

CONSTANCE MARKIEVICZ

Aristocratic leader of men



The 1916 story sought a handy Joan of Arc figure and this daughter of the gentrified world fitted the bill, writes **Conor Mulvagh**

It is perhaps predictable to focus on the figure of Constance Markievicz when considering the role of women in the Irish Revolution. Markievicz was one of the most identifiable and iconic female revolutionaries of the period. To her supporters, she was selfless and principled; she had foregone a life of comfort and opulence in order to champion the causes of labour and republicanism; and she had suffered for it. To her detractors, and there have been several, she has been denigrated both for her gender and her class. She has been singled out as the aristocrat who descended from the gentrified world of her youth and hogged the limelight, posing as a diva among Dublin's poor, both during the 1913 Lockout and in the 1916 Rising. Constance Markievicz has posed a challenge both to her contemporaries and to later biographers: she is anomalistic among Ireland's leading revolutionaries both in terms of her class and her gender.

Born in London to the prominent Anglo-Irish Gore-Booth Family of Lissadell, Co Sligo, Constance was the eldest of five children. Her prowess in horsemanship is something still celebrated at Lissadell today with photographs demonstrating her equestrian ability on display. Underlining the position of the Gore-Booths in society, at 19 Constance made her debut in high society being presented to Queen Victoria. A grand tour of the continent deepened Constance's interest in art and, despite parental reluctance, at 25 she entered art college in London. Student life exposed her to new ideas. The historian Senia Paseta notes how, when she returned to Sligo from London, Constance founded the Sligo Women's Suffrage Society.

Art also brought new people into her life. In 1898, further study in art brought her to Paris. There she met a fellow art student, a member of the Polish nobility, recently widowed with a young son but, at 25, six years her junior. Casimir Dunin-Markievicz married Constance in 1900 and, after a difficult birth, their only daughter, Maeve, was born in 1901. Like her step-brother Stanislaus, Maeve spent much of her infant years being reared by her grandmother and a governess at Lissadell. Once Constance's political life took off in 1908, Maeve was left almost permanently in the care of Lady Gore-Booth.

Interestingly, the charge of being

SNAPSHOT

CONSTANCE MARKIEVICZ

Born: Constance Gore-Booth, 4 February 1868, London

Educated: Slade School of Art, London; Académie Julien, Paris

Affiliation: Irish Citizen Army/IRB/Cumann na mBan

Career: Painter, activist, MP, Minister for Labour

Died: 15 July 1927, Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital, Dublin

a 'bad mother' has been levelled at Markievicz by many of her detractors. However, it is interesting that Constance herself was raised by a governess for much of her youth and the same criticism has not been levelled at her parents. Equally, among the Easter rebels, none of the fathers who went out knowing the risks of their struggle have had the same criticism hang over them. Consider Connolly, Ceannt, Mallin, and MacDonagh. All left behind bereaved wives with young families. It speaks to the preconceptions of gender and motherhood both then and now that this criticism has stubbornly adhered to Markievicz's legacy.

A variety of explanations and turning points have been identified in Markievicz's political awakening: the Boer War, encountering suffrage in London, the Anglo-Irish literary revival, encountering Russian oppression on two summers home with Casimir, the list goes on. Underlining her rejection of her background and her dual commitment to feminism and nationalism, around 1908 Markievicz joined Sinn Féin and Maud

Gonne's Inghinidhe na hÉireann. In 1909, alongside Bulmer Hobson, she founded Fianna Éireann, a republican boy-scouts organisation. Its members, mostly boys from Dublin's most economically deprived neighbourhoods, developed a deep personal devotion to their Chief Scout, Madame Markievicz, and she actively encouraged their harassment of the rival Baden Powell Scouts and Boys' Brigade members.

Markievicz had added socialism to her expanding range of political interests when she joined the Women's Workers Union in 1911. Arrest that year for anti-monarchist activities was followed by experience of police violence during the 1913 Lockout. Further eschewing the preconceptions of her gender, she later became one of the only women to take a full command and combat role in the Irish Citizen Army.

In 1916 itself, Markievicz has been criticised for the killing of an unarmed policeman and for taking credit for the actions of the Irish Citizen Army around St Stephen's Green when it was Michael Mallin and not her who was in command. On the latter charge, it should be borne in mind that Mallin had tried to avoid detection as garrison commander when his unit surrendered. He had four young children and his wife was pregnant with a fifth. It is a compelling theory that Markievicz's highly theatrical surrender may have been calculated to detract attention from him. When Mallin's daughter was born four months after her father's execution, her mother christened the child Mary Constance.

It is unnecessary to go through the well-worn but nonetheless remarkable story of Markievicz from 1916 through to her election as the first female MP in British history to the crowning achievement of being granted one of eight cabinet portfolios when De Valera announced the first Republican cabinet in April 1919. As Minister for Labour, Markievicz's ministry was no mere window dressing. With a staff largely comprised of women and an office that prided itself on never having been discovered, the Ministry of Labour proved highly successful in dealing with arbitration cases and related industrial relations issues. This was at a time when other departments of the revolutionary government were coming in for harsh criticism for inefficiency and disorganisation.



Countess Markievicz arriving at Liberty Hall marking the return of Irish Republican prisoners in June 1917.

UCD ARCHIVES PETER PAUL GALLIGAN PAPERS



So what place does Constance Markievicz have in Irish history? All revolutions are subjected to retrospective mythologisation. Likewise, all states and nations craft their foundation narratives. Think of America's 1776, of France's 1789, of Russia's 1917, and of the cultural and civic importance of Germany's unification in 1870 and of its re-unification in 1990. Foundation narratives do not have to be triumphs, nations can be forged through adversity. Ireland's 1916 was transformed from defeat into a triumph of failure. This has created two 1916s, one historical and one which is theatrical, elegiac, mythic. The former can never fully be recovered, the latter can never fully be unravelled.

What does all this have to do with Constance Markievicz, the daughter of aristocrats who turned on her own class and died a pauper? I would argue that, in assembling Ireland's foundation narrative out of the rubble of 1916 and all that followed, Markievicz presented a unique opportunity for the myth makers. Certainly there had been women casualties of the Rising, they numbered among the wounded and the dead but, out of these, no martyr was found. Borrowing from the French national tradition, what the Easter



From left: Constance Markievicz as a debutante in 1886, stirring soup in the Liberty Hall kitchen and with a revolver.

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Below: Eva Gore-Booth with her sister, Constance Markievicz



‘Comrades’

Eva Gore-Booth

*The peaceful night that round me flows,
Breaks through your iron prison doors,
Free through the world your spirit goes,
Forbidden hands are clasping yours.
The wind is our confederate,
The night has left her doors ajar,
We meet beyond earth's barred gate,
Where all the world's wild Rebels are.*

AN ASSESSMENT DR LUCY COLLINS

EVA GORE-BOOTH, poet and activist, was the sister of Constance Markievicz. Both women rejected their privileged upbringing in different ways: Constance became a revolutionary nationalist while Eva chose pacifism and social reform.



Though the sisters disagreed on the subject of violent rebellion, ‘Comrades’ powerfully expresses their deep personal bond — its simplicity reflects the poet’s need to speak of feelings unfettered by the descriptive detail of everyday life.

Night, traditionally a time for poetic reflection on mortality, offers release; single syllable words aptly express the flow of emotion across all obstacles and the convergence of these two lives.

The sisters were convinced of their power to communicate telepathically since childhood, and here their instinctive closeness finds poetic form.

In the spirit of love and solidarity the poem charts a move beyond earthly states towards spiritual transcendence — the place of pure feeling where idealists unite.

Dr Lucy Collins is a lecturer in English at University College Dublin (UCD). She is the curator of ‘Reading 1916’, launching tomorrow night, an exhibition at UCD Special Collections



1916 story needed was a Joan of Arc, a Liberty storming the barricades, ideally immortalised in some sort of Hibernicised Delacroix painting. They found it in a rebel Countess.

Markievicz was perfect in many ways. She had been handed down a death sentence; she had been dramatic in her surrender and arrest; and she had been a leader of men. Unlike the women of Cumann na mBan who had been consigned to the roles of cooks, nurses, and messengers, she was an equal and not a subordinate. However, this was only half the reason Markievicz best fit the bill. She had also died relatively early on, in 1927, before the paint had dried on the canvass of Ireland’s “four glorious years.”

Roy Foster has recently examined the lives of revolutionary women after independence. Eclipsed behind Markievicz were a host of other women activists, among them

Kathleen Lynn, Margaret Skinnider, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and Madeleine ffrench-Mullen. One who is worth examining briefly here is Jennie Wyse Power. Ten years Markievicz’s senior, Wyse Power was a veteran of the Ladies’ Land League, she campaigned in the first Sinn Féin by-election of 1908. Before the Rising, she ran a vegetarian restaurant on Henry Street which became a focal point for all

shades of advanced politics in the city. Indicating the proximity of Jennie Wyse Power to the leadership of the IRB, it was in her restaurant that the leaders of the Rising signed the Proclamation.

After independence however, Wyse Power lived on. A leading pro-treaty Cumann na mBan member, she became a Cumann na nGaedheal senator in 1922 but broke from the party in 1925. As an independent senator, she rallied against economically and gender-regressive legislation including the hotly-



Markievicz became valuable to propagandists because she was dead. Unlike Lynn, Skinnider, Sheehy Skeffington, or ffrench-Mullen, she could not speak back and pose awkward questions about what the revolution had achieved in terms of gender equality

debated 1927 Juries Bill. She lived on until the 25th anniversary of the Rising in 1941.

Constance Markievicz became valuable to propagandists because she was dead. Unlike Lynn, Skinnider, Sheehy Skeffington, or ffrench-Mullen, she could not speak back and pose awkward questions about what the revolution had achieved in terms of gender equality. After 1927, Markievicz was exactly where those who crafted the mythologised 1916 wanted her — she could be seen but not heard.

Dr Conor Mulvagh is a lecturer in Irish History at the School of History at University College Dublin (UCD) with special responsibility for the Decade of Commemorations. He is the author of ‘Irish Days, Indian Memories - VV Giri and Indian Law Students at University College Dublin, 1913-16’, which launches today. Dr Mulvagh is co-ordinating Globalising the Rising, a conference taking place in UCD tomorrow and Saturday, February 5th and 6th, which will consider the impact and legacy of 1916 on global political systems: www.ucd.ie/centenaries/events-calendar

