



Herstory III

profiles of a further eight Ulster-Scots women



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Introduction

Although women make up more than 50% of the population in most countries and societies, 'Herstory' (or women's history) has been very much neglected until very recently. This is partially because throughout human history women have tended to play a subordinate role to their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons.

In the past women's lives and the opportunities available to them were greatly restricted. In Ulster, apart from those fortunate enough to be born into (or to marry into) the aristocracy and the upper middle classes, most women's lives would have revolved around childbearing and childrearing and, of course, the drudgery of housework. Economically, rural women would have combined these roles with working in agriculture whereas their urban counterparts would most likely have been engaged in textile production. However, domestic service, shop work, office work, nursing and teaching would have also provided employment for considerable numbers of women.

Comparatively few women until very recent times would have had access to anything we might equate with a decent education or the professions such as law, medicine, accountancy or academia. Apart from a few high-profile individuals, women's involvement in politics and in public life was very modest until the second half of the twentieth century.

'Herstory', a term adopted over forty years ago by feminist critics of conventionally written history, is history written from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the role of women, or told from a woman's point of view. The Oxford English Dictionary credits Robin Morgan with coining the term in her book entitled *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970).

The word is arrived at by changing the initial his in history to her, as if history were derived from 'his + story'. Actually the word history was coined by Herodotus, 'the father of history', and is derived from the ancient Greek word, ἱστορία (historía), meaning 'inquiry or knowledge acquired by investigation'. In Homer's writings, a histor is one who reports, having made a thorough investigation of the facts. The word has absolutely nothing to do with the male possessive pronoun.

This publication aspires to examine the lives of eight interesting and significant Ulster-Scots women and their role in history. The range and diversity of their activities and passions are striking. By definition, the lives of these women are far from typical. They are quite exceptional women.

Elizabeth Bell

1862 - 9 July 1934

Elizabeth Gould Bell was a supporter of the women's suffrage movement and a close friend and ally of Mrs Pankhurst, the founder of the Women' Social and Political Union in 1903 and the foremost campaigner for women's suffrage.

The first female medical graduate in Ulster, she qualified in 1893 from the Royal University of Ireland (RUI). She was born in Newry, County Down, and was the daughter of Joseph Bell of Spring Hill, Newry, the clerk of the Newry Poor Law Union. She had a brother and one sister who also qualified in medicine. She married Dr Hugh Fisher but her husband died early in the marriage, leaving her a widow. Their only son died in France during the Great War.

In the years before the Great War, Elizabeth Bell was sympathetic towards the suffragette movement. In November 1911 she was arrested during protests in London and was sent to Holloway. The first recorded militant act by the movement in Belfast took place in 1912 and was an attack on the General Post Office in Donegall Square in which its windows were smashed. It is impossible to say with certainty whether Dr Bell was responsible or not but when Lilian Metge, a wealthy widow and friend, founder of the Lisburn Suffrage Society and the lady who is believed to have been responsible for blowing up the chancel of Lisburn Cathedral in August 1914, asked whether she knew

anything about the incident, she simply smiled sweetly. Dr Bell also took care of suffragettes who had been subjected to forced feeding by the prison authorities after embarking on hunger strike.

By far the greater part of her career was spent in Belfast where her patients were mostly women and young children but in the first decade of the twentieth century she was in Manchester and during the Great War she worked in Malta, where soldiers and sailors wounded in the eastern Mediterranean were treated.

Dr Bell was Honorary Physician to the Maternity and Baby Home at The Grove and medical officer to the Belfast Corporation's 'Baby Club'.

Noted for her 'striking personality and intellect', she lived at 83 Great Victoria Street, Belfast, before moving to 4 College Gardens.

She died on 9 July 1934. One obituary described her as a 'pioneer of the feminist movement in Ireland'.



Frances Browne

16 January 1816 - 21 August 1879

Frances Browne was struck completely blind by smallpox when she was eighteen months old but this affliction did not prevent her becoming a prolific poet, essayist, novelist and writer of children's stories. 'The Blind Poetess of Donegal', as she came to be known, was born in Stranorlar in that county. The seventh of twelve children, Samuel Browne, her father, was the town's postmaster.

At the age of six, she heard a Presbyterian sermon – her family was Presbyterian – which she could not understand. This experience fuelled her determination to secure an education. In a manner reminiscent of Sarah Leech, she developed an insatiable appetite for learning. She received no regular education but educated herself by listening to her brothers and sister reading their lessons aloud and by subjecting adults to interminable questions. She grew up with an excellent grasp of English literature and had special affection for the work of Sir Walter Scott. She then developed a taste for what she described as 'the far more wonderful romance of history'. Many of her poems and stories have allusions to historical events. The French Revolution seems to have exerted an especially strong grip on her imagination, as it might be expected to do because of its close chronological proximity.



In 1841 her first poems were published in the *Irish Penny Journal* and in the London-based *Athenaeum*. One of those included in the *Irish Penny Journal* was 'Songs of Our Land' which is to be found in many anthologies of Irish verse. She published two collections of poems: the first in 1844 and a second in 1847. The *Northern Whig* reprinted many of her poems and through its pages she became widely known as 'The Blind Poetess of Ulster'. Her work also began to appear in the *Chambers's Journal*, for which she continued to write over the next 25 years.

Her literary earnings enabled to pay for the education of a younger sister and she in return acted as Frances's amanuensis. In 1847 she and her sister went to live in Edinburgh, quickly establishing herself in literary circles, and writing essays, reviews, stories, and poems. Five years later she moved to London. There she wrote three three-volume novels: *My Share of the World* (1861), *The Castleford Case* (1862) and *The Hidden Sun* (1866). Two comments are applicable to all three works. First, they were set in a wide range of locales which she had never visited and of course could never see. Secondly, they are powerful and dramatic.

She also wrote stories for children. They too exhibit a strong sense of place and feeling for landscape. *The Eriksons* (1852)

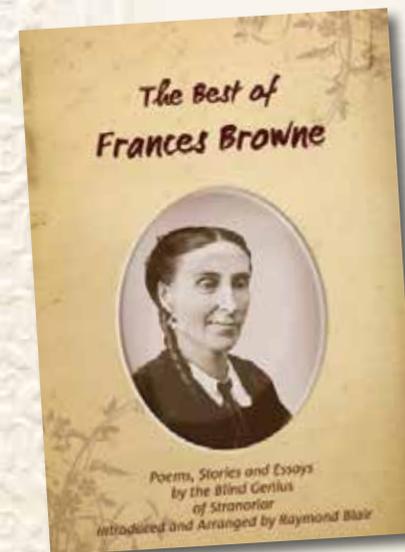


was set in Norway and recreated Norwegian life in impressive detail. Others were set in the Black Forest in Germany, in the Lincolnshire fens and southern Africa.

The book for which Frances Browne is remembered is *Granny's Wonderful Chair* (1857). It is a collection of fairy stories within a frame story. Ultimately it was to achieve classic status in the late-Victorian era but not unfortunately in her lifetime. Frances Hodgson Burnett had read *Granny's Wonderful Chair* as a child and allegedly recounted part of it from memory in her book entitled *St Nicholas* in 1887. While this could be construed as plagiarism (and perhaps it was), the outcome proved was beneficial because Frances Hodgson Burnett's book led to the rediscovery of Frances Browne's text which as a result was reprinted several times and was translated into various languages, thereby becoming a late-nineteenth-century international bestseller.

None of her work was reprinted in her lifetime so that she never earned huge amounts of money. Between 1860 and 1866 she was in receipt of grants from the Royal Literary Fund. She also received money from the 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne, the Royal Bounty fund and a pension from the Civil List. The nadir of her career occurred in 1867. In that year owing to ill health and non-payment by some publishers, she was forced to

declare bankruptcy. This humiliating setback did not deter her from writing and she continued to do so until the time of her death. She died of apoplexy and in her will left less than £100 and all her belongings to Eliza Hickmann, her faithful servant and companion during the last sixteen years of her life. She was buried in Richmond-upon-Thames, Surrey.



Recently there has been increased interest in her life and work. This is evidenced by Patrick Bonar's *The Life and Works of Frances Browne* (2007), the most detailed biography available to date, and Raymond Blair's article in the *Donegal Annual* (2008) entitled 'Frances Browne and the Legends of Ulster'. Blair has also edited an anthology of her poems, short stories and essays entitled *The Best of Frances Browne*.

Emily Winifred Dickson

13 July 1866 - 19 January 1944

Thomas Alexander Dickson was a linen manufacturer and Liberal politician who variously represented Dungannon (1871-1880), County Tyrone (1881-1885) and the St Stephen's Green division of Dublin (1888-1892) in the House of Commons. His wife was very sickly and doctors were frequent visitors to the family home and it was this contact with the medical profession which prompted one of his six children, Emily Winifred, to study medicine.

On leaving school Emily Winifred nursed her mother for a year. She applied to Trinity College, Dublin, but was turned down because she was a woman. Nevertheless she managed to enter the Royal College of Surgeons, where, despite her rather patchy previous education, she won medals and graduated as a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in 1891. She trained in midwifery at the Rotunda Hospital and qualified MB BCH. BAO with a first-class honours degree and gold medal in 1893.

In 1896 she was elected the first woman fellow (FRCSI) of any of the Colleges of Surgeons in the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. She was also awarded a travelling scholarship by the Royal University of Ireland and studied in the General Hospital



in Vienna and subsequently in Berlin, where she was not allowed to attend ward rounds on account of her gender. On returning to Dublin her application for a post at the Rotunda was refused on the same grounds.

She practised as a gynaecologist and was appointed to the Richmond Hospital in Dublin. Having two postgraduate degrees (MD and MAO from RUI in 1896), she published papers and lectured. She was appointed an examiner in midwifery and gynaecology. The appointment generated a massive protest by students from both the RSCI and the Catholic Medical School but happily these protests were ignored.

In the 1880s it was believed that a career in medicine made a woman less suitable for marriage. For example, one commentator opined that the family of a prospective woman doctor would object to spending so much money on her medical education because she would be likely to marry soon.

Such considerations did not prevent Emily Winifred in marrying Robert Macgregor Martin, a Scottish businessman, in 1899. She gave up work to raise their family of four sons and one daughter. When her husband returned shell-shocked from the Great War and unable to work, she returned to medicine as an assistant medical officer at Rainhill Mental Hospital in Lancashire, then in

general practice and as a medical health officer.

She died at the home of her youngest son in Whitecraigs, Renfrewshire.

Dr Dickson's achievement remains impressive: she was a pioneer who on several occasions challenged and breached the barriers of sex discrimination, retired to raise a family of five children and then returned to medicine as the family's breadwinner as a result of her husband's long-term incapacity.

In 2012 Dr Niall Martin, Dr E W Dickson's grandson, donated her papers to the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI). They include certificates, medals, testimonials, correspondence and photographs ranging from the 1880s to the 1920s. In due course they will be catalogued and be made available in the RCSI Library to researchers.

Dr E W Dickson's only daughter, Elizabeth (Betty), took a degree at Oxford University, and in 1927 married Kenneth McKenzie Clark, the future Lord Clark (often irreverently referred to as 'Lord Clark of Civilisation'), the art historian and broadcaster. Alan Clark, the Conservative politician, diarist and military historian, was their son.

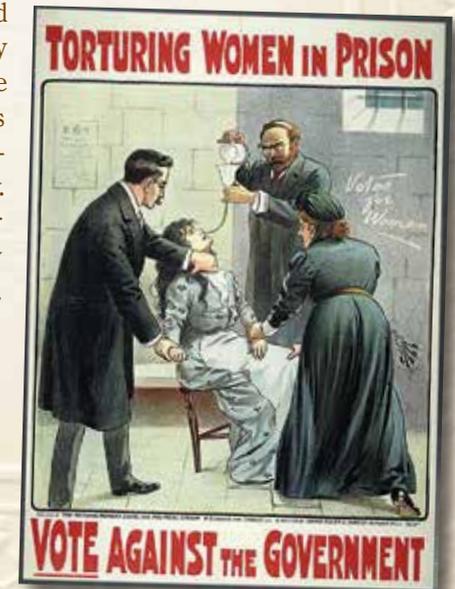


Margaret McCoubrey

1880 - 1955

Between 27 March 1914 and 1 August 1914 there was an intense period of violent Suffragette activity in Ulster, much of it in north Belfast. For example, Abbeylands House, Whiteabbey, was burned to the ground; Seaview House was damaged in an arson attack; Ardmillan House in Fortwilliam Park was targeted; Cavehill Bowling and Tennis Club was set on fire; the Teahouse in Bellevue Gardens was comprehensively destroyed; and Fortwilliam golf course was attacked. Perhaps the most spectacular incident was the blowing up of the chancel of Lisburn Cathedral on 1 August 1914. Although Lilian Metge, a wealthy Lisburn widow, Dorothy Evans, the organiser of the WSPU in Ulster, Maud Wickham (who was widely believed to be the niece of Lord Aberdeen, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland) and Dorothy Carson were arrested for the incident in Lisburn, most of this activity was almost certainly co-ordinated by Margaret McCoubrey. However the authorities never succeeded in pinning responsibility for the Suffragette campaign on her.

Born in Eldersley, near Glasgow, Margaret Mearns started work at the age of twelve in a Glasgow



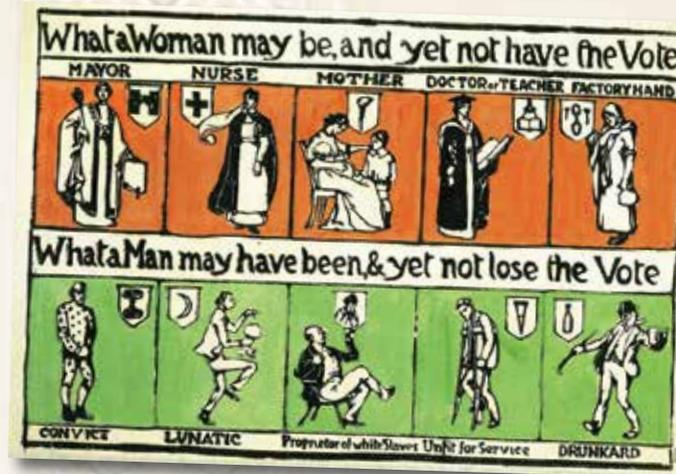


men's outfitters shop but combined this employment with attendance at evening classes. In 1896 she qualified as a junior shorthand typist, and three years later became secretary to the managing director of the first private telephone service in Scotland. She taught in the Skerries Business Training College, of which she became deputy head mistress at the age of twenty-four. A keen interest in education is a recurring theme in her life.

She married John Taylor McCoubrey, an electrician and Belfast trade unionist and moved to Belfast in 1905. In 1910 she joined the Women's Social and Political Union, and was an active militant. She represented the organisation's Ulster membership at meetings in London.

The Carlton cake shop in Donegall Place provided their patrons with cardboard cake boxes with distinctive black and white stripes. These boxes constituted 'good camouflage for carrying firefighters'. According to Margaret McCoubrey's daughter, when suffragettes visited the McCoubrey family home (off the Ormeau Road), there was always cake for tea. On account of her known militancy, her activities were closely monitored - but not closely enough it would seem - by the Royal Irish Constabulary.

At the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, she disregarded the WSPU's orders to cease agitation, and instead founded a branch of the Irish Women's Suffrage Society in Belfast. She



joined the peace movement and gave refuge to conscientious objectors. At that time, the majority of Ulster women regarded pacifism as unpatriotic and female suffrage as a trivial issue compared to the conduct of the war. As a result, only a few

suffragists remained active during the War. McCoubrey single-handedly mounted a month-long peace and suffrage campaign in Belfast in August 1917. She contended that 'a woman looking down on a battlefield would not see dead Germans or dead Englishmen but so many mothers' sons'.

The Co-Operative movement was another theme of her life. She contributed articles to the *Wheat Sheaf*, the Co-Op magazine, and she had a weekly column in the *Co-Op News*. She became general secretary of the Co-Operative Guild, and from 1910 to 1916 was elected onto the board of management. During this period she served on all its sub-committees in turn and taught economics and the history of the Co-Operative Society in the educational department. In 1922, she was elected to represent the Irish guildswomen on the newly formed International Women's Co-Operative Committee, which came into existence at Basel. She took an active part in the work of the Co-Operative

Society's Advisory Council, served on various deputations to Belfast Corporation to lobby on issues such as housing reform, sanitation, the appointment of women constables, and the enforcement of the provisions of the Medical Treatment of School Children Act. When she died, she left behind an uncompleted history of the Co-Operative movement.

An active member of the Independent Labour Party, in 1920 she was elected to serve as a Labour councillor representing Dock ward on Belfast Corporation.

In 1933 she went to live in Carnlough, County Antrim, where she ran Drumalla House, a non-profit making holiday home for members of the Belfast Girl's Club Union.

Anne Louise McIlroy

11 November 1874 - 8 February 1968

Anne Louise McIlroy was born at Lavin House, County Antrim, the daughter of James McIlroy MD, JP, a well-known general practitioner in Ballycastle. She was one of three girls. Of her two sisters, Janie Hamilton McIlroy became a specialist in ophthalmology and the other became a well-known artist in Scotland. She was the first woman Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University of London and at the Royal Free School of Medicine (from 1921 to 1936). In 1929 she became the first woman founder fellow of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. She received many honours and became a Dame (DBE) in 1929.

She was one of the first female medical graduates at Glasgow University, winning class prizes in both medicine and pathology before obtaining her MB ChB in 1898 followed by an MD with commendation in 1900. After further postgraduate work in Dublin, London, Vienna and Berlin specialising in Gynaecology and Obstetrics, she was appointed Gynaecological Surgeon at the Victoria Infirmary in Glasgow, a post she held from 1906 to 1910. Her first prestigious position came in 1911, when she was appointed





first assistant to the Muirhead Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Glasgow.

At the outbreak of the Great War McIlroy gave up her promising career in Glasgow to work for the war effort. She was one of the founders of the Scottish Women's Hospital for Foreign Service. Appointed surgeon-in-chief, she served in France, Serbia, and Salonika, and became surgeon at the Royal Army Medical Corps hospital at Constantinople. She was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* for her services with *L'Armée d'Orient* in Serbia and Salonika in 1916, and an OBE in 1920. On her return to the United Kingdom she wrote a book describing her wartime experiences, *From a Balcony on the Bosphorus* (1924).

She returned to Glasgow after the war but left in 1921 when she was appointed Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the London School of Medicine for Women, thereby becoming the first woman to be appointed a medical professor in United Kingdom. Initially she experienced stern opposition in this role because she was a graduate of a different medical school and one outside of London.

She proved to be an inspiring teacher and achieved an international reputation for her prolific research and writing. She is especially remembered for her book *The Toxaemias of Pregnancy* (1936) and for her work on the relief of pain in

childbirth and the management of asphyxia in the new-born. She also worked as a Surgeon at the Marie Curie Hospital for Women during this period. Her achievements were recognised by universities in the form of honorary degrees, being awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Science degree from London, an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from Glasgow and another Honorary Doctorate of Science degree from Queen's University, Belfast, which she said, as an Ulster woman, she particularly valued.

She retired in 1934, to have, in her own words 'a few years of freedom'. She felt strongly though about doing her duty and when the Second World War broke out she immediately offered her services, despite being well past retirement age. She organised emergency maternity services in Buckinghamshire and, showing her generous nature, selflessly took her own property to provide equipment and comforts at the hospital in the face of the inevitable shortages. After the Second World War she returned to retirement, living with her sister in Turnberry, Ayrshire. She died peacefully in a Glasgow hospital on 8 February 1968.

She truly was a pioneer of women in medicine, who, as one colleague recalled, expected no less from her staff: 'Dame Louise was a hard taskmaster. She expected, and got, the very

best from her staff; praise and criticism were justly awarded. To have worked for and with her was a privilege truly sought after by young aspiring specialists.' She possessed 'great personal charm' and a 'puckish sense of humour'. These qualities are admirably conveyed in her portrait by Sargent that hangs in the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, University of London.

Alice Milligan

14 September 1866 - 13 April 1953

Alice Letitia Milligan was born at Gortmore, Omagh, County Tyrone, and was the third of thirteen children born into a staunchly Methodist family. Her father was Seaton Forrest Milligan, a successful businessman who became a director of the Bank Buildings in Belfast. Seaton Forrest Milligan possessed a keen interest in literature and was an enthusiastic antiquarian.

These interests were evidenced by his election to membership of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland in 1884 and to the Royal Irish Academy in 1887. Charlotte Milligan (née Burns), her mother was of Scottish ancestry.

She was educated at home, then at Methodist College, Belfast (where she excelled across the curriculum), and at King's College, London. She completed a teacher-training course in Belfast and Londonderry. She then went to Dublin to learn Irish. Her interest in the language had its immediate origins in her great-uncle's farm near Omagh. The labourers and maids came from The Rosses, an Irish-speaking part of County Donegal, and she was fascinated by their conversation. Although a love of the Irish language is not incompatible with unionism, Michael Davitt, the founder of the Land League, once told her that his mother made all her children speak Irish, even when they were



in England. According to Mrs Davitt, 'to speak English' was 'a sign of servitude'. It was a lesson that Alice Milligan readily imbibed.

In Dublin she was drawn to the Protestant nationalism of Charles Stewart Parnell. His death and treatment at the hands of the Roman Catholic hierarchy radicalised her. Her fury at the treatment of Parnell by the Roman Catholic Church was a recurring theme of her life. For example, she was contemptuous at the rapturous reception accorded by the Roman Catholic authorities to King Edward VII at Maynooth and scathingly contrasted Parnell's private life with that of the King.

In 1894 Alice and Jenny Armour founded the Irish Women's Association which had branches initially in Belfast, Moneyreagh (a hotbed of Presbyterian nationalism in rural County Down) and Portadown. The following year she launched the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society in Belfast and, with Anna Johnston (whose pseudonym was Ethna Carbery), she co-founded and edited the *Northern Patriot*, the society's journal. The *Northern Patriot* aspired to unite all those who have 'one absorbing life purpose' (i.e. Ireland's independence). Between 1896 and 1899 she also edited the *Shan Van Vocht* (literally 'The poor old woman', a poetic way of referring to Ireland). In poem, published in the *Shan Van Vocht* and entitled 'Westminster 1895', she contended

that to negotiate further with the 'English' Parliament was to prostitute the honour of Ireland.

*O Irishmen, not here, not here
Should Freedom's boon be longer sought
Nor to our foe's disdainful ear,
Demands for Nationhood be brought ...
... Let none debase our country's name
Stooping to carve our freedom's name.*

These lines anticipated the formation of *Sinn Fein* by a decade. The *Shan Van Vocht* ceased publication in 1899 to make way for Arthur Griffith's *United Irishman*, a development for which Alice had decidedly muted sympathy because she was emotionally attached to the *Shan Van Vocht*.

Alice was one of the prime movers in organising the centenary celebrations of the 1798 rebellion. As secretary of the organising committee, she invited John O'Leary, the literary Fenian and inspiration and mentor to W. B. Yeats, to Belfast. To the consternation of the more unionist members of the family, he stayed in the Milligan family home. Edith Milligan indignantly exclaimed: 'Imagine having that man in the house!' She published a biography of Wolfe Tone to mark the centenary of the rebellion. In 1910 she organised events to celebrate the centenary of the



birth of Sir Samuel Ferguson.

Alice's first book, *Glimpses of Erin*, was published as early as 1888, when she was only 22. A collaborative effort with her father, the book concentrates on Ulster and Sligo and may be best described as a hybrid volume combining travelogue with philosophical reflection.

Although primarily remembered for her poetry, she was a prolific author of stories, plays, letters, articles and biography. Much of her poetry appeared in the *United Irishman*. AE (George Russell) rated it as 'the best patriotic poetry written in Ireland in my time'. In 1900 she wrote a play, *The Last Feast of the Fianna*, for the Irish Literary Theatre, and *The Daughter of Donagh* for the Abbey Theatre. She also wrote a number of novels and published a book of poetry entitled *The Harper of the Only God*.

A list of her friends would constitute a who's who of advanced nationalism or of cultural nationalism. The following would feature on such a list and this list is by no means exhaustive: AE, Francis Joseph Biggar, Winifred Carney, Roger Casement, James Connolly (to whom the *Shan Van Vocht* extended an early platform), Michael Davitt, Eamon de Valera, Maud Gonne



(who accurately described Alice as 'small, aggressive and full of observant curiosity'), Arthur Griffith, Bulmer Hobson (over whom Alice exerted significant influence), Douglas Hyde (one of Alice's long-standing friends and most frequent correspondents), Thomas MacDonagh (whom Alice regarded as 'the best living Irish poet'), Standish O'Grady (who, although he regarded as a cultural nationalist, was politically a unionist), John O'Leary and William Butler Yeats.

Equally, she was either a member of or had contact with most of the organisations which constituted advanced nationalism. She was certainly a member of Maud Gonne's *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* ('Daughters of Ireland'), *Sinn Féin* and the Gaelic League. Indeed between 1904 and 1909 Alice was organiser for the Gaelic League and gave history lectures throughout Ireland.

Let us take a brief look at two of her friends: Roger Casement and Winifred Carney. Alice first met Casement in June 1904 and viewed him with respect and affection. She was with him the day on which his knighthood was announced in 1911. After the Larne gunrunning in April 1914 she and Casement travelled together to the town and Casement ventured the opinion: 'We'll have to do something like this.' In 1916 she attended every day of his trial in London and never wavered in her loyalty to him. Her poem, 'The Ash Tree of Uisneach', was written during



the trial at Casement's prompting and provides a fascinating record of her innermost thoughts and feelings about it. Casement wrote to her from prison and on the day he was hanged at Pentonville (3 August 1916), she stood outside the prison.

Winifred Carney had been born in Bangor, County Down (where Alice spent much of her life), in 1887 and had been educated at the Christian Brothers School in Donegall Street in Belfast. She became an enthusiastic Gaelic Leaguer and suffragette and during the 1916 rebellion acted as James Connolly's personal assistant in the GPO. In December 1918 she contested the newly-created Belfast constituency of Victoria in the General Election. Alice gave Carney her unstinting support but the female *Sinn Fein* candidate came a poor third in in this unionist stronghold, polling 539 votes, a measure of how far removed Alice's politics were from the political realities of north-east Ulster. The successful Unionist candidate polled 9,309 votes and even the Labour candidate managed to poll 3,674 votes.

Although Alice lived to be 86, her campaigning life was essentially over by 1916 (the year



when the romanticism of cultural nationalism collided with the brutal simplicities of the republican physical force tradition) and the years thereafter form an anti-climax. She supported the anti-Treaty side in the Irish Civil War, became an admirer of Eamon de Valera and deplored Partition. In January 1938 she was the only female signatory to a document issued by the Northern Council for Unity entitled 'Partition of Ireland: the root cause of Discontent, Disorder and Distress'. In 1941 she received belated recognition for her life's work in the shape of an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland.

During the final years of her life she was virtually destitute. She died at Tyrcur, near Omagh, on 13 April 1953 and is buried in Drumragh graveyard outside the town. Her headstone has an inscription in Irish: 'Nior car fod eile ac Eirinn', which may be rendered as 'She loved no other place but Ireland'.

Through her work and her many contacts, Alice Milligan was one of the most significant and influential figures in the Gaelic revival. Yet until very recently, she was a figure who was mentioned 'in passing' even by historians of the first rank rather than properly evaluated. In 1999 Catherine Morris submitted a doctoral thesis to Aberdeen University entitled 'Alice Milligan and the Irish cultural revival, 1888-1905'. Sheila Turner Johnston provides a very accessible account in *Alice: A Life of Alice Milligan* (Omagh, 1994).

Margaret Elizabeth Noble Sister Nivedita

1867 - 13 October 1911

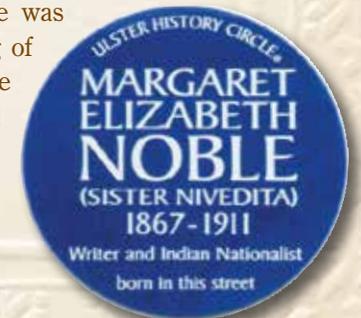
Although both sides of her family were of Scottish descent and she was born in Dungannon, County Tyrone, Margaret Elizabeth Noble is almost universally described as Anglo-Irish. She usually regarded herself as being English. She was the daughter of Samuel Richmond Noble and Mary Isabel Hamilton. Objectively, she was an Ulster-Scot.

Her father was a Wesleyan Methodist clergyman who died when she was ten but not before convincing her that 'service to mankind is true service to God'. Although this is not an orthodox definition of Christianity, service to one's fellow man ought to be a natural outcome of the Christian life. She was brought up by her Hamilton grandfather who had Irish nationalist leanings. She was educated at a Church boarding school in London, where she acquired a love of learning. A desire to serve mankind, a sympathy for nationalism and a mission to educate may be said to give shape and coherence to her life's work.



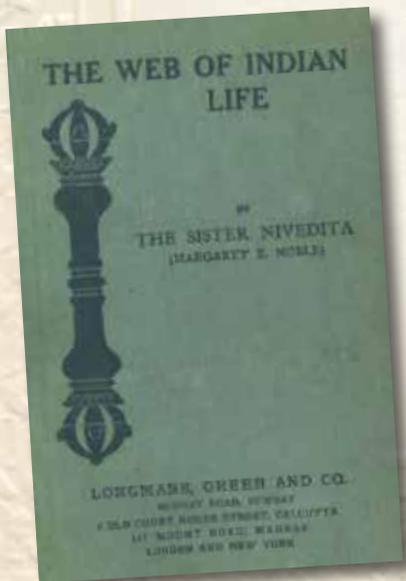
She became a teacher and taught in Keswick, north Wales and in Chester. She was greatly influenced by the teaching methods of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), the Swiss pedagogue, and Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the German educationalist and disciple of Pestalozzi. Pestalozzi's motto was 'Learning by head, hand and heart'. Illiteracy was widespread throughout eighteenth-century Switzerland but Pestalozzi has been credited with responsibility for its virtual elimination by 1830. Froebel contended that children have unique needs and capabilities and developed the concept of the 'Kindergarten'. She co-founded a school in Wimbledon which put their educational theories into practice.

A prolific writer, she contributed articles to various newspapers and periodicals and made a name for herself in intellectual circles. In 1893 she spoke in support of Gladstone's second Home Rule bill to members of the London Sesame Club. She fell in love and was engaged to be married to a young Welshman but unfortunately he died shortly afterwards. Having been brought up in a Christian home, she was active in church life but her understanding of Christianity failed to provide her with the necessary consolation and peace of mind which she craved, prompting her to turn to the study of comparative religions.



She met Swami Vivekandanda in London in 1895 and travelled to India. There Swami Vivekananda gave her the name Nivedita (which means 'One who is dedicated') in March 1898. In November 1898 she started a school for girls in Calcutta which is now called Ramakrishna Sarada Mission Sister Nivedita Girls' High School. She worked to improve the lives of Indian women of all castes.

She also became an exponent of a pan-Indian nationalism, travelled widely and lobbied MPs at Westminster to this end. She viewed India as single entity and would have greatly deplored the partition of the subcontinent which accompanied independence in August 1947. Curiously for an Irish nationalist, she drew an interesting parallel between her conception of India and the then United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In the UK she contended (as a unionist would) that the English, the Scots, the Irish and the Welsh unite in a shared or common identity of Britishness. She expected, possibly not very realistically, Punjabi and Bengali, Sikh, Muslim and Hindu to embrace a similar shared sense of what it might mean to be Indian.



Among her publications were *The Web of Indian Life* (1904) and *The Master as I Saw Him* (1910). The former is still apparently regarded in India as one of the few fair accounts of Hindu society written in English.

She died of dysentery in October 1911. She was only 43. Her body was cremated in Darjeeling, and a memorial erected to her, located below the railway station on the way to the Victoria Falls (of Darjeeling). It is inscribed: 'Here reposes Sister Nivedita, who gave her all to India'. Her many admirers included Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister, and the Countess of Minto, the wife of the Earl of Minto, the Viceroy of India between 1905 and 1910. Rabindranath Tagore, the Bengali polymath and poet who in 1913 became the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, said: 'She was, in fact, a mother of the people'. In 1967, the centenary of her birth, India issued a commemorative stamp in her honour.

Betty Sinclair

3 December 1910 – 25 December 1981

Sinclair is a name which resonates throughout Ulster's political history. William Sinclair (1760-1807), the Belfast linen manufacturer and radical, was the chair of the first society of United Irishmen (and a founder of the Linen Hall Library). Thomas Sinclair (1838-1914), one-time Gladstonian Liberal and Ulster's foremost Liberal Unionist, was the organiser of the Ulster Unionist Convention of 1892 and the author of the Ulster Covenant in 1912. William Pirrie Sinclair (1837- 1900) was briefly Liberal MP for County Antrim (between May and October 1885) and Liberal Unionist MP for Falkirk Burghs between 1886 and 1892. Another Thomas Sinclair (1857-1940) was a distinguished surgeon and MP for Queen's University at Westminster between 1923 and 1940. Maynard Sinclair (1896-1953), whom we will encounter again shortly, was the liberal-minded Unionist MP for Cromac (in the Northern Ireland House of Commons) who was Lord Brookeborough's Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister of Northern Ireland between 1943 and his death aboard the ill-fated *Princess Victoria*. All of these figures could be regarded as being on the left of the political spectrum but none of them came close to being as left wing as Betty Sinclair.



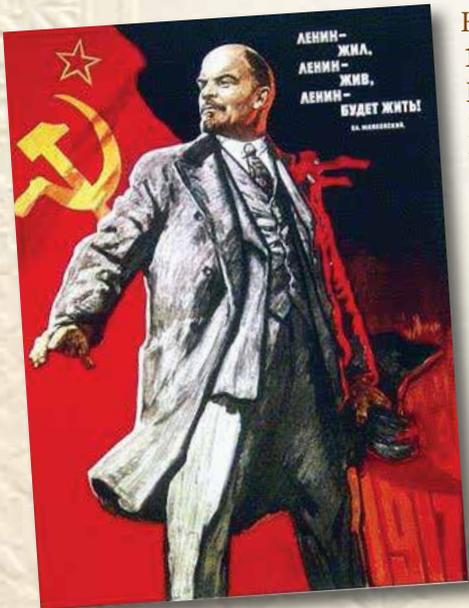
Elizabeth Sinclair was born into a working-class Church of Ireland family in north Belfast. Margaret, her mother, was a reeler in Ewart's linen mills. Her father Joseph was employed in the Harland & Wolff shipyard as a sawyer and politically was a supporter of William Walker, the Labour politician who contested North Belfast in 1905, 1906 and 1907. Like Joseph Sinclair, Walker worked (as a joiner) in Harland & Wolff and was active in the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. In 1911 Walker publicly challenged James Connolly's political assumptions and contended that Irish socialists should focus their activities on the British labour movement. Ultimately, for whatever reason, Betty's politics were to be closer to those of Connolly than Walker.

She received her early education at St Mary's Church of Ireland school on the Crumlin Road. Between 1923 and 1925 she lived with an aunt in Leeds, completed her education and started work in the printing trade. Returning to Belfast in 1925, she worked as a millworker alongside her mother. As an active trade unionist, she was elected by her union to serve on the Belfast & District Trades Union Council. In 1931 she began to attend meetings of the Revolutionary Workers' Group (the precursor of the Communist Party of Ireland or CPI). In 1932 she became a founder member of the CPI and a member of its first central committee.

In the early 1930s Belfast was a city gripped with depression, unemployment and discontent. At the age of 22, as the secretary of the North Belfast Strike Committee, Betty Sinclair exhibited great skill in organising those involved in the outdoor relief (unemployment assistance) strike and orchestrating huge demonstrations by thousands of unemployed workers in 1932. These are often regarded as the first large-scale non-sectarian political demonstrations in Northern Ireland and the last until the formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in the late 1960s (in which Sinclair was also to play a leading part).

Her impressive political activism in 1932 prompted her selection for the International Lenin School (ILS) in Moscow where she was a student between 1933 and 1935. Founded in 1926 as an instrument for the 'Bolshevisation' of the Comintern (or Communist International), the stated objectives of the ILS were:

To assist the Comintern sections in raising the qualifications of leading Party workers whose revolutionary experience must



be strengthened by general theoretical Marxist-Leninist preparation on the one hand; and, on the other, by direct and active study of the organisational and political experiences of the CPSU (the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) and of the experiences and current work of the Communist Parties in the capitalist and colonial countries.

These objectives were to be realised through an intensive study of economics and history, Marxist theory, and the strategy and tactics employed by the world communist movement. Between 1926 and 1938 the ILS provided academic, practical, and ideological training to some 3,500 communist students from 59 countries. Few students imbibed the tenets of Stalinism more thoroughly than Betty Sinclair. To her dying day, she never wavered in her devotion to Stalinism. Other graduates of the ILS include Tito, Władysław Gomułka and Erich Honecker, the President of Yugoslavia, the de facto leader of Poland from 1945 to 1948 and from 1956 to 1970, and the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party in East Germany respectively.

She was fortunate not to have been in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s because she might conceivably have ended up as a victim of the *Yezhovshchina* (or the Great Purges). Instead she was heavily involved in organising 'aid' in Belfast for Republican Spain.

In 1940 she was arrested after the CPI paper *Red Hand* published an article construed to be sympathetic to the IRA, and was sentenced to two months' imprisonment in Armagh jail. It was also in 1940 that she became a full-time worker for the CPI in Belfast. In the General Election to the Northern Ireland House of Commons in 1945 Betty Sinclair contested Cromac in Belfast on behalf of the CPI. She polled an impressive 4,130 votes (32.9% of the valid vote) in a straight contest against Maynard Sinclair, the Unionist candidate and rising star of the Unionist Party. The size of her vote reflected the fact that about a third of the electorate in the constituency would happily vote in any given election for any candidate (independent unionist, Progressive Unionist, independent labour or Labour) other than the Unionist candidate, irrespective of political designation. So in 1929 they voted independent unionist, in 1938 for William Stewart, the founder of the short-lived Progressive Unionist Party, and 1949 independent labour. Betty Sinclair's impressive performance was also an indication of the high regard in which Stalin was still regarded at the end of the Second World War and before the advent of the Cold War. The people of the USSR had suffered grievously at the hands of the Nazis and had contributed massively to the Allied victory. Most people had as yet no appreciation that 'Uncle Joe' was guilty of mass murder on a scale which far surpassed that of Hitler. The truth only began to leak

out after Stalin's death in March 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' denouncing Stalinism at the 20th Party Conference in February 1956.



In 1947 she was appointed full-time secretary of the Belfast & District Trades Unions Council, a position she retained until 1975. Although the support enjoyed by the CPI in these years was derisory, the party wielded huge clout within the local trade union movement, a tribute to Sinclair's acumen and organizational ability.

The bloody suppression of a rising by East German workers in East Berlin in June 1953 and protests in Poland at the end of June 1956 and the Hungarian Revolution in October and November 1956 were events which caused many Communists in the West great angst but not Betty Sinclair.

A founder-member of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association in 1967, she became its first chairperson. Unlike some of the NICRA's membership, she was genuinely non-sectarian and opposed to violence. She resigned in 1969 after the organisation had been infiltrated by Trotskyites and ultra-leftists whose activities she recognized were calculated to exacerbate sectarian divisions.



In 1968 she predictably declined to condemn the Soviet and Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the suppression of 'the Prague Spring'. After 1969 she travelled extensively throughout eastern Europe and in the late 1970s lived in

Prague where she served as the Irish representative on the international editorial board of *World Marxist Review*.

As she died on Christmas Day 1981 as a result of a fire in her east Belfast flat, she was spared the pain of seeing the impact of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR, developments which would have greatly distressed her.

*'For most of history,
"Anonymous" was a woman.'*

Virginia Wolff

This publication contains profiles of
a further eight Ulster-Scots women:

Elizabeth Bell (1862 - 1934)

Frances Browne (1816 - 1879)

Emily Winifred Dickson (1866 - 1944)

Margaret McCoubrey (1880 - 1955)

Anne Louise McIlroy (1874 - 1968)

Alice Milligan (1866 - 1953)

Margaret Elizabeth Noble/Sister Nivedita (1867 - 1911)

Betty Sinclair (1910 - 1981)



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