

PRESS RELEASE

Thursday, 14th February 2019

Letters between WB Yeats and lifelong friend Olivia Shakespear go on display at the National Library of Ireland

To mark Valentine's Day, a selection of newly acquired letters between WB Yeats and his first lover and close friend, the English writer Olivia Shakespear (1863-1938) have gone on display today (14.02.19) at the National Library of Ireland.

Olivia Shakespear was one of the women who – like Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory, and his wife George – were at the heart of Yeats' life and often his work. When they met in 1894, Shakespear was an accomplished writer in an unfulfilling marriage, and became the object of Yeats' affection. Although the physical affair did not last, it deepened into a tender intimacy that was cherished by both of them for the rest of their lives.

The letters date from 1895 to 1936 and most are from Yeats to Shakespear. They include detailed discussion of some of his most important literary works and critiques of Shakespear's own writing. The letters also explore their shared fascination with the occult, reflect on their long friendship and provide insight on the violence and instability of life in Ireland during the revolutionary period.

In a letter to Shakespear dated 6th December 1926, Yeats reflects with a note of regret on the time when they first knew each other: "I came upon two early photographs of you yesterday, while going through my file — one from 'Literary Year Book'. Who ever had a like profile? — a profile from a Sicilian coin. One looks back at one's youth as to a cup that a madman dying of thirst left half tasted. I wonder if you feel like that."

The NLI purchased the extensive series of about 100 autograph signed letters for €293,326 in December 2018 from its 2018 funding allocation, designated by Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD. The letters had been held in reserve following the auction at Sotheby's of the Yeats Family Collection in late 2017.

Commenting on the acquisition, Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD said: "It is wonderful to see these letters join the National Library of Ireland's substantial Yeats collection – an acquisition that was made possible by funding from my Department. Both WB Yeats and Olivia Shakespear are important figures in literary history, and these letters allow us a glimpse into their extraordinary minds. I encourage everyone to take the opportunity to view them at the NLI before the end of the month."

Chairman of the NLI's Board, Paul Shovlin said: "This forty-year correspondence between WB Yeats and Olivia Shakespear reads as an ongoing conversation between the closest of friends, whose initial romantic relationship developed into a lifelong affinity. They join the Yeats Collection at the National Library, which is the largest archive of Yeats manuscripts and books anywhere in the world. The collection is at the heart of the award-winning exhibition: 'Yeats: The Life and Works of William Butler Yeats' which is free and open to all, and welcomes 70,000 visitors each year. We are delighted to share a selection of these newly acquired letters with the public through a display in our main hall on Valentine's Day."

Highlights from the six letters on display at the NLI include:

- **12th April, 1895. WB Yeats to Olivia Shakespear.** Written before their relationship became physical, this letter opens very formally - "My dear Mrs Shakespear" - and includes Yeats' response to her writing: "I have never come across a new work so full of a kind of tremulous delicacy, so full of a kind of fragile beauty, as these books of yours."
- **9th April, 1921. WB Yeats to Olivia Shakespear.** Written from Berkshire, this letter ranges from the dramatic events in Ireland during the War of Independence to the everyday realities of domestic life. At this stage, Yeats was married to George Hyde Lees and had a daughter, Anne, and George was pregnant with their son, Michael. The letter reads: "We are nerving ourselves however to go to Ireland...at the first sign of a lull in the storm there as George pines for Ballylee. I begin to think she would be in better health there with even an occasional murder in the district than in this place or any other spot. We cannot move, if we do move, until Anne stops whooping, and whooping cough seems a long business. I remember nothing of it except a moment of surpassing pride when I whooped in the middle of a large class room at the age of twelve, drew all eyes and was sent home."
- **14th February, 1926. Olivia Shakespear to WB Yeats.** In this letter, written on Valentine's Day 1926, Shakespear has an interesting observation to make about love: "I believe that men are so made that they naturally hate one another & all their talk about Love is Bunkum." There is also evidence of her continuing keen interest in literature and Yeats' life: "I see you had a row at the Abbey when O'Casey's play was produced. I shall go to see it when it is over here."
- **18th December, 1929. WB Yeats to Olivia Shakespear.** Written after Yeats suffered a period of ill health, this letter contains the poem most closely associated with Shakespear and Yeats' long relationship, more than 35 years after they first met, 'After Long Silence'.
- **24th May, 1933. Olivia Shakespear to WB Yeats.** Here Shakespear responds to Yeats' admiration of 'Lady Chatterly's Lover' with the amused candour of long friendship: "I don't agree with you about 'Lady Chatterly' - If you have the expurgated edition, I can't imagine what is left! It is the same thing over and over and bored me considerably. There are good passages, of course."

The letters will be displayed in the main hall of the National Library of Ireland, 7-8 Kildare Street until 28th February 2019. Details of all the NLI's exhibitions are available at www.nli.ie.

Note to Editors:

- Director of the NLI, Dr Sandra Collins is available for comment on request.
- A selection of letters will be on display in the main hall of the NLI from 2pm on Thursday, 14th February until Thursday, 28th February 2019.
- Images of a small number of letters between WB Yeats and Olivia Shakespear are available to download, along with photos of Minister Josepha Madigan viewing the letters at the NLI, through the following link: <https://bit.ly/2RWb5kI>

About the National Library of Ireland: The National Library of Ireland is the library of record for Ireland. Established in 1877, it shares the story of Ireland with the world through its unique collections. The NLI cares for more than ten million items, including books, manuscripts, newspapers, photographs, prints, maps, drawings, ephemera, music and digital media. The Library is open, free of charge, to all those who wish to consult the collections. The five strategic priorities for the National Library of Ireland for 2016-2021 are to collect, protect, connect, innovate and collaborate. Further information is available at www.nli.ie. Follow the NLI on Twitter [@NLIreland](https://twitter.com/NLIreland), Facebook [National Library of Ireland](https://www.facebook.com/NationalLibraryofIreland), Instagram [@NationalLibraryofIreland](https://www.instagram.com/NationalLibraryofIreland), [Flickr on the Commons](https://www.flickr.com/photos/nliireland/) and [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCv3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3v3).