

## IRELAND'S JOAN OF ARC

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One of the least known today, yet the most influential Irish Revolutionaries of her time, was a lady named Maud Gonne. She was born on Dec. 20, 1865, in Aldershot, England, to a British army colonel of Irish descent and a partly Irish mother. Her mother died when Maud was only six and she and her sister were sent to France to be educated. In 1882, her father was posted to Dublin Castle and he brought his two daughters with him and Maud assumed the role of hostess of the household. She grew into a stunningly beautiful woman - six feet tall, pretty face, hour-glass figure and long, wavy, red hair; she was widely praised as one of the beauties of the age.

Maud's father died in 1886 leaving her financially independent. She moved back to France for health reasons after a tubercular hemorrhage, and she met and fell in love with French journalist Lucien Millevoye, editor of a radical newspaper, 'La Patrie.' The pair worked together for both Irish and French nationalist causes. Maud ended her relationship with Millevoye in the late 1890s, but not before she had two children by him: a daughter, Iseult and one that died in infancy.

Maud had been introduced to Fenianism by John O'Leary, a veteran of the 1848 Young Irelander uprising and, in a short time, nationalist leader Tim Harrington recognized that this beautiful, intelligent young woman could be an asset to the nationalist cause. He sent her to Donegal, where mass evictions were taking place. A local newspaper documented her coming as "a Celtic Goddess arriving on a white charger to free the oppressed people of Donegal." A powerful and emotional speaker, She was successful in organizing the locals in protest against the evictions. The fact that she fled to France to avoid arrest is a good measure her success there.

In 1889, John O'Leary introduced Maud to a man whose infatuation with her would last most of his life: poet William Butler Yeats. Yeats proposed to Maud in 1891, and was refused, but largely through her influence, he became involved with Irish nationalism, later joining the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). At that time, the IRB was a secret organization but Maud brought it into public prominence with her many protests against slum landlords and the cruel eviction laws of her day. She also managed to attract police and political attention when she vehemently protested the celebration of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee.

Maud helped Yeats found the National Literary Society of London in 1891, the same year she refused his first marriage proposal; undaunted, Yeats proposed again and even proposed to Maud's daughter by Millevoeye – also unsuccessfully. Returning to Paris, and to Millevoeye, Maud published a nationalist newsletter called 'L'Irlande Libre (Free Ireland).' She worked tirelessly raising funds for the movement, traveling to the US, Scotland, and England. By now the name of Maud Gonne was well known among Irish nationalists and she was called Ireland's Joan of Arc.

Returning to Ireland, she co-founded the Transvaal Committee, which supported the Afrikaners in the Boer War, and on Easter Sunday 1900 she co-founded Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Erin), a revolutionary women's society for whose monthly journal she wrote many political and feminist articles. Somehow, while doing all this, she found time to star on stage in Yeats play, 'Cathleen ní Houlihan,' which Yeats had written specifically for her.

In 1900, in Paris, Irish politician Arthur Griffith introduced Maud to Major John MacBride, who had been second in command of the Irish Brigade that fought on the Afrikaner side in the Boer War. In 1903 Maud married MacBride. Although the marriage produced a son, Seán, it was short-lived and the couple separated. Maud continued to write political articles and in 1910 she joined Constance Markievicz, James Connolly and Jim Larkin in a campaign to feed the poor children of Dublin. When it was arranged that King Edward visit Dublin, Maude helped form a Citizen's Watch Committee and spoke before a rally of the Irish Parliamentary Party damning their support of the visit. After her speech, an hour-long fight broke out which led to the ruin of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Sinn Fein rose from its ashes.

During World War One, she worked with the Red Cross in France and returned to Ireland in 1917. She found Ireland in turmoil after the Easter Rising of 1916 and the execution of the rising leaders, including her estranged husband, John MacBride. Within a year she was jailed by the British for her part in the anti-conscription movement. This was part of the trumped up "German Plot" that the British used to discredit anti-conscription activity. Maud was interned at Holloway Jail for six months along with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Clarke, Countess Markievicz and others. After she was released, she worked for the White Cross for relief of Irish victims during the War of Independence.

When Ireland's Civil War came, Maud supported the anti-treaty side. She helped to found the Women's Prisoners Defense League to help Republican prisoners and their families. In 1923, she once again found herself imprisoned, this time by the Irish Free State government, without charge. Along with 91 other women, Maud went on hunger strike. The Free State government released her after 20 days. In 1927, after government leader Kevin O'Higgins was assassinated and several IRA men were indiscriminately arrested, she organized a public demonstration which filled Dublin's streets and the men were later released. For the rest of her life Maud would continue to support the Republican cause and work for the Women's Prisoners Defense League, which mobilized again in defense of Republican prisoners in 1935.

Maud Gonne MacBride died on April 27, 1953, but her influence on Ireland and the world continued after her death through her son, Seán MacBride. As a young man, Seán fought on the Republican side in the Civil War and later carried on his mother's crusade for the fair treatment of political prisoners, not just in Ireland, but all over the world. Seán was one of the founders of Amnesty International and, in 1974, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Maud Gonne MacBride is buried in the Republican plot in Glasnevin Cemetery, a fitting final tribute to the woman who was referred to as Ireland's Joan of Arc.