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Introducing Countess Constance Markievicz née Gore-Booth: Aristocrat and Republican, Socialist and Artist, Feminist and Free Spirit

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To celebrate the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, *Constance Markievicz. Lettere dal carcere. L'Irlanda verso la libertà* was published in Italy, edited by Loredana Salis who also wrote the preliminary essay, the introductions to the various sections and provided chronological references and footnotes; the translation is by Lucia Angelica Salaris, while an afterword focusing on the proto-feminist ideas of the writer of the letters was added by Cristina Nadotti.

Linda Hogan, in her essay “Occupying a Precarious Position: Women in Culture and Church in Ireland”, has rightly remarked:

Our understanding of the true extent of women’s involvement in the creation of contemporary Ireland is in some measure modified by the retrieval of the memory of the politically and religiously significant women who have been written out of history. (2000, 681)

Volumes have been published in Italy by scholars who have studied and written about the lives and achievements of the two Gore-Booth sisters, protagonists, each in her own different fashion, of the history of Ireland during those first crucial twenty years of the 20th century. In fact, witness is borne to the vitality of Irish Studies in Italy by Rosangela Barone’s *The Oak Tree and the Olive Tree – the True Dream of Eva Gore Booth* of 1991, Marta Petrusiewicz’s *Un sogno irlandese. La storia di Constance Markievicz comandante dell’I.R.A. (1868-1927)* of 1998 and, last but not least, by Salis’s recent volume. These works are central to retrieval of the memory of two women who, from apparently distant political and religious stances, contributed to the birth of contemporary Ireland and who, due above all to misogynous negligence, have been written out of our history books. It is rather significant that the two Gore-Booth sisters are barely mentioned in the ground-breaking first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Deane, 1991), though they are quoted and referred to several

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times in volumes IV and V of the 2002 edition of the same anthology covering *Irish Women's Writings and Traditions* (Bourke *et al.*, 2002). In her introduction, Loredana Salis provides us with both biographical details and satisfactory footnotes to the *Lettere* which permit the reader to fully understand the calibre of the woman who wrote them and the importance of her role in the history of contemporary Ireland which she, in her unconventional way, contributed to shape.

Constance Georgina was the elder of the two Gore-Booth sisters, a skilled horsewoman and gifted artist, who acquired a title when she married the much-discussed Polish count Casimir Dunin Markievicz whom she met in *bohémienne* Paris where she went to study art.

Seminal encounters were destined to change the course of the life of this undeniably privileged though rebellious young woman, open to knowledge and life, who made a radical choice, in strident opposition to her own social class – the landowning Anglo-Irish gentry – and fought to free Ireland from Britain's colonial yoke.

Maud Gonne, the revolutionary actress and the object of poet W.B. Yeats's unrequited passionate love, induced her to take part in the formation of the female wing of the independence movement; trade unionist Jim Larkin involved her in the provision of assistance to strikers during the great transport walkout of 1913, while the leader of the left-wing division of the 1916 Easter Rising, James Connolly, marshalled her to his side making her second-in-command of the unit at St Stephen's Green which she defended valiantly for six days. In 2015, Derek Molyneux and Darren Kelly, in a collection of documents published as *When the Clock Struck in 1916: Close-Quarter Combat in the Easter Rising*, wrote:

Countess Markievicz's military plans for the Easter 1916 Rising written in a Polish notebook were based on Robert Emmet's rebellion and her notes on it and the lessons to be learned from it confirm to historians that the rebellion was far from an amateur affair. The simple fact that a woman was making military notes is groundbreaking. (Quoted in McGreevy, 2016)

The Countess was arrested and sentenced to death along with the other leaders of the insurrection but spared, to her own personal chagrin, only because she was a woman, while her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. She was released as the result of the 1917 amnesty. More than once she was imprisoned in both Ireland and England, but during one of these periods of incarceration she was the first woman ever to be elected to the Parliament of Westminster, where she never set foot, refusing as she did, to swear loyalty to the British sovereign. She was also the first woman in Western Europe to become a government minister when as a member of Sinn Féin she was made Minister for Labour during Éamon De Valera's independent government. She remained in office from 1919 to 1921.

On the opposite side of Europe, we find Aleksandra Michajlovna Kolontaj, a minister in Lenin's government from 1917 to 1918, whose biographical and ideological traits bear a striking resemblance to those of the Countess.

But "Madame" the Countess was a woman with a clear vision of the *rôle* attending women in the Ireland of the future:

Now, here is a chance for our women. Let them remind their men, that their first duty is to examine any legislation proposed not from a party point of view, [...], but simply and only from the standpoint of their Nation. Let them learn to be statesmen and not merely politicians. (Markievicz 2002 [1918], 100)¹

Her younger sister, Eva Selena Gore-Booth, poet and theologian, was an active feminist engaged in social aid to the deprived citizens of Manchester alongside her partner Esther Roper, whom she met in 1896 at Bordighera when both women were guests at "Casa Coraggio" owned by the Scottish philanthropist, George MacDonald. Eva's was a strongly pacifist form of commitment of a mystical-Christian kind, totally unlike her elder sister's mission of armed rebellion. Despite these differences, the relationship between the two was welded by strong bonds of sisterhood. It is no fluke that Barone's pioneering work on Eva devotes as many as eight pages (18-25) to an essential, all-round indispensable portrait of Constance.

Historian Marta Petrusiewicz's study, in perfect keeping with the book's editorial line, aims at outlining Markievicz's markedly ideological character, availing itself of a collection of documents, excerpts from her speeches, letters and political discourses.

Radically different is the work carried out by Loredana Salis and published recently in Italian in book form. This volume is a collection of "Con's" letters from prison, most of them addressed to her sister and edited in 1934 by Esther Roper, in an effort to contrast the amnesia of historians, or worse still, misogynist attempts to underplay Markievicz's political commitment and pass it off as the caprice of a young, spoilt, bored aristocrat, as portrayed in the biography entitled *Constance Markievicz: or the Average Revolutionary; A Biography* (1934), published that same year by Seán O'Faoláin and followed by a re-edition, revised, issued in 1968, in the light of the well-documented biography by Anne Marreco, *The Rebel Countess: The Life and Times of Constance Markievicz* of 1967.

Constance Markievicz – aristocrat and republican, socialist and artist, feminist and free spirit – a similarly complex and multi-faceted character, needed more careful and empathic treatment than a biography based simply on facts and documents.

¹ Constance Markievicz, *Women Ideals and the Nation*, was commissioned by the feminist association Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland), and published in 1918 under the title *A Call to the Women of Ireland*, <<http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000180471>> (05/2018).

Constance Markievicz. Lettere dal carcere. L'Irlanda verso la libertà is an effort made by two women to focus on the Countess's intimate life. The letters are translated by Lucia Angelica Salaris, owner of the small publishing house based in Sardinia. The book also includes detailed contextual footnotes, a chronology and a highly insightful introduction by Loredana Salis which explains, among other relevant points, the core of her research. She has not attempted to produce yet another biography of the Countess, but has chosen to provide us with a different picture of her, not a portrayal of a late Romantic Byronic heroine, but one aimed at assessing her literary and artistic achievement, the fruit of the suffering and seclusion which we find in the letters she addressed to her sister, the only person she truly loved during her life. Writing and drawing were all that was left of her creative life during her time in prison: "Mi piace così tanto scrivere e non ho perso questo piacere. È ben saldo nella mia mente" (72)².

Salis provides us with a portrait not a biography, a portrait which permits further qualities to surface and come to the fore, thanks to details, isolated turns of phrase, all conveying a sense of profound truth. The letters bear witness to the suffering in prison of a woman, endowed with the sensitivity of an artist. Her words, often censured by an anonymous though ever-present censor, reveal her most intimate feelings with a levity which bears witness to her mindful concern for the vicarious suffering her dear addressee was bound to experience. Like the voiceless female inmates of the prison's other cells, who lacked both the words required to express their pain and addressees capable of hearing and empathising with them, she was well aware of her physical condition and appearance:

Queste sono le domande che dovrebbero essere rivolte a me e a tutti i prigionieri politici al momento delle visite:
 Quanto pesi? Quale era normalmente il tuo peso?
 Cosa ti viene dato da mangiare? Riesci a mangiarlo?
 Quanto esercizio fisico al giorno fai?
 Con che frequenza ti danno biancheria pulita?
 Sei costipato? Riesci ad avere delle medicine?
 Che temperatura c'è nell'ambiente in cui lavori?
 Qual è il tuo compito? Quanto lavoro fai in una settimana?
 Se non permettono a me o a chiunque altro di rispondere, fate pressione con ogni mezzo possibile per avere delle risposte. (67)³

² "I love writing it so, and I've not lost it. It's in my head all right!" (Markievicz 1934, 150).

³ "These questions should be asked me and all political prisoners at a visit: What do you weigh? What was your normal weight? What do you get to eat? Can you eat it? How much exercise do you get per day? How often do you get clean underclothes? Are you constipated? Can you get medicine? What temperature is the room you work in? What is your task? How much do you do in a week? If they won't let me or any of the others answer, push to get answers by every possible means" (Markievicz 1934, 145).

Markievicz's *Letters* recall Gramsci's *Quaderni dal carcere* (2014 [1949-1951]) as rightly noticed by Salis in the introduction, but they contain something more direct and personal than his political writings, because they are written by a woman to her sister and strike an intimate note, an immediate desire to denounce the human condition of those confined to prison. In a certain sense they are more pragmatic than Gramsci's works which are theoretical. There is also a literary quality in them. The details, the angle which brings the portrait to life, definitely recall Gramsci's letters to his wife and sons (2012 and 2016) which just as surely provide a portrait of the man as Constance's do of the woman:

L'altro giorno, per la prima volta dopo più di tre mesi, mi sono guardata allo specchio, ed è piuttosto divertente incontrare se stessi come una persona sconosciuta. Ci siamo inchinate e abbiamo sorriso l'una all'altra, ho pensato che ho i denti sporchi e che avrebbero un gran bisogno di un dentista, e sono molto dimagrita e bruciata dal sole. Tra sei mesi non mi riconoscerò più, data la mia pessima memoria per i volti! [...] meno vedo il mio viso, più cresce la mia curiosità nei suoi confronti, e non risento del suo invecchiare. (73)⁴

This volume is a valuable research and teaching resource. A general bibliography of the many references from the copious notes is missing, probably due to the publisher's choice to reach a vaster readership. But it is also one of the consequences of the fact that this is a very ambitious work in progress, of which what follows is proof. In an effort to provide an appropriate background to her portrait, Salis conducted the two interviews included in the following section of this issue of *Studi irlandesi, Voices*, in which she tries to recreate the Anglo-Irish milieu into which Constance was born and in which she was raised, a reality which has slowly and inexorably vanished from contemporary Ireland.

To complete the artistic and literary portrait of Constance Markievicz and Eva Gore-Booth we are now waiting for this young Italian scholar to issue the first critical edition of the plays produced jointly by the two sisters, passionate about theatre. The first play, entitled *The Death of Fionavar from The Triumph of Maeve* was written by Eva and illustrated by Constance in the ominous year of 1916 (fig. 1 and 2). Other plays followed: *Blood Money* (1925), *The Invincible Mother* (1925), *Broken Dreams* (1926-1927). On 29 January 1927, Constance writes to Eva about *The Death of Fionavar* and of her desire to work together for the theatre about which she believes she knows a lot:

⁴ "I saw myself, for the first time, for over three months, the other day, and it is quite amusing to meet yourself as a stranger. We bowed and grinned, and I thought my teeth very dirty and very much wanting a dentist, and I'd got very thin and very sunburnt. In six months I shall not recognise myself at all, my memory for faces being so bad! [...] The less I see my face the more curious I grow about it, and I don't resent getting old" (Markievicz 1934, 149).

Sto ancora leggendo il tuo 'Maeve'. [...] Mi piace moltissimo l'ultimo monologo di Maeve, ma sarebbe molto difficile da mettere in scena. Vorrei tanto insegnarti come scrivere un'opera teatrale in versi. È possibile e può avere successo. Vorrei che potessimo collaborare. Starò diventando presuntuosa? Ma so di capire ciò che riguarda l'arte del palcoscenico, il pubblico teatrale e la produzione – e con questo intendo l'intero processo – dall'autore fino alla comparsa più insignificante. Metto tutti questi elementi tra i componenti che contribuiscono alla produzione di una messa in scena, e tutti devono cooperare. Non si può suonare musica d'organo con uno scacciapensieri, e tu fai suonare musica per organo al tuo zufolo. (83)⁵

The publication of their plays would add an important *tessera* to the mosaic of the history of Irish theatre in the 1920's, of which the Abbey Theatre was an important, though by no means exclusive, expression.

This time, a larger budget will be required if reproductions of the beautiful illustrations of the first play are to be included. These were produced by Constance while in prison and sentenced to death, using the feather of a bird which she picked up in the prison courtyard, an incident she recalls and comments on after she has been transferred to an English prison:

Quando esce il tuo prossimo libro, e quello con i miei disegni, se mai uscirà? Erano venuti molto male. Ora posso fare assai meglio. Quando ho lasciato l'Irlanda stavo giusto ritornando al mio chiaro-scuro. Mi ero fatta delle penne con piume di corvo trovate nel cortile. Sono molto meglio della maggior parte delle penne: si ottiene un tratto così morbido e sottile. (72)⁶

And when the book came out she observed her pictures very carefully, even noticing the changes made by the printer:

Io sto bene e non sono per niente infelice. Mi piace moltissimo il libro, è una grande gioia: La rosa l'hanno messa recisa dentro il triangolo, ma io non l'avevo messa ben dritta?

⁵“I am still reading your 'Maeve.' [...] I do love Maeve's last speech, but it would be very difficult to make a stage success of it. I long to give you a lecture on writing a verse play. It could be done and a success made of it. I wish we could collaborate. Aren't I getting conceited? But I feel I understand audiences and stage craft and play-producing: – by this, I mean the whole process – from author to the meanest super. I include all these as material that goes to produce a dramatic performance, and they must all pull together. You can't play organ music on a Jew's harp, and you give your penny whistles organ music to play” (Markievicz 1934, 161-162).

⁶“When is your next book coming out, and the one with my pictures, if it ever does? They were very bad. I can do much better now. I was just beginning to get some feeling into my black and white when I left Ireland. I made quills out of rooks' feathers that I found in the garden. They are much nicer than most pens: you can get such a fine, soft line” (Markievicz 1934, 150).

[...] Mi piace molto essere presente nella poesia e mi sento così importante.
(66-67)⁷

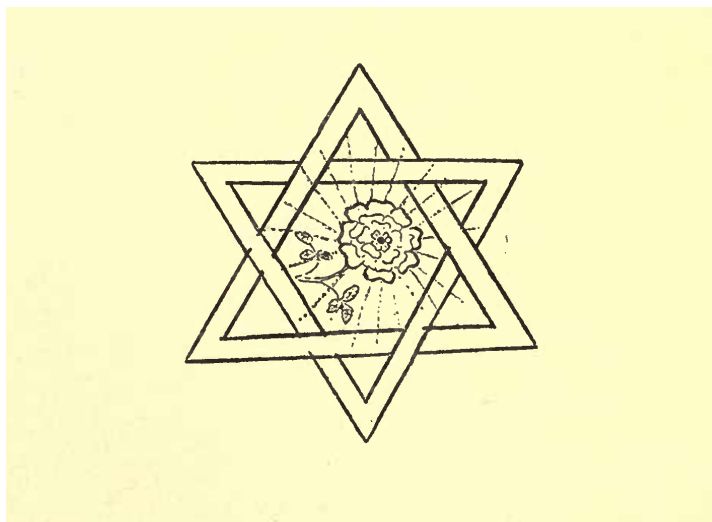


Figure 1

The following are passages from the above-mentioned poem that opens the volume. One cannot help noticing how these lines are echoed in “Easter 1916” which Yeats wrote years later to comment on “the terrible beauty” born from the Rising and what it had meant for him, “I write it out in a verse - / MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be” (Yeats 1990, 178):

Poets, Utopians, bravest of the brave,
Pearse and MacDonagh, Plunkett, Connolly,
Dreamers turned fighters but to find a Grave,
Glad for the dream’s austerity to die.

And my own sister, through wild hours of Pain,
Whilst murderous bombs were blotting
Out the stars,
Little I thought to see you smile again
As I did yesterday, through prison bars. (Markievicz 1934, 132)

⁷ “I am alright and not a bit unhappy. I love the book, it is a real joy. They have put the Rose in the triangle on its side, didn’t I put it up right?” (Eva Gore-Booth 1916, 15); “[...] I love being in poetry and feel so important” (9).

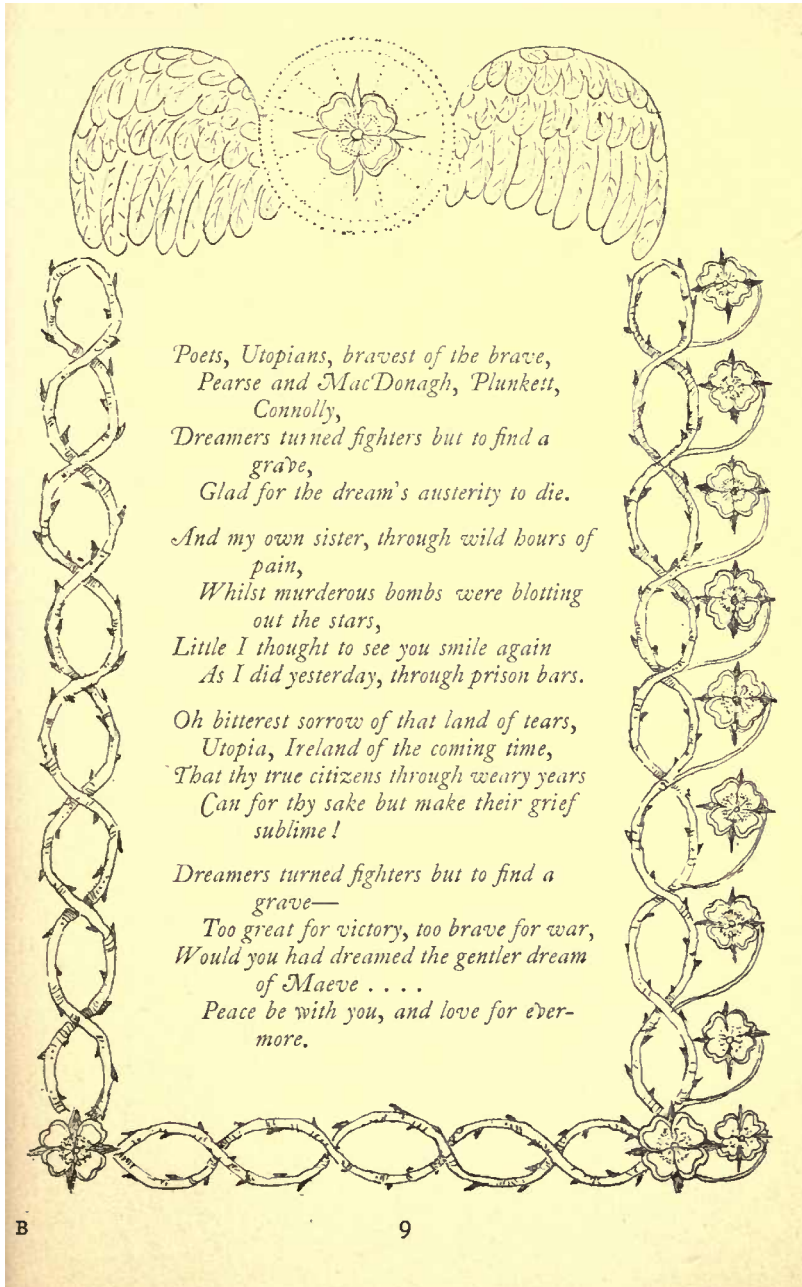


Figure 2

ENVOI

The *fil rouge* of Loredana Salis's work is that transgression is the necessary condition of freedom. "Biting the apple of freedom" is the powerful metaphor Constance used to describe it during a political rally. It expresses her sense of life and the way she had chosen to live it to the end of her days. In these words, we denote the very essence of her commitment and devotion to her cause and people, the far-sightedness of her vision of what Ireland should be, as well as the bravado of someone who rebels against the rules of her class and gender and does it *in yer face*. Constance not only plays the part of the larger-than-life leader but she is one. Nadotti in her afterword rightly remarks that Markievicz is one of those women who want "to give trouble" through the strength of their ideas. And this is what she did and what her memory continues to do to many.

We shall conclude by recalling for a moment poet William Butler Yeats's negative obsession with Constance Markievicz, a friend of his youth, whose political choice he never accepted or approved of. He made his disapproval the object of "his denunciation of abstract thought in beautiful women" (482) an idea central to the poem "A Prayer for My Daughter", included in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* dated 1921.

If, according to the Irish poet, Eva was, in her youth frail and sweet as a gazelle, though devastated by "some vague Utopia" ("In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz"), Constance, now in prison, was in her youth as powerful, free and wild as "a rock-bred, sea-born bird" ruined by a "bitter, abstract thing" ("On a Political Prisoner").

At this stage, to illustrate Yeats's opinions of the two sisters, we can juxtapose passages from three of his poems, the first two published in the aforementioned collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the third published in *The Winding Stairs and Other Poems* (1933), written, however, in 1927, shortly after the deaths of the two sisters.

"Easter 1916"

[..]

That woman's days were spent
 In ignorant good-will,
 Her nights in argument
 Until her voice grew shrill.
 What voice more sweet than hers
 When young and beautiful,
 She rode to harriers?
 [..]. (Yeats 1921, 176)

“On a Political Prisoner”

She that but little patience knew,
 From childhood on, had now so much.
 A grey gull lost its fear and flew
 Down to her cell and there alit,
 And there endured her finger's touch
 And from her fingers ate its bit.

Did she in touching that lone wing
 Recall the years before her mind
 Became a bitter, an abstract thing,
 Her thought some popular enmity:
 Blind and leader of the blind
 Drinking the foul ditch where they lie?
 [...]
 She seemed to have grown clean and sweet
 Like any rock-bred, sea-born bird:
 [...]. (Yeats 1921, 180)

“In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz”

The light of evening, Lissadell,
 Great windows open to the south,
 Two girls in silk kimonos, both
 Beautiful, one a gazelle.
 But a raving autumn shears
 Blossoms from the summer's wreath;
 The older is condemned to death,
 Pardoned, drags out lonely years
 Conspiring among the ignorant.
 I know not what the younger dreams –
 Some vague Utopia – and she seems,
 When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
 An image of such politics.
 [...]. (Yeats 1933, 241)

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