

ANNE DEVLIN

by Mike McCormack, AOH NY State Historian

Irish history is filled with the names of noble souls who fought and died to break her chains of bondage. Some who suffered and died for that cause are less known than others. They led no insurrection; they made no memorable speech from the dock; they held no position of power; but theirs was a martyr's role nonetheless. They were the common Irish whose quiet sacrifice nurtured and preserved the dream of freedom. One such, was a simple house keeper, born in 1778, and whose name should be as well known as that of Emmet, Pearse, and Tone. Her name was Anne Devlin.

A cousin of two United Irish rebel leaders, Arthur Devlin and Michael Dwyer, she was the devoted Aide to the bold Robert Emmet, leader of the second rising of the United Irishmen. Posing as his housekeeper, she helped him plan the rising and carried correspondence between him and other leaders associated with the ill-fated rebellion of 1803. She was a proud and dedicated Irish woman and Ireland's freedom was her only dream. When the rising was crushed, Emmet went on the run into the Wicklow Mountains, and Miss Devlin saw to his well-being as they awaited arrangements to smuggle him to France. The British knew that Anne was aware of the hiding places of Emmet and other leaders who had escaped. She was taken prisoner, stabbed and half-hanged to get her to reveal their whereabouts. When she refused, she was placed in solitary confinement in Kilmainham Jail.

For three years, Anne Devlin was subjected to torture and bribes. She suffered the brutal indecencies that only women prisoners can suffer at the hands of depraved jailers. Yet her determination was never broken. She remained loyal to the cause and betrayed not one of the men her jailers sought to capture. In their continuing efforts to make her talk, members of Anne's family were also incarcerated including her 12-year-old brother who contracted prison fever and died in a Kilmainham cell near her own. Her body and her heart were broken, and still she did not betray Ireland's heroes. When Prime Minister Pitt died in 1806, there was a change in the British Administration in Ireland and Anne Devlin and her family were finally released from Kilmainham.

When Anne was released, she appeared a broken old woman – at 28 years of age! She had contracted a debilitating case of Erysipelas, which left her limbs numb and feeble, and which plagued her for the remainder of her life. She disappeared into the slums of Dublin where she married a man named Campbell who died in 1845 and left her with a son and invalid daughter. She managed a meager existence taking in wash. In 1842, Dr. Richard Madden, who was researching the history of the United Irishmen and their times, was directed to a poor old washerwoman, Mrs. Campbell, living in a miserable hovel in a stable-yard in the Dublin Liberties. He learned of Anne's sacrifice and became an ardent admirer, occasionally helping her with donations. Unfortunately Dr. Madden, who worked on government assignment, was transferred to Cuba, and spent many years away from Ireland. Upon his return, he went to the Liberties to seek her out and learned the sad story of her final days and her death two days earlier.

He met a young woman, apparently steeped in poverty herself, in whose room Anne Devlin had lodged. He recorded that the woman told him, *The poor creature, God rest her, it's well for her, she's dead. There was a coffin got from the Society for her, and she was buried yesterday.* To his inquiry of what she had died from, the answer was, *She was old and weak, indeed, but she died mostly of want. She had a son, but he was not able to do much for her, except now and then to pay her lodging, which was five pence a week. He lived away from her, and so did her daughter, who was a poor widow, and was hard enough set to get a living herself. About ten or twelve days ago a gentleman called there and gave the old woman something. Only for this she would not have lived as long as she did. She was very badly off, not only for food, but for bedclothes. Nearly all the rags she had to cover her went, at one time or another, to get a morsel of bread.*

Dr. Madden was heartbroken at finding her grave in the pauper's section of Glasnevin cemetery. It was an incredibly tragic end to a most noble lady. He had her remains re-buried in the patriot's part of the cemetery known as the Circle, right near Daniel O'Connell, and erected a memorial over her. He left this account of her in volume III of his monumental history of the United Irishmen, *The extraordinary sufferings endured, and the courage and fidelity displayed, by this young woman have few parallels. She was tortured, frightfully maltreated, her person goaded and pricked with bayonets, hung up by the neck, and was only spared to be exposed to temptations, to be subjected to new and worse horrors than any she had undergone, to suffer solitary confinement, to be daily tormented with threats of further privations, till her health broke down and her mind shattered, and after years of suffering in the same prison, when others of her family were confined without any communication with them, she was turned adrift on the world, without a house to return to, or friends or relations to succor or shelter her. The day will come when the name of Anne Devlin, the poor neglected creature who, when I knew her, was dragging out a miserable existence, struggling with infirmity and poverty, will be spoken of with feelings of kindness not unmixed with admiration.*



Anne Devlin Memorial, Glasnevin

But the times are changing and in February, 2004, the South Dublin County Council proudly unveiled a statue of Anne in the village of Rathfarnham, just a few yards from the house in Butterfield lane where she served Robert Emmet and Ireland. Even then, the statue caused controversy since many historians preferred a statue of Emmet he had led the Rising. However, saner heads prevailed and this beautiful statue not only adds a bit of character to Rathfarnham village, it highlight the significance of it's history. Irish-Canadian poet, Paul Potts, dedicated an entire chapter in his book of essays, **Invitation to a Sacrament** to all who helped Anne Devlin , and he wrote that, *it is true that she was a servant girl; it is equally true that she was one of the glories of the world. Because of her a light shines out, from the slums around the Coombe and from the ploughs on a Wicklow hillside, to equal the brightness of any star. This Wicklow peasant working girl beat the British Empire.* They had been beaten by the spirit of unconquered Ireland, housed in the heart and mind of a simple Irish girl. Anne Devlin is an inspiration to all who hold freedom dear.



Anne Devlin Statue, Rathfarnham