The documents displayed in this exhibition – letters, newspaper clippings, pamphlets, concert programmes, and others – are testament to a remarkable life. When the collection first arrived at the Borthwick Institute for Archives in 2008, few could have imagined the stories contained within: a little girl so enchanting upon the violin that she played before queens and prime ministers; a young woman who, despite her public profile, steadfastly rejected the social, political and religious norms of her day; a tireless artistic innovator in the modernist heyday of artistic experimentation; an intrepid traveller and champion of international co-operation; a devotee of mystical movements following a determined quest for spiritual enlightenment in the modern world. Maud MacCarthy (1882–1967), pioneering spirit that she was, managed to be all of these.

But MacCarthy’s story has gone more or less untold until now. Why? At the end of her life, in the freer atmosphere of the 1960s, the world had almost caught up with MacCarthy. By then, her fascination with Eastern spirituality would barely have raised an eyebrow, her objections to nationalism and imperialism would have been readily understood, and even her commitment to using music as a healing agent, labelled as quackery in the 1930s, had gone mainstream (in the form of music therapy). Indeed, for much of her life, MacCarthy was well ahead of her times. She was one of the first Western scholars and performers of Indian music, for example, and developed community arts projects in the poorest parts of London before it had occurred to many others to use the arts in this way.

As is so often the case with those out of step with their contemporaries, MacCarthy’s work met with suspicion, sometimes even ridicule. She did not respect the limitations traditionally placed on her gender, of course, and her complicated personal life (separated from her husband in the 1910s, co-habiting out of wedlock in the 1920s), as well as her open involvement with mysticism and the occult, can hardly have helped.

Of MacCarthy’s many projects, probably the most provocative was the Festival of Remembrance, which she produced at London’s Royal Albert Hall and Queen’s Hall on Armistice Nights in the 1920s. Central to these events was A World Requiem, a major choral work with a text by MacCarthy set to music by her lover and, later, husband John Foulds in tribute to the war dead of all nations. Yet MacCarthy’s and Foulds’s message of international peace and reconciliation after bloodshed met with vociferous criticism in some sections of the British press. Faced with such hostility, MacCarthy chose to live her later life, between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s, in India, renouncing worldly connections as a mystic and a Swami, the highest spiritual attainment in the Hindu Sannyasi system. True to form, she was the first woman ever to achieve this status.

Once in India, MacCarthy’s controversial reputation in Britain faded, and the personal documents displayed in this exhibition, collected in her earlier life, languished at the mercy of insect infestation. She fell into obscurity, remembered not even by historians of those fields to which she made such important contributions. Thanks to her son, John Patrick, who carefully preserved and ordered these papers, we can now look back on

But just how did a celebrated child prodigy violinist, born into an Irish Catholic family, end up as Swami Omananda Puri, master practitioner of Eastern mysticism? The key to understanding the course of events that led MacCarthy to India, to the mystical work she undertook there, as well as to her status as something of a religious and social maverick in Britain, is the friendship she formed with another pioneering spirit, albeit of an earlier generation: the infamous radical campaigner and religious leader, *Annie Besant* (1847–1933). Scandalously divorced from a Church of England clergyman and associated with a notorious campaign for contraception, Besant spoke on behalf of the National Secular Society and campaigned for Irish and Indian independence before assuming the presidency of the Theosophical Society, an organization that sought the re-unification of science and religion and the pursuit of ancient occult traditions. Besant’s influence on MacCarthy ran deep, providing an exemplar of leadership the younger woman would attempt to emulate again and again as she sought a place within the Theosophical Society, which she joined in 1900.

Eschewing the authority of any one religion, the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, attempted to blend esoteric traditions of magic, including Eastern traditions, with the empirical rigour of nineteenth-century rationalism, much as the contemporaneous spiritualist movement did in the form of the Society for Psychical Research. MacCarthy’s first trip to India in 1906 was spent with Besant at the Theosophical Society’s international headquarters in Adyar, a part of the city of Madras (now Chennai). MacCarthy’s association with Theosophy, and with Besant, quickly eroded the respectable reputation she had previously established as a concert violinist. On 24 July 1907 the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, darkly, that ‘Miss Maud MacCarthy, violinist [...] has determined to abandon music, and will devote herself to theosophy’.2 The earliest damage to MacCarthy’s credibility in the eyes of the establishment had been done, despite her father’s insistence that she was still ‘a staunch Roman Catholic’.3 Theosophy was viewed with suspicion by those who feared its impact on the Christian churches.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* was accurate in its identification of MacCarthy’s unconventional interests but absolutely wrong about her abandonment of music. Quite the reverse was true. On her first trip to India, MacCarthy dedicated herself not only to the teachings of Theosophy’s founder, Helena Petrova Blavatsky, but also to investigation of the mysterious properties of music, which she and Besant thought to be one of the most powerful occult agents in the natural world. ‘My mind was a seething why about music’, MacCarthy wrote, ‘not as the art we know, but as a science–art’. By this, she meant, for example, ‘why one note or chord of music produces one psycho-physiological effect, and another, a different one’.4 Fascinated by things unaccounted for by mainstream science, MacCarthy set about experimenting with what she described as the magical, occult effects of music on the human mind and body. Alongside her other activities, MacCarthy later practised what she called ‘phonotherapy’, a medical procedure consisting of healing through the power of sound vibrations alone.

No matter which of her artistic projects currently occupied her, ‘religion continued’,
as MacCarthy herself put it, ‘to be my absorbing interest: not a religion, not any study of books; but I longed for alignment with Cosmic Consciousness – a wonderful, romantic opening out, setting one free’. Such ideas were clearly indebted to MacCarthy’s encounter with the Theosophical Society. Theosophists believe that direct knowledge of divinity and the cosmos can be attained by each individual. They also emphasize the importance of immanent religious experience and the notion of the search for a universal “truth” that binds all religions through, for example, art and music. MacCarthy made that her aim when she returned to London from India in the 1910s. From co-leading the music portion of the Sunday Morning Meetings at London’s Theosophical Headquarters, through to her mystical project, the Temple of Labour, her settlement house Grove End, and even the high-profile Festival of Remembrance concerts, MacCarthy wanted to awaken religious feeling in as many people as possible. This religious awakening was valuable not only for its own sake, but because she thought that it would bring greater health and happiness to those who encountered it.

MacCarthy’s partner in these projects was the composer John Foulds (1880–1939), the man for whom she left her first husband. Foulds remains the better known of the Foulds-MacCarthy partnership today. Among many other works, he composed and conducted A World Requiem, which was performed at MacCarthy’s Festival of Remembrance and initially supported by the British Legion, particularly its president Earl Haig. Foulds, too, was a member of the Theosophical Society, and shared MacCarthy’s commitment to using the arts for the betterment of the many rather than the few. Before meeting MacCarthy, Foulds had combined his career as a cellist in Manchester’s Hallé Orchestra with musical work at the University of Manchester’s settlement in the poor district of Ancoats, a line of work he later continued for the Y.M.C.A. in London during the First World War.

It was MacCarthy’s relationship with Foulds that contributed to her severing of formal ties with the Theosophical Society at the beginning of 1917. In the previous year, the Executive Committee of the Theosophical Society in England feared that the Foulds-MacCarthy relationship would cause a scandal for the Society, and began to limit their leadership and involvement in sanctioned Theosophical activities like the Sunday Morning Meetings. At the same time, the Theosophical Society’s Executive was also probably wary of the challenge to Theosophy’s institutional structure (which had been consolidating and concretizing since the beginning of the Besant presidency) that Maud’s claims to occult agency and her attempts to teach others how to contact suprahuman entities represented. Despite the formal parting of ways, MacCarthy continued to plough a Theosophical furrow in projects such as the Festival of Remembrance and at her Theosophically inspired mystical arts hub, Grove End, and she maintained a cordial correspondence with her mentor Annie Besant well into the 1920s.

MacCarthy’s artistic pursuits were not limited to music. Her artistic interests and contacts across different cultural worlds in Britain and India in the first half of the twentieth century were incredibly diverse and by no means limited to the sphere of the Theosophical Society. Although not a painter herself, MacCarthy was nevertheless extremely interested in the spiritual potential of the visual arts, a matter she theorized in published writings about art. A central concern for her was the way in which the material forms of art and craft could be conduits for invisible cosmic ideals. In this way, the sensory powers of music

5 The Boy and the Brothers, p.8.
6 Foulds’s ideas about music, including discussion of his collaboration with MacCarthy, are published in John Foulds, Music To-day: Its Heritage from the Past, and Legacy to the Future (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1934).
for her were always more satisfactorily suited to conveying mystical thought, forms and energies than the material practices of sculpture, painting and drawing. She was an active member of the Theosophical Art Circle, which published the Orpheus journal, and she was close to the journal’s editor, the poet and artist Clifford Bax. Her organizing talents were put to use when, with the support of Besant, she founded the Brotherhood of Arts, Crafts and Industries. After leaving the Theosophical Society, MacCarthy channelled her energies into two related arts organizations; the School of Mysteries and the Temple of Labour, which she ran with Foulds. These organizations were avowedly occult in that they were founded on “secret” knowledge and mystical experience.

MacCarthy’s ideas about the potential “internationalism” of the arts were incredibly radical in their time and anticipate some of today’s discussion about the contemporary globalized art world. Her interest in the East, and particularly India, was often tinged with an Orientalist desire for a supposedly more spiritual, less materialistic “East”. Yet, her genuine interest in contemporary art in India, and her admonishment to Western artists that they had more to learn from the East than vice versa, was a challenge to the conventional colonial systems of art education and artistic hierarchies of her time. This position towards reviving “traditional” and indigenous art forms with an emphasis on the handcrafted was formed through her contacts in the art world in India and Britain, such as the writer and art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, the Irish-born disciple of Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita (née Margaret Noble) and artist Abanindranath Tagore, as well as her readings of anti-industrial writers such as those sages of the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris and John Ruskin.

MacCarthy believed that the modern, materialistic, Western world could be improved through a new, more equal, encounter with the East. Yet this did not make her anti-modern. It is one of the ironies of artistic modernism that so many of its leading practitioners were influenced by movements such as Theosophy which looked to the past as much as they did to the future. Wassily Kandinsky, Alexander Scriabin and W. B. Yeats (with whom MacCarthy regularly corresponded) are only the best known Theosophists from the worlds of art, music and literature. MacCarthy’s work with organizations such as the Theosophical Art Circle promoted unfamiliar artistic forms as an allied endeavour to the investigation of unfamiliar natural laws (such as telepathy). MacCarthy’s interest in Theosophy intersected not only with a taste for the artistically experimental, but also for the socially radical. She was interested in the ‘woman question’ and befriended the prominent women’s suffrage campaigner Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. Her artistic work with London’s poor led to collaboration with the prominent Labour politician George Lansbury. In other words, MacCarthy’s interest in esoteric religious traditions went hand-in-hand with an agenda of artistic modernism and social reform. She cannot be dismissed simply as a religious crank. Her work should be located squarely within the trajectory of twentieth-century modernity, even if this might involve a broadening in our understanding of this term. Each of the eight cases that make up this exhibition deals with a distinct phase in MacCarthy’s life and work, covering particularly the period up until her long-term move to India in 1934. This is the first occasion that any of these papers have been displayed in public. An accompanying digital version of this exhibition can be found online:

http://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/pioneering-spirit.jsp

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