

Countess Constance Markievicz



The woman who was charged with taking part "in an armed rebellion against His majesty the King" and sentenced to "Death by being shot" is the same woman who in her prison letters wrote, "Remember no one has it in his power to make me unhappy." This woman is Countess Constance Markievicz, one of the remarkable Irish women involved in freeing Ireland from English domination.

Constance Georgina Gore-Booth, born in London in 1868, was raised in Sligo in the manner typical of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry of the time. Her family's castle, Lissadell Court, oversaw 32,000 acres of Irish land making her father one of the largest landowners in the West of Ireland. One of her younger neighbors, William Butler Yeats, was struck by the image of Con riding on horseback:

When long ago I saw her ride
Under Ben Bulbin to the meet,
The beauty of her countryside
With all youth's lovely wildness stirred...
(*"On a Political Prisoner"*)

Yeats must have seen in Constance's wildness that she was a woman committed to be extraordinary. Yeats was friendly with Constance and her sister Eva throughout the sisters' exceptional lives, in time writing a poem about them:

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.
(*"In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and
Constance Markievicz"*)



Could anyone who knew Constance Gore-Booth's upbringing, a woman presented to Queen Victoria in 1887, predict that she would spend time in Mountjoy Prison, Aylsbury Prison, Holloway Jail, Cork Jail and as a guest of the Free State government after the Irish Civil War?

Sir Henry Gore-Booth stands in history as an enlightened land baron. He supported home industries and an agricultural cooperative among his tenants and kept his tenants harmless during the famine of 1879-1880. His children mingled among the local Irish, learning Irish songs and stories, as did Yeats. The father's example--he was an Arctic explorer--may have led to Con's risk-taking disposition and her advocacy of causes on behalf of the powerless. The Countess's last days were in a ward in St. Patrick Dunn's, a charity hospital in Dublin. There a woman left a bottle of Lourdes water for Madame, saying, "She's given up everything for us and she thinks what is good for us is good enough for her."

Constance's first foray into radical politics was with Eva in the women's suffragist movement. In 1896 she and Eva founded the Sligo Women's Suffrage Society. The women's movement led to the labor movement where Con came under the influence of Jim Larkin and James Connolly. Connolly saw the two movements as connected: "In Ireland the woman's cause is felt by all Labour men and women as their cause." Connolly would become her commanding officer in the 1916 Rising.

Following her artistic bent, Constance went to Paris in 1898 to study art and to write plays. Her work in the theater helped her to evade capture years later when she was "on the run." It also led to her marriage in 1900 to Count Casimir Markievicz, a playwright and a Pole living under Russian domination. Theirs was a marriage of nationalists-- Constance giving up her personal life and life of comfort for Ireland; Casimir almost being killed in the fight for Polish borders.

Back in Ireland, Countess Markievicz intensified her devotion to nationalist causes. In 1909 she formed a kind of radical Boy Scouts organization called Fianna Na h-Eirann. The boys who joined Fianna pledged never to join any armed English force. Indeed, the boys were a cadet training corps for the ultimate physical force clash for which nationalist leaders were preparing. Her boys used their first aid training to care for those injured during skirmishes with police at anti-conscription rallies. The handbook of the Fianna was used by the Citizens' Army for drilling exercises, and the boys helped to train the Cumann na mBan, the women's auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers. The Countess's work with the Fianna boys was her first step on the path to a death sentence.

The first quarter of the 20th century was a time of conflict which changed the map of Europe. A world war erupted in 1914, Ireland attempted to expel England in 1916 and the Russians dethroned the Czars in 1918. The year 1913 prefigured the Rising of 1916. The Lockout of 1913, a labor dispute which led to the lockout of 20,000 workers from their jobs, gave Irish

leaders like Jim Larkin, James Connolly and Joseph Plunkett a conflict in which to develop their leadership styles and more incentive to commit to the cause of Irish independence. The Countess learned how to run soup kitchens and second hand clothing shops, and experienced the need poor people had for fuel, often delivered by Madame herself to slum dwellings. Attention to the wants of the least among us was a part of the Countess's life until her death. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington called Constance's work during the Lockout "her finest achievement, greater than her manning the barricades in 1916 and facing the sentence of death. She espoused an unpopular cause, and braved conventions in her championship of the poor and lowly."

When the World War started in 1914, the Countess helped to lead an anti-enlistment campaign to counter John Redmond's call for Irish men to help England in its distress. Redmond hoped for some post-war accommodation on Home Rule. She would later oppose Lloyd George's Conscription Act in 1918, as did all of the Irish MPs. Sinn Fein collected two million signatures against the conscription of Irish men. The English government, on trumped up charges called the "German Plot," arrested leaders like Eamon de Valera, Maud Gonne MacBride and Countess Markievich, all sent to Holloway Jail. The Act was withdrawn and the prisoners released.



Of course, the Countess who resisted conscription in 1918 was the Countess hardened by her experiences as an officer in the 1916 Rising. The photographs of Markievicz in her Irish Citizens' Army uniform are visual confirmation of her commitment to Irish freedom by force. As close as she was to Francis and Hanna Skeffington, their pacifism was not hers. Her Fianna boys grew to be Volunteers and Citizens' Army soldiers. During the Rising she was second in command to Michael Mallin at St. Stephen's Green and at the College of Surgeons. Arrested, the Countess's only defense at her court martial was, "I went out to fight for Ireland's freedom, and it doesn't matter what happens to me. I did what I thought was right and I stand by it." Her sentence

to death was commuted to penal servitude for life "solely and only on account of her sex." Constance was released from Alysbury Prison on October 1917 as part of a general amnesty.

While in Alysbury Prison, Countess Markievicz took instruction in the Catholic Faith from the prison chaplain. She has said that it was the faith of her

comrades in the Irish Citizens' Army which inspired her to embrace Catholicism. She took Anastasia as her Baptismal name.

Accustomed to conflict, Markievicz continued to clash with British authorities after her release from Aylsbury Prison. She resisted conscription and evaded the Black and Tans from whom she was always "on the run," but she was apprehended for seditious speech and served time in Cork Jail. As the British were releasing its hand from the throat of the Irish, the Countess found herself embroiled in the political turmoil of the Irish Civil War. A long time ally of de Valera, Constance voted with his party against the treaty signed by Michael Collins. The tragic Civil War of 1921-22 ended with de Valera ordering a cease fire, the assassination of Michael Collins being one of the hurtful outcomes of the fratricidal war.

As Ireland struggled to be born as an independent state, Countess Markievicz was in the center of events. Running for office from Holloway Jail, in 1919 she was elected as the first woman to the English Parliament. When the Irish MPs in Westminster voted in absentia to form the Dail Eireann, deemed illegal by the British government, Markievicz's vote was "Fe Glas ag Gallaibh" (imprisoned abroad). She was appointed by de Valera as Minister of Labour, the only woman who sat in any government at the time, except for a woman in the new USSR government. She was in Mountjoy Prison during Bloody Sunday (1921). She voted against the Treaty signed by Michael Collins and took up arms against the Free State, surrendering her weapon only to her commander, Cathal Brugha: "Madame, I order you as a soldier to hand over your rifle." Con, a member of the Dail, spent a month as an intern of the Free State for her part in street protests against the Free State government.



Each of us can decide if Countess Constance Markievicz gave up too much for Ireland. Her daughter Maeve, born in 1901, was raised by Constance's mother and governesses. Maeve had Constance and Eva's upbringing at Lissadell. She saw her mother but was not close to her. Constance admitted late in life that the only one close to her was Eva. She saw Casimir only twice since 1916, once in 1924 and in 1927 as she lay dying. As she fought the British, he was fighting in Russia and was ruined financially by the Communist Revolution. He was, in a sense, married to Poland, helping to rebuild his native land. The 300,000 who lined the route to Glasnevin Cemetery for Madame's burial showed that many appreciated her sacrifices for the people of Ireland. Her life will be cherished, said Reginald Roper in a eulogy, "by those who were starving, those whose rents she paid, those to whom she carried sacks of coal on her shoulders...."

Beannacht De ar a hanam dilis.
The blessing of God on her dear soul.
(from The Nation: "A Patriot at Rest")

(written by John Walsh)

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