



Two versions of the photograph of Patrick Pearse surrendering to General Lowe, only one features Elizabeth O'Farrell by his side.

ELIZABETH O'FARRELL

# The woman airbrushed from history

Nurse was trusted confidante of rebel leaders before and after the Rising, writes **Catherine Cox**

**F**OR many Elizabeth O'Farrell has come to symbolise the airbrushing of women from the history of Easter Week 1916. Today she is remembered in two ways: as the woman Patrick Pearse selected to carry his message seeking to open negotiations for the cessation of hostilities at the end of Easter Week. And, as the woman who, in an alleged act of wilful amnesia, was 'airbrushed' from the photograph of Pearse delivering the surrender to Brigadier General William Lowe. She is remembered for being forgotten.

So who was O'Farrell? Born in Dublin in 1884 — her father, Christopher, was a dock labourer and her mother, Margaret, a shopkeeper. Elizabeth was a trained midwife and became a fluent Irish speaker, a suffragist and trade unionist. In 1906, she, along with her lifelong friend Julia Grenan, joined Inghinidhe na hÉireann; they later became members of the Inghinidhe branch of Cumann na mBan, an auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers. She supported the workers during the 1913 Lockout and worked with Constance Markievicz, who is credited with introducing her and Grenan to James Connolly at Liberty Hall as "someone he could trust", at the start of Easter Week.

From Monday 24 April, she acted as a dispatch driver to the West of Ireland subsequently

reporting back to the GPO where most of the leaders of the Rising were based. She and Grenan acted as dispatch carriers, 'running', according to a 1957 *Irish Press* report, "the gauntlet of the military snipers taking food, ammunition and 'War News' copy to the printer". *The Catholic Bulletin's* 1917 description of the women's activities, is less dramatic, emphasising the role of Cumann na mBan women as assistants rather than participants in the Rising, a view shared by some of its members: "They looked after the needs of the men under arms, they nursed the wounded, they soothed the suffering and it was they who softly breathed the last prayer into the ear of the dying".

O'Farrell's own, very detailed account of the events of Easter Week suggests she did all these things and more. She, along with Grenan and Winifred Carney, accompanied Pearse and the Volunteers to Moore Street following the evacuation of the GPO. There, she nursed the wounded, including James Connolly, and cooked food for the Volunteers.

**SNAPSHOT**

**ELIZABETH O'FARRELL**

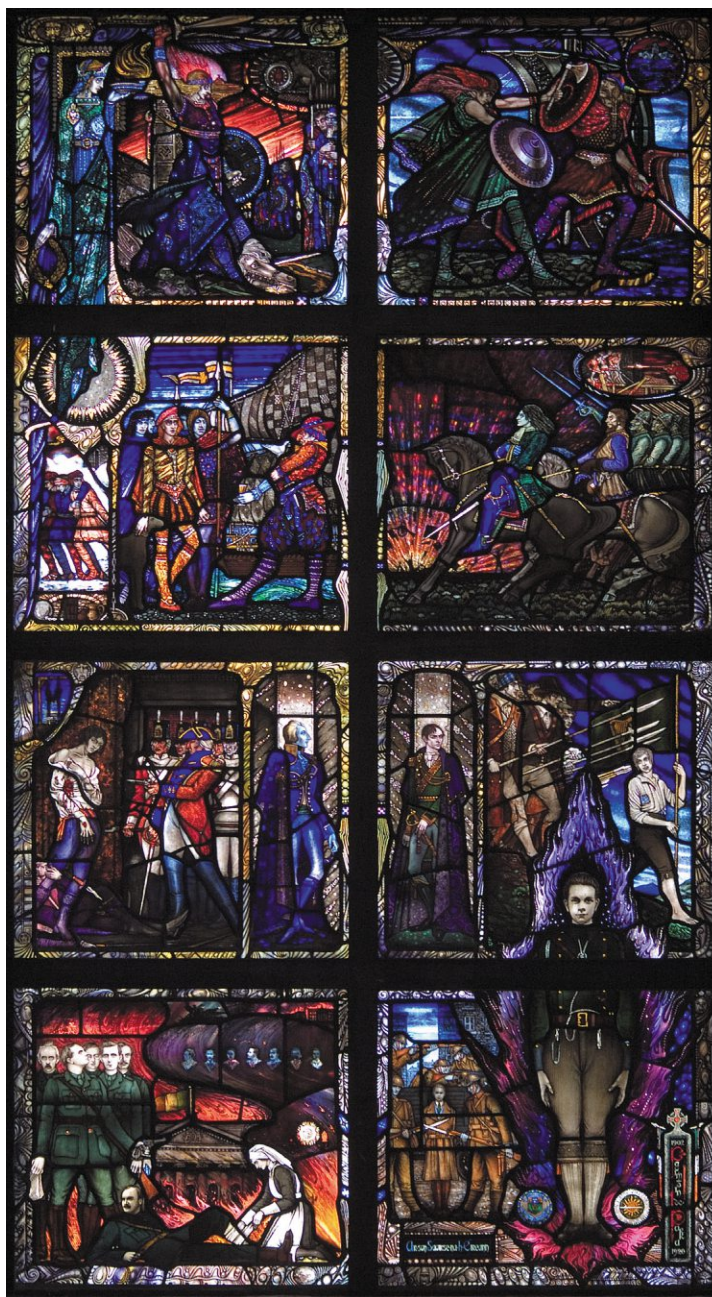
**Born:** 5 November 1884, City Quay, Dublin

**Educated:** Convent of Mercy

**Affiliation:** Cumann na mBan

**Career:** Nurse, midwife, activist

**Died:** 25 June 1957, Bray, Co Wicklow



Elizabeth O'Farrell is immortalised in a panel in the Kevin Barry Memorial Window at UCD. The stained glass window was commissioned from the Harry Clarke studio by medical graduates of UCD in the 1930s in memory of Kevin Barry, the UCD medical student executed during the War of Independence.

The next day, Saturday 29 April, O'Farrell left Moore Street armed with a "small white flag" and a red cross on her arm and apron to deliver Pearse's message to Lowe. When Lowe insisted on an unconditional surrender, she delivered the order to the other commandants throughout Dublin. This involved going to the Royal College of Surgeons where Markievicz was based and Grand Canal Street Dispensary, near Boland's Mill, where Eamon de Valera had moved to.

While traversing the city, she recalls seeing The O'Rahilly's body outside "Kelly's shop" on Moore Street and the shooting of a man behind her when she was crossing Grand Canal Street Bridge. De Valera's refusal to accept orders from

anyone but Thomas MacDonagh required her to cross the city a second time to consult with him.

Despite being assured by Lowe that she would not be taken prisoner, she spent a short time in Ship Street and Richmond Barracks and then in Kilmainham Gaol though she was released on 1 May on Lowe's orders who apologised; she found him to be 'most courteous'. Unlike her friend Grenan who remained in Kilmainham, she was spared hearing the execution of Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh.

After the Rising, she continued to be active in Cumann na mBan, delivering dispatches for the IRA during the War of Independence. They both opposed the Treaty and were hostile to the Free State. During and after the Civil War they raised funds for the families of anti-Treaty prisoners, and she remained involved in Republican politics right up to the IRA's 1956-62 border campaigns. O'Farrell died in 1957.

Her role in the Rising has been marked in various ways. In a front-page report on her



Above: UCD's Catherine Cox. Below: Elizabeth O'Farrell.



death in the *Irish Press* she was described as "big, blonde and fearless". A decade later, during the period of commemoration marking the 50th anniversary of the Rising, a memorial plaque to her was unveiled at Holles Street Hospital and the Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell foundation established. More recently, another plaque was unveiled at the renamed Elizabeth O'Farrell Park while in 2014 a play entitled *Airbrushed* was staged in Dublin.

The play reignited the old speculation that O'Farrell was removed from the photograph of Pearse delivering the surrender to Lowe. Though she was standing beside him, only the hem of O'Farrell's dress and her feet are visible. Allegedly, O'Farrell gave an account of the event to the Cistercian monks of Roscrea in May 1956, and explained that she deliberately hid from the camera, which she subsequently regretted. There is also a version of the photograph in which her dress and her feet are removed.

The contribution women like O'Farrell made to the Rising and other movements has received more attention over the last decades. Ground-breaking work of scholars publishing in the 1980s has been built upon, providing us with a nuanced and sophisticated history of the nature of Irish women's activism in this period. As Senia Pasetta shows these "women built the foundations for the liberation of their sex and their country". Sadly, many subsequently became disillusioned with the state they helped to inaugurate.

Dr Catherine Cox, UCD School of History, is author of *Negotiating Insanity in the Southeast of Ireland, 1820-1900* and, with Dr Susannah Riordan, is co-editor of *Adolescence in Modern Irish History* (1915)

