

Estella Solomons: A portrait of the artist as a Republican

Painter concealed ammunition in her studio, writes **Róisín Kennedy**

ESTELLA SOLOMONS came from a prominent Jewish Dublin family. Her father, Maurice, was a well-known optician and his practice on Nassau Street is mentioned in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Solomons trained at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art where Willie Pearse had also been a student. Her contemporary at the school, Beatrice Elvery remembered that 'it was difficult not to be swept away in a flood of patriotism'.

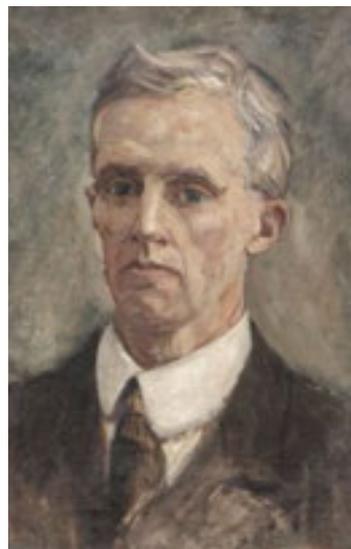
Solomons continued her studies at the Chelsea School of Art in London and at Colorossi's Studio in Paris where she was accompanied by Elvery and Cissie Beckett, aunt of the future writer Samuel Beckett. A visit to a major exhibition of the work of Rembrandt in Amsterdam in 1906 had a decisive impact on her art practice. Not only did his approach influence Solomons' style of portraiture but the Dutch master's etchings inspired her to take up printmaking.

In 1915 Solomons joined the Rathmines branch of Cumann na mBan. Phyllis Ryan, future wife of Seán T O'Kelly, drilled the unit. The women studied signalling and first aid and Solomons was taught how to fire a revolver by a Sinn Féin agent, known as 'the Buttermen' because his official job was a milkman. She actively assisted the Republican cause by distributing and concealing arms and ammunition, sometimes in her studio. She apparently also hid weapons in the vegetable patch of her parents' garden in Waterloo Road, surprising them by her sudden interest in gardening.

In 1910 Solomons had taken a studio at the top of 17 Great Brunswick Street, now Pearse Street, where she installed an etching press. Portraits of the leading literary patriots of the day including Alice Milligan, Joseph Campbell and Padraic de Brún were painted here. James Stephens, the novelist, who lived in the flat immediately below her studio, was another sitter.

Séamus O'Sullivan later recalled the studio, where many War of Independence revolutionaries hid out: 'With its pleasantly-arranged throne and curtains, was not only a centre of artistic activity and goodly conversation, but it was also a centre of quiet, of calm; a place of refuge for many whose political and national activities had brought them a very undesirable amount of notice in "the bad times".'

Sometimes Solomons painted their portraits, destroying them as security measures required. Surviving portraits include



Estella Solomons' portraits of Erskine Childers and Sinn Féin activist Darrell Figgis, and a self-portrait.

one of Seán Milroy, a frequent visitor, and Frank Gallagher, who she painted in 1920 after she moved her studio to No 26 Great Brunswick Street. She also painted Frank Aiken, IRA Chief of Staff, in 1923. During the Civil War the studio was often raided by Free State troops as Solomons supported the anti-treaty side. She resigned her job as an art teacher rather than take the Oath of Allegiance.

IRA commander Ernie O'Malley knew Solomons well. He corresponded with her when he was recovering from hunger strike in Kilmainham in 1923.

One of his letters refers to a uniform and belt she had given to him years before. While on manoeuvres in Limerick in the War of Independence, the house he was staying in came under attack from the Black and Tans. In the resulting shoot-out the belt was lost in a muddy field. It was quite distinctive as O'Malley had had it adjusted by a local cobbler. Six months later, having escaped from an earlier sojourn in Kilmainham Jail, O'Malley,



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back in Limerick, discovered that a fellow volunteer was using his belt. He had taken it from a Black and Tan who had been shot at the Drumkeen ambush weeks before. O'Malley clearly regarded the belt as a kind of talisman and kept it until his final capture in Dublin during the Civil War.

Many of Solomons' prints depict the alleyways, byways and parks of contemporary Dublin. She illustrated DL Kelleher's *The Glamour of Dublin* in 1928. Originally published after the devastation of the 1916 Rising, the later edition features eight views of familiar locations in the city centre including Merchant's Arch and King's Inns. Her etching of A Georgian Doorway was included in Katherine MacCormack's *Leabhar Ultáin* in 1920. This publication featured illustrations by several prominent Irish artists and was sold in aid of the new children's hospital in Charlemont Street, Dublin that had been founded by two prominent members of Cumann na mBan, Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine ffrench-Mullen.

Having withdrawn from her political activities after the Civil War, Solomons was elected an associate member of the Royal Hibernian Academy in 1925. In 1926 she married the poet James Starkey, also known as Séamus O'Sullivan. The couple, then in their forties, had delayed their wedding until after the death of her parents as they would not have approved of their daughter's marriage to a gentile.

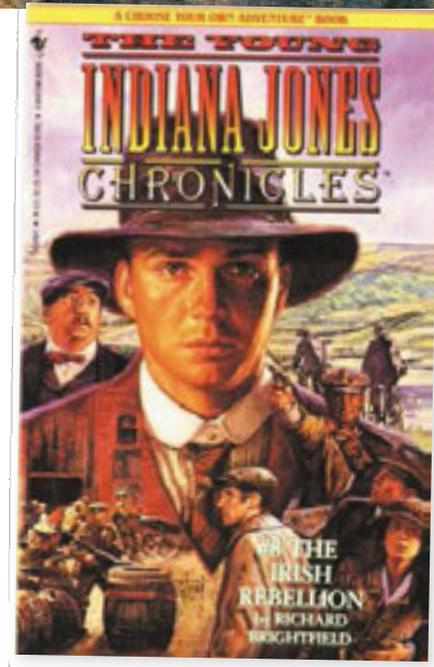
Solomons and O'Sullivan's collaborated on the *Dublin Magazine*, a new literary journal he had founded in 1923. Solomons provided vital financial support particularly in sourcing advertising, an extremely difficult task in the tough economic climate of the new Free State. She was helped

in this endeavour by Kathleen Goodfellow, a lifelong friend who had joined Cumann na mBan at the same time.

The Sunday afternoon salons held by the O'Sullivans at their home at Grange in Rathfarnham were frequented by the Dublin literary circle including the artist and critic, George Russell (AE). Solomons accompanied him on his annual painting trips to Donegal. Her two solo exhibitions, the first held in her Pearse Street studio in 1926, and the second at the Dublin Painters Gallery in 1931, were dominated by landscapes. In 1938 the O'Sullivans relocated to Morehampton Road in Donnybrook bringing their 10,000 books with them. After the death of her husband in 1958, Solomons continued to live there in relative tranquillity until she died ten years later.

Like many artists of her generation, Solomons was devoted to the cause of Irish nationalism. Her willingness to get directly involved in military activity and to assist fellow republicans was courageous. But ultimately in the aftermath of the Civil War she pursued a more conciliatory path by focusing on the promotion of artistic and literary culture. Given the conservative climate of the new state this was regarded by artists such as Solomons as an essential goal, without which an independent Ireland would have had little to offer its citizens.

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The Irish artist Robert Ballagh returned to Paget's epic image in 2012, reinterpreting it for a limited edition print that was sold to fund the refurbishment of a graveyard plot for volunteers who died in the Rising.

The Anglo-Irish artist Kathleen Fox was actually in Dublin that Easter and, like many, went in to the city-centre to see what all the fuss was about. She recognised a woman being arrested outside the Royal College of Surgeons and made a quick sketch of the scene. Fox later worked the sketch, of Countess Markievicz, into a painting titled *The Arrest* which is now in the Niland Collection in Sligo. It is virtually unique, being an eye-witness image of the events. Fox was so moved by the scene, she included herself in the painting as an onlooker.

In more recent, popular culture, the US TV series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* devoted an entire episode to our youthful hero landing in Dublin on the eve of the Rising. He meets up with Seán Lemass and hangs out with a struggling young playwright called O'Casey. The dialogue is pretty hilarious, featuring gems along the lines of: "Hey Shaun! Why don't you call it after that flag? The Ploughy, starry one over there!"