

THE COUNTESS OF IRISH FREEDOM

by Mike McCormack, NY State Historian



She was called the **Countess of Irish Freedom** by playwright Sean O'Casey and though born with a silver spoon in her mouth, she spat it out and risked her life for the common people of Ireland that she loved so much.

Constance Gore-Booth was born into a well-to-do Anglo-Irish family on Feb. 4, 1868 in London. Her father had a large estate in Co. Sligo where she moved in the circles of the Ascendancy growing up as a noted horsewoman and a crack shot as well as a beautiful young woman. She couldn't help comparing her life to the lives of the poor dispossessed Irish families. Even when she later married into wealth and privilege, she never forgot the plight of the common Irish. She studied art and in 1898, attend the Julian School in Paris. It was there she met Count Casimir Markievicz, from a wealthy Polish family. Though he was Catholic, they were married on Sept. 29, 1901. Constance Gore-Booth was now the Countess Markievicz.

In 1903 they moved to Dublin where she began to make an impression as a landscape artist. She and Casimir founded the United Arts Club in 1905 but she soon tired of this life. *Nature should provide me with something to live for, something to die for*, she said. Then in 1906 she found that 'something. She rented a cottage in the Dublin hills from formerly rented by poet, Pádraic Colum. He left old copies of the revolutionary publications *The Peasant* and *Sinn Féin* there. Reading these, Constance found the cause to inspire her life.

In 1908 she became active in nationalist politics, joining Sinn Féin and Maud Gonne's women's group, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*. She went to England in 1908 and stood for election against a young man named Winston Churchill. She lost and returned to Ireland where she founded *Fianna Éireann* in 1909, an organization similar to the boy scouts, but focusing on military drill and the use of firearms. Pádraic Pearse would later say that without *Fianna Éireann*, *the Volunteers of 1913 would not have arisen*.

By 1911 she was an executive member of both *Inghinidhe* and Sinn Féin. She was jailed for the first time for demonstrating against the visit of King George V. She also involved herself in the labor unrest of the time, running a soup kitchen during the lockout of union workers in 1913 and supporting labor leaders James Larkin and James Connolly. Her activity took a toll on her marriage and Casimir left for the Balkans, where he served as a war correspondent and then joined the Imperial Russian cavalry during World War I.

As the war began, Constance was in the center of the nationalist activity in Dublin which exploded on the 24th of April, 1916 in the Easter Rising. Most women in the movement participated as nurses or by running messages through the streets. Not the Countess. As part of Connolly's Citizen Army, she was second in command to Michael Mallin at St. Stephen's Green. She supervised the erection of barricades and was in the middle of the fighting. Moved by the faith of the men around her and its connection to the long struggle for Irish independence, she promised herself she would become a Catholic.

Mallin, Markievicz and their men held Stephen's Green for six days, finally giving up only when the Brits showed them

a copy of Pearse's surrender order. The English officer who took their surrender was a distant relative of Markievicz and he offered to drive her to jail. *No offence, old feller*, she said, *but I much prefer to tag along with my own*. She was taken to Kilmainham jail where she was the only one of 70 women prisoners who was put into solitary confinement. Expecting to be executed, she sat in her cell listening to the volleys of the firing squads as her comrades were murdered. As prepared as she was to die, alone in her cell the sounds must have been frightening. At her court martial she had told the court, *I did what was right and I stand by it*. She was sentenced to death, but General Maxwell commuted this to life in prison on 'account of the prisoner's sex.' She told the officer who brought her the news, *I do wish your lot had the decency to shoot me*.

Released in the General Amnesty of 1917, she kept her promise and became a Catholic. The fire within her had not been extinguished by the tragic events of 1916, and she continued the struggle. In 1918 she was jailed by the Brits during a phony 'German Plot,' aimed at breaking anti-conscription forces in Ireland. While in prison, she became the first woman elected to the British Parliament, running as a Sinn Féin candidate. She refused to take the oath of allegiance to the King and was denied her seat, but when the first Dáil Éireann was formed two months later, she was appointed the first Minister of Labor and went on the run. She was jailed twice during the War of Independence and was released to attend the Treaty debates.

When the Irish Civil War broke out Constance was once more involved in the fighting, helping to defend Moran's Hotel in Dublin. Later she toured the US raising funds for the Republican cause. After the Civil War she regained her seat in the Dáil, but her politics ran her afoul of the Free State government and she was jailed again. Along with 92 other women prisoners, she went on hunger strike and was released after a month. She joined Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fáil party in 1926 and was elected as one of its candidates in 1927. However, a month later she became sick and died in a public ward at Sir Patrick Dunn's Hospital. It may have been appendicitis or cancer, many said it was simply overwork.

She could have lived a life of leisure, insulated from the trials and tribulations of the common man, but the Countess gave it all up and intentionally risked her life for them. When her body was taken to the Republican plot at Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, for burial, as many as 300,000 people turned out on the streets to bid her farewell. At her graveside, Eamon de Valera gave the eulogy. When young people are searching for history's heroes, they should be told the story of Constance Gore-Booth, she was truly the Countess of Irish freedom.

