the children in her care into submission by invoking the spectre of Fenianism.26 ‘When I was a Little Girl’ expresses the siege mentality of a Protestant household through the eyes of a child who identifies not with the dominant unionist ideology of her upbringing but with the imagined community of militant republicans. The Ireland of this poem is divided between the ‘loyal folk’ whose colonial interests are guarded by a Protestant God and the Fenian ‘army of Papists’ which is demonized as the perpetrator of sectarian violence:

When I was a little girl,
In a garden playing,
A thing was always said
To chide us delaying

[...]

‘Come in! for it’s growing late,
And the grass will wet ye!
Come in! or when it’s dark
The Fenians will get ye.’

And round the nursery fire
Sat still to listen,
Fifty bare toes on the hearth,  
Ten eyes a-glisten.

To hear of a night in March,  
And loyal folk waiting
To see a great army of men  
Come devastating —

An army of Papists grim,  
With a green flag o’er them,  
Red-coats and black police
Flying before them.

But God (Who our nurse declared  
Guards British dominions)  
Sent down a deep fall of snow
And scattered the Fenians.

‘But somewhere they’re lurking yet,  
Maybe they’re near us,’
Four little hearts pit-a-pat
Thought ‘Can they hear us?’

Then the wind-shaken pane  
Sounded like drumming;
‘Oh!’ they cried, ‘tuck us in,
The Fenians are coming!’

[...]

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;

Able to lift aloft  
That Green Flag o’er them  
(Red-coats and black police
Flying before them).

And, as she dropped asleep,  
Was wondering whether  
God, if they prayed to Him,  
Would give fine weather.?
‘When I Was A Little Girl’ was published in *Hero Lays*, a collection of Milligan’s poetry edited by George Russell. Critics invariably interpret ‘When I was a Little Girl’ as a work of autobiography in which Milligan is perceived to rationalize the shift in her political affiliations. Padraic Colum republished the verse in 1930 because he saw it as revealing how ‘in the midst of Belfast distrust of Irish Nationalism she was a little Nationalist’. When Seamus MacManus included the poem in his 1951 anthology, *We Sang for Ireland*, he described Milligan as poet who managed to smash ‘the shackles of alienism whereunto she was born’. In articles that appeared in the nationalist press before and after the publication of the poem, Milligan stressed that she aimed to expose the forms and consequences of such alienism by making clear the cultural prejudices engendered by unionist doctrine.

The figure of the nursemaid who scares children into compliance first appeared in one of Milligan’s regular ‘Notes from the North’ columns published in the *Irish Weekly Independent* in January 1895. Urging her readers to ‘record contemporary narratives of the ’67 movement’, Milligan herself contributed a ‘Northern narrative of the Fenian time’. It was in this article that she noted how Protestant mythology had demonized the Fenians as a ‘yelling, murderous band’ that held a ‘wild longing to cut Protestant throats’. Soon after the poem was published in 1908 Milligan received a private letter from an American reader who challenged the veracity of her account of the Fenian rising because he claimed that no snow actually fell in Ireland in 1867. Milligan explained in a letter to *The Leader* that she intended the poem not as a work of factual history but as an exploration of the myths that underpin dogma:

In the poem, ‘When I was a little girl’, I tell the tale as it was told to me. The Loyalists and Orange people of the North have assuredly imbibed the belief that but for a late and terribly severe winter, including snow, the Fenian rising would have been a repetition of what they call ‘the great Ulster massacre of 1641’. This feeling of apprehension had been, doubtless, engendered, and, increased by heredity; generation after generation of Northern land-owners and land-tillers since the time of the plantation must have gone to bed nightly with an uneasy feeling that the rightful occupiers of the land were prowling around in the dark outside.

Milligan insists that the central issue of the poem is not whether snow actually fell in 1867 but the utilization of the myth by a Protestant community that aimed to promote and sustain sectarian ascendancy. ‘When I was a Little Girl’ tackles the question of how such myths are engendered.
As these childhood narratives suggest, when Milligan began her literary career in the 1880s her aesthetic and political preferences were far removed from those she would adopt a few years later. This difference is clearly illustrated in her first significant publication, a travel book written for an English readership that she co-authored with her father in 1888. Glimpses of Erin was a by-product of its authors’ active participation in the Belfast Naturalist Field Club, a society that promoted the work of amateur archaeologists and antiquarians. In a recent study, Clive Hutchinson argues that the introverted regionalism of this organization intensified in the late nineteenth century. ‘As the demand for Home Rule grew throughout the country,’ he suggests, ‘the middle classes centred their scientific interests more and more on Ulster and looked less to the remainder of the island of Ireland’. In line with the general position of the Belfast Naturalist Field Club, Glimpses of Erin promises the English tourist a voyage into unseen, un trodden and, by implication, uncolonized Irish landscapes. By emphasising traditional folk images of Ireland, the Milligans’ book presents a benign account of the northern territories that purposely avoids political controversy.

Two years later in 1890 Alice Milligan published her first novel, A Royal Democrat. By setting her futuristic fantasy in the 1940s Milligan trans cends the complex and contending discourses of late nineteenth-century Irish politics. The novel’s hero is Arthur Cormac, the Prince of Wales. This heir to the English throne is an idealized figure of cultural unification who, as the product of an English father and an Irish mother, can straddle the cultural divides he discovers in Ireland. The King names his son Cormac to emphasize his Irish descent, in the hope that ‘loyalty to the Crown might at some future date result on the part of the troublesome nation’. Returning from a tour of the colonies, Arthur is shipwrecked off the west coast of Ireland. He arrives in Innishowen to discover that his father, the King, has expired and that he himself is presumed to have died at sea. Thereafter, he poses as Cormac King, a visitor recently arrived from America. Long fascinated by the Irish Parliamentary Party, Cormac willingly involves himself in the Irish political scene. A series of circumstances leads to his association with a violent land revolt, after which he is rounded up with other Irish political prisoners and dispatched to London. The prince’s life is saved when his Irish friend, Nola Shane, forwards a locket belonging to Cormac to the queen of England. The latter immediately recognizes the locket and not only grants a royal pardon for Cormac but also grants Home Rule to Ireland. This fictional event takes place in 1949 — the southern Irish Free State would in fact be declared a Republic in 1948.

The fictional depiction of nationalist politics serves to relegate the late nineteenth century to a nightmare of history. In the novel’s second
chapter, entitled ‘In which we deal with ancient history’, the narrator describes key figures in the Land League and Parliamentary Party being killed or exiled during an attempted revolution:

John Dillon fell, shot by an English bullet whilst leading a patriotic band from the mountains of Tipperary to attack the hostile camp. Michael Davitt and William O’Brien were executed, the former being taken off Galway in a ship which had come from America, under his command, with fresh supplies of men and arms. The latter was captured after a gallant campaign in Ulster ... Dr Kane also fell a victim ... The war was suppressed in the other provinces, the last place to yield being Galway, which held out in hope of reinforcements from America. When Michael Davitt was taken on board the ship destined for that city, all hope was lost, and the capital of Connaught surrendered.\(^{38}\)

Unsurprisingly, the novel met with a poor reception from the Irish nationalist press. Belfast’s Irish News commented that ‘Miss Milligan assumes that the present Irish movement will fail. We hope that the assumption is altogether fiction’.\(^{39}\) United Ireland objected not so much to the failure of constitutional nationalism as to the violent means with which the author disposed of Ireland’s politicians: ‘She has taken the bold step of anticipating ... that some leaders of the Irish Parliamentary Party, including the editor of this newspaper, have been disposed of by the very comfortable process of hanging or shooting — an assumption against which we beg to offer our respectful dissent either as a piece of prophecy or a matter of good taste.’\(^{40}\)

Ironically, it was the actual death in October 1891 of the Irish Parliamentary Party’s leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, which brought Milligan into the Revival and altered her view of Ireland. Milligan’s unpublished diary entries provide a valuable contemporary record not only of the transformations in her own political psyche but of the changing landscape of an Ireland gripped by the Parnell split and the emerging cultural renaissance. In June 1891 Milligan recorded how she had experienced a sudden conversion to Parnellism while riding on a tram through O’Connell Street. From this point on she attended every public event in Dublin at which Parnell was due to appear in order to see his face because, she believed, only then she would know ‘whether to trust him’.\(^{41}\) Milligan concluded, however, that the sexual scandal made Parnell an ‘impossible leader’\(^{42}\) — a view confirmed when she did finally witness his ‘sad downcast expression ... the ghastly pallor of his face’.\(^{43}\)

In 1909 she recalled in The Leader that Parnell’s unexpected death transformed her view of him and of Ireland: ‘the name of the dead Chief acted like a talisman’ for herself and other ‘Protestants of the
Plantation'. The death of Parnell in October 1891 provoked an immediate transformation in Milligan's relationship to her family and to her place in the unionist stronghold of Belfast. Instead of being at home in the North she recorded in her diary that she now considered herself to be a prisoner of the 'enemy's camp'. On 8 October 1891, two days after Parnell's death, Milligan wrote in her diary that, 'the last vestige of independence is gone, except some new man come to the front, or the spirit of the people becomes strong enough to take the stand that Parnell took'. From this moment on, Milligan would dedicate herself wholeheartedly to reactivating an Irish nationalist cultural and political history of Belfast.

John O'Mahony, the literary editor of the Irish Weekly Independent, asked her to write a poem about Parnell to commemorate the second anniversary of his death, and Milligan produced 'Ode for 6 October: Dedicated to the memory of the dead and the cause that shall not die'. In this work Milligan explored the mythical conversion experienced by a Protestant female child who is alienated from Irish culture and history:

Throughout the toilsome hours of my schooling days,
No mention of thee was made unto me, save only
By speakers in heedless scorn or in harsh dispraise.
No word was told me at all of thy burdening sorrow,
No tale of thine ancient warfare yet was heard.  

The child's understanding of Ireland's struggle does not come from formal education but reaches her in 'a way beyond reach of mortal knowing'. In spite of everything she has been taught, the child in this poem harbours an affiliation with the independence movement of her country. Similarly, Milligan's recollections of her own childhood reveal an Ireland that is riven with social, cultural, and political division. Indeed, she argued that as late as 1891 northern Protestants feared that Home Rule would result in their dispossession when 'the natives would get back their own'. She embellished this particular story of northern paranoia with a personal account of land loss: 'My own ancestral farm at the time of the 1886 Home Rule Bill was reported to have reverted to a Catholic country tailor-man.'

At the same time as she described her own political epiphany in October 1891 Milligan began work on the first version of a novel that she would return to many times subsequently. In The Cromwellians, set in 1654, Milligan interrogated the historical origins of discord between Protestant and Catholic, between settler and native. Although only nine pages of the novel's final chapter have survived, this fragment contains a moment of revelation that is crucial to the novel's plot. The seventeenth-century occupation was a seminal event in Irish history
when many natives were dispossessed after Cromwell compensated loyal soldiers with Irish homes and land. The Cromwellian soldier Hosea Greatreax has expelled Onora Cavanagh from her father’s lands. Aware that marriage between settler and native was an offence punishable by seizure of land and transplantation to Connaught, Onora takes a religious conversion in order to marry the soldier who has taken her father’s lands. She later divulges her real identity at a social gathering, knowing that this disclosure will destroy her husband’s standing in the settler community. Conscious that the minister, Tobias Morton, is observing her every move, Onora performs devotional actions that identify her as a Catholic. The minister privately confides his suspicions about Hosea Greatreax’s wife to his neighbour:

She hath a Papist face and a proud heart and her beauty such as it is, is of the devil ... Truly I myself saw the woman make the sign of the cross upon her breast and upon the babe and doubtless she purposes secretly to rear him in the Romanish superstition though openly she professeth our purer faith.51

Milligan had immense difficulty both writing *The Cromwellians* and finding publication outlets for the manuscript after completing it in 1893. She eventually re-wrote the novel as a stage melodrama, and recycled characters and incidents in several short stories that deal with similar scenarios of dispossession, colonial occupation, and betrayal. For instance, in 1899 Milligan published four short stories in *The Irish Emerald* that are set in 1654 and contain characters and scenes featured in *The Cromwellians*. The central figures of the novel, Onora and Hosea Greatreax, also appear in *The Lady of One Hand* (14 January 1899) and *The Outlaw’s Bride* (15 April 1899). *Young Mitchil of the Pipes: A Tale of the Cromwellian Settlement* (21 January 1899) describes a native Irish community that is under attack from Cromwellian soldiers. In *The Wolf-Hunt of Lug-Na-Fulla* (8 April 1899) another illegal and transgressive relationship occurs between an English soldier and the Irish family whose home he has occupied.

The dramatized version of the novel was eventually published in serial form in the *United Irishman* throughout December 1903 under the title *The Daughter of Donagh*. After its rejection by the Abbey Theatre, the melodrama was eventually performed by the Cork National Players in 1905. At the end of *The Daughter of Donagh*, man and wife are expelled from their own communities and alienated from one another. The state of dispossession that is depicted in her play was something that Milligan herself experienced when she switched her political and cultural allegiances from unionism to nationalism. In a 1904 letter to
the *United Irishman* Milligan claimed that the act of writing *The Cromwellians* between 1891 and 1893 coincided with her own political awakening: ‘In the long period devoted to working on it, my own political opinions became clearly and firmly defined, and the bulky manuscript has ever since been preserved as a memorial to my own political development.’52

If Milligan found that the current sectarian strife was planted deep in Ireland’s colonial past, that very history also provided her with possibilities for political and social rejuvenation. The events of 1798 provided Milligan with a language through which she could articulate the anti-sectarian ideals she saw as crucial to the Irish Revival. The United Irishmen, a secret organization founded in 1791, led an uprising against English governance in Ireland. Under the banner of republicanism they brought together people from different classes, religions, and regions across Ireland. The political idealism of the United Irishmen envisaged revolutionary changes in Irish political life that accommodated the culture and language of its native population. At a meeting of the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society Milligan insisted that the insurrection represented the first coherent struggle against English colonial rule in which ‘Protestants and Catholics were united in a great national organisation’.53 She argued in an 1895 article for the *Irish Weekly Independent* that the United Irishmen were unique because they recognized that ‘the future liberty of Ireland depended on the abolition of creed distinctions and the promotion of union amongst all whose homes were in the land’.54 Milligan not only reminded her contemporaries of Protestant involvement at every stage of the insurrection but she repeatedly championed the fact that ‘it was in Belfast this movement originated’.55

Milligan wrote about 1798 more than any other event in Irish history. In an attempt to make the past live beyond textbook accounts, she also delivered magic lantern slide lectures that displayed images of United Irishmen and the battle sites of 1798. In an 1895 lecture she emphasized the importance of teaching the events of 1798 to northern Protestants because they ‘had been brought up in utter ignorance of the simple facts connected with the history of that time’.56 The three plays, four short stories, numerous ballads and poems that she wrote between 1893 and 1899 are set in, or refer directly to 1798. Emphasising the republican history of ‘the enemy’s camp’, Milligan located her ‘98 fictional works in Belfast and the North.57 Her short stories frequently depict characters who abandon the loyalist ideals of their families. *The Little Green Slippers, a Belfast story of Christmas, 1798*, published in the *Shan Van Vocht* on 6 December 1897, details the struggle of a Protestant woman to affirm her personal and political identity. With the growing dominance of a military state, Jessica Huston’s widowed mother
decides to marry a wealthy businessman who is loyal to the English crown. By defiantly wearing green slippers to an English military ball, Jessica disrupts ‘the settled order of things’ and refuses complicity with the loyalist allegiances of her mother, stepfather, and unsuitable suitor.58

1798 also plays an important role in stories that are set in nineteenth-century Ireland. Despite his status as ‘a sensible, settled, middle-aged doctor, an elder of the Presbyterian Church’, the narrator of the 1896 story A Boy from Barnesmore agrees to help an Irish-American Fenian smuggle arms into Derry in the 1860s. Attempting to rationalize his automatic willingness to take part in the hazardous venture, Dr Carr evokes the memory of his grandfather’s exploits at the battle of Ballynahinch: ‘Forgetful of everything … I was going to become guilty of high treason, or treason felony. “My grandfather was with Monroe in ’98,” I said, “and you may confide in me anyhow.”’59 Viewing the events of 1798 as crucial to the identity of Ireland’s cultural and political revival, Milligan appealed through her lectures and editorials for oral histories and folk memories of 1798 to be gathered.

After an 1895 talk, the Irish News reported how she requested her audience to record ‘any local incidents concerning the stirring period … before the few old people who are still living and who remember the days of ’98 pass away’.60 From 1896 to 1898 the Shan Van Vocht regularly published such oral histories of 1798, which were collected locally by the editor and her readers. In September 1897 Milligan again encouraged people to ‘revive the memory of the humbler and almost forgotten heroes of the strife’.61 By searching for oral histories and traces of the United Irish movement Milligan aimed to involve people in the process of commemoration. She used the pages of the journal to translate northern oral histories into an official printed record. Helena Concannon in her 1919 study Women of Ninety-Eight recognized the importance of this project, describing the Shan Van Vocht as the ‘most valuable repository of patriotic memories’.62

Milligan was not alone in celebrating the principles of the United Irishmen, for the centenary of their revolt provided an opportunity for a concentrated commemoration of solidarity and colonial insurgency. The crowds attending the unveiling of Theobald Wolfe Tone’s statue on 15 August 1898, for example, formed the largest ever gathering on a Dublin street. A decade’s worth of lectures and publications on the topic prepared Milligan for the high profile role she was elected to perform in organizing the Centennial of ’98. She was one of the five delegates chosen from Belfast to represent Ulster on an Executive Committee formed to organize the commemorative events. In September 1897 Milligan was elected to three of the five sub-committees (the Literary and Exhibitions Committee, the Memorial
Committee, the Tours & Hotels Committee) that were set up to bolster the effectiveness of the Centenary. While serving on the Dublin-based Executive, Milligan continued as secretary of the Belfast Centenary Committee, and as proof of her strong rural connections she was also elected the representative for Lettkeny’s ‘98 Centenary Association.

Milligan wanted the Centenary to transcend class, cultural, religious, political, and gender divides. Instead, she found that conflict between constitutional nationalists and republicans in Belfast proved a formidable barrier to unity. In September 1897 a bitter dispute arose between Milligan and the leaders of the National Federation and National League — a branch of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Members of this organization, she claimed, were infiltrating the ‘98 clubs in order to win support for nationalist politicians in the forthcoming Belfast municipal elections. Milligan had two principal objections to the appropriation of the ‘98 commemoration by career politicians. Firstly, she felt that this encouraged factionalism and, secondly, women were excluded from the institutional process of constitutional politics. Throughout 1897 she discovered that, as a woman, she was often barred from Centenary meetings.63 To guarantee herself and other Irish women a role in the commemoration Milligan launched the Irish Women’s Centenary Union in Belfast. On 6 April 1897 she beseeched readers of the Shan Van Vocht: ‘Is it too much to ask ... that the women of Ireland, who are not called on to have any opinion whatever as to who has the right to speak for Ireland in the British Parliament, should form that Union which a historic occasion demands?’

The importance of Milligan’s attempts to find a voice for women throughout the Revival was acknowledged in 1919 by the poet Susan Mitchell, whose series of articles for The Shamrock addressed one of Ireland’s most suppressed narratives, ‘the hero tale of Irishwomen’.64 Arguing that Alice Milligan exemplified the struggle of Irish women, Mitchell portrayed her as a dynamic force that helped shape new political and cultural conceptions of the Irish nation. With all her strange idiosyncrasies and ‘Ulster grit’, Milligan had acted when ‘the men were listless and without hope’. In a ‘dark disheartened day’, Mitchell continues, she had taken ‘up the torch of the fallen runners and carried it bravely forward’.65 Mitchell suggests that Milligan played a vital role in the long race of Irish history, by keeping aflame the nationalist torch she inherited from her predecessors so that future generations could benefit from it:

The torch was handed on by the runners through the centuries, and when one fell another took his place, and I think that Alice Milligan is the link that binds the nationality we know to-day to the Fenian movement whose spirit informs all of her work.66
After Partition Milligan struggled to keep the torch burning while she was confined within the still occupied territory of the North. A founding member of the Anti-Partition League, she seized every opportunity — including radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, pamphlets, poetry, and public lectures — to insist that Ireland could never be a Republic while the North remained under British sovereignty. Within such a context the events of 1798 took on even greater significance as a beacon of hope. Milligan highlighted what she saw as the ‘hostile’ and ‘un-Irish’ atmosphere of the North when she spoke at Wexford’s commemoration of the United Irishmen in July 1938.67 A week later Milligan told Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh of her enduring commitment to the struggle she had worked for all her life: ‘I am at present absorbed politically in the north where the fight goes on.’68 Hindered by the regular interception of her mail and obliged to report daily to a barracks in County Tyrone, Milligan conceived of herself through the 1930s as an ‘interned prisoner’.69 She had earlier complained to Sinead de Valera that since 1919 she was ‘more or less a prisoner, entirely secluded by circumstances amongst relatives entirely opposed to the Republican cause’.70 In the 1930s she described in a letter to the poet Seamus Ó’Sullivan the isolation, despair, and confusion she felt living under partition:

A curse upon the Border & those that made it — only for that a Taxi from this village would take me right through in a hasty call and back — but a complex mixture of taxi, trains, buses & limited time baffles me.71

Milligan would never live to see the realization of her vision of national unity. Nevertheless, as Susan Mitchell predicted, she remains a vital figure in the history of modern Ireland.

I would like to thank Jessica Morris, Frank Krutnik, Kevin Whelan, and Margaret Kelleher for their generous help, advice, and wisdom in writing this article.

NOTES
1. United Ireland, 16 December 1893.
2. Irish Weekly Independent, 21 September 1895.
4. Milligan’s extensive publications and activities are detailed on a day to day, month to month, year by year basis in an appendix to my PhD thesis, From the Margins: Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival, 1888-1905 (University of Aberdeen: September 1999).
5. Anna Johnston (1866-1902) began publishing poetry under the pen-name, Ethna Carbery, in the late 1880s. She and Alice Milligan first met at the inauguration of the Gaelic League in Dublin. Together they became members of the Belfast Amnesty Association and the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society. In October 1895 they founded and edited the McCracken Society's journal, The Northern Patriot. However, the Society's sponsors opposed Johnston's involvement after they discovered her father was Robert Johnston, a prominent member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Both women resigned from the paper and established their own journal the Shan Van Vocht in January 1896. Like Milligan, Anna Johnston was elected to the 1898 Executive Committee as a representative of Ulster in 1897. She took part in the first tableaux vivants show in Belfast in May 1898 and was Secretary of Inghinidhe na hÉireann in 1900. In 1901 she was married to the writer Seamus MacManus. After Anna Johnston's death of gastro-enteritis in April 1902, Milligan and MacManus collected her poems and short stories from The Northern Patriot, the Shan Van Vocht, Irish Weekly Independent, United Ireland and the Irish Homestead for publication in book form. The Four Winds of Ireland (poetry) was published in 1902; two collections of short stories followed - The Passionate Hearts (1903) and In The Celtic Past (1904).

6. Irish Weekly Independent, 31 August 1895.


9. The only other two prominent activists of the Irish Cultural Revival with Methodist backgrounds were Fred John Allan (1861-1937) and George William Russell ('AE', 1867-1935). Both Allan and Russell worked with Milligan at different points in her career. Born in England, Fred Allan’s political views may have been influenced by British Methodist support of the Liberal Party and their approval of Gladstone’s Home Rule policy. Following his move to Dublin, Allan became an avid supporter of Parnell through his journalism in the Freeman's Journal. As business manager of the Irish Daily Independent Allan first came into contact with Alice Milligan whose weekly column 'Notes from the North' appeared in the paper throughout 1894 to 1895. Allan was a prominent IRB member and Milligan shared many lecture platforms with him in Belfast. However, their friendship came to a sharp end during the acrimonious period (December 1895 to January 1896) when Milligan and Anna Johnston left The Northern Patriot to establish the Shan Van Vocht. Milligan publicly accused Allan of undemocratic ascendancy in the ranks of the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society and its journal, The Northern Patriot. For further information about the significance of George Russell’s northern, nonconformist roots, see Nicholas Allen, George Russell (AE) and the New Ireland, 1905-1930 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003).


12. The Irish Review (April-Sept. 1914), p. 214. Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916) was a poet, playwright, and scholar as well as one of the signatories of the 1916 proclamation. He was executed in 1916 for his part in organizing the rising. MacDonagh worked with Milligan in Cork during 1905 when she was a full-time paid Gaelic league lecturer.

13. From an article by Alice Milligan entitled, ‘Ulster and Home Rule’ in Evening
15. National Library of Ireland, Aíne Ceant Papers, Ms. PC 661 (4) Folder 4. In 1936 Milligan was due to read a series of her poems on radio. However, family illness and bad weather made it impossible for her to leave the North and she pulled out of the broadcast at the last moment. She submitted an autobiographical sketch to Aíne Ceant who presented the programme in place of Milligan. The programme details are as follows: ‘A Poet Reads. No. 5 Alice Milligan’ (13 February 1936, 7pm Dublin, Althone, Cork programmes). Throughout the 1930s Milligan considered the Ceant household her ‘political headquarters’ (NLJ Ceant Papers, PC. 661 (4) Folder 1 date: 15 September 1937) and her letters to Aíne Ceant provide the best insight into Milligan’s career throughout the 1930s.
16. NLJ Maire Nic Shuilibhlaigh Papers, Acc. 5835. Folder 1 p. 4. This transcript entitled ‘Yeats, Martyn, Moore and the Irish Literary Theatre’ was written by Milligan as part of a series of lectures about the Irish Literary Theatre to be read by her close friend Maire Nic Shuilibhlaigh in September 1938.
17. Irish Weekly Independent, 26 June 1895.
18. Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner, 7 September 1940.
19. Irish Weekly and Ulster Examiner, 7 September 1940.
22. Shan Van Vocht, April 1898.
23. NLJ Aíne Ceant Papers, Ms. PC 661 (4) Folder 4.
24. Undated and unidentified article from Dublin’s Evening Telegraph quoted by Henry Mangan, pp. xv-xvi.
25. The story was serialized over three months in the Shan Van Vocht: (Chapter I & II, Feb. 1896, pp. 17-23; Chapter IV, 6 March 1896, pp. 52-55; Chapter V, 3 April 1896, pp. 71-3). The O’Briens of Milligan’s story were clearly based on the politician William Smith O’Brien (1803-64) of Dromoland Castle, Co. Clare and his daughter, the novelist Charlotte Grace O’Brien (1845-1905). The latter converted to Catholicism in 1887. William Smith O’Brien helped lead a Young Ireland revolt in 1848 in Co. Tipperary.
26. A secret Irish Republican organization founded in 1858, the Fenians took their name from the mythological warrior troop that defended Ireland in the Ossianic cycle. In March 1867, a year after Milligan’s birth, the Fenians mounted an insurrection that was quickly suppressed.
28. Hero Lays was the first collection of Milligan’s poetry from newspapers. It was a project initiated and funded by Irish republican sympathizers in Argentina led by William Bulfin (1862-1910). Milligan remained in close contact with Bulfin (‘Che Bueno’) who actively supported the Shan Van Vocht from its inception in 1896. As editor and proprietor of the nationalist paper The Southern Cross, Bulfin was a central figure in the Irish republican movement abroad and remained an active supporter of Milligan’s work until his death. For further information about William Bulfin, see ‘The Irish diaspora in Argentina’ by Laura Izarra in Newsletter of the British Association for Irish Studies, 32 (October 2002), 5-9.
32. Irish Weekly Independent, 5 January 1895.
33. The Leader, 17 July 1909, p. 517.
and a position on the Executive Committee of the Irish Industries Association in
1893.
35. 'Contrasting Natures: The Issue of Names', in Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and
biographical and bibliographical references suggest that Milligan's first novel was
published in 1892 rather than in March 1890. However, the newspaper reviews and
Milligan's own diary confirm that it was in fact published in March 1890. Mention
of Charles Stewart Parnell's untimely fictional death in A Royal Democrat may
explain the continual wrong dating of the novel.
37. A Royal Democrat, p. 10.
40. United Ireland, 22 March 1890. The editor of United Ireland at this time was William
O'Brien.
41. Diary, 30 May 1891, p. 45.
42. Diary, 31 May 1891, p. 47.
43. Diary, 1 June 1891, pp. 50-1.
44. The Leader, 16 Oct. 1909. Parnell acted as talisman for Milligan until her death. As
late as 1941 she wrote a letter entitled 'Parnell's visit to Belfast' for the Irish Weekly
and Ulster Examiner (25 October 1941, p. 5) in which she described Parnell's visit in
the 1880s to the Rectory (Milligan's home from 1927-1943) at Mountfield, County
Tyrone: 'Parnell was, I believe, in Omagh (my native place) to support the
candidature of Rev. Harold Rylett, put up for a division in County Tyrone. He was
a Unitarian minister ... On visiting Mountfield where I reside ... he [Parnell] spoke
opposite the window where I am now writing ... Every time I draw a can of water
it is from the pump Parnell could have leaned on.'
45. Diary, 8 October 1891, p. 103.
46. Diary, 8 October 1891, p. 103.
47. This poem first appeared in the Irish WeeklyIndependent (14 October 1893). It was
not re-published until 1954 when Henry Mangan included it in his volume, Poems
by Alice Milligan, pp. 5-10.
49. The Leader, 17 July 1909, p. 517.
50. This nine page hand-written extract runs from pages 189 to 197. The total
manuscript would have contained more than 200 pages and is among the Alice
Milligan papers held in the Allen Library, O'Connell Schools, Dublin. Following
the death of his sister in 1953, Ernest Milligan contacted Brother W.P. Allen, a well-
known Republican figure, and asked him to write the biography of his sister. A call
was put out to all Alice Milligan's friends for letters and material relating to her.
This was collected by Brother Allen and stored in boxes at the Christian Brothers'
School in Dublin. Allen listed the letters sent to him but never wrote the biography;
he may have passed on much of his information to Henry Mangan, whose 1954
anthology of Milligan's poetry included the first detailed biographical sketch of her
career. Until now, no scholar has accessed this archive of manuscripts which
contains extracts from an unpublished Cromwellian novel, the final act of a '98
melodrama, letters, tableaux sketches, and drawings. Milligan stored these items at
her friend Maire Brolchain's house in Galway during 1921 when she and her
brother moved from Dublin to the north. Milligan wrote often about trying to
collect her papers but never made the trip to Galway. Brolchain passed all the
material in her possession to the Allen Library at Ernest Milligan's request.
51. The Cromwellians, p. 191.
52. United Irishman, 9 January 1904.
53. Irish News, 7 June 1895.
54. Irish WeeklyIndependent, 21 December 1895.
55. Irish News, 7 June 1895.
56. Irish News, 7 June 1895.
57. Characters such as Jessica Huston in The Little Green Slippers. A Belfast story of
Christmas, 1798 (Shan Van Vocht, 6 December 1897, pp. 213-218) live in Belfast while Randal MacAllister in the short story, A Rebel's Wooing (Shan Van Vocht, 7 August 1896) leaves his home in the 'little village of Cushendall' to fight with the United Irishmen.

Two years before the publication of this story, Milligan informed readers of the Irish Weekly Independent that her brother-in-law owned an actual pair of green slippers worn by a Belfast woman as a protest against the execution of United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken: 'A near relative of my own is the fortunate possessor of a relic of this McCracken mourning, in the shape of a dainty pair of emerald green slippers or half boots, which were the property of a lady whose people were in sympathy with the cause' (6 April 1895). Francis Joseph Bigger added a handwritten note to his copy of Milligan's article: 'Given by Dr Wheeler [husband of Alice Milligan's sister Edith Wheeler (1867-1920)] who had them from Miss Spencer, an old lady of Belfast. Mr Wheeler gave them to Mr Robert Young for his collection' (BCL F.J. Bigger Papers, A 86 p. 46). Robert Young was a historian of Belfast.

Shan Van Vocht, 15 January 1896. Despite the historical Unionist affiliations shown by the majority of Irish Methodists Milligan herself claimed during the build-up to the 1938 Commemoration of the United Irish insurrection that her own great grandfather and his five sons had 'marched to the battle of Antrim'. NLI Áine Ceannt Papers, Ms. PC 661 (4) Folder 4.

Irish News, 7 June 1895.

Shan Van Vocht, 6 September 1897.


For instance, Belfast's Irish News (4 September 1897) published a letter from Milligan in which she complained that she was excluded from '98 meetings held in Belfast on grounds of gender. For further details about the conflict Milligan encountered during the centenary see my chapter 'Taking up the torch: Alice Milligan and the Race to Remember', in From the Margins: Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival, 1888-1905 (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen: September 1999). For a broader discussion about the politics of the Centenary see T. J. O'Keefe, 'The Efforts To Celebrate the United Irishmen: The '98 Centennial', Éire-Ireland, 23 (1988), 51-73.

The Shamrock, 1 March 1919.

The Shamrock, 1 March 1919.

The Shamrock, 1 March 1919.

The People (Wexford), 2 July 1938, p. 7.

NLI Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh Papers, Acc. 5835 (Folder 10), p. 7.

NLI Áine Ceannt Papers, Ms. PC 661 (4) Folder 4.

NLI Sinéad de Valera Papers, MS 18, 311.

Trinity College, Dublin, Seamus O'Sullivan Papers, Ms. 4635/1264: (2). Dated 17 July 1930.