### **MEDIA RELEASE**



National Library of Ireland exhibition of extremely rare artefacts using innovative interactive Microsoft technology opened by Mr Martin Mansergh, TD, Minister of State at the Department of Finance

**20 January 2010:** Hundreds of rare items from the National Library of Ireland's collections – some of which are either too light sensitive, air sensitive or too valuable to be placed on public display in exhibition cases – can now be viewed in close-up detail by visitors thanks to the use of an innovative technology solution developed by Microsoft Ireland in partnership with Martello Media.

The *Discover your National Library* exhibition, which was opened today by **Mr Martin Mansergh TD, Minister of State at the Department of Finance**, enables visitors to examine objects from the Library's collections in the kind of detail that has hitherto been possible for only a limited number of researchers, academics and other specialists. Over the lifespan of the exhibition, several thousand different objects will be featured and will be made available online.

Such is the rich visual experience created by the high-resolution technologies used to display the items that exhibition visitors will almost certainly be enticed to view these items – and stay engaged by them – for long periods of time.

Among the artefacts on view currently (artefacts on display will change three times a year) are rare manuscripts such as the Book of Maguaran, an early **14**<sup>th</sup> **century** poembook containing poetry composed in Irish for the McGovern family; a 1588 deed signed by **Sir Walter Raleigh**; a 1795 **lottery ticket**; a set of 1920s cigarette cards illustrated by the painter **Jack B Yeats**; several 18<sup>th</sup> century survey maps of Irish bogs (designed to assess whether it was feasible to grow crops such as corn or hemp on Ireland's bogs at a time when the English government was fighting the Napoleonic wars and suffering economic shortages); a letter from **Éamonn Ceannt** to his wife Áine O'Brennan, written a few hours before his execution on 8 May, 1916; and a notebook of stunning drawings by 19<sup>th</sup> century antiquary George Petrie of his archaeological finds, ranging from arrowheads to gold ornaments.

The exhibition opening was attended by Éamonn Ceannt's grand-nephew, also called Éamonn Ceannt.

Launching *Discover your National Library*, Mr Martin Mansergh, TD, Minister of State at the Department of Finance said that the exhibition technology enables visitors to explore the Library's rich and varied collections and to examine details of beautiful visual materials which, in many cases, could previously have been appreciated only by using a magnifying glass.

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"Additional innovative features of the exhibition include 'turn the page' technology, which will enable visitors to read all the pages in the various books featured, and not just the open pages on display. An unusual element of the exhibition is that a designated area has been provided for a series of temporary exhibitions including one to mark the centenary of the Bogs Commission, and another dedicated to Alice Milligan, a prominent figure in early 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist and literary revival circles. The year will close with an exhibition on the Irish Texts Society", Mr Mansergh noted.

Speaking at the launch of the exhibition, Paul Rellis, MD, Microsoft Ireland said: "We are delighted to have partnered with the National Library of Ireland to help improve the access to these rare treasures and documents. This project shows the true potential that technology has in helping to bring arts and culture to more and more people. We hope that by digitising this collection, and by helping to bring it online, we will encourage more people to explore and research the extensive range of treasures housed in the Library."

One of the most popular features of the exhibition is the interactive Microsoft Surface 'discovery table' using Silverlight technology which is at the heart of the exhibition. Every object in the exhibition (and many which are not currently in the exhibition but will be in the future) is held in the table which is the exhibition's central repository. Here visitors can view images of objects from the collections in amazing detail. The images are tagged in such a way that if the visitor finds an item they are particularly interested in, the technology automatically links them to other similar items likely to be of interest.

Throughout, the exhibition makes extensive use of digital media, with special features including a series of talks shown on large plasma screens and given by the Library's curators who use a highly accessible approach (rather than academic approach) to describe the significance of certain items on display.

Each display case is accompanied by a touchscreen which contains copies of the objects on display so visitors can scroll through multiple pages when the object is a volume, or see other similar objects from the Library's holdings – the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of Irish documentary material numbering almost eight million items including maps, prints, drawings, manuscripts, photographs, books, newspapers and periodicals.

The *Discover* exhibition is now open to the public at 2-3 Kildare Street, Dublin. The selection of items on view will be refreshed and updated every four months. Admission is free. The contents of the central Silverlight Discovery Table may be seen on **www.nli.ie.** 

#### **Ends**

#### Note for editors:

The Microsoft Surface is a multi-touch computer technology. A specially developed programme was developed and tailored to meet the needs of the National Library of Ireland by a team in Microsoft Ireland in partnership with Martello Media. The computer responds to natural hand gestures and objects, enabling people to interact with digital content in a simple and intuitive way.

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- (1) The *Discover* exhibition was designed by the Dun Laoghaire-based company Martello Media. It also designed the Library's Yeats exhibition, which in 2006 won the British-based Association for Heritage Interpretation Awards *Interpret Britain and Ireland Award* for "the outstanding way in which it informed and involved the public".
- (2) The *Discover* exhibition is just one strand of the National Library of Ireland's emerging digital library programme. Last year, in a move aimed at transforming access by the public to its collections, the Library introduced two free online services. The first involved the placing on line of 20,000 photographs from the Lawrence, Poole and Independent Newspapers collections to the Library's website <a href="www.nli.ie/digital-photographs.aspx">www.nli.ie/digital-photographs.aspx</a>
  The second involved the placing on line of 'Sources', a digital directory of Irish studies containing 196,574 records of materials housed in the National Library of Ireland or in universities and research institutions around the world. Subjects covered in the materials range from art, architecture and archaeology through economics and genealogy to history, politics, literature, science and zoology. The digital directory may be found on <a href="http://sources.nli.ie">http://sources.nli.ie</a>.

For further information, please contact Elizabeth Kirwan, Assistant Keeper – Outreach and Preservation Tel: 01-603 0316 or Joanna Finegan, Assistant Keeper Tel: 01-603 0207