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Revealing History

Kathleen Clarke

Republican, Politician, Campaigner



Introduction

As a republican activist, 1916 Easter Rising widow, charity fundraiser and campaigner for social change, **Kathleen Clarke** was a leading figure in the Irish revolutionary period. Instrumental in the foundation of Cumann na mBan, she also established the Irish Volunteers' Dependants' Fund charity shortly after the execution of her husband Tom and brother Ned Daly in 1916. As the widow Mrs Tom Clarke and as a political prisoner, she was an important part of republican propaganda and fundraising campaigns during the War of Independence. An influential Sinn Féin party member, Dublin Corporation councillor and TD, she would later become the first woman Lord Mayor of Dublin. Clarke also campaigned for better political representation for women and for social change including healthcare for poor children. During her long life Kathleen Clarke remained a constant and vocal defender of her husband's reputation.

Digitisation of NLI Primary Sources

This PDF draws from primary source material held in the National Library of Ireland newly digitised to mark the Irish Decade of Centenaries (1912-1923). These documents range from personal letters, memoirs, and official papers to contemporary handbills, maps and photographs and help contextualise the decisions and motivations of the men and women, including Kathleen Clarke, who helped shape the revolutionary period in Ireland.

Key Moments

1914

Cumann na mBan

Kathleen Clarke helped found Cumann na mBan (the Women's Council), established on 2 April 1914 as a republican women's paramilitary organisation and auxiliary corps to the all-male Irish Volunteers.

1916

The Irish Volunteers' Dependants' Fund

The Irish Volunteers' Dependants' Fund (IVDF) was founded by Clarke a few days after her husband Tom's execution in 1916. The IVDF was important as both a fundraiser for families affected by the Easter Rising and as a general propaganda vehicle promoting the revolutionary cause in Ireland.

1918

Arrested

Arrested during the fabricated 'German plot' roundups in May 1918 Clarke was imprisoned in women-only Holloway Prison in London for nine months alongside Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne.

1917

Sinn Féin Executive Council

Already Cumann na mBan vice-president, Kathleen Clarke was elected to the Sinn Féin Executive Council where she campaigned to attain equal political rights and representation for women within the party.

1919
-1920

Dublin Corporation

Elected to Dublin Corporation Kathleen Clarke campaigned for the official recognition of the Sinn Féin government during the Irish War of Independence. She was also president of the republican children's court and helped to set up the Irish White Cross. During the War of Independence Kathleen Clarke was active as a courier, smuggling money and weapons to IRA fighters.

1921

Dáil Eireann

Clarke was elected to Dáil Eireann for the Dublin-Mid constituency in 1921. She spoke passionately against the Anglo-Irish Treaty in the Second Dáil and took the anti-Treaty side during the subsequent Irish Civil War.

1922
-1923

Anti-Treaty IRA

During the Civil War Kathleen Clarke had influential roles in both anti-Treaty Cumann na mBan and the Anti-Treaty IRA including communications, logistics, and fundraising. She lost her Dáil seat in 1922 but eventually accepted the new Irish Free State.



Fenian

Kathleen Daly was born into a prominent Fenian family in Limerick on 11 April 1878. Both her father Edward and her uncle John were Fenian activists and she was already a militant republican by the time she married Tom Clarke in New York in 1901. When the Clarkes returned from America in 1907, their newsagent and tobacconist shop, first in Parnell Street and later in Amiens Street, was a hive of republican activity. Her husband, one of the 1916 Proclamation Signatories, helped revive the Irish Republic Brotherhood (IRB) and establish the Irish Volunteers in 1913. Her brother Edward 'Ned' Daly was one of the first to join the Volunteers while her sister Madge Daly would later join Cumann na mBan to work alongside Kathleen.



A photograph of Kathleen Daly taken in Limerick before she emigrated to the USA in 1901 to marry Tom Clarke. You can learn more about this photograph (TC 4) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo277295>

Militant

Cumann na mBan was formally established in 1914 as an all-female organisation that would work alongside the Irish Volunteers. Kathleen Clarke was a key member of the republican organisation's first branch, the Ard Chraobh (High Branch) located in Dublin's Brunswick Street. She served first on its Executive Committee helping to draft its manifesto and later as Vice-President. Cumann na mBan members worked closely with the Irish Volunteers in the lead up to and during the 1916 Easter Rising, transporting arms and relaying messages. Clarke was sworn into the IRB before the fighting started and given the plans for the rebellion by her husband so she could maintain contact with republican networks in the event of a failed rising.

Cumann na mBan was formally established in 1914 as an all-female organisation that would work alongside the Irish Volunteers.



An undated photograph of a social meeting for Cumann na mBan's Ard Chraobh. Kathleen Clarke is seated at the far left of the group. You can find out more about this photograph (NPA CNB) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo276947>

HUGH O'BRIEN MORAN,
SOLICITOR.

26 19, GLENTWORTH STREET,
LIMERICK.

March 6th 1917.

RE THOMAS JAMES CLARKE.

Dear Miss Daly,

I now send you the following articles received from
Head Quarters, Irish Command, Parkgate, Dublin;— Spectacle Case,
Pencil, Stamp Book (7 Stamps) and Knife, which please hand to Mrs Clarke.

The Authorities state that those were the only Articles
which were on the Deceased's possession at the time of his death.

Yours faithfully,

Hugh O'Brien Moran
JKO.

Miss Madge Daly,
Sarsfield Street,
Limerick.

A letter of 6 May 1917 from solicitor Hugh O'Brien Moran to Kathleen's sister, Madge, enclosing Tom Clarke's personal effects after his execution. Madge received the items on behalf of her sister. You can learn more about this letter (MS 49,355 /10/1) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo515752>

Widow of 1916

Kathleen Clarke was imprisoned in Dublin Castle after the failure of the 1916 Easter Rising. She was released in time to see her husband Tom before his execution on 3 May 1916. She returned to Kilmainham the following night to say goodbye to her brother Ned Daly who was executed on 4 May.

The executions of both her husband and her brother had a deep personal impact on Kathleen Clarke. A mother of three, she was expecting another child at the time but didn't tell her husband during their last meeting. She fell seriously ill shortly afterwards and had a miscarriage. After their deaths she was heavily involved in organising relief for the dependants of the many republicans who had been imprisoned in the aftermath of the Easter Rising. Clarke helped persuade Cumann na mBan to prioritise keeping alive the memory of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising. The organisation would also focus on public demonstrations on behalf of republican prisoners as well as organising welcoming ceremonies for those militants arriving home from British and Irish jails.

Charity Organiser

Soon after her husband's execution Kathleen Clarke established the Irish Volunteers' Dependants' Fund (IVDF) to raise funds for those families bereaved by the Easter Rising and the executions that followed. In August 1916, the IVDF amalgamated with the Irish National Aid Association to form the Irish National Aid and Volunteers Dependants' Fund (INAAVDF). Clarke remained president of this new combined organisation.

In February 1921 Clarke helped found the Irish White Cross which distributed funds raised by the charity the American Committee for Relief in Ireland. This money was allocated to Irish civilians who were injured or suffered financial difficulties because of Ireland's War of Independence and later the Civil War.



A 1916 photograph of Kathleen Clarke with her sons John Daly, Tom, and Emmet was used to help raise money for the Irish Volunteers' Dependents' Fund. You can learn more about this photograph (TC 14) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo277561>

Oct 5th 1917

Went to the Sinn Féin Convention today. & came home disjected, & know this more many than who had been friends of mine but none came near me, except Sean & Pádraig for a minute & W. Kelly from Dungannon. I had a strong feeling that those present & myself were not in sympathy with each other. I felt quite in a foreign element. First there was Arthur Griffith's opening address which I must admit was a very clever piece of work. It gave a history of Sinn Féin from the beginning to 1917, entirely ignoring its more important period from somewhere about 1908^{or 1910} to 1916, also that the present Sinn Féin was not ~~was~~ previous maintainance, "that the present situation had any relation to the fight in Easter 1916. He alluded to the men who had died at Easter in an unattached way, as brave men, his aim seemed to be that Easter was ~~more~~ in the nature of an accident in the history of Sinn Féin, arising from nothing ending in nothing. Sinn Féin, his Sinn Féin did it all come to the prevention of co-operation

Handwritten notes by Kathleen Clarke on the 1917 Sinn Féin Convention. Clarke refers to being 'in a foreign element' and how angry she was at the hostile reception given to Constance Markievicz's speech. You can find out more about this document (MS 49,356/2) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo311875>

Campaigner

Kathleen Clarke campaigned for women's rights throughout her political career. Her motion at Sinn Féin's annual convention in October 1917 ensured that equal rights for women became party policy. Four women were elected onto the executive committee that year: Countess Markievicz, Clarke, Kathleen Lynn, and Countess Plunkett. The same weekend Cumann na mBan held its fourth annual convention electing Clarke onto its executive committee. She was also a founding member of Cumann na d'Teachtaire. (League of Female Delegates) which worked to ensure that women would be elected on to public boards and onto all bodies within the Sinn Féin organisation.

Prisoner

Between 1918 and 1919 Kathleen Clarke spent nine months in London's female-only Holloway Gaol for her alleged involvement in the 'German Plot'. As the mother of three young children her detention was condemned in Ireland and internationally. While Clarke was in prison her children were looked after by her sisters in Limerick. In Holloway she refused to eat prison food, becoming extremely ill and suffering a heart attack before being released in February 1919. Her time in prison solidified her public reputation as an ardent republican; she was granted the freedom of Limerick City while still a prisoner.

MS 35,294/3/14
34 Westmoreland St
21-8-18

Dear Lord Mayor,

As you are aware I was granted permit unconditionally returned here last Sunday morning. I am not much the worse for experience, though I have to go slowly still. I expect to be in Portlaoineach this week end. I feel much

indebted to you for your great personal kindness & valuable help. I feel sure but for the protests made that the Government would gladly have let me remain interned until I was indured.

I am greatly anxious about Mrs Clarke's health. She is critically ill & ought not to be kept in prison in her condition. I hope

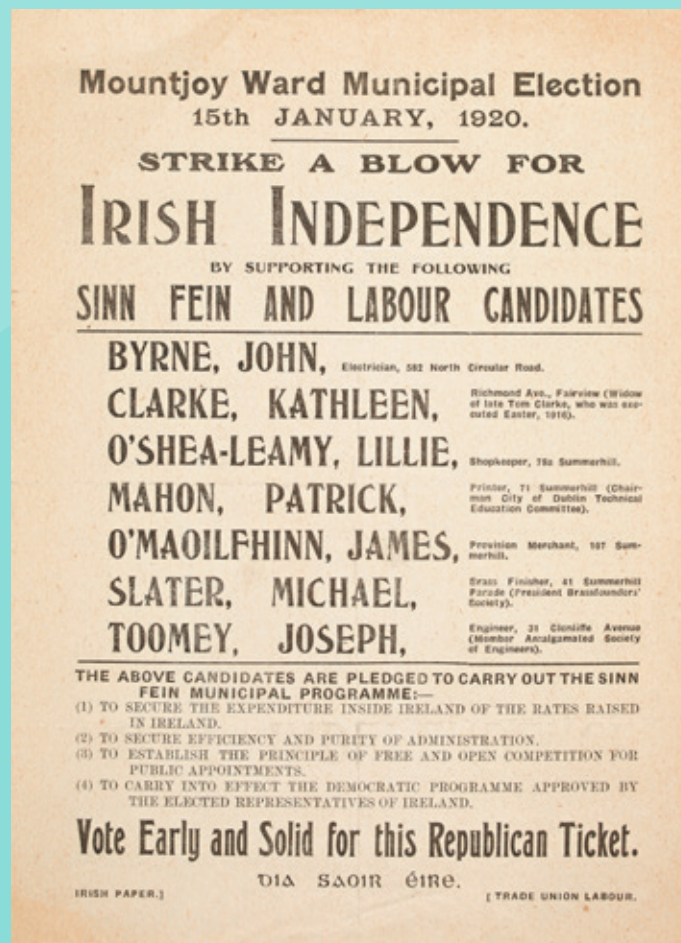
something can be done for all these prisoners. It is scandalous to keep them locked away without the slightest charge being made against them.

Sincerely yours
H. S. Skeffington

A letter of 21 August 1918 from Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington to Laurence O'Neill, Lord Mayor of Dublin, referring to her concern for Kathleen Clarke's health in prison. You can find out more about this document (MS 35,294/3/14) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0146809>

Elected Representative

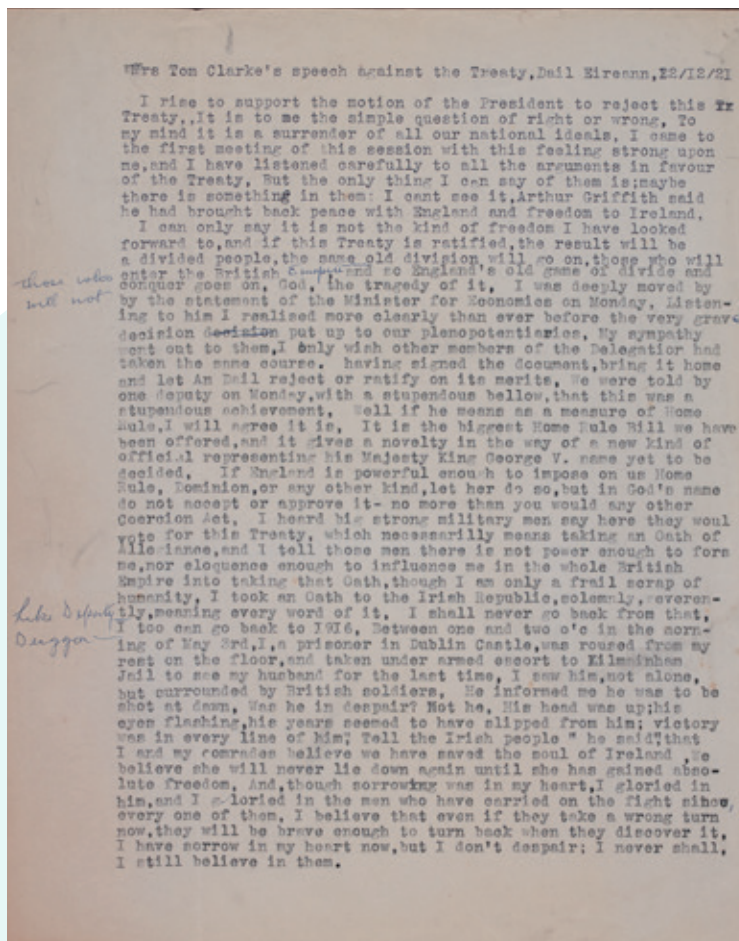
As a leading member of Sinn Féin and a widow of 1916, Clarke ran successfully in both Dublin Corporation and national elections for Sinn Féin during the Irish War of Independence. She was first returned as a Dublin Corporation councillor for both the Wood Quay and Mountjoy wards in 1919. Using her new elected position, she campaigned for the official recognition of the Sinn Féin government, was a member of the Harcourt Street Children's Hospital board and chaired the school meals committee. Clarke also served in the Dáil Courts becoming president of the Court of Conscience and the children's court. In 1921 she was elected to the Second Dáil for the Dublin-Mid constituency.



A Dublin municipal election handbill of 15 January 1920 for the Mountjoy Ward asking voters to 'strike a blow for Irish independence' by voting for Sinn Féin and Labour candidates. Clarke was successfully elected. You can learn more about this poster (EPH C75) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo05o662o>

Anti-Treatyite

Kathleen Clarke was strongly opposed to the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. As a TD and member of Sinn Féin's Standing Committee Clarke's voice carried real weight in the Treaty debates. She was adamant that the Treaty would not provide 'the kind of freedom I have looked forward to' and would not accept anything less than the republic for which her husband had died. She voted against the Treaty in the Dáil on 7 January 1922 and lost her seat in the June 1922 elections. Despite chairing negotiations aimed at avoiding an Irish civil war, when fighting broke out Clarke was active in both anti-Treaty Cumann na mBan and the Anti-Treaty IRA with roles in communications, logistics, and fundraising.



A transcript of Kathleen Clarke's speech of 22 December 1921 to the Dáil supporting the motion of Éamon de Valera to reject the Treaty. You can learn more about this document (MS 49,883/42) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0649344>

Protector

While Kathleen Clarke took the anti-Treaty side during the Irish Civil War, she eventually made peace with the new Free State. Afterwards she continued her social work including fundraising trip to America for the Irish National Aid and Volunteers' Dependants' Fund in 1924, and membership of the National Graves Association board. Politically, Clarke was a founding member of Éamon de Valera's new political party, Fianna Fáil, in 1926. She was elected as a TD for Dublin North in June 1927 before serving in the Seanad from 1928 to 1936 and becoming Dublin's first woman Lord Mayor in 1939. Despite disagreeing strongly with de Valera over what she saw as the anti-woman attitudes of the 1937 constitution, she stayed in the party until 1943.

Kathleen Clarke was a relentless protector of her husband's reputation. She always maintained that Tom Clarke was in fact the first president of the provisional government, and not Patrick Pearse. In the lead up to the important fiftieth commemorations of the Easter Rising in 1966, she led a public campaign for the recognition of her husband's presidency. Having moved to Liverpool in 1965 to be with her son Emmet, Kathleen Clarke died on 29 September 1972, aged 94. She was given a state funeral in Dublin and is buried in Deansgrange Cemetery.



A 1941 photograph of Clarke as the first woman Lord Mayor of Dublin, seated at the centre of the group in a fur coat, glasses and hat. She was keen on removing all traces of past British authority from her office, including having portraits of British monarchs taken down from the Mansion House walls. You can learn more about this photograph (NPA SHE78) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000671008>

Conclusion

Kathleen Clarke was a leading politician, militant, and social campaigner throughout the Irish revolutionary period. Widow of 1916, mother of three, charity fundraiser and lifelong republican, she helped found important organisations during this period like the Irish Volunteers' Dependants' Fund, Cumann na mBan, and the Irish White Cross. Contributing to the fight for Irish freedom as a courier during the War of Independence, she later fought on the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War. As a politician, she was a long-serving Dublin Corporation councillor and elected to the Second Dáil. A vehement opponent of the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty Clarke spoke passionately during the Treaty debates and voted against it. Later she would be a founding figure in Fianna Fáil, serve as a TD and senator before becoming the first woman Lord Mayor of Dublin. Clarke used her public position to campaign for social change, including women's rights, workers' rights, and better access to education and healthcare for disadvantaged children. Although often suffering from poor health, Kathleen Clarke remained determined to protect the reputation of her husband Tom right up to her death in 1972.

Widow of 1916, mother of three, charity fundraiser and lifelong republican

17 Serpentine Road,
Ballsbridge,
Dublin 4.

Copy

August 19th, 1965.

Dear Eamon,

Having read your letter of the 6th inst., I feel that a frank and friendly discussion is both desirable and useful.

We are both in full agreement that Tom Clarke cared nothing for personal honours and that vanity had no place in his mind. His one ambition was to free Ireland from foreign domination.

I believe that we are both very anxious that no avoidable controversy should be allowed to arise which might mar the fitting celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising.

The proposed issuing of a coin or medal with Pearse's head on it is bound to lead to a needless public controversy for this would imply that Pearse was President. In the interest of historical accuracy this implication could not be allowed to pass unchallenged.

When the Military Council met before the Rising to sign the Proclamation three positions were created:- Tom Clarke, President, P.H.Pearse Commander-in-Chief and James Connolly, Commander of Dublin. Immediately after the meeting Tom Clarke told me what had happened at the meeting and he seemed very happy that his comrades thought so much of him. Again in Kilmainham Jail, a few hours before his death, he told me that when they arrived at the G.P.O. to take over, the other signatories with him stood back for him to shoot the lock in his position as President. Would a man of his character have told me that if it had not been so? Anyone knowing Tom Clarke or had the least knowledge of his life's work or his outlook would understand that he was not a man to resign to another the responsibilities of his Office. No dedicated man would do so; Tom Clarke was most certainly a dedicated man. You may notice how completely at variance his statements were with that in your letter in which you assert that he refused to be named President.

In my capacity as official confidant of the Supreme Council of the I.R.B. I was given detailed information of all their decisions and plans and the names of the people with whom I should communicate in the event of the members of the Supreme Council or the Military Council all being arrested or killed. I had to commit all this information accurately to memory. They were determined that the work would go on even if they were all dead.

/Over ...

A letter of 19 August 1965 to 'Eamon' from Clarke referring to her own role in the Easter Rising and asking for due recognition of her husband's appointment as President of the Provisional Government in 1916. You can learn more about this letter (MS 49,883/33/8) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlso00769145/HierarchyTree#page/1/mode/1up>



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