

## **Michael Collins** **and the** **Women Who Spied For Ireland**

Women played a major role in Michael Collins' life. He was born in 1890 in the family's stone farmhouse at Woodfield, outside Clonakilty County Cork. He was the youngest of eight children and came from a family in which women were in the majority. Michael Collins' father passed on when he was young and his mother, Marianne, was in charge and responsible for the family affairs. So he got used to idea of strong, resourceful women at an early age. He was the adored son of the household and found it natural that women should love and admire him. Michael Collins in turn appreciated the company of women as well, and found conversing with women very natural.

During the long winter evenings when he was a young boy, Collins would listen as neighbors gathered around to tell stories about the potato famine of 1848. They would share stories about seeing people on the roadside who had starved to death. They had been too weak to reach the Clonakilty workhouse. These stories would shape Collins' attitude for years to come. He was reared in a district influenced by Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, the famous Fenian leader who had been born in nearby Rosscarbery.

By 1909, Gaelic Athletic Association helped channel his boundless energy. Sam Maguire, a good friend in the GAA, introduced him to the Irish Republican Brotherhood. It was here that he formed enduring friendships. He quickly rose through the ranks. In one year he was section master and by 1914 he was treasurer of the coordinating body for the IRB in London.

Michael Collins was imprisoned for his involvement in the Easter Rising. But his jail time only sharpened his skills for espionage. He became chief organizer of a system which successfully got messages, food, newspapers and items from the non-punishment to the punishment camp. The game of smuggling and communication made him happy that he could outsmart the authorities. These methods of secrecy and manipulation he would fully exploit in succeeding years.

Collins believed in the secrecy principal which the IRB upheld. He belonged to the Tom Clarke/Sean MacDermott school of thought, which believed that physical force would be the surest method of getting the British authorities to accept an independent Irish government. Being on the IRB Supreme Council helped him become acquainted with men and women throughout Ireland who would one day become part of the Irish movement.

After being released from prison, he returns to Dublin. Kathleen Clarke (Wife of Tom Clarke and one of the signatories of the Irish Proclamation) founded the Irish Volunteers' Dependents' Fund to help ease the financial burden on families. When Michael Collins' name came up for consideration for the full time secretarial position, Kathleen Clarke said "He was just the man I had been hoping for." His position helped to coordinate funds collected from Clan na Gael, an Irish Republican organization in America. Kathleen also entrusted him with names of the countrywide IRB contact which her husband Tom had given her. She said "he had the ability and the force and the enthusiasm and drive that very few men had."

It is during this time he writes to his sister Hannie, “You have no idea how busy I’ve been,” “for a fortnight I’ve been up almost alternate nights.” Collins embarked on a nationwide campaign of meetings and speeches. He threw himself totally into whipping up recruits for the cause.

In March 1917, he had been indirectly receiving copies of reports emanating from Dublin Castle, British military headquarters in Ireland. Ned Broy had the daily task of keeping track of Sinn Fein members. He would discreetly slip in a 3<sup>rd</sup> carbon copy and give it to a Sinn Fein member who then passed it on to Collins.

It was Lily Mernin, a typist at Dublin Castle, told him things “which he carefully wrote down and then concealed them in his socks.” Collins would give Lily a key to a house on Clonliffe Road. She would let herself in, type up records of her deciphering and would place her work in a sealed envelope which he would later collect. She compiled a list of officers, many disguised as civilians, using pseudonyms and living outside the barracks. Never throughout the period did Lily meet any of Collins’s intelligence officers, nor the inhabitants of the home on Clonliffe Road. Lily was known as Lt. G and fed Collins confidential documents on troop movements, their strength and armaments.

The Police knew of Michael Collins but the photo held by the police was totally unlike the real Michael Collins. In fact, he was described as “age 28, 5 ft. 11 in., complexion fresh”. Which was not much to go on. Intelligence from Dublin Castle continued to improve in July of 1919. Information surfaced on Detective Sergeant Smith that he was very close to capturing Collins. He made the decision that “Dog Smith” was to be eliminated. Collins was not known to have killed anyone himself but people who worked closely with him said that ordering killings filled him with tension and anxiety. He would pace the floor until news was brought to him that the killing had taken place.

During 1919 and 1920 when Collins was constantly on the run, he found periods of rest and happiness, in Dilly Dicker’s arms, his girlfriend at the time. Although he was strong and forceful with his comrades, he was gentle, and affectionate and kind to Dilly. This was a time when men respected women, and within the volunteer organization there was an unspoken code that unless a couple was married it would be improper to engage in sex. The man who made a girl pregnant was ostracized as much as the girl herself. Dignity was incorporated into the volunteer code. They had principles that they all lived up to and Michael Collins was no exception.

In 1920, a romance blossomed between Dilly and Collins. Dilly got deeper into helping him with intelligence. Aided by his men, Dilly would climb into a large basket covered with letters, she was wheeled on to the mail boat and into the mailroom where she would emerge in a mail sorter’s uniform and sort mail from Britain. Letters destined for the British secret service would find their way into her handbag or her bosom or inside her elastic-legged knickers. Dilly played an active part in shielding Collins from capture. One night the auxiliaries pounced on Dilly’s house. Collins made way for his attic hide away, while Dilly gently touched the piano keys to distract the authorities.

Michael Collins was a wanted man and a wanted man had to hide from authorities. He had up to 30 different hideouts. One house which he used often was the second home of Moya Llewelyn Davies. Collins relied on Moya’s confidentiality; she was sympathetic and discreetly supported Sinn Fein. She fed him a strong amount of information as she often had an inside track on British cabinet meanderings. Moya obtained information through her husband who was Lloyd George’s

solicitor and chairman of the British Post Office. This is according to Maire Comerford, a member of Cumann na mban who acted as an intermediary for Collins. The youthful Maire could be seen any day darting through the streets of Dublin on her bicycle, with a dispatch for Michael Collins tucked inside her garments. When information was too dangerous to be committed to paper, Maire would get word to Collins to meet Moya at one of the many safe houses.

One evening Maire Comerford brought a document from Moya in code. Maire met Collins, Ned Broy and Kathleen Lynn, a medical officer, at Devlin's – a local bar. The four were walking down the street when Collins noticed a hold-up in the distance. He whispered to Maire "faint". So Maire faked her faint and he held her. The three sat on the footpath and as the Auxiliaries approached them. Collins was fanning Maire's face with the secret document while Ned Broy produced his Dublin Castle identification. Collins said to Kathleen Lynn "get your smelling salts." This revived Maire, they thanked the Auxiliaries and they went on their way.

There were men in the British Secret Service who were getting close to Michael Collins and his intelligence operation. Collins said "it is these men we had to put out of the way." Because of their frequent visits to the Cairo café, they were dubbed 'the Cairo gang', by Collins and his men. From information given by women and men on the outside and Lily Mernin, Ned Broy, among others on the inside of the Castle, Collins put together a list of names. At precisely 9am Sunday Morning on November 21, eleven of the Cairo gang were shot dead.

When Michael Collins needed to get in touch with one of his women spies he would send a note. In case his letters were intercepted he would use terms of endearment. A sample of a note written to Leslie Price: Dearest Leslie, Try to meet me at the usual place on Thursday, 8:30 pm Love M.

The usual place was Moya Davies home. Leslie returned from Cork to relay a message that Tom Barry was pleading for guns. Leslie was traveling throughout Cork organizing Cumann na mBan. Moya and Leslie were sent by Collins to Cork with a car full of guns, packed in flour sacks, which were later used by Tom Barry's Flying Column. Leslie received two additional Dearest Leslie letters from Collins and she and Moya made two additional gun running trips to Cork's number 1 and 2 Brigades.

Moya often used her car to smuggle guns and guns were often hidden in her house. Her connections with the British establishment provided an excellent cover for espionage. She was once having dinner with Collins and some friends at a Dublin café. When the café was raided by the military, Collins passed his gun to Moya, who was able to hide it under her clothes. All managed to escape arrest.

Another mission was for Nancy O'Brien who was returning from England with a case of guns for Collins. She had trouble lifting the crate containing the guns and a policeman kindly offered her help.

His dear friend and intelligence agent Moya Davies, was arrested when her home was raided one night. Collins disliked the thought of women being confined to the dismal surrounding of a prison. His contacts made sure that Moya and other female agents received a few small comforts, such as woolen rugs, good books, food and sweets.

I mentioned just a few of the women responsible for Ireland's independence. There were many more. Such as Sinead Mason, his loyal, bold and brave personal secretary, who worked a 12 hour day for him, saved him from arrest on several occasions while he was on the run. Or Lady Hazel

Lavery who acted as a conduit between Collins and the British establishment during the Anglo-Irish treaty negotiations.

Women played an important role in Collins' espionage. They never let him down despite being harassed on occasions. Collins depended on women because, in general they had an easier time than men in evading suspicions of the British authorities. It is obvious that were it not for the women who helped to shield him from the British, he would have found it impossible to evade arrest between 1919 and 1921. Furthermore, he needed women as well as men to send dispatches up and down the countryside. So behind every great man.....

The source of my information is from Meda Ryan, "Michael Collins and the Women who Spied for Ireland."