

## **Four Influential Ryan sisters of Tomcoole by Kayleigh Walker, Carla Harpur, Elizabeth Colfer, Sean Furlong, Madison Murphy, Billy Carroll**

The Ryan family of Tomcoole, Taghmon, Co. Wexford were a very notable family who played a massive part in Irish politics. John and Eliza Ryan lived on a farm of 150 acres where they reared twelve children. All twelve of the Ryan children received second level education and eleven of them went on to receive third level education.

Most remarkable was the Ryan's attitude to their daughters. At a time when most girls did not receive second level education, all of the Ryan daughters went to Loreto Abbey in Gorey and most of them attended University in Dublin. These women later were deeply involved in politics and were not afraid to stand up for their beliefs. We will now look at the lives of four of the Ryan daughters and their impact on Irish politics a century ago.

### **Mary Kate Ryan**

Mary Kate (Kit) Ryan was born on 31st October 1878.

She shared the nationalist views of her family. She was the second eldest in her family. Like her brothers and sisters she went to the local primary school and then attended Loreto Abbey in Gorey and Loreto College, St. Stephen's Green.

She studied at the Royal University of Ireland and got a degree in modern languages. She qualified as a teacher in Cambridge, England. Kit taught in England before returning to Ireland in 1909. She became a lecturer in University College Dublin.

Kit lived at 19 Ranelagh Road, and provided accommodation for her younger brothers and sisters. The house was a meeting place for nationalists. Kit was a member of the Gaelic League and was a Sinn Féin supporter.

After the 1916 Rising, Kit was arrested and imprisoned in Mountjoy. She was released after a number of weeks as she was unwell. She remained active in politics and UCD authorities were concerned that she was spreading her nationalist ideas. On 1st April 1918 Kit married Sean T. O'Ceallaigh. They had met during the 1916 Rising. They had no children.



### Wedding Photo of Séan Ó Ceallaigh

She worked for Dáil Eireann as a translator during the War of Independence. She was on the Anti-Treaty side, and was very annoyed that her sister Min married Pro-Treaty activist Richard Mulcahy.

In the late 1920s Kit was vice-president of the UCD Republican Club. She developed rheumatic heart disease and had to resign her job in 1934. She was confined to a wheelchair and sadly died while in Germany receiving treatment.

Mary Kate (Kit) Ryan was a very brave and influential Wexford woman.

### Nell Ryan

Ellen (Nell) Ryan was born on 5th July 1881 in Tomcoole, Co. Wexford. Ellen was the fourth eldest in the family. She was well educated at the local national school and as a boarder at Loreto Abbey, Gorey. She spent some years in Germany working as a Governess. Like the rest of her family, Nell was deeply involved in nationalist politics and fought for Irish Independence. Nell took part in the Easter Rising in 1916 and was imprisoned in Mountjoy at this time. During her time in prison, Nell wrote to friends to say that prison life wasn't too bad but it wasn't like home. She said that she had a visit from the priest and also received lovely boxes of sweets from friends. At one stage there were only five women prisoners in the jail. Nell was transferred to jail in England in June. On her release, she continued to fight for Irish independence.

Nell was in charge of Cumann na mBan in the South Wexford Brigade area. She often carried dispatches and helped men on the run. She showed great bravery. In 1922 she was arrested again and went on hunger strike. Before being jailed again, Nell was secretary of the Comhairle Dáil Ceantair of Sinn Féin from 1918 to 1922.

Following her release from jail, she became an active member of Fianna Fáil. She was also the first female member of Wexford County Council when very few women sat on County Councils. As well as this, she was chairperson of the Wexford Board of Health and was a member of Wexford Vocational Educational Committee. Nell was also a member of the Red Cross and a member of Wexford Harbour Board. Nell was known to stand up for her beliefs

and was great at putting her argument across in debates. She was also very intelligent and had a good sense of humour. Nell was a very generous person who never complained despite having stomach cancer as a result of the hunger strike while in Kilmainham Jail.

Nell died on 8th December 1959 and her funeral was attended by many Government Ministers and President Eamon de Valera.

## **Min Ryan**

Min Ryan (Mary Josephine Ryan) was born in Tomcoole, Taghmon, Co. Wexford in 1884.

After studying French, German and English in the Royal University of Dublin, Min graduated in 1908. Prior to moving to London to study, teach and organise a branch of Cumann na mBan at London University she was acquainted with Sean MacDiarmada.

After her return from London in 1914 Min came home to Wexford. In early 1915 she taught German in Rathmines Technical School. At this time she became one of the secretaries of Cumann na mBan, and often met Sean MacDiarmada.

It was through her eldest brother Father Martin Ryan that Min was first attracted to nationalist ideas. Father Martin would talk a lot about the language and Sinn Fein movements when he came home from Maynooth on holidays.

The Ryans were the only family in the locality that were interested in Sinn Fein. In her witness statement to the Bureau of Military History, Min said that if you talked about Sinn Fein, neighbours looked at you as “a bit queer with notions”.

She lived with her sister Mary-Kate at number 19 Ranelagh Road, where she was housekeeper. The sisters' house was frequently used as a meeting place for the Irish Republican Activists. Min was very involved in events during Easter Week.

There was great excitement before the Rising. Min was one of the founding members of Cumann na mBan. Cumann na mBan spent time making bandages before the Rising. Everyone knew something was going to happen. Every Easter all the Ryans went home to Wexford, but Seán MacDiarmada advised Min to stay, and look after her brother Jim. On Holy Thursday, Seán MacDiarmada sent Min with a dispatch to Sean Sinnott, the leader of the Wexford Volunteers.

On Easter Sunday, Min returned to Wexford, with news that the Rising had been called off. On Monday, Min was called to report to the city, as the Rising was taking place. At this stage, her sister, Phyllis, stayed at home, as there were a lot of guns in the house.

Min spent a lot of time in the GPO during Easter week. She spent her time with Tom Clarke, Seán MacDiarmada, Joseph Plunkett, and Michael Collins.

Min delivered a lot of messages and dispatches, including copies of the Proclamation, to the leaders' wives. She carried dispatches to Wexford and also carried the Countermand letter to call off the Rising.

She spent Thursday night with her sister, who was a nun. Her sister begged them to get Pádraig Pearse to call off the Rising. Min described how terrible it was to see the buildings in Dublin City Centre being burned. Following the Rising, the leaders of the Rising were imprisoned and executed. Min visited her fiancée Sean MacDiarmada in his prison cell shortly before his execution. In one of his final letters Seán wrote about Min “Miss Ryan, who in all probability would have been my wife”.

After the rising, Min was sent to New York to inform John Devoy, the Irish-American Republican Activist, about the rising.

In 1919, Min married Richard Mulcahy who later became head of the Pro-Treaty side in the Civil War. As a result, her family were not happy as the Ryans were on the Anti-Treaty side in the war. Min's siblings tried to stop her marrying Richard Mulcahy but Min went ahead with the marriage. Richard Mulcahy was elected to the Dáil in 1918 and took over as Minister of Defence when Michael Collins died in 1922.

Min withdrew from politics after she got married and raised a family of six children. Unfortunately she stopped visiting Tomcoole and the split in the family continued long after the Civil War. Unfortunately, the split in her family was common to many Irish families after the Civil War.



**Min Ryan and Richard Mulcahy**

Min died in Dublin on 11th April 1977. Min Ryan is well remembered in Wexford with a park, dedicated to her memory, opened in the summer of 2020. The Mulcahy family kindly donated €200,000 towards the development of the park.

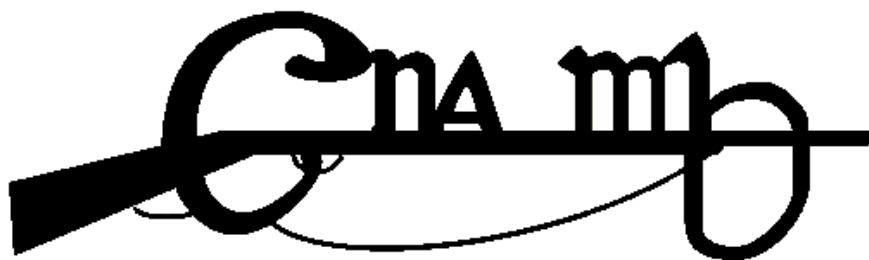


### **Min Ryan Park**

#### **Phyllis Ryan**

Phyllis Ryan was the youngest of the Ryan children. She was born on 28th February 1895 and like her sisters, she was a boarder in Loreto Abbey, Gorey. Phyllis was one of the first women to attend the National University and she received a Master of Science degree. Phyllis was an analytical chemist and set up her own business in Dublin. She also worked for Wexford County Council and was responsible for the analysis of milk for Dublin Corporation.

Like many of her family, Phyllis was deeply involved in nationalist politics and was captain of the Ranelagh Craobh of Cumann na mBan.



### **Cumann na mBan Logo**

She was only twenty one years old when she was on duty in the GPO during the Easter Rising. She carried dispatches for Padraig Pearse from the GPO during the Rising. When her sister Mary Kate (Kit) died, she married her late sister's husband Seán T. Ó Ceallaigh. From then on she preferred to be addressed by her name in Irish – Phyllis Bean Uí Cheallaigh. In 1945, Seán T. became president. Phyllis resigned her job and went to live at Áras an Uachtarán. At the time it was not in good repair but she made it comfortable to live in. Phyllis was described as a very affable first lady.

After his time as president, Seán and Phyllis retired to County Wicklow. Phyllis died on 19th November 1983 and is buried with her husband in Glasnevin Cemetery.

As you can see the Ryan girls showed great bravery throughout their lives and had a huge role to play in politics one hundred years ago.



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