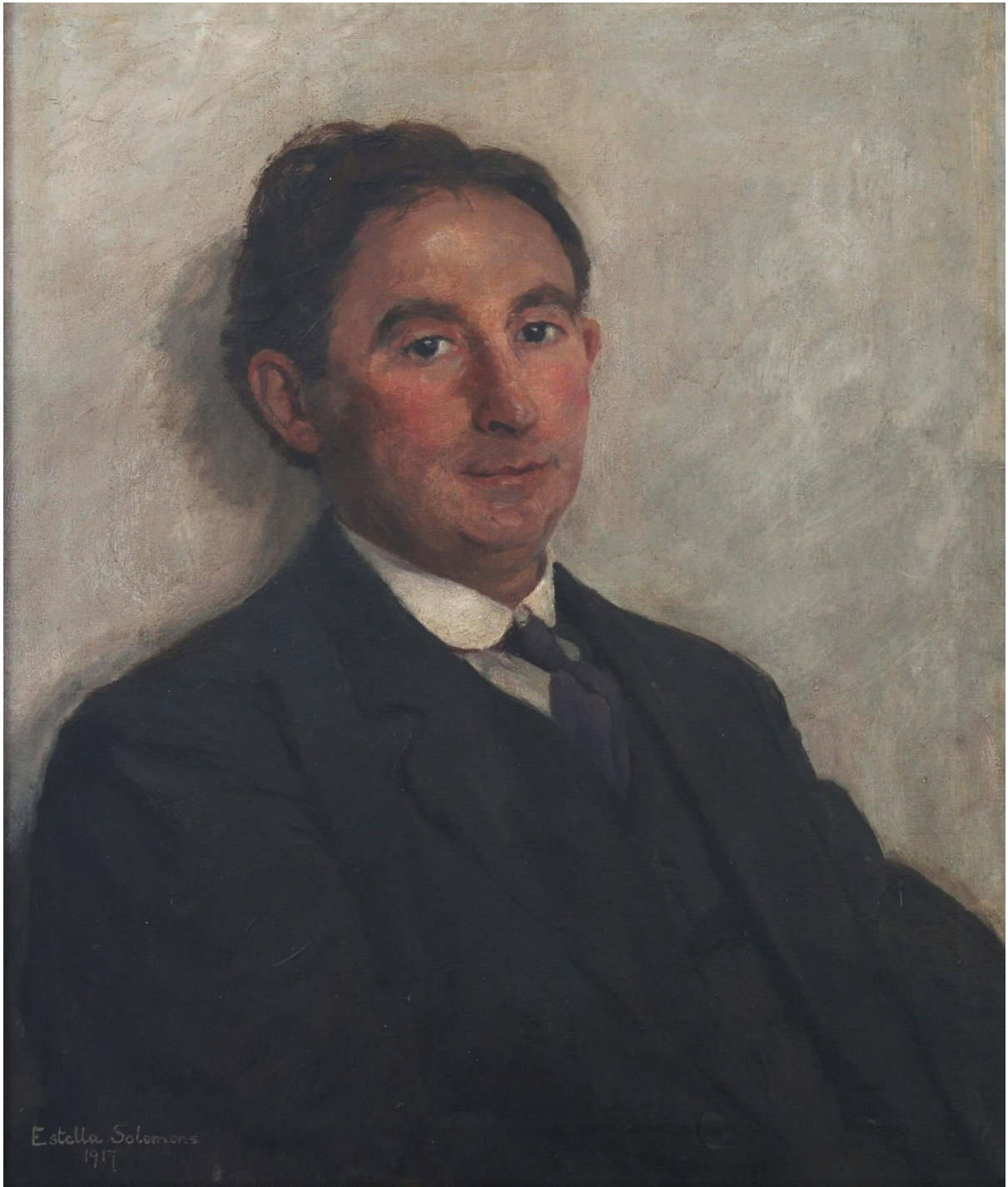
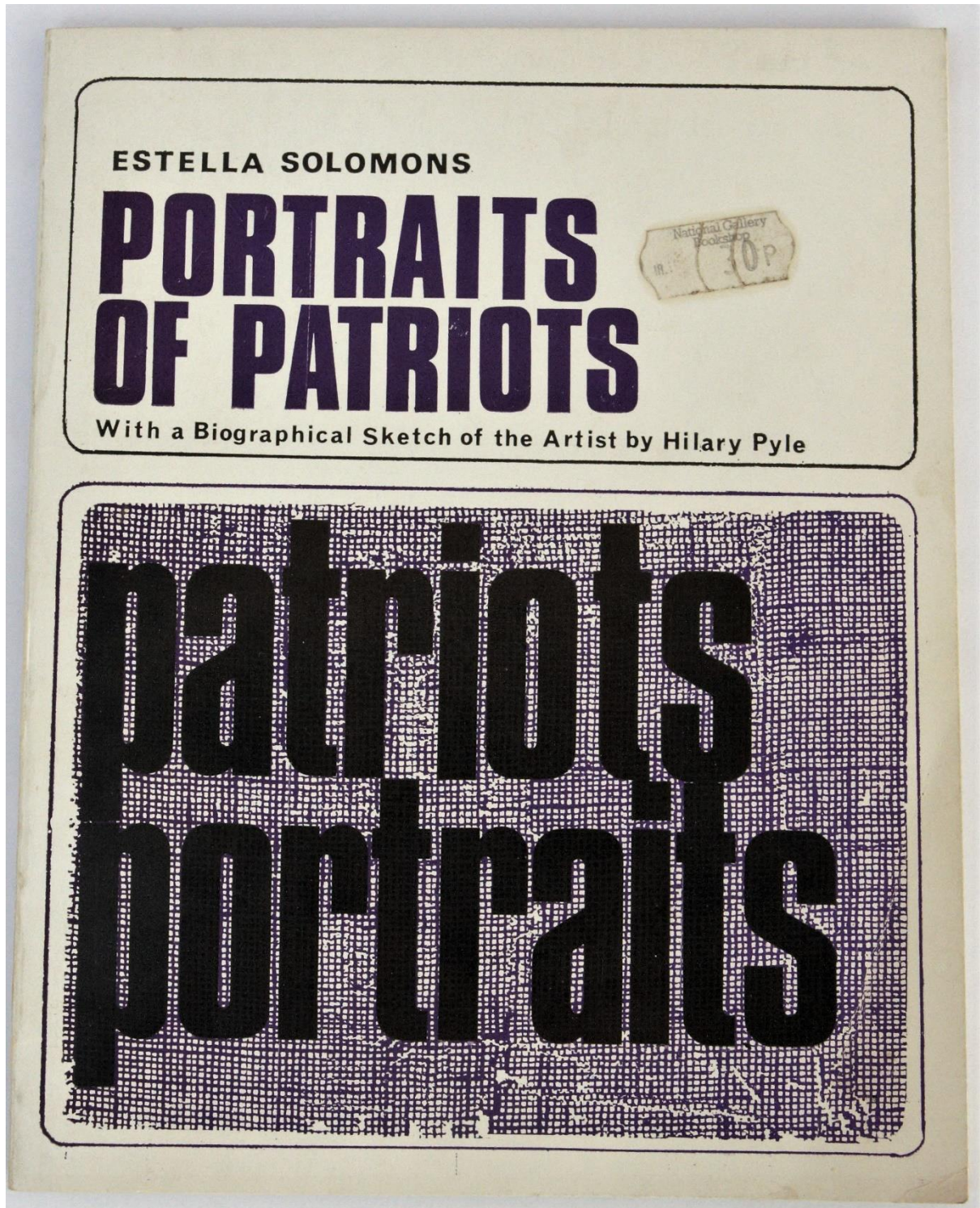


Mná 100



Seumas O'Kelly 1917. Private Collection. Photographer Cuan Ó'Seireadáin. Courtesy of Conradh na Gaeilge.

This portrait was selected for the publication *Portraits of Patriots*, 1966 written by Hilary Pyle, art historian, art critic and curator, marking the 50th anniversary of the Rising. Pyle met Estella Solomons (1882-1968) in her home in Donnybrook. Her portrait of Seumas O'Kelly (1917) was one of the images selected for this publication, in fact it was the first illustration in the book. In 1966 the painting was still in the artist's possession.



Estella Solomons Portraits of Patriots by Hilary Pyle. Private Collection. Photograph Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

After it was published in this commemorative book, Seumas O'Kelly's nephew Alphonsus Sweeney went to Estella Solomons studio, and he brought with him his small daughter Emer. She recalls this visit:

'My father Alphonsus Sweeney was brought up by his Uncle Seumas when his parents emigrated to St Louis. The First World War intervened and he never joined them. When I was a child my father took me to Morehampton Road in his Austin Cambridge when he was visiting Estella to collect the painting. He left me in the car alone and after a short time came back with the painting wrapped in brown paper. I remember him being elated and it was like being reunited with a much loved family member. Thanks to Estella I have had this strong connection with Seumas O'Kelly.'

This painting passed by descent to Emer. Today, one hundred years on, it has pride of place in her home, in a central position, one could almost say that it is the heart of her house. As part of this Mná100 Centenary piece we are delighted to share a colour image of this portrait, which conveys a sense of character, emotion and expression. Thank you to Cuan Ó'Seireadáin for supplying this image.

Estella worked in a time when capturing a likeness in portraiture was not greeted with the same sense of awe and wonder as it had in earlier centuries when the skill of the portraitist was revered. In the early 20th century the camera was becoming widely available, and even those on small incomes could afford a studio portrait for a special occasion. The oil on canvas of Seumas O'Kelly is an exceptional portrait, it goes beyond a likeness captured by a lens. The artist with brush strokes and paint pigments, has a mastered lifelike features, expression and pathos in the sitter's expression, he who was known as the 'gentle revolutionary.'

Why did the Estella Solomons request to paint Seumas O'Kelly's portrait in the summer of 1917? What compelled her to transfer his likeness to canvas? Was she aware of his delicate health? In 1911 he suffered from rheumatic fever that had weakened his heart. By the following year, 1918, he would be dead.

It was not a commission.

It was likely that it was his literary achievements that brought about Estella Solomons' request to paint him, a man who had been one of the youngest Newspapers Editors in Ireland, whose body of work had been prolific - writing poetry, short stories and plays. Although his short story "The Weaver's Grave" which is the most acclaimed piece of his literary output was published after his death.

The
Weaver's Grave
By Seumas O'Kelly



Presentation Edition
With Eight Illustrations by
Jack B. Yeats

THE TALBOT PRESS LIMITED
T. FISHER UNWIN, LIMITED

∴ DUBLIN
∴ LONDON

The Weavers Grave by Seumas O'Kelly. Private Collection. Photograph Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Within Estella Solomons' circle were leading writers and intellectuals of the day, and as the years went on so many of these people were actively involved in the Campaign for Independence. She herself was also active, and 1917 was a significant year for the artist. That year Estella Solomons joined Cumann na mBan, which was an organisation that had its own uniform along with a rifle badge with the initials of the organisation. It was set up as an organisation that pledged its support to national aspirations for an independent Ireland. Signalling, first aid training and fundraising for arms were the main activities of the organisation, but for active members, such as Estella, some were placed in charge of arms dumps and were trained in the use of firearms.

The sitter:

Seumas O'Kelly

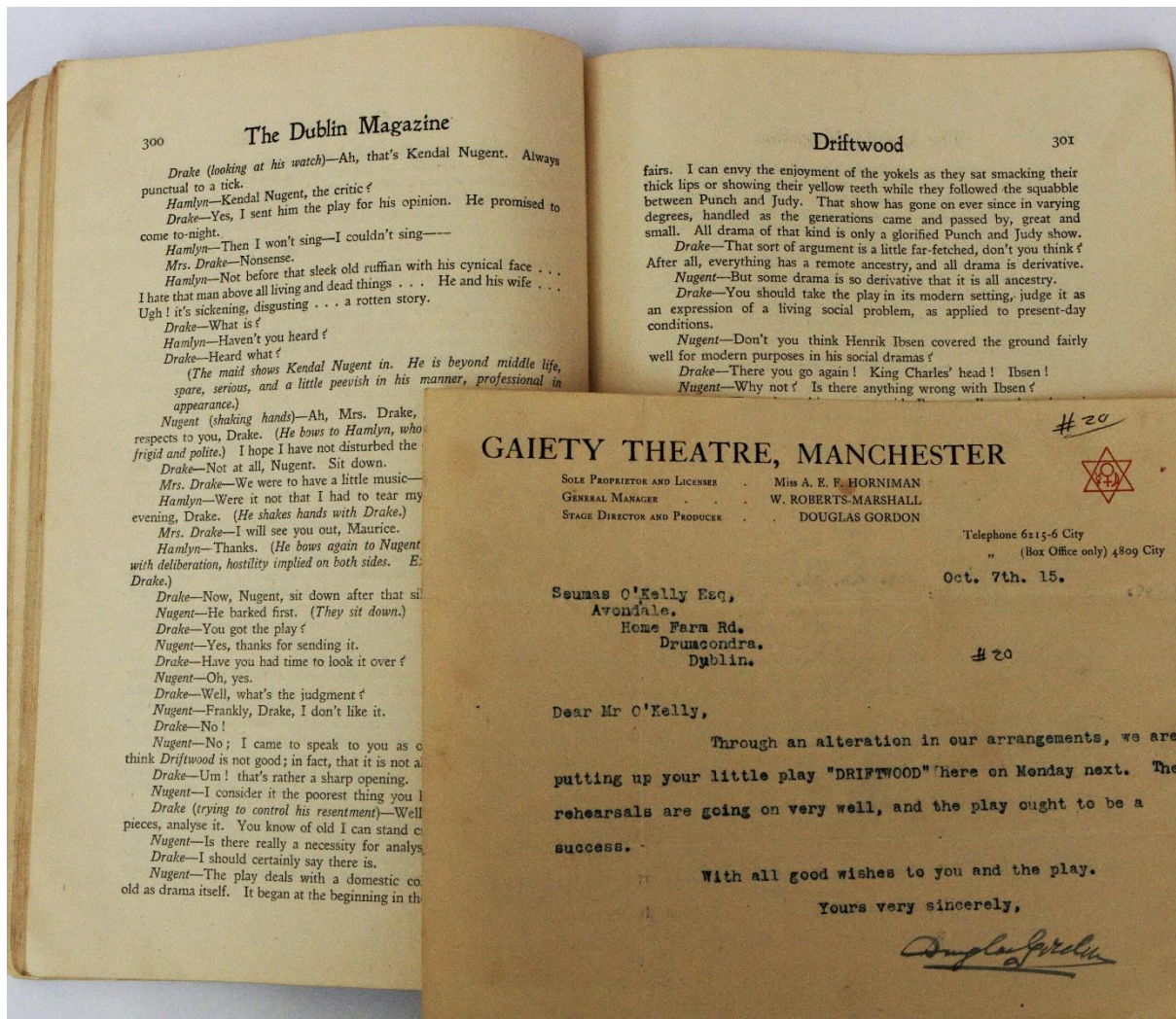
James Kelly (later known as Seumas O'Kelly) was a native of Galway, from the area of Mobhill, Loughrea. He was the youngest of a large family of Michael and Catherine Kelly. His mother's maiden name was Fitzgerald and she came from Foxhill, Loughrea. His family were evicted from the Clanricarde estate. According to James Durney, Historian-in-Residence in 2016 for County Kildare, Michael O'Kelly subsequently opened a newsagents in Mobhill, Loughrea and was able to educate his family.

James, now calling himself Seumas, began his career as a journalist, and by 1903 he was working in West Cork, editing *The Southern Star* newspaper. Subsequently he worked on a number of other publications before moving to Naas in 1906 to become editor of the *Leinster Leader*. The following year, his widowed father, his sister Nora and his nephew Alphonsus Sweeney moved from Galway to live with him. James Durney records that he was renting a substantial house *Abbeyville* on the Grand Canal.

Seumas was editor of the *Leinster Leader* newspaper until 1912. The Editorship was taken over by his brother Michael O'Kelly. For further information see this article by Kildare Historian-in-Residence James Durney: [The Brothers O'Kelly Leinster Leader Editors](#).

By 1917, the year he sat for his portrait, Seumas O'Kelly was a well-known and well-published writer, novelist and a playwright, writing in both the Irish and English languages. His first play was *The Matchmakers* (1907) a comedy in one act, and was followed by *The Flame on the Hearth* (1908). It was his work with *The Shuiler's Child* (1909), a tragedy in three acts which gave him critical acclaim. It tells the story of a workhouse child who is adopted, a role that was played by Constance de Markievicz. The mother was played by Mary Walker, better known by her stage name Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh. It was a Theatre of Ireland Production at the Rotunda. It was also published by Maunsell's in its Irish Plays series. This play was followed by *Meadowsweet* (1912) and *The Bribe – A Play in Three Acts* (1913) which was the story of a shop keeper and Poor Law Guardian who accepts a bribe to appoint a dispensary doctor in a small town. These plays were all staged at the Abbey Theatre Dublin.

James Durney notes that he collaborated with Casimir Dunin de Markievicz on a one-act play *Lustre*. Annie Horiman, the Abbey Theatre benefactor asked him to write a play for an English audience. His play *Driftwood* was produced in Dublin in the Gaiety Theatre, and in 1915 was performed in Manchester and London.



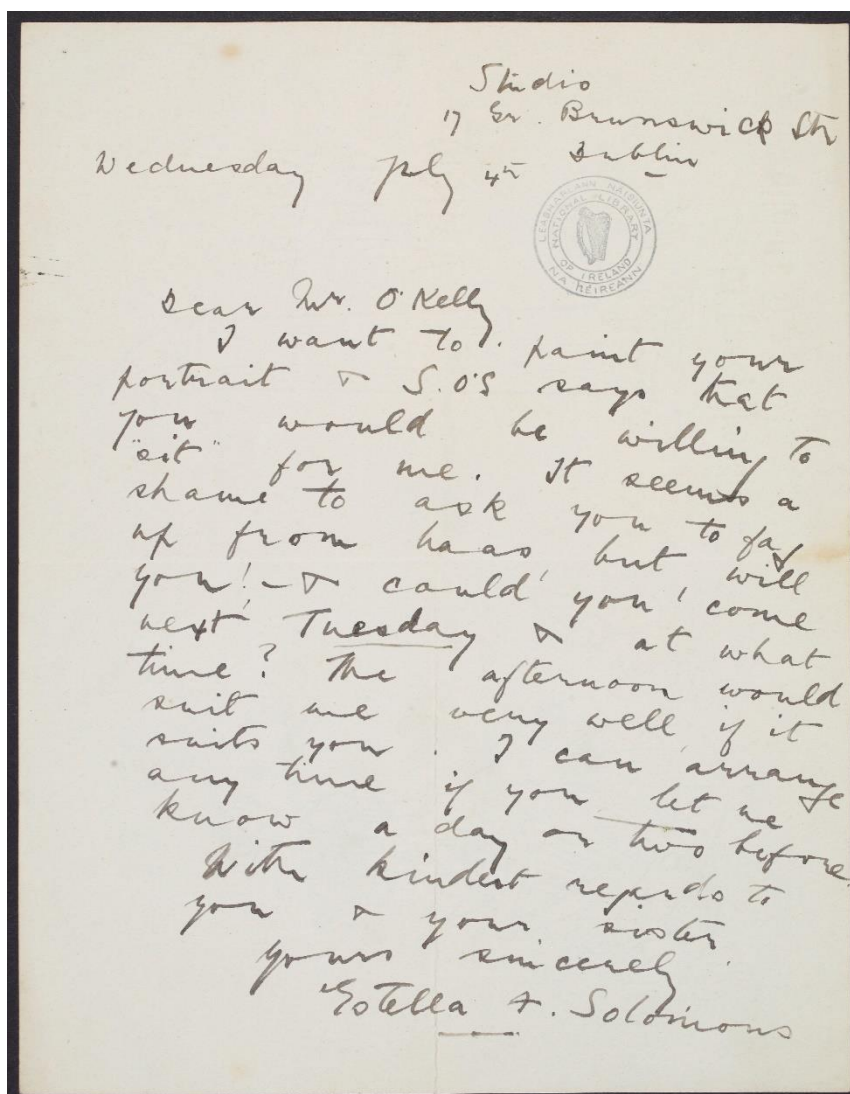
Driftwood by Seumas O'Kelly featured in *The Dublin Magazine* November 1923 along with telegram to Seumas O'Kelly informing him the play will be staged in Gaiety Theatre, Manchester, October 7 1915. Private Collection. Photograph Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

His growing reputation in England led to the publication of his novel *The Lady of the Deerpark*, by Methuen in London in 1917. It tells the story of the Big House, a Catholic family of declining fortunes, told through the voice of the agent Paul Jennings. That year his short story collection, *Waysiders: Stories of Connacht* was published by T Fisher Unwin in London.

According to Patrick Maume, who wrote his Dictionary of Irish Biography entry, his writing was inspired by his home place, the fictitious location Ballyrea, was in fact Loughrea. You can read his entry [here](#). He was active in the Naas Sinn Féin Club, and spent much time in Dublin, where he numbered Arthur Griffith, James Stephens and Seumas O'Sullivan (James Starkey) as close friends. It was through these friendships Estella would have known Seumas O'Kelly. Seumas O'Sullivan (who Estella would later marry) and James Stephens had a flat in the building she had her studio, 17 Great Brunswick Street.

Extant letters now in the National Library of Ireland, show how Estella Solomons approached Seumas O'Kelly asking him to sit for her. The letter she wrote to him comes as she describes from her Studio, which was located at number 17 Great Brunswick Street, now Pearse Street. She addressed him formally as Mr O'Kelly.

She opens her letter directly, with the statement 'I want to paint your portrait' adding 'and SOS says that you would be willing to 'sit' for me.



Letter from Estella Frances Solomons, to Seumus O'Kelly, asking him to sit for a portrait, (year unknown) July 4th. MS 49,491/2/999. Courtesy of National Library of Ireland

Studio

17 Gr Brunswick Street Dublin

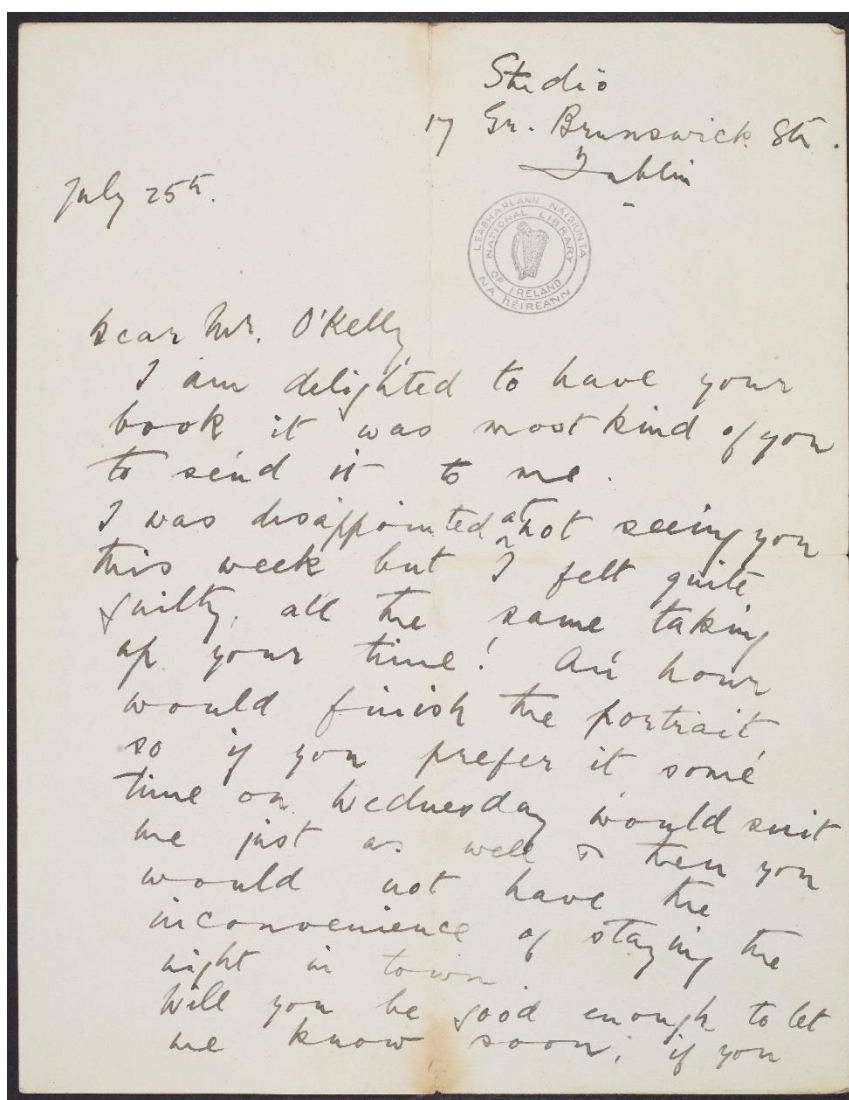
Wednesday July 4th

Dear Mr O'Kelly,

I want to paint your portrait & S.O.S.¹ says that you would be willing to sit for me. It seems a shame to ask you to [gad] up from Naas but will you! - & could you come next Tuesday & at what time? The afternoon would suit me very well if it suits you. I can arrange any time if you let me know a day or two before.

With kindest regards to you and your sister.²

Estella F. Solomons.



Letter from Estella Frances Solomons, to Seumus O'Kelly, organising an appointment to finish his portrait, (year unknown) July 25, MS 49,491/2/1000. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

¹ SOS is James Starkey, who was known to all by his writing nom de plumme, Seamus O'Sullivan. Seamus, as Estella always described him rather than his given name of James, would be her husband in later years. As she was a Jewish and he was Christian she waited until her parents were dead before marrying him.

² His sister Nora O'Kelly who lived with him. She died on 6 May 1939 aged 75.

The second letter, is dated and seems to come following the first sitting. The second sitting she describes as only taking an hour of his time.

July 25th

Studio

17 Gr Brunswick St, Dublin

Dear Mr O'Kelly,

I am delighted to have your book it was most kind of you to send it to me.³ I was disappointed at not seeing you this week but I felt quite guilty all the same taking up your time! An hour would finish the portrait so if you prefer some time on Wednesday would suit me just as well and then you would not have the inconvenience of staying the night in town. Will you be good enough to let me know soon, if you are not coming on Tuesday and then at what time you will be here on Wednesday. Everyone seems to be very well! The streets are lined with attentive policemen – there is a convention on in Trinity College⁴ today. Hoping you are very well and with kind regards

Yours sincerely Estella F Solomons.

The portrait appears to have been completed but the artist was not happy and looked for a third sitting as indicated by another letter that has survived, now in the collection of the National Library of Ireland

This letter is also addressed from the Studio, 17 Great Brunswick Street, undated.

Saturday

Dear Mr O'Kelly

Is there any chance of your being in Dublin on this Wednesday or the coming week?

I find that on working at your portrait that I would like to have another look at you!

An hour would be enough if you could spare it.

The following week would suit me equally well if it would be better for you.

Grand about Cosgrave!⁵

Hoping you are well and with kind regards

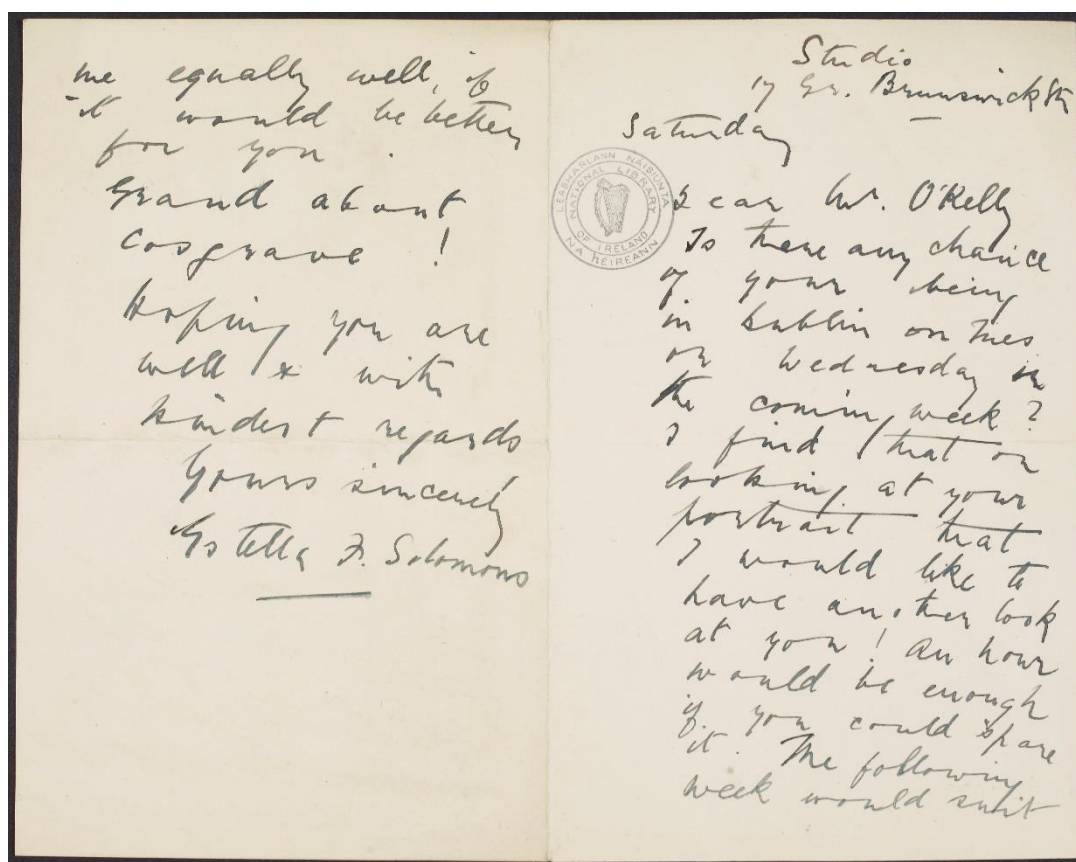
³ This could have been either his novel *The Lady of the Deerpark*, Methuen, 1917. Or his short story collection, *Waysiders: Stories of Connaught* was published by T Fisher Unwin in London the same year.

⁴ The Irish Convention which took place from July 1917–April 1918, to discuss a Home Rule settlement. It was made up of 95 members under the chairmanship of Sir Horace Plunkett it included Ulster Unionists, Southern Unionists, members of the Irish Parliamentary Party and independents. It was boycotted by Sinn Féin and the Labour Party. It ended in failure in April 1918.

⁵ WT Cosgrave 1880-1965 attended the inaugural meeting of Sinn Féin in 1905 and later elected to Dublin City Corporation as a member of that party. He was a member of the Irish Volunteers who fought in 1916. He was sentenced to death, but this was commuted to life in prison. He was released in December 1916. In August 1917 he was elected for Sinn Féin as a Member of Parliament for Kilkenny City. In this letter Estella Solomons was making reference to his selection to stand for election, which was announced in July 1917.

Yours sincerely

Estella F. Solomons.



Letter from Estella Frances Solomons, to Seumus O'Kelly, asking him to attend one more sitting for his portrait, (date unknown), MS 49,491/2/1001. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

In 1918 following the arrests as part of the so called 'German Plot' O'Kelly offered his services to edit *Nationality*, the Sinn Féin party newspaper. He had been in retirement since 1912 but the political situation including the arrest of his brother Michael O'Kelly meant that he had continued his work as an Editor.

In 1918 he went to work on *Nationality* in the Sinn Féin Headquarters in 6 Harcourt Street. This famous location had been home to so much political activity. For more information on this building today it is home to Conradh na Gaeilge (the Gaelic League) and for its history see: <https://www.tg4.ie/en/player/home/?pid=6248630966001&series=Uimhir%206&genre=Faisneis>

The Armistice that marked the end of the Great War (now known as World War I) on 11th November 2018 this led to an attack on 6 Harcourt Street by what was described as separation women, off duty soldiers and Trinity students. O'Kelly was working there when the attack happened. According to his brother Michael he came to work the day following the attack but it was clear he was unwell, he collapsed and was brought to Jervis Street Hospital. He never recovered consciousness and died at 5am on the 14th of November. His death certificate gave his death noted his coma, and gave cerebral haemorrhage as cause of death.

475	1918	Seumas O'Kelly	M	Bachelor	40 yrs	Journalist	Cerebral Haemorrhage foma Cerb.	J. Black Inmate Jervis St. Hospital	November Twentieth 1918	G. P. Custace Registrar
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Mná100 would like to sincerely thank Emer Grief for access to Seumas O'Kelly's private archive, Cuan Ó Seireadáin, tCóilín Ó Cearbhaill, and the staff of Conradh na Gaeilge along with Evan Chamberlain of New Departures Media.

For further information see:

Cian Ó Seireadáin

Seumas O'Kelly, Ricorso.net/trx/az-data/authors/o/OKelly.s/life.htm retrieved, September 2020.