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“Cecilia Betham (1843-1913): Ireland’s First Female International Sports Star”

Asked to name a female Irish international sports star, individuals such as the athletics all-rounder Mary Peters, the athlete Sonia O’Sullivan, the swimmer Michelle Smith de Bruin or the boxer Katie Taylor would spring to mind. Few would have heard of Cecilia Betham.

For a number of years in the 1860s, Cecilia Betham dominated the Irish and British archery worlds. Yet she doesn’t merit a mention in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, a sad commentary on the oblivion into which her sporting triumphs have fallen, possibly because archery was a minority sport, confined mainly to the landed gentry and other members of the mid-Victorian elite, and therefore a sport that held little attraction or interest for the bulk of the population. It did not help that most of the erstwhile enthusiasts for archery abandoned it in the 1870s for other sports. For a brief period, however, archery was a sport with an unusually high profile in Ireland: in the 1850s and, more especially, in the 1860s, many of the élite of Irish society were enthusiastic toxophilites, and it was at the height of archery’s popularity in the latter decade that this pioneer in the field of Irish women’s sports achieved her fleeting fame.

Cecilia Maria Eleanor Betham was born in January 1843 in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, the second child and only daughter of Molyneux Cecil John Betham and his wife, Elizabeth, the only daughter of Sir Richard Ford, chief magistrate at Bow Street, in London. In 1846 the Betham family was recorded as residing at 123

Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in London; by 1851 they were living at 16 Clarges Street, in Westminster. According to the 1851 census, Cecilia's ten-year-old brother, Cecil William, was a pupil at Westminster School, one of England's most prestigious public schools, while Cecilia was being schooled at home. The Bethams shared their home with three live-in female servants: a nursery maid, a cook and a housemaid. Molyneux Betham had been called to the bar but did not practise. He returned to Ireland with his family following the death on 26 October 1853 of his father, Sir William Betham, the Ulster King of Arms and Principal Herald of All Ireland, a post he had held since April 1820. Molyneux served as Cork Herald until his death in February 1880; his brother, Sheffield Philip Fiennes Betham, served as Dublin Herald.

When the Bethams moved to Ireland, they took up residence at the house of Cecilia's deceased grandfather at Rockford, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. It was while living at Rockford that Cecilia developed her interest in archery. She, like her father, uncle Sheffield and other Bethams in the neighbourhood were keen members of one of Ireland's oldest archery clubs, the County of Dublin Archers, which was based at nearby Monkstown. The club had originally been established c. 1845 as the County Dublin Toxophilite Society, one of only a handful of Irish archery clubs in existence at this time. Little is known of its early activities, apart from the fact that, like its fellow clubs, it held competitions that were attended mainly by local 'fashionables' who were wined and dined and treated to a pleasant night's dancing at the end of each meeting. Its usual shooting grounds were on a parcel of land of around nine acres, owned by the Earl of Longford and Viscount de Vesci, which had a clear view of the Dublin Mountains. The club was

resurrected as the County of Dublin Archers on 14 June 1857 and it quickly established itself as one of the most vibrant and influential of the dozens of archery clubs that were established in Ireland in the late 1850s and the 1860s. Molyneux Betham was the club captain for most of the 1860s, and he was also a principal originator of the Irish national championships and the Leinster championships in that decade; he won some 11 national and provincial titles in the 1860s and 1870s. The County of Dublin Archers held shoots every Saturday from May to October, mostly on the grounds of Monkstown Castle. This was a site with the kind of romantic medieval connotations that had a strong appeal to archers, whose meetings, according to Martin Johnes, “had the cultivated feel of a medieval tournament”. The club’s uniform for ladies consisted of white petticoats, green jackets and turned-up straw hats that were decorated with ostrich feathers, while the men, as was the case in many other archery clubs, sported Lincoln green velvet caps and uniforms. The weekly meetings at Monkstown offered attractive prizes, such as a silver arrow for the ladies’ competition and a silver tassel for the men’s. The prizes for the annual competition consisted of a silver bracer for the ladies and an attractive silver trophy, the Norton Challenge Cup, for the men. The latter prize was donated by a club member, Captain John Norton, who, in 1866, rather eccentrically demonstrated to his fellow toxophilites at the Grand Leinster Archery Society meeting in Dublin his ‘percussion shell arrow’, which exploded on contact with the ground. Norton explained to his audience that “it would also explode on striking a ship’s sail, and might be found useful against pirates”. A few years previously, he had also argued that the same device “might be used effectively against wild animals, such as lions, tigers, buffaloes &c, even when shot from a

lady's bow" – although such targets were unlikely to present themselves to Irishwomen going about their normal daily round!

Cecilia Betham's unusual prowess as an archer first came to national attention when she was runner-up in the Irish women's championship at the Carlisle archery ground in Bray in August 1863 (the second time this national competition had been held). The winner was Mrs Horniblow of Warwickshire, a dominant force in English archery. Although Horniblow emerged as the eventual winner, Betham ran her a close second, equalling Mrs Horniblow's number of hits at the 50-yard distance but being outscored at the 60-yard distance. The Bray meeting in 1863 was the beginning of a keen rivalry between Betham and Horniblow that lasted for several years. In the following year, spectators at archery meetings in England were particularly captivated by the tussle between the veteran Horniblow and the emerging challenger, Betham, as evidenced by reports of the latter's victories over the former at the prestigious Leamington and Midland archery event on 15 and 16 June and the Crystal Palace contest on 30 June and 1 July. Betham's greatest success in England in 1864 was her victory at the Grand National archery competition, the UK's championship archery contest, which was held at Alexandra Park in London in early July. Her winning score was the highest recorded hitherto. The editor of the *Archer's Register for 1864* reported admiringly that:

"This year is notable for the appearance of the young Irish archeress, Miss Betham, who astonished all archers at Leamington, repeated the process at Sydenham [the Crystal Palace], and then achieved another signal triumph in the park of England's new princess.[.....] She comes of a 'fighting race', and appears to

be endowed with singular firmness of nerve, which is the real secret of success in match-shooting. Indeed, an opinion has been expressed that she could, at her own distances, dispose of the stronger sex, a few gentlemen only being excepted, with the same ease with which she distanced her formidable competitors, Mrs Horniblow and Mrs Atkinson”.

London Society commented on Betham’s successes in England in 1864 that “the Shamrock has come to England and been everywhere victorious”, and that “the long invincible names of Horniblow, Atkinson, Chetwyn, Hare, Turner, and many more ‘good archers and true’, whose names are household words where modern skill in the use of the bow is the theme, were vanquished”. Betham added to her English triumphs in 1864 by winning her first Irish women’s championship at the Leinster Cricket Ground on Dublin’s South Circular Road at the end of July.

The following years saw Betham recording a remarkable run of national and important regional victories. She won additional UK national championships at Clifton, Bristol, in July 1865, at Crown Point, near Norwich, in July 1866, and at Hereford racecourse in July 1868, and was runner-up at Preston, near Brighton, in July 1867. She was placed fourth out of 59 competitors at Aston Park, Birmingham, in 1869. She won the Scottish national title in August 1865. Her haul of prestigious English regional titles included the Leamington and Midland prize in 1865, 1866 and 1867 and the Crystal Palace prize in 1865 and 1866. She won further Irish national championships in 1865 and 1867 and was runner-up, to Mrs Horniblow, in 1866. Her Irish provincial victories included the Leinster

championship in 1863, 1866 and 1867, the Ulster championship in 1866 and 1867 and the Munster championship in 1867 and 1868.

Betham's sporting prowess meant that she attained something akin to celebrity status. Not only was she fêted in the press, but she also had a dance dedicated in her honour. There was even a faint echo of the modern sporting celebrity's endorsement of sports goods and other commodities, when Betham wrote approvingly in the *Archer's Register for 1864* about Dr J. McGrigor Croft's newly patented arrow. McGrigor Croft, inventor of the twin-screw paddles that were fitted to Queen Victoria's yacht *Elfin*, applied the same principles of rotary motion to try to produce an arrow that would have greater velocity and a more direct line of flight than conventional arrows. Betham, in an advertisement commending McGrigor Croft's invention, considered that the arrow had "a decided superiority over the common arrow, in swiftness, lowness, steadiness, and accuracy of flight" Her rival, Mrs Horniblow, lauded its "merits of greater steadiness and greater celerity" and felt that it "would be of peculiar utility in wintery weather".

Although Betham continued to compete in archery competitions into the early 1870s, her best days were behind her by then. She had some impressive performances in the latter part of her career: for example, her winning performance at the County of Dublin Archers' end-of-year meeting in September 1872 prompted an enthusiastic *Freeman's Journal* reporter to claim that her shooting constituted "an extraordinary feat, of which Robin Hood or William Tell themselves might be proud", and she came a creditable seventh in the UK

national championship at Cheltenham College in June 1871 and at Winchester College in August 1874, respectively. However, she failed to reach the heights that she had attained in the mid-1860s. To an extent, the decline in her performances in the 1870s mirrored archery's decline in Ireland in the same decade, as the number of Irish archery clubs suffered a dramatic fall and the devotees increasingly took up other sports, particularly the more attractive summer alternative of lawn tennis. (Ireland's first lawn tennis club, Monkstown, was started by members of the County of Dublin Archers in 1877.

Cecilia married her first cousin, William Sheffield Betham, a former captain in the Royal Lancashire Militia, who was some 30 years her senior, in July 1874.

William Sheffield was also a member of the County of Dublin Archers. The couple had one child, Gertrude Cecilia Betham, who was born on 2 July 1875, before William Sheffield died on 12 April 1876. Cecilia married for the second time on 23 June 1891, in Market Drayton, Shropshire. Her husband, John Edmond Corbett, was the second son of the late Revd Robert Corbett of Leamington. The 1901 census records the pair as living in Lillington, Warwickshire; 52-year old John Edmond, the head of the household, was recorded as living on his own means. The married couple shared their home with Gertrude Cecilia, Cecilia's daughter, and Mildred Corbett, John's daughter, as well as two servants. In the 1911 census, Cecilia is recorded as residing at The Beeches, 69 Stafford Street, in Market Drayton. Once again a widow by that stage, she shared her home with Nellie Billington, a 25-year-old servant. According to the census, Cecilia was living on "private means", probably inherited from her deceased husband. She died on 18 April 1913, at the age of 70, leaving effects worth £8,933 17s. 8d. No

contemporary newspaper commented on her passing that she had been a notable archery champion in her younger days.

Although she died in obscurity, it is to be hoped that the next edition of the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* will include an entry devoted to her. At a time when women's opportunities for engaging in sport were extremely limited, Cecilia Betham was a notably successful pioneering sportswoman, the first Irishwoman to achieve international fame and success for her sporting prowess.

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FURTHER READING

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