

The Yeats sisters: a magnificent celebration

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I watched Imelda May's fascinating programme on Sky Arts last night, in which she explored the story of the Yeats sisters, Elizabeth and Susan, who were usually known as Lolly and Lily.

Now apparently (and certainly to me) unknown, they were the sisters of the Irish poet, William Butler Yeats. They were profoundly influential in his life, not least, because they printed and published the first editions of many of his works through their Dublin based Cuala Press.

I was pleased that both their father and brothers made only peripheral appearances in this programme. It was, rightly, a celebration of two profoundly intelligent and diligent women who through their work had a major impact on the arts and crafts movement in Ireland, and beyond, in the period from 1900 to 1940.

Lily Yeats' work as an embroiderer and artist was displayed, and it was truly magnificent, especially (in my opinion) when she avoided people and animals and instead celebrated the landscape.

What, however, truly fascinated me was the work of the Press itself .

I love letter press printing. There is something extraordinarily powerful about this form of creation, which becomes art in itself.

What I do, have to admit, though is that the love in question is the result of an idea that I have held dear since I was a teenager. That is that a person possessed of an idea, the means to put it on paper, and a mechanism to reproduce it has the most powerful possible tool to influence the world in which they live. I have never changed my belief about this and I know that my fascination with writing and everything to do with its recreation will, for me, never end. I did in that sense feel a very powerful affinity with what Lolly Yeats, in particular, was doing with the Cuala press.

The fact that they first published so many of the writers whose work I absorbed in my twenties and thirties when I was seeking to understand Ireland, its history, its

independence and the movement that eventually delivered that freedom was something of which I was not previously aware. That left me both enthused, and a little annoyed. That these sisters' role went unacknowledged whilst their brother is so well-known is such a powerful symbol of cultural oppression, and makes the point that International Women's Day, which this programme marked, is still deeply relevant.

It also helps that I am an enormous fan of Imelda May's work that now exist in an increasing variety of forms. She is herself a force of nature, willing to take the risk to say things that others know, but are not willing to express. She was the right person to explore the Yeats sisters' courage, and her enthusiasm was both obvious and very genuine.

I have been writing with the intention of seeing my words in print since my early teenage years. The roles of the publisher, editor, designer and printer are too often ignored in all of that process. Last night's programme was a true celebration of two exceptional sisters and I am delighted to have watched it. It was great work by all involved.