George Russell (AE) @ 150

An art exhibition of works specially selected from two of Ireland’s largest AE collections, Trinity College Dublin and Armagh County Museum running from 11th March to 22nd April 2017

Natural magic: the paintings of AE Russell

by Deirdre Kelly

Fig.1
Estella Solomons, AE

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great honour for me to be able to talk to you this evening to celebrate the artistic life of the great man AE. He was a man of many parts; writer, poet, editor, social and agricultural reformer, mystic and artist. I think my favourite description of him comes from his protégé, the writer Frank O’Connor who gave the eulogy at AE’s graveside. Talking about AE he said that within a half an hour of his acquaintance he encased you in universal curiosity and affection. ‘It was like being enveloped in an old fur coat,’ O’Connor maintained, ‘a little bit smelly and definitely designed for someone of nobler
stature, but though it might threaten you with suffocation, it never left you feeling cold’.¹

For the last few years I have been researching the art of AE for a PhD and I have come to regard AE, like O’Connor, as a somewhat avuncular figure, slightly dishevelled and maybe absentminded but someone with a good heart and humility who you know would only want to help you in any way they could. Someone loyal and steadfast; a true friend.

This wonderful exhibition of AE’s work comprises works held here in Armagh County Museum and from the Art Collections of Trinity College Dublin (TCD). We are very grateful to these repositories for housing AE’s works and for enabling this exhibition. Thanks in no small part to the work of T.G.F. Paterson (1888-1971), curator of the Armagh County Museum from 1937 to 1963 who had a personal interest in AE and who persuaded and cajoled people into donating to the museum that we have such a range and selection of AE memorabilia as well.

As for AE’s paintings in the Trinity Collection: in 1969 Trinity bought the Starkey collection of AE paintings upon the death of Estella Solomons, Mrs James Starkey whose portrait of AE is displayed here (fig.1, cat.no.25). James Starkey, the real name of the writer Seamus O’Sullivan, edited the Dublin Magazine. He was one of a number of AE protégées including Eva Gore-Booth, sister of Constance Markievicz, and Ella Young among others. James Starkey and Estella Solomons actually met at one of AE’s meetings of the Hermetic Society where people came to discuss and study eastern writings every Thursday evening. They were very close friends with AE and after his wife Violet died in 1932 AE spent every Sunday afternoon with them as well as Christmas that year. The following year he left for London and stayed with Estella’s sister in a boarding house. The Starkeys collected a large number of AE’s paintings, seventeen in all, some most probably gifted by AE. The collection of paintings was bought by TCD in 1969 from the Starkey family at a price considerably lower than it would have been on the open market. A generous donation from a Dr Letitia Dean and Miss Naomi Overend enabled the College to do so. Two other paintings from Trinity Hall, Man in a cabbage field (fig.12, cat.no.8) and A mystical figure standing between two mortals in a winged

¹ Frank O’Connor, My father’s Son (New York, 1968), p.78.
boat (cat.no.4) have no concrete provenance but my research suggests that they possibly belonged to a Warden of Trinity Hall, a Miss Marjorie Cunningham. She was a great friend of AE and Yeats, both of whom often visited Trinity Hall to meet with her students who also attended some of AE’s famous ‘Sunday-night’ gatherings at home. A large collection of books and items belonging to Miss Cunningham were left to the Hall upon her death in 1940 so it is most likely that she either bought the AE paintings or he gifted them to her and in turn they were left to Trinity Hall but there is no firm evidence.

Firstly, I am going to give little background information on AE and talk in general about his art before looking at some specific images within this exhibition to try to give an insight into AE’s mind when he painted these images.

George Russell, better known as AE was born in Lurgan, Co. Armagh in 1867 and he moved to Dublin with his family when he was eleven when his father got a position as a clerk in a brewery. He attended the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art where he made friends with W.B Yeats who was a couple of years older than him. Yeats was a great influence on George and in many ways he always felt that admiration and slight intimidation in Yeats’ presence even as his own confidence and fame grew. It was said that when Yeats entered a room AE would relapse into silence as if overawed. Yet, he confided to his art patron the Irish-American lawyer, John Quinn, ‘I am always fighting with Yeats but if I hadn’t him to fight with it would be a great gap in my life’.² Although they had their difficulties, their friendship and rivalry defined them.

From an early age George seems to have had a natural artistic ability as well as an otherworldly persona. Yeats remembered how in art school George ‘never tried to paint the [life] model as we tried to because some other vision rose before him’.³ So he painted what he visualised instead of what he saw and he admitted in later years that even as a young child here in Armagh when he played out in the fields, he saw strange figures and heard bells tinkling. In the mid 1880s Yeats introduced George to a mutual friend, Charles Johnston, whose father was the


www.tcd.ie/artcollections/exhibitions/armagh-russell150.php
Ulster M.P William Johnston and here again George was delighted to meet someone who shared his ideas and they became firm friends. Johnston had plans to join the Indian Civil Service and learned Sanskrit for it. He introduced Yeats and George to the world of Eastern writings and sacred literature. George immersed himself in this world and explained in his semi-autobiography The Candle of Vision written in 1918, how one night he dreamt of the word AEON. Not knowing what it meant, the next day he went to the library, opened a book and saw that that it was defined as ‘one of the first created beings in the universe’. Regarding this as a sign, he decided to use these letters as a pseudonym and submitted a piece to be published. However, as his handwriting was so appalling the copywriter was unable to read the letters and could only make out the first two, AE, so that is what he printed. George regarded this as another positive sign and decided that from now on that is what he would be called. He told John Quinn many years later in 1905 that ‘I like the pseudonym AE which I have always written under and which is much better known than George Russell’. He also confided to W.B. Yeats:

I took the pseudonym AE in order to escape from personal notoriety and if Katherine Tynan [Irish writer and poet] had not made it public a great many years ago I would never have done so. And I would have had a much pleasanter life.

But what about this man AE? What was he? Was he a writer, poet, mystic, artist or all of the above? How did he regard himself? At the time of the 1911 Census AE was living in 17 Rathgar Avenue, Rathmines, Dublin with his wife Violet and two sons, Bryan and Diarmuid at the height of his prowess, editing the Irish Homestead, dishing out advice and suggestions on everything from cattle scouring to literary criticism. Under the Census heading ‘occupation’ it might surprise you to learn that he wrote “artist and writer” with the words “oil paintings” scribbled underneath as if to affirm this statement.

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4 AE (1905), letter to Quinn, 17 May, in N.Y.P.L.
5 AE (1921), letter to Yeats, in Some passages from the letters of AE to W.B. Yeats (Dublin, 1936), p. 51. (N.L.I., Pádraig Ó’Broin Collection, LO8233)
6 ‘George Wm Russell, Rathgar, Dublin.’ (http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000147143/)
Therefore, painting was obviously an enormously important part of his life - and in 1911 at least it was THE most important part of his life. At this time his paintings were extremely popular with both public and critical approval. He outshone his fellow exhibitors in his 1911 exhibition at the Leinster Lecture Hall, Dublin which included such notables as Paul and Grace Henry who one critic wrote, unlike AE they (the Henrys) ‘seldom rise above the dead level of mediocrity and too often fall below it’.  

How this perception has changed over the years.

So there we have the evidence that for all his versatility, AE’s first love was painting. Throughout his very busy life, he always remained faithful to his painting whenever he had the opportunity. ‘Let the motive for action be in the action itself and not the event,’ he declared. ‘That it is right to do things for the sake of doing them and not for praise or profit or any such motive. I can do that with painting’.  

Unfortunately, AE as an artist has not received the recognition that I believe he deserves. This view was supported by the critic Bruce Arnold when he asserted that ‘George Russell the artist has been neglected . . . he painted well, with originality and a consistent style. And he deserves attention’. Thankfully, that is what he is getting here this evening. Every summer, he packed up his paints and fresh new canvases, from 30 to 40, and went for four to six weeks to the west or northwest of Ireland; Sligo and Donegal were his favourite destinations. As the years progressed he preferred to go to Donegal and stayed in the same cottage with the same landlady Janie Stewart where he was visited by friends and acquaintances.

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9 Bruce Arnold, ‘George Russell was a fine landscape painter’ in Irish Independent, 10 Dec. 1967, p. 25.
such as the American scholar Arthur Kingsley Porter and his wife Lucy who had a home in Donegal, Glenveigh Castle, and the barrister and M.P. Hugh Law and his wife Charlotte who bought a number of his works or AE gifted his works to them. That is the problem with trying to provide a comprehensive catalogue of AE’s works – it is almost impossible because he gave so many of his paintings away and very rarely titled or dated his work. Sometimes it is only through cross-referencing of measurements that one can see if one is researching a different painting with the same title. For instance, I know of at least four paintings with the title, *On the Beach* including the one belonging to the Museum here and all four have different dimensions. So why did he not title his works? Well, as he told a Joanne Fortune who curated an exhibition of his work in Chicago in 1917 ‘I don’t mind what titles are put on the pictures. It is my great difficulty finding titles . . . but you can put any names to the pictures or any lines you think suitable’.10 Because of this it has been up to galleries and curators to retrospectively title his work mostly by using lines from his poetry or descriptive headings. That is why some of the titles are unwieldly and downright strange. Here for instance in this wonderful exhibition we have the long titles *Across the shining water rode Mananaan MacLir* and then that painting that I mentioned from Trinity Hall *A mystical figure standing between two mortals in a winged boat with a swan’s head forming the prow*. Yet, this lack of titles does not take away from the work and fortunately, some catalogues do still exist which show the titles he did put on, including his very first public exhibition in 1904 when he was persuaded to exhibit with Constance Markievicz and her husband, Casimir, a Polish artist who lived next door to AE. This first exhibition was entitled *Pictures of Two Countries* that is, Ireland and Poland and we are so lucky to have one of those paintings from AE’s very first exhibition, the very beautiful *Spirit of the Pool* (fig.11, cat.no.16) painted in 1904 and housed here in The Armagh County Museum.11 Three more paintings from that first exhibition are also regularly displayed: *Life Enters the Seed* in The Model, Sligo and Casimir Markievicz’s portrait of AE in the Dublin Municipal Gallery, The Hugh Lane together with *The Winged Horse*.

As we see around us AE’s paintings can be divided into roughly three categories: seascapes/landscapes, portraits/self-portraits, and ‘dream’/mystical images, that is those based on his visions. He was a competent landscape and seascape painter with an almost impressionistic use of paint - the paint is applied in a washed or fluid style to try to capture the light and atmosphere of his seascape images in particular. My personal favourite of these images is *Sunset* (fig.3) displayed downstairs where AE has captured an atmospheric, serene and melancholy setting with very few motifs; a boat, two seagulls and the sinking sun and yet it is so beautiful that one could get lost in it.

![Sunset](image)

**Fig.3**

AE, *Sunset*

Oil on board, 22x31.4cm,

Armagh County Museum,

Purchased 1940

He was fond of depicting children who always appear innocent and pure in his images. When AE left Dublin in 1933 he asked his friends to come to his house and pick out anything they might like. Frank O’Connor was reluctant to do so, hating the thought of AE leaving but adamant that whatever he took it would not be a painting with those ‘dreadful children who appeared in almost every picture he painted and whom he had originally seen in a painting of Corot’s’ and continued to paint thereafter.\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) Frank O’Connor, *My Father’s Son*, p. 84.
Also, he was a capable portraitist. There is a lovely self-portrait from 1903 displayed here downstairs done in pastel. He was also competent at capturing other people. Again, from the collection here, is a portrait of the actress Elizabeth Young, sister of the mystic and poet Ella (fig.4). Elizabeth played the eponymous role of *Deirdre* in AE’s only play of 1902. He himself played her great love, Naoise while Ella played the maid, Lavarcham. Of course as is the way with great Irish sagas, it does not end well. *Deirdre* featured alongside Yeats’s ‘Cathleen Ni Houlihan’ in a joint performance from the Irish National Theatre Society that year to great success.

![Fig.4](image)

AE, *Elizabeth Young*.

Oil on canvas, 59.6x47cm,
Armagh County Museum,
Bequeathed by the sitter, 1965

AE actually designed all the costumes for his play and you can see a lovely drawing of Elizabeth in AE’s design online in the Irish digital repository ‘Inspiring Ireland.’
What about those other category of AE’s images that people do not really know what to make of, that perhaps were the reason he received some derogatory titles over the years such as ‘The Hairy Fairy’? Well, these paintings are difficult to understand, may even seem repetitive but I believe are also very beautiful and misunderstood and I hope to maybe give you a better and clearer understanding of what AE was trying to convey in these mystical works.

As I have mentioned, he revealed that he had always seen visions from a young child but did not know what they meant. During the mid-nineteenth century collectors such as Samuel Ferguson, George Petrie and others had promoted a renewal of Irish pride through acquisitions of ancient manuscripts and the discovery of ancient artefacts such as the Tara Brooch etc. The Irish writer Standish O’Grady fuelled by this resurgence translated the stories and legends of ancient Ireland into hugely popular volumes called *The History of Ireland* published between 1878-80. O’Grady certainly used a measure of artistic licence but his stories of Irish heroes such as Cuchulainn facing down a seemingly insurmountable challenge appealed to writers and artists of the revival period anxious to tap into the spirit of the time. Yeats, Lady Gregory and AE were excited about these stories and they inspired their creative juices. As AE read about these stories about figures such as the Tuatha De Danaan commonly called the sidh after their elevated hill fortresses, he

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13Digital Repository of Ireland ([http://repository.dri.ie/catalog/5999n7205](http://repository.dri.ie/catalog/5999n7205))

www.tcd.ie/artcollections/exhibitions/armagh-russell150.php
understood that these beings were the same figures who frequented his dreams. The sídh were the gods of pre-Christian Ireland, revered and respected by the people because of their intelligence, prowess and seemingly supernatural abilities. For AE and his fellow Anglo-Irish sect, realising that their status in an ever changing Ireland was increasingly diminishing, the sídh seemed to symbolise everything that was most noble and dignified about the true Irish race. So more and more his visions seemed clearly to him to be these ancient Irish gods who somehow he was able to see.

At the same time when he met Charles Johnston who opened his eyes to the sacred literature of the east, AE at last felt that he understood life’s purpose and his purpose in it. Johnston set up the first Theosophical Society in Dublin in 1886 after returning from a visit to London with the controversial leader of the Theosophical Movement, Madame H.P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian émigré. She had set up the TM in America in 1875 at the height of a spiritualist craze. So what is theosophy? Well, it is a syncretism or a mixture of several religions; some ideology from Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism and also some Christian tenets. Basic objectives include the idea of karma and reincarnation, a brotherhood of man without distinction to creed or race and being in harmony with one another and nature. And one of the fundamental principles of theosophy is the idea of the prototype or archetype, that is, that all humans, animals, matter and spirit derives from an ancestor or pre-existing elemental being which are their original embodiments. Therefore, when AE believed he visualised the sídh AND he started reading about these prototypes he put two and two together and concluded that the sídh were the original embodiments of the Irish race. So his dream or mystical paintings were his attempts to transfer his visions of these beings onto canvas. During the turn of the twentieth century when AE was working for the IAOS travelling the length and breadth of the country there was still a wide belief particularly among rural areas of the old traditions and folklore surrounding the sídh. Stories about changelings were common so Yeats wrote a poem about The Stolen Child and AE painted a lovely pastel image displayed here called The Stolen Child (fig.6, cat.no.23). So even though for a contemporary audience these ideas might seem strange and outlandish, in AE’s time there was still a strong belief in these superstitions and his paintings proved hugely popular.
Now we will look at a couple of images from this exhibition to interpret them a little more closely. AE’s idea of the prototype is seen in an image from TCD called *Three Divinities* (fig.7, cat.no.19). Three elemental beings are depicted. The central figure holds its hands outwards while the other two hold their arms to their chests. In Buddhism and Hinduism, movement of the hands means movement of the mind and each gesture of the hands would be very recognisable to an initiate. So here, hands open, pointing downwards indicates generosity and giving; hands folded indicates meditation. Theosophical believers also felt that colours played a part in manifesting one’s thoughts. Here, the colours AE used adheres to theosophy’s blend of mystical gold signifying ‘highest intellect’ and fiery reds which signifies ‘pride’.
In a 1911 interview to the American anthropologist and writer, Walter Yelling Evans-Wentz (1878-1965) AE described how it was possible that three figures could actually be one figure manifesting itself in many beautiful forms. You can also see this in the pastel I mentioned, *The Stolen Child* where it looks like AE is depicting three beings emerging from one. Now this might not have been as difficult to comprehend in AE’s time as it sounds now. You have to remember that there were all sorts of experiments and innovations occurring at the turn of the twentieth century. For instance in 1905 Einstein developed his special theory of relativity, one part of which related to time and put forward the proposal that depending on where one referenced oneself in the universe, one could be existing in either the past, present or future compared to someone else’s existence. So that is why for AE and those who believed in theosophy, the idea of one original being emanating into three beings, all equal and evolving at the same time appeared quite reasonable. Because theosophy seemed to use this scientific...
reasoning in its ideology, it attracted a lot of followers many of whom were disillusioned and anxious about the new century’s developments and technologies with the machine seemingly overtaking man. Theosophy seemed to be able to envelop these new concepts while still maintaining a sense of spiritual-ness or faith.

Fig. 8

AE, *Across the shining water rode Mananaan MacLir*, c 1910 or earlier

Oil on canvas, grisaille, 43 x 56cm,
Sullivan/Solomons Collection 1969
The Art Collections, Trinity College Dublin

Also in the 1911 interview AE explained that there were two types of visionary beings that he was able to distinguish. The first, whom he called ‘opalescent beings’ were of a higher order, in other words, more intellectual and able to think for themselves. In his image *Across the shining water rode Mananaan MacLir* (fig.8, cat.no2) AE shows Mananaan, who is the son of Lir, leader of the Tuatha De Danaan and the equivalent of the Supreme Being in theosophical terms. Mananaan is triumphantly ‘riding the waves’ on a winged horse. In Irish mythology the horse was a spiritual entity, close to the otherworld or Tir na nOg. We know that from stories such as Niamh and Oisin and AE wrote that ‘there are certain figures which appear continually in our literature, spoken of as a divine folk, apparitions of light taller than human, riding on winged horses’.15 In this image

14 Labelled 4. The date on the painting may refer to when the Starkeys actually acquired it as AE rarely dated his work and I have dated it provisionally after 1908 from research.
Mananaan holds aloft a torch in his outstretched hand proclaiming his dominance over the waves.

![Image of Mananaan](image_url)

**Fig. 9**

AE, *Spirit of the Wood*,

Oil on canvas, 41 x 53cm,

TCD

Sullivan/Solomons Collection 1969

The Art Collections, Trinity College Dublin

The other category that AE talked about were what he called ‘the shining ones’, beings that he saw much more often than the opalescent beings. The shining ones were further down the scale in terms of hierarchy and were divided into wood beings and water beings. In *Spirit of the Wood* (fig. 9, cat.no.1) AE epitomises the inner goodness or spiritual-ness of the wood being emanating from the canvas in a blinding aura. These examples *Mananaan* and *Spirit of the wood* show that when he wanted to AE’s painting process could be really good when he really thought about it. Mananaan is painted in a style described as grisaille which means AE has painted layer upon layer of neutral grey oil-paint to create an almost ‘relief’ like effect in imitation of sculpture and in *Spirit of the Woods* he has used various mediums such to create a glaze to allow this magnificent luminous figure to almost emerge from the canvas. In AE’s images of the wood beings, the humans do not seem afraid of these apparitions. We can see this in images such as *The Sidhe and

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16 Labelled 1.
a boy where the boy seems to interact with the small sidh or sidh-og (fig.10, cat.no.15).

![Image](image-url)

Fig.10

AE, *The Sidhe and a boy*, after 1906,

Oil on canvas, 41.5 x 53cm,

Sullivan/Solomons Collection 1969

The Art Collections, Trinity College Dublin

However, AE was not so comfortable with water beings. He felt they had a malevolent influence and filled him with dread because whenever he came in contact with them ‘a great drowsiness of mind overcame him’. He believed the water beings drew their life out of ‘the Soul of the World’ and said that ‘... as I gazed into the dark waters consciousness seemed to sink beneath them’. Interestingly, ‘in Finnish folklore the water being frequents rivers, waterfalls and lakes. It is often called ‘näkk’ in Swedish, or ‘nix’ in English which has changed to the word ‘nick’ over time, hence the term ‘Old Nick’ when referring to Satan or the Devil.’ So that superstition about the water beings is in several mythologies.

*The Spirit of the Pool* (fig.11, cat.no.16) attempts to visualise AE’s anxiety about the water beings. In the image, three figures cower in the background while the beautiful vision rests on the rockface to the right foreground of the composition. It is one of AE’s most evocative paintings; blues and purples create a harmonious background while orange and blue flames radiate from the figure. While seemingly innocuous and innocent, AE’s anxiety about the water beings and what he sensed

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17 A sketch for this painting is in a sketchbook in the National Gallery of Ireland (MS 15594)
as an ‘evil influence’ is communicated in the image through the reaction of the human figures. The vision is beautiful yet the spectators seem afraid of it. They cower together. AE felt that ‘halfway between spirit and matter there is a state where good and evil wear one face’ and in this image he attempts to encapsulate this condition. The ambiguous nature of the ‘dangerous beauty’ of the being is epitomised by the viewers’ apprehension.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 11**

AE, *The Spirit of the Pool*, 1904

Oil on canvas, 49 x 66.8cm,

Armagh County Museum,

Purchased 1958.

*Man in a cabbage field* (fig.12, cat.no.8) which comes from Trinity Hall can fall into the theosophical principle of man working in harmony with nature. AE, through his work with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) felt that helping the rural farmer make a better life for himself was an extension of his own spiritual beliefs. So this seemingly contradictory life he led - being a practical social reformer and then a mystic, was in fact for AE quite reasonable. In the context of AE’s spiritual believes, it is highly possible that the figure encompassing or protecting the man in the field is a representation of Aditi, who, in theosophical doctrine, is the Hindu goddess of the sky and earth. She is also

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21 Exhibited Leinster Lecture Hall 1904 (cat.no.210). Casimir Markievicz exhibited eighty-five paintings (cat.nos.1-81), Constance Markievicz, seventy-six (cat.nos.82-157) and AE, sixty-two (cat.nos.158-220). Entry fee was six pence.
known as the mother of the gods and the figures in the background barely discernible until you look really closely representing a figure watching over a child re-enforce this viewpoint. The Irish equivalent is Dana or Danu, goddess and mother of the Tuatha De Danaan. In Irish mythology the goddess of the land chose the mortal who would be king and if he adhered to her desires and wishes then the land would be fertile and the crops abundant. In his book *The Candle of Vision*, AE equated the ploughman with a god of the land.

I could see a ploughman lifting himself from his obscure toil and stand with lit eyes as if he too had been fire-smitten and was caught into heaven as I was, and knew for that moment he was a god.  

One of AE’s most popular images *The Potato Gatherers* (fig.13) displayed downstairs, also deals with this concept of harmony with nature and with one another. AE painted a number of images of people working out in the fields. Each image displays indistinct figures in the foreground labouring under a heavy load in a generalised rural setting; nature itself being the divine presence or third

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22 AE, *The candle of vision*, p. 11.
party. In order to succeed in gathering all the crops, they must work as a team and so relinquish their claim to individuality.

*Fig.13*

AE, *The Potato Gatherers*,
Oil on canvas, 50.7 x 61cm,
Armagh County Museum

*The Potato Gatherers* is similar compositionally to Jean Millet’s (1814-1875), *The Gleaners* yet it differs in its idealised setting as well as the sense of harmony between the figures. AE admired Millet and said that he revealed a greater divinity than other artists who failed ‘with all their spiritual and imaginative gifts to suggest the vision of that which needs no seeking, for it is everywhere’; his vision being man and woman working with nature. In AE’s view, individualism in life and business could never create a spirit of co-operation.

That is why I have titled this talk *Natural Magic*. The practical side of AE, working with the IAOS, helping the rural farmer, saw nature as the conduit to achieve co-operation and harmony. But for him this was not in contradiction to his mysticism and beliefs but rather an extension of it. He believed that creating harmony and co-operation was an integral, natural progression of this spiritual ideology. He wrote a poem entitled *Natural magic* published in his 1894 anthology, ‘Homeward Songs by the way’ which acknowledges how being aware of nature’s magic around us is a vital component in one’s life even for the practical person

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23 (ARM.CM.1.1949). Donated by representative of Lily Yeats. Exhibited in Egan’s Memorial Exhibition 1936 (cat.no.5).
‘All unwise is thought or duty – Still our wisdom envies you: We who lack the living beauty Half our secret knowledge rue.’

Fig.14
AE, *The Kings of the Faery Race*, c.1900,
Oil on board, 62 x 46.5cm,
Sullivan/Solomons Collection

The Art Collections, Trinity College Dublin

It must be mentioned that one obvious feature of AE’s dream paintings is the androgynous nature of the mystical or elemental beings. He was asked by Evans-Wentz about the sexuality of the figures he visualised but AE did not know whether they had the ability to reproduce or were immortal. However, in theosophical doctrine the androgyne is a common feature -because the androgyne, halfway between feminine and masculine was the embodiment of harmony. This viewpoint was expounded by Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the theosophical movement as the Ideal because it constituted the synthesis of opposites; male and female, spirit and matter, positive and negative, vertical and horizontal. The vertical line represents male and the horizontal female. Anyone of you familiar with the paintings of the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian who was also a theosophist

25 Starkey/Solomon Collection, formerly called *The Palaces of the Sidh* or *The Five Queens* (cat.no.15).
will be aware of horizontal and vertical lines in his abstract images. This explains why ostensibly AE’s mystical beings may be thought to be feminine because of flowing locks and robes, this is not necessarily the case. AE admitted that he believed the beings grew old and then passed into new bodies just as men do, but whether by birth or by growth of a new body, he couldn’t say, since he had no certain knowledge about this. That is why images such as TCD’s *Kings of the Faery Race* (fig.14, cat.no.13) was also exhibited under the title *The Five Queens* because of the confusion over sexuality.

So, finally, thank you all for listening. I hope my talk gave you a little clearer insight into AE’s paintings and maybe a different perspective when you look at them again. It is unfortunate that over time AE’s artistic reputation has somewhat diminished because of the complexities of his subject matter and the different times and beliefs that that he lived in but it was also due to his somewhat shoddy painting process it has to be said. He was so intent on getting his ideas and visions down on canvas that he sometimes neglected the ‘housekeeping’ part of the painting process, that is, preparing the ground or surface that you paint on so that the longevity of the work can be protected. Unfortunately, AE was impatient and those kind of details often got the better of him which is why the quality of some of his work has not stood the test of time. AE himself argued that he thought technique could sometimes obstruct natural expression and it was better to become absorbed in the subject and to leave it ‘to nature to do the rest’ – a good excuse for shoddy workmanship I suppose.  

He did not succeed in his wish to be a professional full-time painter. His friend, John Eglinton believed that he must have felt certain regret that the only course open to him had been one of practical affairs. He loved beautiful paintings and confided to Eglinton that he thought ‘nature had intended me to be a painter’.

Still, I leave it to one critic to summarise what I believe should be the general view towards AE’s art. Writing in the *Irish Times* in 1912, Joe Joyce stated that ‘finally, there is AE the painter. I am told that he cannot draw and this may possibly be true. But he can produce pictures with which one can live with for

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years without wanting to throw things at them, and very few people who can draw are able to do this..."^{28}

10th March 2017

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^{28} Joe Joyce, ‘From the archives’ in *Irish Times*, 23 March 1912