

# Ten Irish Heroines of 1916

## The Women of the Rising

By Brigid O'Sullivan

### Introduction

If you are familiar with the events of 1916 Ireland, you will know it was a pivotal shift in Irish history, the final thrust that would propel Ireland into an uncontrollable tailspin of political turmoil, anarchy, violence, and change.

In 1916, the First World War raged with massive losses. The Irish brigades fought in the British army directly on the front line and often were first to be killed. Was this by accident? A coincidence? Perhaps. Some say the Irish soldiers were placed in line first by the British. Some thought so and Irish enlistment in the British army decreased dramatically as time went on. Combined with huge casualties and deaths, these facts lead to Britain introducing conscription for men between the ages of 18 and 40 unless they were widowed with children. Irish rebels were outraged. They did not think this was Ireland's war. A small group of rebels prepared for an insurrection, hoping the British were too preoccupied with the war to put up much of a fight. On the other hand, could they have been that naïve? Some thought they knew they would lose the battle. Others even welcomed the end and the 'blood sacrifice' they would ultimately give.

However, this was not about conscription, or the fact a war was going on in another part of the world. The rebels believed their actions were a blood sacrifice for centuries of abuse, theft of their country and hopefully a way to reclaim the land they believed stolen and raped by the British 700 years past. At the time, Dublin had one of the highest poverty rates in all of Europe. The rebels chose Dublin to make their stand and on April 24th they took over the General Post Office, the Four Courts, Jacob's Factory, Boland's Mill, and the South Dublin Union, St. Stephen's Green, and the College of Surgeons. Raised over the Post Office was the tri-color flag, and then posted out front the Proclamation of the Irish Republic which ironically places both men and women at the top of the list, (something unusual for the times) addressing each sex equally it began ... *Irish men and Irish women ...*

Throughout Ireland's history, women have been involved in espionage, secret societies or provided first aid to the wounded ... but never did they take such a widespread and heroic public presence as in 1916 when Ireland fought for her independence. The battle of the sexes was far from won, even in Ireland but despite Irish women's place in society they rose up and fought bravely in one way or another for Irish freedom. Below is a short BIO about my favorite ten women in 1916.

### 1. **Constance Markievicz nee Constance Georgina Gore-Booth**

Later, this extraordinary woman was known simply by *Madame* or *the Countess* by those who knew or loved her.

Constance Markievicz is probably the best-known female Rebel of the Easter Rising. She was a true Irish heroine. I say heroine not because she fought alongside men for Irish freedom or that she said to her jailers, "**I do wish your lot had the guts to execute me,**" but her larger than life status comes from the things she did for the Poor of Dublin. She set up a soup kitchen in Liberty Hall during the 1913 Lockout, delivered food to shut-ins, set up a boy scout troop that not only raised awareness of Irishness and cultivate an Irish Patriotism in boys but prepared them with life skills, and discipline. Parents encouraged their boys to join Fianna Éireann . For some, this was the only way they had regular food in their bellies.

In learning about Constance, we need to go back to her own childhood. Beginning as a young girl, she had a compassionate and observant nature. She and the other Gore-Booth children would have been aware of their parents and grandparents involvement helping the Poor on the West coast of Sligo. The Gore-Booths were known as 'good landlords'. They provided food during crop failures, set up a food storehouse in their own home, reduced rents and supported the new Land Laws allowing tenants to become property owners. Still, there was only so much one family could do especially when they were in the minority. From 1879 to 1883, over 23,000 people were evicted from their homes in Ireland with nowhere to go and no way to feed themselves or their families.

As a teen, Constance would later become involved in the women's suffragist movement but would always have a soft spot for the Poor as well as the inequity of the classes. **Several times, she dressed up as a 'beggar girl' to see if people who**

**claimed to be charitable actually were, laughing gleefully at them when she fooled them with her identity.**

Toward the end of Constance's life, she continued to give everything away. She constantly helped those less fortunate even if it meant climbing several flights of stairs in her own shabby clothes, exhausted and coughing, probably suffering from early signs of congestive heart failure from years of smoking to carry sacks of coal for some invalid while she herself went without heat. This is what the real Constance was like, not the headstrong Rebel of Irish history books.

Her funeral was a huge demonstration with eight lorry loads of flowers, and thousands lining the streets. Sinn Fein, her adored Fianna boys, the Irish Citizen army and other organizations followed her to Glasnevin Cemetery.

Eamon de Valera gave the oration. ...

*Madame Markievicz is gone from us. Madame the friend of the toiler, the lover of the poor. Ease and station she put aside and took the way of service with the weak and downtrodden. Sacrifice, misunderstanding and scorn lay on her road she adopted, but she trod unflinchingly. She now lies at rest with her fellow champions of the right, mourned by the people whose liberties she fought for, blessed by the loving prayers of the poor she tried so hard to befriend ... We know the friendliness, the great woman's heart of her, the great Irish soul of her, and we know the loss we have suffered is not to be repaired. It is sadly we leave, but we pray High Heaven that all she longed and worked for, may one day be achieved.*

## **2. Eva Gore-Booth (1870-1926)**

Though less known than her famous sister, Constance, Eva was no less devoted to social injustice. A devoted suffragist, she campaigned for the rights of women but stood more in the background than many more visible women of the 1916 Easter Rising. Eva did not fight. She did not approve of violence but she was always supportive of her then famous sister and wrote to her every day each time Constance was incarcerated, sending her letters of encouragement.

As a Gore-Booth, she came from a landed gentry's family with servants, grooms, gardeners, cooks, and governesses. One such governess, Miss Noel became a lifelong friend to Eva. She schooled her in Art, Greek, and Italian literature. *Miss Noel describes her charge as a frail fragile looking child, most*

*unselfish and gentle with the look of a Botticelli angel.* But there was a reason for Eva's sullenness, even then. Class inequalities, poverty and the low class of women tore at her heart, making her sad and one might say guilt ridden. She left Lissadell with all its grand marble columns, stables, barns, and exquisite gardens for the slums of Manchester England. She would spend the rest of her life campaigning for the poor and fighting, often using the written word, for the rights of female workers. Manchester at the time, was the industrial capital of the world and several books brought the plight of industrial workers to the attention of middle class women who read about the awful conditions in their novels. They could relate to the poverty and depression when they realized it was women who often suffered sexual harassment, lower wages, and crudeness in the factories. By 1916, the suffragist movement was in full gear.

Also in 1916, an Irishman in the British diplomatic service named Sir Roger Casement became committed to the Irish Republican cause. After working in the Congo and exposing slave trading, he became convinced of a necessary armed Rising in Ireland going so far as arranging arms trading with Germany. He was captured and tried for treason with a verdict of the death penalty. **He and other non-combatants were heroes to Eva and she immortalized him in her poetry.**

Eva tried desperately to get a reprieve for Casement and attended his trial, hoping to lend him support. She organized press reports, wrote to the Manchester Guardian and anyone else she thought would listen but to no avail. When it was found that Casement was homosexual and admitted so in a recovered diary, the defendant was portrayed as a sexual deviant, tipping the scales decisively toward his guilt. Eva was devastated. Those that knew Casement insisted the British government forged his diary. *Ester Roper wrote, "Relentless foes sat in seats of power and they poisoned the public mind by circulation lying stories. It was a vile way of hunting a man to death."* **Eva also had wanted to explain that Casement had actually tried to stop the Rising, not to join it, but this never came out at the trial because Casement would not allow it even if it were true.** In one last desperate attempt to save Casement's life on August 2nd, Eva and four others had an audience with the King at Buckingham Palace but even this did not help Casement's case. On August 3rd 1916, Sir Roger Casement was hung! In her poem, *Heroic Death*, Eva refers to Casement's burning grave at Pentonville.

### 3. **Maud Gonne** (1866 -1956)

Maud Gonne was an actress and journalist and had an interest in the occult. In 1900 she founded the Daughters of Ireland (Inghinidhe na hÉireann) She held classes in the Irish language, Irish history, art, and Irish music and dancing, always beginning at the school age level. At this time, women were excluded from political life and all female organizations frowned upon by the Catholic Church. Women were not allowed to vote but this did not stop Maud Gonne from working toward her political aims. She was brave, outspoken and filled with outrage at the injustices she attributed to the British monarchy. The first stone was cast when she witnessed people being evicted by the thousands from their homes. Whole families left homeless when a battering ram leveled their tiny cottage. In one interview, Maud quoted Charles Stewart Parnell, "**England's contributions to Ireland are workhouses, prisons, and lunatic asylums.**"

Maud Gonne escaped to France to avoid being arrested after publishing a paper explaining the loss of Irish identity. It was in France that she learned about 'school lunch programs' and later would work to include these same programs in Irish schools.

#### **Some Interesting Stories of Maud Gonne**

As an actress, Maud Gonne, very much like Constance Markievicz had a flare for the dramatic.

Though not actually present during the Rising, (she was in Paris) three separate occasions she showed Ireland just what Maud Gonne thought about British occupation in what she considered her home country.

1. In April of 1900, Queen Victoria or the 'Famine Queen' as Maud called her visited Ireland whereby she organized a 'Political Children's Treat' in Phoenix Park with the agenda of influencing Ireland's youth to join the British army and fight in the Boer War. Irish Nationalists were understandably incensed. In response to this outrageous propaganda, Maud Gonne and James Connolly created an even bigger 'Nationalist Treat' convincing Dublin firms to pack lunches and donate food. On July 1st, a week after the Wolfe Tone Commemoration, a parade of children stretching 2 miles long, marched out from Loopline (the site of Queen Victoria's previous celebration) toward Conturk Park. The kids waved any kind of flag they had, be it French, American or Irish just as long as it was not a Union Jack. They

sang Rebel songs. Maud waited for them in the park with buns and sweets and her passionate speech against joining the British army. James Connolly called it *the first political parade of the coming generation*.

2. In 1911, she hung her black bloomers from her window in protest to her Unionist neighbors and the visit of King George V.

3. Combined with James Connolly they protested further by throwing a coffin into the River Liffey with the label of *British Empire written all over it*.

#### 4. **Helena Molony** ( 1883-1967)

Inspired by speeches of cultural revival by Maud Gonne and the historical legends she read by Douglas Hyde, Helena Molony joined Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) in the summer of 1903. Molony soon became an effective speaker in her own right and was elected secretary of the group. In 1908, she founded a woman's monthly newspaper, *Bean na hÉireann*. Under the guise of a lady's paper, it was the necessary propaganda endorsing militant republicanism and separatism. She was a member of the Irish Women Worker's Union and during the Lockout of 1913, a widespread labor union dispute where hundreds lost their jobs, Helena worked in Liberty Hall's food kitchen and addressed striker meetings. With experience in the theater, Molony outsmarted the police by disguising Jim Larkin to enable his famous appearance on the balcony of the Imperial Hotel where he had promised to make a speech. She was also a guiding light for attracting other notable women. Constance Markievicz planned the details of her scouting organization, Na Fianna Fail in the Sherrard Street home of Molony's brother, Frank. Likewise, Dr Kathleen Lynn claimed she was influenced in her republicanism by Molony, going on to imply that Molony was an intelligent attractive girl and people seemed drawn to her. James Connolly naturally sought her out, explaining that labor problems and nation were actually one issue. He was anxious to have women involved as well as men in the fight for Ireland's freedom.

By 1911, Molony as well as countless others, changed their tactics from the power of speech and pen to the power of direct action. Now she was carrying a revolver and writing of the escalating situation in Ireland. **She was arrested after smashing an illuminated portrait of George V during his visit to Ireland.** At first she was embarrassed by her arrest saying, "no one but rowdies went to the police station" but her tune soon changed when she continued her behavior. When

she was arrested for a second time she stated, "that was marvelous; I felt myself in the same company as Wolfe Tone."

## 5. **Jennie Wyse Power** (1858-1941)

Born Jane O'Toole in County Wicklow, Jennie Wyse Power ran a shop on 21 Henry Street calling it the Irish Farm Produce Company refusing to sell anything but Irish produce. The shop had a restaurant, which was used by the Gaelic League and founders of Sinn Féin for meetings and in her home they finalized details of the Proclamation of the Republic.

With history as vice president of the Ladies Land League, she was a supporter of Charles Stewart Parnell and even named her son after him. Jennie was a champion of the poor. Elected as Poor Law Guardian in North Dublin, she criticized public housing and public health conditions. She was President of Cumann na mBhan, the female Irish Volunteers group. As a Free State supporter, she became disillusioned with the group after the Free State elections in 1922 and started her own separate group calling it Cumann na Saoirse, (the League of Freedom) and held several senior positions in the new Free State Dáil.

## 6. **Elizabeth O'Farrell** (1884-1957)

Elizabeth was an Irish nurse who delivered dispatches and messages at the beginning of the Rising. When the fighting grew desperate she was one of the few women who stayed behind in the GPO to nurse the wounded while all the other women were sent away under the cover of the Red Cross flag. The entire city was surrounded by British troops and many civilians had already been killed with much of the city destroyed. Seventeen men lay wounded or dieing in the GPO and Elizabeth, along with Julia Grenan had their hands full with little time for rest. When the order was given to surrender to the British, it was Elizabeth O'Farrell, who delivered the surrender documents. A white flag could not be found so she carried a dirty handkerchief tied to a stick, hoping it would provide cover from flying bullets, which it eventually did. The rebels asked for terms but the only terms agreed to were unconditional surrender, which was in a note Elizabeth carried back to Pearse. The British were wary when Elizabeth returned with their answer and was told she was one minute late, making their point that they were not to be fooled with. Believing her to be a spy, the commander surveyed her coldly and then ordered the Red Cross patches to cut from her sleeves and apron. Then she was taken elsewhere and searched. Finally, Elizabeth was introduced to General W.H.M. Lowe who asked her if Pearse needed a stretcher. She said no and saw no need to correct him that it was Connolly who needed a stretcher and not Pearse.

### **As a Prisoner**

General Lowe had given his word of honor that Elizabeth would not be arrested. She was in the custody of Captain Wheeler who took her to Dublin Castle, given supper, a comfortable bed and told she was there as a guest until morning. When she woke the next day, she realized her coat was missing, along with money a few of the rebels had given her for



safekeeping. One of the soldiers said he was saving up to be married. She was given back the coat but not the money.

Next, she was taken to Ship Street Barracks. She kept protesting that General Lowe said she would not be arrested and Captain Wheeler made her a guest but no one seemed to care. She was stripped bare and again searched. Eleven other women joined her. After supper, they were marched into the courtyard where she boldly went up to a tall well dressed soldier and repeated that there had been a grave mistake and that she had General Lowe's word of honor that she should not be made a prisoner. His reply to her was, "don't be silly. I know for a fact you shot six policemen yesterday." Then they were moved to Richmond Barracks where she continued to protest to different officers stating that when she was released she would "publish to the ends of the earth how General Lowe kept his word of honor." Ten minutes later it was relayed that all the women would be transferred to Kilmainham Gaol. At the same time a priest Elizabeth knew showed up. She told him her plight and he told the officer that he knew she had General Lowe's word and he was going to call him that minute. After the women were marched to Kilmainham Gaol, counted and signed for, it was mentioned that Elizabeth would probably be released but not before she was strip-searched again and put into one of the very small cells. After a terrible meal served in tin cups, she heard a hurried jangling of keys and the door quickly pulled open. The first officer who had searched her clothes, stolen her money and sent her to Ship Street Barracks stood before her apologizing. He brought her downstairs where Captain Wheeler was waiting with a car. The priest had sent him a letter. He told Elizabeth that General Lowe was extremely annoyed that such a thing should have happened to her and that he was coming in person to apologize. When she met with the General and after explaining her ordeals she asked for her money back. "Who took your money?" he asked. She pointed to the officer who explained that the Provost Marshal had it. "Go and get it and restore it to this lady immediately," he shouted.

## **7. Dr. Kathleen Lynn (1874-1955)**

Preparation for the Rising was inefficient, partly because the counter-command issued by Eion Mac Neill left man in confusion. People simply did not know whether the Rising would take place or not. Most thought the former. Dr. Kathleen Lynn was one of the few people, if not the only woman, who knew about the Rising ahead of time. She gathered medical provisions and nurses at Liberty Hall and outlying garrisons, knowing there would be numerous casualties.

As a close friend of Countess Markievicz and the story goes that she convinced her to wear a skirt over her trousers when wearing her Irish Citizen Army uniform. She was also at her bedside while the Countess lay dying in Sir Patrick's Dun Hospital.

What a remarkable woman this lady was! She was the first woman doctor to graduate from the Royal University of Ireland in 1899. Born in Mayo into a comfortable Church of Ireland family, she moved to Dublin to deliver healthcare to the poor, taking a special interest in the children there. When she saw Dublin's extreme poverty, she became involved in politics, becoming convinced the only way for the economy to change was to free Ireland from British rule. She served soup in Liberty Hall, supporting workers during the 1913 Lockout and James Connolly appointed her chief medical officer during the Easter Rising in the City Hall garrison. When her commander was shot, she took over as next in command, a remarkable role for a woman in those days. For a short time she was imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol. After the Rising, she worked toward the War of Independence and joined Sinn Féin party, and saw the Treaty as an economic menace to women. Again, she was arrested in 1918 but was released to assist with a worldwide flu epidemic and along with Madeline Mullen established St. Ultan's

Hospital for infants; this became the first hospital to provide a vaccine for the prevention and control of tuberculosis in 1936.

## 8. **Winnie Carney** (1887-1943)

When I researched Winnie Carney, I found what must have been at times, a very lonely existence. She must have been under constant suspicion. Living in Belfast, she was secretary to the Textile Workers Union and later, when she moved to Dublin in the South, though an anti-Treaty supporter, Winnie married a Unionist. So she was from Northern Ireland but living in Dublin. That fact alone must have made people wary of her. These were dangerous times. *It must have been like living on both sides of the train tracks at a time when everyone and anyone was suspected as a spy.*

She joined the Belfast branch of Cumann na mBan (the female division of the Irish Volunteers) and worked closely with James Connolly who also lived in Belfast. By 1916, both moved to Dublin and Winnie was the typist for all Connolly's dispatches during the Rising. The only woman in the General Post Office at the time, **she entered the building with a typewriter and a Webley revolver**. When the fighting and mayhem escalated, she was ordered to leave the garrison, along with the other women and injured, and to evacuate the GPO. She refused however, not wanting to leave Connolly's side while he lay dying.

Later, she devoted her efforts to labor and socialist activities and was arrested several times, once, a charge stating for possession of seditious papers.

## 9. **Nellie Gifford** (1880-1971)

I have a soft spot for Nellie Gifford as I think she was very much interested in spreading the word about Ireland's historical past, no matter how recent it had been for her. As one of twelve children to a Dublin solicitor, she was the only one involved in the Rising, though two of her sisters, Grace and Muriel were engaged to be married to men in the IRB, the most famous being her sister Grace for marrying Joseph Plunkett only hours before his execution.

During the Easter Rising, Nellie was in charge of the kitchen in the College of Surgeons and delivering food to outposts and was subsequently imprisoned for several weeks, following the surrender. She made her way to America after that and went out tour, lecturing about her part in the Rising and raising anti-British sentiments even though two of her brothers were in the British army. She married in 1918 and had one daughter. The following year she returned to Ireland. In 1932, she organized a 1916 exhibition in the National Museum of Ireland and a large number of donations were obtained from people, largely through her own efforts. She put the same effort into restoring Kilmainham Jail.

## 10. **Rose McNamara**

Rose was an officer at Marrowbone Lane Distillery when the fighting broke out. She recalls that when the order for surrender came, she and twenty-one other women gave themselves up right alongside the men even though they could have easily signed a statement saying they were innocent and did not take part in the rebellion.

An account by Rose, listed at Military Archives, Rathmines records her words. "The men gave each of us their small arms, to do as we liked with thinking we were going to go home but we were not going to leave the men we were with all the week to their fate, **we decided to go along with them and be with them to the end, whatever our fate may be.**"

There were so many women involved in the Easter Rising that it would be difficult to list them all. Women like Margaret Skinnider who served as a scout and dispatch rider, miraculously missing her death by snipers as bullets rained down from the Shelbourne Hotel, puncturing the tires on her bicycle as she rode and Mary Gibney, who had no *official* affiliation with the Republican cause yet volunteered just the same.

They came from all ranks of society, women of the upper classes, shop assistants, rich and poor. Brave, and determined that Ireland become a Republic, **women took on even greater risks than the men.**

They were the only link between shifting food and supplies between garrisons; they carried dispatches and gathered information, dodged bullets while they traveled and a few were shot dead. Winnie Carney, Julia Grenan, and Elizabeth O'Farrell stayed behind in the GPO, knowing it was likely they would either be shot or arrested as spies. I ask you, how would Irish history have been written without these brave women?

Thanks for reading but don't stop now!

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