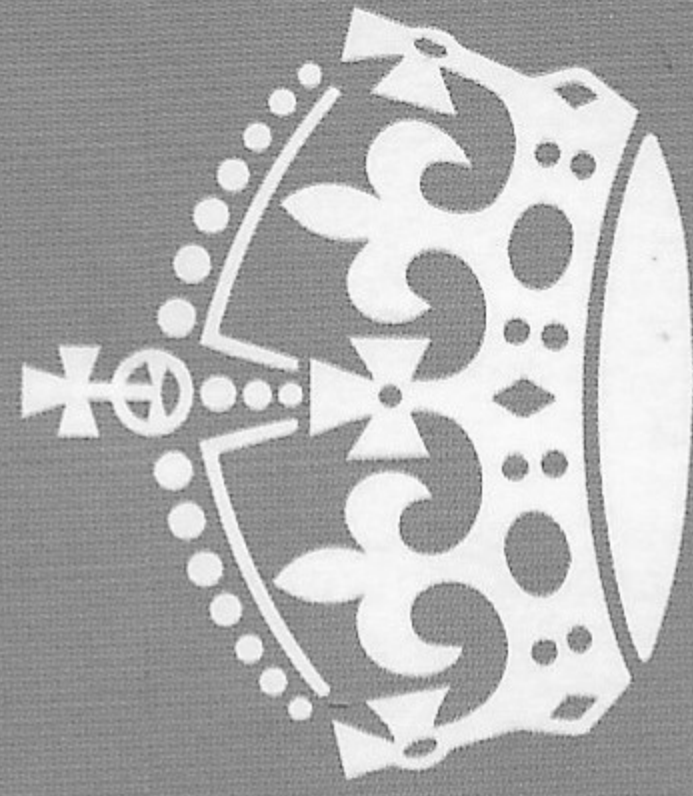




WELL BEHAVED WOMEN SELDOM MAKE HISTORY

- LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH

HELENA MOLONY

The most valuable heritage of the Irish Labour movement to-day is the Connolly tradition, and if there is one person who embodies this more than any other, it is Helena Molony, for she worked side by side with Connolly to create it. The Connolly tradition is that point of view which regards true Nationalism and true democracy as being irrevocably linked, or, as Helena Molony put it, that they are two sides of one movement. Like Connolly, she looks back to the time when by Irish law and custom ownership was vested in the clan, and not in the chief, as in the feudal law imposed by England. Consequently, Miss Molony sees that the restoration of Irish independence, the undoing of the Conquest, means the reassertion by the Irish people of the title to their own land and natural resources. The glory of such a conception, which means a frontal attack on poverty and social misery as well as on capitalist greed, shines through all her activities, and this alone would entitle her to rank as one of the most significant figures in the Irish movement of to-day.

"How did you come into the National struggle?" I asked her.

A sudden light came into her eyes.

"I was a young girl dreaming about Ireland," she replied, "when I saw and heard Maud Gonne speaking by the Custom House in Dublin one August evening in 1903. She was a most lovely figure, and she inspired me—as she did many others—with a love of Ireland. To me she epitomised Ireland—the Ireland of the poets and dreamers. I had been reading Douglas Hyde—his history and legends. She gathered all this up and made it real for me. She electrified me and filled me with some of her own spirit. I found in her—as I have found ever since—a mixture of the poetic and practical, for to me the poets are always the most practical. In those days she gave hard practical service to the Irish people, for she succeeded in defeating the proposal that Dublin should present an Address of Loyalty to the King on his visit to the city. To accomplish this—the first time for hundreds of years—was a big thing. She made me want to help, and, encouraged by my brother Frank, I went to join *Ingheana na h-Eireann*. At the offices of

the Celtic Literary Society, in Brunswick Street, I saw a notice on the door, signed by Dudley Digges (who afterwards made a reputation as an actor and film artist) telling all members to go to Madame Gonne's house in Rathgar. When I arrived there and entered the garden, I found the house was being raided by detectives. At that time a raid was a novelty. We have grown used to them since. Upon being asked if I were a member, I answered boldly: 'Yes!' I could not bring myself to deny it, though I had not yet joined. I felt I was claiming too great an honour, for me to be a member of such a body was the greatest honour in the world. However, friends told me to come up and join the following week. The police raid was merely my baptism of fire.

"Once inside I felt I had to take an active part. My opportunity came when I got the idea of running a monthly paper, *Bean na h-Eireann*. I asked friends to subscribe a shilling a month, and started out, entirely without experience, to produce an Irish women's journal. *The United Irishman*, starting as a physical force, separatist journal, had gradually changed its policy to one of reactionary social and dual-kingdom ideas. Griffith, at this time, was working out his famous Hungarian policy. We wanted to start a paper to counteract this. We wanted it to be a women's paper, advocating militancy, separatism and feminism. Maud Gonne did French notes and gardening notes (root out weeds as you want to root out British domination, she advised), I did the Labour notes and edited the production. For the first two issues I had editorial assistance. But my helper departed suddenly, leaving me with the third issue to bring out in a few days. I remember sitting up the whole of Christmas night writing a leading article. In spite of my inexperience—or perhaps because of it—some of the best writers in Ireland contributed their early and finest work to our columns. James Stephens wrote his poem, 'The Red Haired Man's Wife'—perhaps the most complete expression of feminism in poetry, the last stanza and, in fact, nearly all of it, applying to the Nation as well:—

'I am separate still,

I am I and not you,

And my mind and my will,

As in secret they grew,

Still are secret, unreached and untouched,

And not subject to you.'

"Apart from this, Plunkett, MacDonagh, Pearse, Connolly, and others, gave us some of their best work. Often I went to Plunkett in

despair and begged him to write me something to make up a column. And he would give me a poem. Others were equally generous. The Celtic Literary Society and *Inghéana na h-Eireann* were pioneers of the Celtic Literary and Dramatic movement, and our journal was an instrument in this.

'I went to the Trades Hall for my Labour notes. There was no Labour movement in Dublin then, except the exclusive skilled unions, and I knew little of Labour ideas. But I was always on the side of the underdog. My attention was turned definitely to Labour matters, when I discovered that one of the best and most intelligent girl members we had was getting 5/- a week as a shirt-maker. At this period I was fumbling at the idea of a junction between Labour and Nationalism—which Connolly worked out clearly. The connection was always there, though at first we did not perceive it. Labour and the Nation were really one. I saw Connolly's *Harp*, which he edited in America, and wrote him enthusiastically about it, saying that I wished he were back in Dublin. I asked him for articles, too. Later I was shown letters from Connolly asking about our journal and my activities. No doubt this led to our coming together.

"I had been studying Irish land tenure, and had found out that up to the sixteenth century no chief had an absolute right to the land, and that he could not surrender it without the consent of his people. This Irish view of property seemed to me to be right, and it helped to form my Labour views. I also found much support in the Christian moral code of justice and righteousness.

"During the anti-Royal Address campaign, in 1911, I took an active part. Big meetings were held in Smithfield and College Green. I was arrested after one of them for breaking a window in Grafton Street, which contained a picture of the king. The police saw me fling a stone from the brake, and, though the driver whipped up his horses, they were soon in full cry after me. I was arrested as I left the brake, and fined 40/- or a month. There was a wild scene in the court when I refused to pay. However, in about fourteen days I was released, and I accused the Lord Mayor of paying my fine to stop the agitation. Later I discovered that Anna Parnell paid it to enable me to go on editing her *History of the Ladies' Land League*, which she had brought me to publish.

"The Socialist Party of Ireland, containing such men as Skeffington and Carpenter, held a big public meeting to welcome me on my release, and I was asked to speak. I had been accused of attacking the king personally. So I said that I was not concerned with the king's

personal character. I was only concerned with his public character as a foreign ruler in Ireland, and, as here he stood for oppression, I regarded him in that capacity as one of the greatest scoundrels in Europe. This infuriated the police, who rushed the platform, beat Skeffington and Carpenter, and re-arrested me. Skeffington, with his usual courage and consideration, appeared on my behalf in court. I was accused of making remarks derogatory to his majesty's person, and received another month. *John Bull*—that organ of pure-souled British imperialism—edited by Bottomley, not yet in gaol for fraud, denounced me in an open letter. The Suffragettes were busy in England, and I was ranged with them, only on a lower level. Even some of my friends thought my conduct reprehensible and rowdy. I was feeling rather crushed about this—for I was still young and inexperienced—when I received a telegram from Maud Gonne, who was then in Paris. It read: 'Splendid. You have kept up the reputation of *Ingheana na h-Eireann*.' I cannot describe how elated I felt when I received that. My heart was lifted up. This is just another example for that instinctive capacity for doing the right thing, which Maud Gonne possesses. Whenever a blow is struck for Ireland, applaud it, said Terence MacSwiney. Next to striking the blow, this is the sound course. Those who allow themselves to be intimidated by the silly snobbery of their enemies into ranging themselves against their own side are the most foolish and pitiable of all."

With her political activities Miss Molony found time to take up acting. She was trained by Dudley Digges, and achieved success when she played in *Eleanor's Enterprize*, by George Birmingham, in a company run by the Count Markievicz. After this the Abbey Theatre asked for her services, and she played here up till the end of 1913. The big Dublin lock-out in that year drew her closer to the Labour movement. In the strike days she was playing in *The Mineral Workers*, having to appear on the stage at 8.20, and to come on the stage in the closing scenes at 10.20. After her first appearance she went out one evening by the back way to address a great strike meeting at Liberty Hall, returning in time to finish her part on the stage. Mr. St. John Ervine, who acted as Abbey Manager for a time, attempted to stop this by getting an understudy dressed for the part on the plea that she had left the theatre. But, with the backing of the company and her own insistence, she went on and finished her part. Among her theatrical memories is the time when she played the mother in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, when Lady Gregory played Cathleen.

When war broke out, she was on the Continent for her health, and

she stayed to do some nursing of wounded soldiers. But she remained in close touch with Ireland, and returned in 1915, when active preparations for the Rebellion were going on. Connolly sent for her at this time and asked her to take over the secretaryship of the Women Workers' Union. Although without experience of Labour organisation, she consented, and so began a close connection. The Women Workers' office and workroom at 29 Eden Quay soon became a centre of activities. Volunteer leaders dropped in to discuss plans two or three times a week. It was the hub of the movement. And Connolly, Helena Molony emphasises, was the driving force. "Looking back on those days," she declared, "it seems as if he made the Rebellion!" But second only to Connolly was the little group of women, of whom Helena Molony was one. They set themselves to spur on the laggards, not that spurring was required. The atmosphere, as she recalls it, was one of glorious enthusiasm. But the women were impatient. "Not yet," they said, satirically. "Always 'Not yet'!" It is of interest to remember this when we are given the conventional view of men being held back by their wives or else brushing their pleadings aside. Remember, too, that these women trained with the men, and were ready to share all risks and sacrifices. Helena Molony held her Commission in the Citizen Army, and waited impatiently for the day. Bitterly she recalls how treachery and weakness muddled the final plans, though nothing can dim the glory and—I think—the achievement of that heroic effort. "We had men with arms all over Ireland, ready to rise at the signal!" she told me. "We all knew the Rebellion was going to take place. Only fools thought it could be stopped. A rebellion cannot be stopped once it is on its way. If an all-Ireland Rising had taken place, as planned, we might have won out!"—a wistful look came into her eyes. Like most pioneers, Helena Molony is not so much concerned with what has been done as with what might have been done. Yet to have planted the idea of Ireland as a separate nation firmly both in the minds of her own people and in the mind of the world is no little thing. And this was accomplished by a handful of Irishmen and women, of whom she was one.

"Perhaps the time was not ripe for success," went on Miss Molony, reflectively. "Our people had not a widespread economic knowledge to cope with social evils. I should have hated to see Padraig Pearse as President of an Irish Republic if the misery and wretchedness of the tenements had still gone on. Our next move forward must be accompanied by clear knowledge and determination to deal with poverty,

unemployment and industrial servitude. Connolly had this knowledge—all the leaders in 1916 had goodwill. But our movement must stand finally on what it proposes to do for the mass of the people of Ireland."

She turned to the narrative of 1916 days. There was such glorious enthusiasm, she said. "People with that enthusiasm cannot be beaten, whatever happens."

It had been Connolly's practice for months past to write up notices on the blackboard in Liberty Hall: "Attack on Dublin Castle," "Attack on Pigeon House Fort." These had been instructions for route marches, but gradually they had familiarised men with what had to be done.

"I suppose you'll all be back to tea!" said one of the girls, in good-humoured raillery, to Connolly the day before. But they weren't back, and she was out with them.

Easter Sunday night Helena Molony slept on the coats in the workroom. She joined the party that started out from Liberty Hall to attack Dublin Castle. There were 16 men and 9 women in this party. At first she was going with the main body to the Post Office, but it was decided that Miss Winifred Carney should go there instead. Before they set out Connolly handed revolvers to her and another woman, telling them not to use these except in a last resort. We may imagine this little band marching in the Easter sunshine through the Dublin streets to strike a blow which generations will marvel at. Helena Molony speaks of the thrill of pride which filled them as they realised that it was their privilege to do what had been talked of so long.

They reached the gates of the Castle, and Sean Connolly, who was in command, ordered the policeman on duty to stand aside. He refused. Connolly insisted and warned him, presenting the revolver. But this blind tool of imperialism could not believe that the Irish people were demanding their own. Connolly shot him dead, and that bullet destroyed the *status quo* in Ireland. "Get in!" he ordered his followers. But they hesitated a moment. Had they acted as quickly as himself they might have taken the castle. But they did capture the guard room at the gate. Another policeman appeared at a corner, and Helena Molony fired at random to warn him off. She confessed to a feeling of relief when she saw him skip out of the way unharmed. The party took possession of the City Hall, which, on Easter Monday, was empty. They occupied top and bottom, getting ready for attack. Helena Molony was sent to the Post Office for reinforcements. She returned with the order to hold on. Men were scarce everywhere. On the way she met Skeffington in Dame Street. He was

terrible distressed, and was trying to keep order among the civilian population. A little later a machine gun bombardment was begun against the *Evening Mail* office opposite, which was also occupied. The noise was terrific, and the City Hall band waited in silence for their turn.

The first casualty was Sean Connolly—who died almost instantly after being shot. Dr. Kathleen Lynn, who came to attend the wounded, was trapped there after dark when the attack came. One prisoner was taken before hostilities began—a British soldier walked in, either unconscious of the place being occupied or else acting as a spy. Helena Molony took him prisoner, and kept him there. She was chaffed about her prisoner. When the attack started, the din was deafening. Plaster fell from the ceiling and was ripped from the walls, every shot was followed by a tearing, rending, falling sound, while clouds of dust rose. A wounded man in a chair begged Dr. Lynn not to leave him, so they placed him in the shelter of a column, and she stayed near. Some of the defenders were on the roof and some inside, but no real defence was possible. Standing in the room, Helena Molony thought every moment would see the end, and that the whole place would collapse. Amid the terrific crashes of machine fire she made ready to face death, when suddenly a small hand was thrust into hers. Looking down, she saw a girl of about fifteen—from the workroom—who had slipped in with the others.

"What do you think, Miss Molony?" she said, in a thin, high-pitched voice. "We cannot give in, can we? Mr. Connolly said we weren't to give in!"

The bravery of that little Irish girl—whoever she was—was comforting in that dark hour.

Presently the enemy arrived. Soldiers poured through the door with bayonets fixed. They swarmed over the roof from neighbouring buildings. They had not dared to attack before nightfall. Judge of their surprise when they were faced with nine defenders.

The rest of the story belongs to the history of Ireland. It shines like one of the illuminated pages of the treasured Book of Kells—with green for loyalty, gold for hope and crimson for the blood of martyred men. The prisoners were taken away to Kilmainham, where they were kept on siege rations, in ignorance as to the fate of the others. They heard the news of the general surrender. A soldier asked another what would be done with the leaders.

"Oh, they'll kill the blighters as they bring them in!" said the other, carelessly.

Translated into officer language, and with the mockery of a court-martial, this is what happened. The hardest part of all, commented Miss Molony, was to hear the shots beneath our prison windows and to know that these meant the death of our leaders.

"Pearse and Plunkett were shot dead. Connolly was dragged out, unable to stand, and murdered. After that life seemed to come to an end for me. An officer who took me in from the City Hall told me he very nearly 'got me' on the roof once or twice, but that, and my eight months' imprisonment, were of little account then.

"1916 has been represented as a gesture of sacrifice. It is said that those in it knew they would be defeated. I knew these men, and knew how they gave their lives to build this movement. I know how we all felt. We thought we were going to do this big thing, to free our country. It was like a religion—something that filled the whole of life. Personal feelings and vanities, wealth, comfort, position—these things did not matter. Joseph Plunkett rose from a sick bed to go out. Pearse, gentle and quiet, left the work that he loved. MacDonagh would have won laurels as a poet and man of letters. Everyone was exalted and caught in the sweep of a great movement. We saw a vision of Ireland free, pure, happy. We did not realise this vision. But we saw it.

"After 1916 the colour went out of life for me. But presently the whole nation began to stir. On the first anniversary of Connolly's death we put out a streamer right across the front of Liberty Hall, which read: '*James Connolly, Murdered by the British Government, Easter, 1916.*' In five minutes the police dashed in and tore it down. This made me angry, and so in the workshop I set about making another one. We took it to the upper room, fixed it from the top window, and had two tons of coal shot down before the only door leading to it. We were left alone for hours while the police gathered reinforcements. Suddenly they fired a fusillade of shots. The man in charge went out and asked what they wanted. The army of police demanded that the streamer must be lowered. He told them that if they wanted it, they must get it. So they proceeded to dig through the coal. Eventually they got it, but all Dublin knew it was there. So the first anniversary was kept."

Successive anniversaries have found Helena Molony working steadily to finish the task which Connolly and the others began. As organiser of the Irish Women Workers' Union and member of the Dublin Trades and Labour Council, she occupied a position of trust in the Irish Labour movement. Known as an uncompromising Republican, her activities helped to fuse the National with the Labour ideal.



Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington



Helena Molony