

Grace Evelyn Gifford

By Mike McCormack

One of Ireland's most tragic daughters, Grace Evelyn Gifford, was born on March 4, 1888, the second youngest of 12 children of a Catholic father and a Protestant mother in Rathmines, Dublin. As was then the practice, the boys were brought up Catholic and the girls as Protestants. Grace went to school in Dublin and at 16 went to the Metropolitan School of Art, where she studied under Irish artist William Orpen. Orpen regarded her as most gifted and in 1907 she attended a course in Fine Art at the Slade School of Art in London. She returned to Dublin in 1908 and tried to earn a living as a caricaturist, publishing her cartoons in **The Shanachie**, **Irish Life**, **Meadowstreet** and **The Irish Review**. She earned little money, but enjoyed a lively social life.

She met a London lady journalist, who brought her to the opening of the new bilingual St Enda's School where she met Joseph Mary Plunkett for the first time. She also met the future leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, including Tomás MacDonagh, whom she would introduce to her sister Muriel. They married in 1912 and Muriel became a Catholic. Grace's interest in the Catholic religion also grew leading to a closer acquaintance with Joseph Plunkett as she began to question him about his faith. She could not have found a better teacher since St. Oliver Plunkett was a member of Joseph's family. Joseph proposed to Grace in 1915 and she took lessons in the Catholic religion. She was formally received into the Catholic Church in April, 1916. Having no knowledge of the plans for the Easter Rising, she had planned to marry Joseph on Easter Sunday of that same year.

Joseph hadn't told Grace of the impending insurrection which was scheduled for Easter Sunday, nor did he expect the chronic health problems he was experiencing – an advanced case of tuberculosis – to require emergency surgery the week before. As it turned out, the operation forced Joseph to postpone the wedding, just as other circumstances forced the postponement of the rising to Easter Monday. The first indication to Grace that something was going on came on the evening of Holy Saturday when Plunkett's young aide, Michael Collins, dropped by to deliver her a sum of money and a small gun for her protection. Grace was horrified at the sight of the gun, but Collins left without offering a confused Grace Gifford any further explanation.

One can only imagine the confusion, anxiety, and distress experienced by Grace as the events of Easter week unfolded with her beloved in the center of the fighting. After the Rising failed, Joseph and the other leaders were taken to Kilmainham Jail, swiftly court martialed and sentenced to death by firing squad. When Grace learned that Joseph was due to be shot on May 4th; she hurriedly visited a Dublin jeweler and bought a wedding ring. On the night of May 3rd she was given permission to visit Joseph. Arrangements had been made for them to meet in the prison chapel where the prison chaplain married them with two prison guards as witnesses. Accompanied by fifteen soldiers they crammed into Joseph's tiny cell, on the wall of which he had scratched his memorable poem *I See His Blood Upon the Rose*. After only a ten-minute visit, Grace was ushered out. A few short hours later, Joseph was murdered by a vengeful British military in the stone-breakers yard of Kilmainham Jail.

Grace never married again; she resumed her commercial art work to earn a living. She also decided to devote herself, through her art, to the promotion of the Sinn Féin policies Joseph had given his life for. Throughout her long widowhood she became a staunch Irish Republican and was even elected to the reorganized Sinn Féin executive in 1917 where she served alongside Kathleen Clarke and Constance Markievicz and opposed the treaty which led to the Irish Civil War. Throughout the Civil War, many republicans were arrested and incarcerated without trial or charge. Grace herself was one. Arrested in February 1923, as fate would have it, she was held in the same Kilmainham Jail where her Joseph had been executed. In what had to be an extremely emotional incarceration, she was moved to paint a beautiful picture on her cell wall of the Madonna and Child, perhaps in honor of Joseph's middle name. It became an instant treasure to all who saw it and it became known as **The Kilmainham Madonna**. It remained on the wall when the women prisoners were transferred to the North Dublin Union and after Kilmainham was closed in 1924.

When the Civil War ended, Grace, who was no friend of the Irish Free State, had no home of her own and very little money. Official animosity toward those who had opposed the treaty remained strong and she received no help from the government. Her talent as an artist was her only asset; her cartoons were published in a few newspapers and magazines and she illustrated W. B. Yeats' **The Words upon the Window Pane** in 1930. She moved from one rented flat to another and ate in inexpensive city-center restaurants. She had many admirers, but had no wish to remarry. Her circumstances improved in 1932 when she received a Civil List pension from de Valera's Fianna Fáil government. From the 1940s onwards, her health declined and in 1950 she was taken to hospital and then a nursing home, which she didn't like. She returned to her flat where she died suddenly, and alone, on 13 December, 1955. This tragic lady, whose life was altered by her love for an Irish patriot and his cause, was removed to St Kevin's Church and she was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery with full military honors.

But what ever became of the Kilmainham Madonna? For the answer to that question, go to the National AOH website AOH.COM and check out the December history there.

