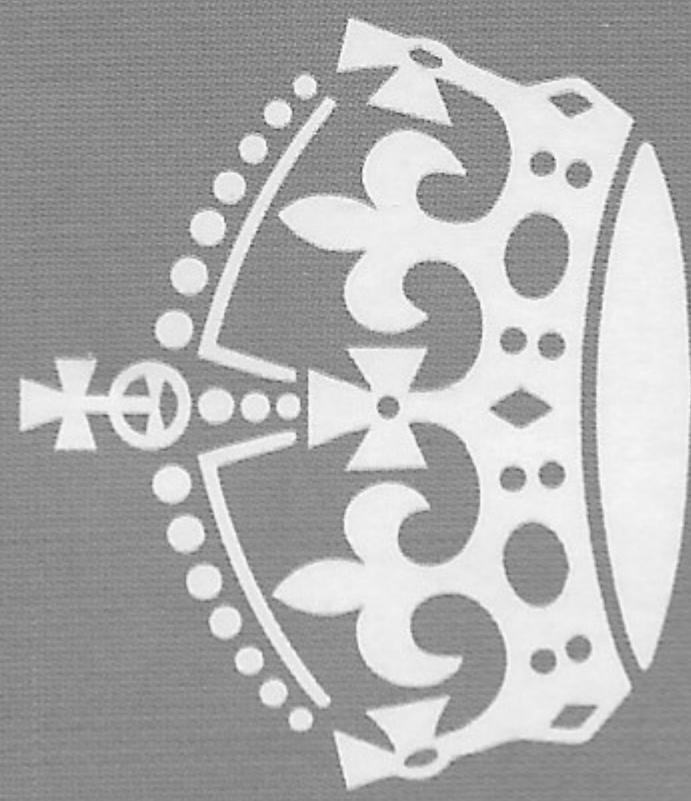




WELL BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY

- LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH

Rebel Irish Women

MAUD GONNE MACBRIDE

IN writing of Madame Gonne MacBride—or, as she is known to thousands of Irish men and women, Maud Gonne—there is so much to say that it is hard to know where to begin. Yet nothing anyone can say really matters very much. Madame MacBride is a complete personality, serene and unchallengeable. She has brought incomparable gifts of beauty, of sincerity, of penetration, of will and devotion, and has placed all these at the service of her own people. She has remained faithful to the cause which as a girl drew her away from courts, festivities, ball-rooms Viceregal functions. Ever since, she has served Ireland with humility and with pride. Humour is hers, too, and a gentleness rare in those who face the fiercest storms of political and national struggle. Some inner quiet has kept her spirit tranquil with a serene tranquility that heads the attack. She does not fritter her strength, but uses it to accomplish the aim she sets before her. Sometimes I think she has come into the world to teach us what can be accomplished by individual resolution, by the iron persistence of a will which bends before no obstacles. Time after time she has led a forlorn attack, grasping the broken banners and turning it into a victory.

Very early she was caught up by the cause of Ireland, which to her has always meant the cause of the people. As a child of aristocratic family, she ran in and out of the whitewashed cabins of the peasants, and was everywhere received with kindness. And so, to one of her temperament, it was only natural that she should come to identify herself with their struggles later. She was too ardent and eager to remain satisfied with the role of a sympathetic spectator, and soon she threw herself into the work of the Land League. Arthur Griffith sought her help to establish his paper, *The United Irishman*. He had £20 to begin with, and she helped him to bring out the second number, putting time, money, articles and enthusiasm at its service. From that time

Madame MacBride's life is a history of the modern Irish movement. She took her part in all its victories, defeats, despairs and hopes.

In the *Voice of Ireland* she has vividly described an early scene which drew her into the land movement.

"It was on a mild stormy night in the village street of Falcragh in Donegal. There was a sudden clatter of hoofs and cries and lights, then two long police cars carrying prisoners and a mounted escort of constabulary drew up near the inn where I was staying. Young and curious and fresh from school in France, I made my way through a crowd of women with shawls round their heads, some of them waiting. There were six prisoners, handcuffed together in pairs."

She tells how, mastering shyness and seeing the people looking dazed, she waved her handkerchief and called for cheers:—

"A year later but for the zeal and watchful care of the people I, too, would have found myself whirled away into the stormy darkness to Derry Gaol on a police car for having helped other girls and boys in Donegal to defend other little farms on the hills . . . As it was, I was hurried to some place on the railway, where I and Deputy Pat O'Brien—Pat the Builder, as he was called from the number of Land League huts he helped to erect—were hoisted into the train and taken away to Dublin."

Another glimpse of those early days was revealed when, as a girl of sixteen, she went to stay with a family at Navan, close to where evictions were being carried out. One bitterly cold night her host returned from riding and told how a woman and her children had been put out on the hillside.

"I don't think they'll live through the night," he said carelessly. "I told them how it would be if they joined the Land League!"

Maud Gonne returned home next day.

She soon found herself drifting away from the social circle, where, too often, the people were spoken of with contemptuous indifference or treated worse than dogs, and, encouraged by Michael Davitt, she took the step of joining the Land League. She flung herself into the campaign to save the people's homes, and records with pride that there was not a single family whose case she took up whom she did not get back. She recalls the struggle on the De Freyne estate, when the houses of the tenants were fired and a child was badly burned. She saw women

with singed hair dashing through the flames. On the Olphert estate there was a fierce fight with the dispossessed tenants when the police tried to arrest a priest, Fr. MacFadden. A policeman was killed, and for this four men received life sentences. These were some of the men for whose release Madame MacBride worked tirelessly.

She began to take an active part in the Celtic Literary Society and in the National Players' Movement. Of this group W. B. Yeats became the President and Maud Gonne the Vice-President. The method adopted was that of holding a series of festivals, as was the custom in ancient Ireland. W. B. Yeats wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and gave the play to Maud Gonne on condition that she played the title role.

It was produced first on April 2nd, 1902, in St. Teresa's Hall, Dublin. Besides inspiring this beautiful play, Maud Gonne made an ideal Cathleen. In Dublin, people have said: "I saw Maud Gonne play in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*!" as in the past they may have said: "I heard Abraham Lincoln speak!" It was an historic event. W. B. Yeats has written in his note to the play:—

"Miss Maud Gonne played very finely, and her great height made

Kathleen seem a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity. Since then the part has been twice played in America by women who insisted on keeping their young faces. . . . The most beautiful woman of her time when she played my Kathleen 'made-up' centuries old, and never should the part be played but with a like sincerity."

This literary and dramatic revival owed much in its inception to *Ingheana na h-Eireann*, an organisation of Irish girls and women, founded by Madame MacBride, for the study of the Irish language, literature and drama. Many who afterwards gained reputations at the Abbey Theatre—such as Sara Allgood and her sister—were Maud Gonne's pupils. Madame MacBride herself has the dramatic qualities and talents necessary for a distinguished stage career. At one time she was offered an engagement to tour the provinces, but she was too wrapped up in her National work to allow anything to draw her from it.

In Paris, where she spent several years, she founded and edited an Irish journal, *L'Irlande Libre*, which voiced the cause of Irish independence. Her sincerity and beauty made her an outstanding figure. She also found time to paint at the famous studios of Julien and Humbert. Her work as an artist has a distinctive delicacy. She has illustrated books of Celtic legends, though many gems of beautiful colouring and

design are unpublished. In later years her feeling for art has found expression in an exquisite shell flower industry which was started to find employment for girls victimised owing to their work for the National movement. But her work for Ireland has always been her dominant passion, overshadowing everything else.

It was while pleading the cause of evicted tenants that Madame MacBride found there were other Irishmen in prison belonging to an earlier time, and apparently forgotten by everyone. These were the treason-felony prisoners. Of them she writes (*Voice of Ireland*):—

“With some help and a little diplomacy of my own I obtained from an unobtrusive Home Secretary a permit to visit eight of the seventeen Irish treason-felony prisoners in Portland, three of whom had never received a visit from a friend during the ten years of their captivity. I shall never forget that visit. On the way I saw gangs of convicts chained like beasts of burden to great carts of stones from the quarries. At the gates my visit caused a flutter among the officials. A fashionably dressed young girl was hardly the sort of visitor they were accustomed to escort into the ‘cage.’”

After leaving them she carried on a prisoners’ campaign with untiring persistence, speaking in England, France, Holland and America. Everywhere it was a triumphal procession. At Brussels the students took the horses out of the carriage and drew it themselves. Her eloquence, her generous appeal, her splendid voice and striking personality roused enthusiasm everywhere. She was called the Irish Joan of Arc.

Mr. Asquith saw the reports in the French press and asked Redmond to get them stopped.

“Nothing but the release of these men will stop Maud Gonne!” said Redmond.

Some of the attempts to draw her away from the agitation were curious. She was approached by the Czarist authorities to make an investigation of Russian prisons, on condition that she reported they were better than the English. She refused this ingenious offer. Others tried to enlist her humanitarian sentiments for prisoners of other lands. But she regarded it as her special mission to look to her countrymen. Yet, so far is she from having an insular outlook that when the Russian Revolution was accomplished, she took the lead in organising the first great celebration in Dublin.

Madame MacBride has had many unusual experiences in her active career.

“I remember,” she said, “a strange amnesty meeting in Tipperary,

during the Parnell split, where Dillon and Redmond both spoke. At the banquet that followed I sat between the two, and they spoke to me, but not to each other! Later on, after my Sinn Féin lectures, they would speak to each other, but not to me!”

An exciting incident occurred when it was arranged that King Edward should visit Dublin. The Lord Mayor was pledged not to receive him. But it leaked out that the Lord Mayor was to be conveniently absent and an alderman was to present the keys of the city. Madame MacBride was the moving spirit in the formation of a Citizens’ Watch Committee which sent a deputation of two—Edward Martyn, the dramatist, and herself—to the yearly rally of the Parliamentary Party, which was being held at the Rotunda, Dublin. Here they determined to find out the truth. Edward Martyn, who was to have been spokesman, suffered from stage fright, and it fell to Madame MacBride to put the question concerning the Royal visit from her vantage ground on the platform, to which she had been invited. In vain did the organisers of the meeting try to prevent it being asked! A free fight occurred at the meeting for upwards of an hour, with broken chairs flying about all over the hall. This was the end of the Parliamentary Party in Ireland. Sinn Féin rose from its ruins.

When the Pact between Mr. de Valera and the Collins-Griffith group was broken and the Four Courts was attacked with British guns, Madame MacBride at once gave up her position in Paris, where she had been the Irish representative, and returned home. She went straight to the help of those who needed it most. Week after week she—with a small band of devoted women—held meetings on the heap of ruins in O’Connell Street, the ruins themselves being eloquent reminders of the recent fighting. She conducted processions of prisoners’ children to various churches to pray for the release of fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters. At this time Dublin was a city of angry passions, and I remember seeing a man in a motor car pull out a revolver and fire over the heads of the children in order to create a panic. Madame MacBride prevented this. Her tall queenly figure, robed in black, moving gracefully among the children, made an appealing pageant of every march.

These Prisoners’ meetings were held every Sunday during the ten years when Republicans were being arrested. They were regarded as the one place where the latest news might be heard concerning the prisoners. She built up the organisation—the Women’s Prisoners’ Defence League—which arranged for the supply of food, clothing and other necessities for prisoners. Nothing could happen in prison without

the Defence League hearing of it, and, by means of poster parades, led by Madame MacBride, they informed the outside world. But no one who was not familiar with the struggle could imagine the self-sacrifice which distinguished this little band of women and their leader. During the blackest days they frequently met outside Mountjoy Gaol for an all-night vigil. In bitter weather they faced cold, rain and wind. At times the prison guards would turn the hose-pipe on this group. But they succeeded in turning the searchlight of publicity on to dark places. Madame MacBride was arrested, but, by means of a hunger strike, she forced her release. By candle light, one dark night, she was borne out on a stretcher to the prison gate, there to resume her tireless activity. Towards the end of the mass prison hunger strike, which was resorted to later when the patience of the captives was exhausted, she organised a reception room bright with flowers, and an hospital where the men could come on their release. Here nurses gave voluntary attention to those who crawled out of prison more dead than alive.

Madame MacBride's quality shows most clearly in her conflicts with "authority." It is inspiring to see her walk through a police barrier while inspectors are anxiously assuring her that it is quite impossible to get through that way. She won her right to disregard cordons, to penetrate police courts and prisons. Once the police tried to prevent her speaking at a protest meeting outside Mountjoy prison by urging the horses of the lorry on. As a result, the moving lorry and speaker gathered enormous crowds at every step. Finally, in despair, the police took the horses away, and, after having helped to gather the audience, left her with it in the centre of the city. Then the Women's Prisoners' Defence League was "proclaimed" and its meetings forbidden in Dublin. Thousands turned out to see the alternative poster parades that were held. The People's Rights Association—composed of the same members as the League—held two meetings in the provinces for every meeting banned in the city. The ban was soon withdrawn.

When Kevin O'Higgins was shot, several young men well known as Republicans were arrested and charged with murder. No evidence was ever produced against them, and, soon after, they were released. But protest meetings arranged during the week were proclaimed. Next Sunday, at mid-day, the weekly Prisoners' meeting was due. O'Connell Street swarmed with uniformed and plain clothes men. An atmosphere of terror had been worked up. Covered vans, a few nights before, had patrolled up and down O'Connell Street, each filled with men armed with sticks for the purpose of preventing demonstrations. But, at the

time the meeting was announced, a laneway opened through the vast throng of people who packed the street, and Madame MacBride headed the slow procession, in single file, of her Defence League women. She carried a huge bouquet of flowers and looked radiant. Her followers bore placards. In some strange fashion her presence filled that great audience with a sense of irresistible power. The meeting was held, and she spoke the first words in public against the methods of savage repression current then. When the prisoners were released, it was recognised that she was right. On another occasion some girls were arrested for posting up bills calling attention to the prisoners. At her Sunday meeting Madame MacBride brought a supply of these bills and announced her intention of posting them. She invited the audience to join her. Going across the road, she stuck some up on the General Post Office building, and others did the same. Soon they were plastered everywhere. Then she resumed her meeting.

These public activities, at critical times, call for the highest courage. But she has done just as fine service in comforting and helping bewildered girls and women who have been suddenly plunged into trouble when their men-folk have been arrested. She has piloted them through the courts, arranged visits, fixed up what could be done in the way of parcels of food, and, by the comfort of her presence, has made matters easier for them. All over Ireland and outside is that great body of silent observers who know her worth. In remote villages people came out of their cabins and I have heard them say to her: "Madame, I want to thank you for what you did for my son!" or: "Do you remember what you did for my daughter in such a year?" And this fame, resting in the hearts of the people, is the best of all.

In doing what she has done Madame MacBride realises her capacity for service, and is far from regarding herself as a martyr. When someone complimented her on leaving the Viceregal functions to serve the people's cause, she replied: "But it was very dull there!" Those regarded as martyrs for humanity are invariably the happiest among us, while those loaded with position and favours are often the most miserable.

The praise which Madame MacBride has received and the affection with which she is regarded have not had the effect of turning her head, as often happens with weaker men and women. There was a touch of humility about her when she met those whom she has helped—as if she felt that they have suffered far more than she has done, and that she shares the common responsibility for it. Perhaps it is some idea of the community of suffering which has made her ever ready to face

danger and endure weariness, to go to prison, or to spend long hours of vigil outside Mountjoy Gaol.

W. B. Yeats is only one of the many Irishmen who have called Maud Gonne "the most beautiful woman of her time." An English writer, H. W. Nevins, said in his autobiographical *Chances and Changes* :—

"With Yeats one naturally associated the name of Maud Gonne in those days. For in the previous year they had made a progress through Ireland together, holding meetings to commemorate the rebellion of '98. . . . I, like everybody else, . . . was overwhelmed by her beauty. It was indeed amazing. I held my breath in adoration. Tall she was, and exquisitely formed; the loveliest hair and face that ever the sun shone on."

He continues :—

"One thing further I noticed. At the club she sat long silent, perhaps bored by the political conversation, perhaps thinking of Paris, from which she had just arrived. But when the others began asking me questions about the Greek War and fighting, at once she raised herself and became eager, listening and asking questions with the rest. Then I saw the meaning of that strong and beautiful chin. I knew that her longing was for action in place of all the theorising and talk so common in Dublin."

But I imagine the tribute that Madame MacBride would care for most was one which I heard an old Irish labourer voice at a meeting she addressed in O'Connell Street. She was speaking of the Land League days. "The younger generation do not remember these things," she said, "but I do, for I am an old woman."

"Cathleen ni Houlihan never grows old!" said the workman.

For Madame MacBride this is true. One had only to see her graceful figure passing through a crowd or bending over the roses in her garden, and to look into her eyes—crystal clear and starry as a child's—to know that for all her work and suffering, her heart was as young as ever.

Madame MacBride is not of that company who have honours, dignities and wealth thrust on them by the world—she has rather shed these baubles as impediments—but she is of the few who remain enshrined in the hearts of the people, loved not for their position, but for their worth. *And they shall be remembered for ever.*

CONSTANCE DE MARKIEVICZ

*Nay, not outcast, whilst through your soul a sudden rapture thrills,
And all your dreams are shaken by the salt Atlantic wind,
The gods descend at twilight from the magic-hearted hills,
And there are woods and primroses in the country of your mind.*

—To Constance—In Prison. (EVA GORE-BOOTH.)

On the wet, streaming pavements of Dublin, just by O'Connell Bridge, while blackened ruins were still smouldering, flaring newspaper placards announced in thick black type: "*Countess Markievicz — Sentenced to Death.*" Prisoners were still being marched to the Castle—grey-bearded, haggard men and slightly-built working class lads—while barefoot newsboys ran under the noses of the military to cheer. For some this placard was almost the first intimation that such a woman lived. Yet how many people to-day could tell the names of the nonentities who pronounced the sentence. They sank back at once to their muddy obscurity. But the name of Madame Markievicz lives—and will live.

A living flame, Constance de Markievicz lights up everything that was fine and glorious in the 1916 Easter Rising—one of the noblest episodes in our human story. She was an aristocrat—a slight, erect, highly-strung, eager woman. And she wanted that finest of all democracies—a nation of aristocrats. The O'Rahilly—who came out in '16 because he wouldn't let the others down—would have appreciated the fine temper of her spirit. Enjolras, the student in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, who dies at the barricades of Paris, was such a character—except that imagination can never convey the grandeur of reality. This 1916—what was it? Peadar O'Donnell in *The Knife*—which every lover of human freedom ought to read—tells us—

" . . . one day a couple of hundred Dublin workmen, a couple of score of students, a handful of intellectuals, came out into the