

Duffy, Louise Gavan

by Mary Kotsonouris

Duffy, Louise Gavan (1884–1969), educator, nationalist and Irish language enthusiast, was born 17 July 1884 in Cimiez, near Nice, the only daughter among four children of the marriage of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (qv), journalist and politician, and his third wife, Louise Hall of Rock Ferry, Cheshire. Her mother died when she was five and she was reared in Nice by her Australian half-sisters from her father's second marriage; she was educated privately at home. Her interest in Irish was stimulated when she found an Irish grammar among her father's books, although he himself had no Irish. When he died in 1903, she visited Ireland for the first time to attend his funeral and resolved to stay, but was not able to do so until 1907 when a small legacy from her maternal grandmother made it possible to return. She joined the Gaelic League, attended the Gaeltacht in Tourmakeady, Co. Mayo, and became fluent in Irish. After completing a correspondence course from Cusack's College, London, she matriculated in 1907, and subsequently went on to study at UCD, during which time she was a resident at the Women's College, Dominican Convent, Eccles St., Dublin. Having graduated BA in 1911, she managed and taught (1911–12) at Scoil Íde, set up by Patrick Pearse (qv). When Scoil Íde closed the following year, she went on to take the Cambridge teacher's diploma in 1913 and her MA (again from UCD) in 1916. She worked as an assistant in education at St Dominic's Training College in Eccles St. (1915–16).

Though best known for her involvement in nationalist politics and the Gaelic revival, Gavan Duffy was sympathetic to the women's suffrage movement and was among the speakers at a mass meeting of women in the Antient Concert Rooms, Dublin (1 June 1912) which demanded an amendment to the Home Rule Bill to include women voters. She joined Cumann na mBan on its foundation in April 1914 and was made joint secretary with Mollie Maguire (Mary Catherine Colum (qv)), who later married Padraic Colum (qv). Politically she was not in any inner circle and therefore knew nothing about the planned Rising until Easter Monday 1916, when she learned of it by chance. Having made her way without any difficulty to the General Post Office she asked to speak to Pearse and impressed on him her opposition to what he and his comrades had embarked upon. In her view their actions were not justified because of the certainty of defeat and the loss of life. Nevertheless, she went to help in the kitchen on the top floor, where Desmond FitzGerald (qv) was in charge, and remained there until the building was evacuated on Friday evening. Her group, led by FitzGerald, was the last to leave, bringing some wounded men to Jervis Street Hospital. On the following day she reiterated to Thomas MacDonagh (qv) her opposition to the Rising, when she went to Jacobs factory where MacDonagh was still holding out unaware of the surrender of the GPO, and had a bitter argument with him.

Reelected to Cumann na mBan's executive at their 1917 convention, she was one of a number of influential nationalist women who signed a petition demanding self-determination for Ireland which was handed to President Woodrow Wilson by Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (qv) in 1918. She became involved in 1917 in the National Aid Association and Volunteers Dependents Fund, very likely as a result of her painstaking forays across Dublin to deliver messages to families from men she had met in the GPO and who were now prisoners. In 1917 she fulfilled her personal ambition by opening in St Stephen's Green an Irish speaking school for girls, Scoil Bhríde, with Annie McHugh, who later married Ernest Blythe (qv). The school was raided by the military on several occasions, and not without reason as it was used by some Volunteers as a place to meet or conceal papers: Richard Mulcahy (qv), Desmond Fitzgerald and Michael Collins (qv) all had keys, and Collins met Archbishop Patrick Clune (qv) there in October 1920. As a supporter of the Treaty, Gavan Duffy left Cumann na mBan and joined Cumann na Saoirse, the women's organisation which backed the Free State government.

After the civil war she ceased to be politically active and concentrated her energies on educational matters. Finance was a continual problem but in 1926 through the good offices of Ernest Blythe, now minister for finance, the school was amalgamated into the national school system, which entitled it to be publicly funded with a senior girls school attached. Her work with UCD's department of education began in 1926 when Scoil Bhríde was recognised for teacher training purposes. Until her retirement in 1956 she was a government supervisor and later lectured on the teaching of French. Having retired she devoted much of her time to the Legion of Mary and to a group which worked with French au pairs in Dublin. In 1948 she was awarded an honorary LLD by the NUI. She gave a lively and lengthy account of Cumann na mBan and the events of Easter Week to the Bureau of Military History, and a lecture on the same topic at UCD in March 1966 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Rising; this was subsequently published.

There is little doubt that her close friendship with Ernest Blythe influenced her political outlook and led to a cooling-off in relations with her brother. George Gavan Duffy (qv) was a prominent figure in the struggle for independence and a signatory of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Appointed minister for foreign affairs in January 1922 he resigned in protest when the provisional government closed the dáil courts on the outbreak of civil war. A strong upholder of the rule of law, he voiced his opposition in the dáil to several of the more draconian emergency measures and thus became somewhat of a *bête noire* to the government. Prompted by Blythe, his sister made it clear that she also failed to understand his reservations. Thereafter, up to the time of his death in 1951, they met only on formal family occasions.

Louise Gavan Duffy died 12 October 1969, unmarried, at her home, 7 Kenilworth Square, Dublin and was buried in the family plot in Glasnevin cemetery.

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BMH, witness statement (1 Apr. 1949); RTE radio broadcast, 1966; Kathleen O'Brennan, 'Louise Gavan Duffy', *Leader*, 14 July 1945; UCD, *Report of the President for the sessions 1955–56* (1956); F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Easter rising, 1916, and University College Dublin* (1966); Leon Ó Broin, *Charles Gavan Duffy* (1967); *Ir. Independent*, 13 Oct. 1969; *Ir. Times*, death notice and obit 13 Oct. 1969, apprec. 15 Oct. 1969; Cyril Pearl, *The three lives of Gavan Duffy* (1979); Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable revolutionaries: women and Irish nationalism* (1983); McRedmond; Ruth Taillon, *When history was made: the women of 1916* (1996); Mary M. Macken, 'Women in the university and college', Michael Tierney (ed.), *Struggle with fortune* (n.d.), 142–65; NUI records; information from Máire Gavan Duffy