NATIONAL LIBRARY of IRELAND

MEDIA RELEASE

Actor Fiona Shaw opens exhibition celebrating the work of Alice Milligan: unjustly forgotten journalist, political activist, feminist, human rights campaigner, 'Cultural Ambassador', theatre pioneer and Ulster Protestant Unionist who became an Irish nationalist and tireless promoter of the Irish language and was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by President de Valera

18 November 2010: Politicians North and South, feminists, academics, historians, theatre producers and representatives from Irish language organisations and cultural institutions gathered at the National Library of Ireland today to join **actor Fiona Shaw** for the launch of *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival*, a ground-breaking exhibition celebrating the work of Alice Milligan, 'possibly the best kept secret in Irish history', an iconic and fascinating journalist, political activist, feminist, human rights campaigner and 'Cultural Ambassador' who hailed from a middle class Protestant Unionist family in Co Tyrone, went on to promote the Irish language through the Gaelic League, and became a pioneer in many other fields.

Alice Milligan was one of the most intriguing and politically engaged figures during the formation of modern Ireland. She was on first-name terms with James Connolly, WB Yeats, Roger Casement, Arthur Griffith and Maud Gonne. She wrote for 60 Irish newspapers for over 60 years; she was described as the most successful producer of theatre plays in Ireland in her day, and was hailed as 'the best living Irish writer' by the poet Thomas MacDonagh; she was a 19th and 20th century 'Cultural Ambassador' whose magazines, theatre plays, novels, short stories and poems achieved an extraordinary global reach; her newspaper articles were widely read in South Africa, America, Europe and South America, and she was hugely successful in connecting the Irish Diaspora to the national movement for the development of Irish arts and culture.

Although largely forgotten today, Alice Milligan's numerous achievements, including her success in connecting with the Irish Diaspora, were recognised by President Éamonn De Valera. He presented her with an Honorary Doctorate in 1941 to mark not only her long career as a prolific journalist and but also as a theatre producer, playwright, Latin teacher and founder of the numerous cultural, literary and feminist organisations that played such an important part in social, cultural and political life in Ireland.

Alice Milligan was one of 13 children born into a middle class Protestant Unionist family near Omagh, Co Tyrone. After studying in King's College London, she qualified as a teacher. Later, she became a staunch Irish nationalist and supporter of the 1916 Rising, helped found the Anti-Partition Union in the 1930s, and promoted the Irish language through the Gaelic League, using popular visual forms such as magic lantern shows and theatre performances to regenerate Irish culture.

Today, one of Alice Milligan's greatest advocates is Cambridge scholar Dr Catherine Morris, who was recently appointed Trinity College Dublin/National Library of Ireland Cultural Coordinator.

When Dr Morris first began researching the work of Alice Milligan, she was astonished at how such a major cultural and historical figure could have been so shamefully ignored in Ireland. Fifteen years after her research began, Catherine Morris has written a book on the career of Alice Milligan and she has also curated this ground-breaking exhibition at the National Library of Ireland.

The exhibition, which is now open to the public at 2 Kildare Street, continues until February 2011. Admission is free. The material for *Alice Milligan and the Irish Cultural Revival* is drawn from the archives of the National Library. It is part of a broader multimedia exhibition, *Discover your National Library*, which features treasures from the Library's collections.

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Additional biographical information: Alice Milligan

Alice Milligan was born in 1866 in a village near Omagh, Co Tyrone. Educated at Methodist College Belfast, she went on to study English literature and history at King's College London, and later trained as a Latin teacher in Belfast.

In the late 1880s, she regularly gave talks to archaeology groups during which she projected pictures onto walls using gas-powered magic lanterns. These were methods and technologies of communicating that she later radicalised in her theatre productions. As part of her work for the Irish Cultural Revival, Alice Milligan not only projected images representing Irish-Ireland into public spaces, she devised a theatre movement in which people themselves embodied the pictures that they projected back into their own communities.

Milligan played a central part in Irish cultural life. Amongst many innovations, she used the very popular form of *tableaux vivants* (in which actors on stage hold a still pose for some moments) to dramatise scenes from Irish history and culture. She was also one of the first *theatre* impresarios to use Irish actors rather than English actors in her plays. In addition, many of her theatre productions featured spoken Irish.

Among the organisations that she helped set up were a Derry branch of the Irish Industries Association, the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society, the Irish Women's Centenary Union and three branches of the Irish Women's Association.

Magazines that she established and co-edited included *The Northern Patriot* and *The Shan Van Vocht,* two ground-breaking journals in Belfast, both launched in 1895. In 1896 she opened an office in New York to help market the journals to the Irish Diaspora in America.

With her sisters, she collected and published Irish folk songs from Co Tyrone and actively promoted the Irish language as a 'lantern lecturer' for the Gaelic League. As a result of Milligan's hugely popular cultural initiatives, the number of Irish language speakers in Belfast rose from 900 to almost 4,000 within ten years.

In 1891, she moved to Dublin to learn Irish and became fascinated by nationalist politician Charles Stewart Parnell. His sudden death in October of that year confirmed the shift in

her political sympathies, and she became increasingly involved in promoting almost every aspect of Irish culture.

Alongside her cultural interests, Milligan was also a political and community activist. She helped to organise the 1898 centenary commemorations of the 1798 rebellion, and in 1916, after the Easter Rising, she travelled to London to attend the trial of Roger Casement. She spent much of that year visiting political prisoners, and after Partition, when she was again living in Northern Ireland, she helped found the Anti-Partition Union.

Although much of the 1930s were spent by her in the role of caring for relatives, she remained engaged by contemporary issues. During the 1940s, when she was well into her seventies, she was remained active in international causes such as campaign for Indian famine relief.