

O'Farrell, Elizabeth

by Frances Clarke and James Quinn

O'Farrell, Elizabeth (1884–1957), republican, was born at 42 City Quay, Dublin, the youngest of two daughters of Christopher Farrell, a dock labourer, and his wife Margaret, a housekeeper. She was educated locally by the Sisters of Mercy. The 1911 census recorded her as living at 17 Hastings Street, Ringsend, with her married sister and widowed mother. As a child she formed a lifelong friendship with Julia (Sighle, Sheila) Grenan (1884–1972), the second of three children (two boys and a girl) of Patrick Grenan, a joiner; the Grenans lived in Lombard Street, near Elizabeth's childhood home. Julia was also educated by the Sisters of Mercy, and both girls were members of the Sacred Heart and Total Abstinence sodalities. On leaving school, Elizabeth became a midwife, working at Holles Street hospital, while Julia worked as a dressmaker. Both shared strong nationalist beliefs, and often acted in tandem: they joined the Gaelic League and became fluent in Irish, and also joined the Irish Women's Franchise League and the Irish Women Workers' Union. In 1906 they became members of Inghinidhe na hÉireann, the women's nationalist organisation, and joined the Inghinidhe branch of Cumann na mBan soon after its establishment in April 1914 as an auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers. They supported the workers during the 1913 strike in Dublin, and assisted Constance Markievicz (qv) in her efforts to prevent recruitment into the British army. Markievicz took a personal interest in both women and trained them in the use of firearms.

On Easter Sunday 1916 (23 April) Markievicz accompanied them to Liberty Hall and told James Connolly (qv) they could be trusted completely. With an insurrection planned for the following day, they were assigned to the Irish Citizen Army, with O'Farrell entrusted to deliver dispatches to republican units in Athenry, Spiddal and Galway city, while Grenan was sent to Dundalk and Carrickmacross. On returning to Dublin, they reported for duty to the General Post Office and performed nursing and courier duties over the next few days; they also delivered ammunition from the GPO to the garrison in the College of Surgeons by hiding it under their clothes. After James Connolly's ankle was shattered by a bullet on 27 April, O'Farrell and Grenan volunteered to care for him and stayed in the GPO as it was shelled by British artillery. With the building in flames, they and Connolly's secretary, Winifred Carney (qv), refused to leave until the final evacuation on the evening of Friday, 28 April, and were the last women to leave. They retreated with the garrison to Moore Street, where O'Farrell and Grenan nursed the wounded at No. 16. Here the leaders finally decided to lay down their arms. O'Farrell was chosen by Patrick Pearse (qv) to contact the British military on the morning of 29 April to discuss terms of surrender (he feared that a man given this task would be immediately shot down). Given a Red Cross insignia and white flag, she walked out into heavy fire in the Moore Street area and approached an army barricade. She was initially suspected of being a spy but was eventually taken to Brigadier-General W. H. M. Lowe, who sent her back

to Pearse with a demand for unconditional surrender. Accompanied by O'Farrell, Pearse then surrendered in person to Lowe that afternoon (a partly obscured O'Farrell can be seen in a press photograph taken at the moment of surrender). Later that day and on 30 April she volunteered to take the surrender order to Volunteer and Citizen Army units at the Four Courts, the College of Surgeons, Boland's mill and Jacob's factory. It was a dangerous task and she came under fire on several occasions. She also received a suspicious and sometimes hostile reception from garrisons that wanted to fight on, but eventually all were convinced of the authenticity of her orders and laid down their arms.

Grateful for her service in this perilous mission, Lowe assured O'Farrell that she would be released, but after the surrender she was stripped and searched and imprisoned overnight in Ship Street barracks. On hearing of this, Lowe had her released immediately and apologised for her treatment. Grenan was imprisoned after the surrender in Kilmainham jail until 9 May, and heard the volleys of shots that executed several of the rising's leaders.

After the rising O'Farrell and Grenan continued to work for Cumann na mBan. They carried dispatches for the IRA during the war of independence, and opposed the 1921 Anglo–Irish treaty. Living together at 27 Lower Mount Street, Dublin, they remained hostile to the Free State, and during and after the civil war collected funds for the families of anti-treatyite prisoners. They regularly attended republican functions and in 1933 followed Mary MacSwiney (qv) in resigning from Cumann na mBan when, drifting to the left, the organisation voted to rescind its oath of allegiance to the first and second dáils. Both women supported the 1956–62 IRA border campaign, and in January 1957, following the deaths of the IRA men Seán South (qv) and Fergal O'Hanlon, O'Farrell addressed a rally in College Green, Dublin. By that time she was in failing health; she died 25 June 1957 while on holiday in Bray, Co. Wicklow, and was buried in the republican plot in Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin. Julia Grenan died in Dublin on 6 January 1972 and was buried alongside O'Farrell; members of Provisional Sinn Féin provided a guard of honour at her funeral.

In 1967 a memorial plaque to Elizabeth O'Farrell was unveiled at Holles Street hospital and the Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell foundation to support nursing postgraduate studies was established. In 2003 another plaque commemorating her was unveiled in City Quay Park, which was renamed Elizabeth O'Farrell Park in 2012.

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Eithne Coyle papers (UCD archives, MS P61/4); Elizabeth O'Farrell, 'Events of Easter week', *Catholic Bulletin*, vii (1917), 265–70, 329–34; Julia Grenan, 'Events of Easter week', *ibid.*, 396–8; Elizabeth O'Farrell, 'Recollections', *An Phoblacht*, 26

Apr., 31 May, 7 June 1926; *Ir. Press*, 26 June 1957 (incl. photograph of O'Farrell); 7 Jan. 1972; *Ir. Times*, 11 Jan. 1972; *An Phoblacht*, iii, no. 2 (Feb. 1972); Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable revolutionaries: women and Irish nationalism* (1983); Donncha O Dúlaing, *Voices of Ireland: conversations with Donncha O Dúlaing* (1984); Ruth Taillon, *The women of 1916: when history was made* (1996); Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish republican women 1900–1922* (2010); ead., *Dissidents: Irish republican women 1922–1941* (2012); information from Glasnevin Cemeteries Group

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