

2016 Decade of Centenaries projects

Title of project:

Grace Gifford Plunkett

Category for which you wish to be entered (i.e. 1916, World War 1; Women in the Revolutionary Period, local/regional category):

Women in the Revolutionary Period

Name(s) of class / group of students / individual student submitting the project:

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School roll number (this should be provided if possible):

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Grace Gifford Plunkett 1888 - 1955



"Oh Grace just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger

They'll take me out at dawn and I will die

With all my love I place this wedding ring upon your finger

There won't be time to share our love for we must say goodbye"

Chorus from "Grace" written by Frank and Seán O' Meara 1985

¹ Image Courtesy of Glasnevin Museum on Twitter #Onthisdayin1888 Grace Gifford Plunkett was born (cited 06.01.2016)

For many Irish people the tragic story of Grace Gifford Plunkett and her heroic husband, Joseph Mary Plunkett, was first told to them through this ballad. The story of the two lovers who not only delayed their wedding to allow Joseph to play his fateful role in the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin, but who also married one another in Kilmainham Gaol several hours before Joseph's execution on the 4th May 1916, struck a chord with not only the public of the twentieth century but continues to do so today, well into the twenty first. The couple were both twenty eight years old when they married one another, and Grace last saw Joseph in his cell shortly before he was shot. Grace's bravery and unwavering love for one of the heroes of the Rising saw her become a tragic heroine in the eyes of the Irish public and she subsequently has been linked with Sarah Curran, beloved of Robert Emmett, who was shot for taking part in an armed rebellion for Irish freedom in 1803.

Grace was born to Frederick and Isabelle (née Burton) Gifford on the 4th March 1888 in 8 Temple Villas in Rathmines, Dublin. She was a twin, the second youngest of twelve children and was raised in the Protestant religion alongside her sisters. Her brothers however were raised as Roman Catholics as her parent's marriage was a mixed one - following societal rules the boys followed their father's religion, the girls their mother's. Both her parents were strongly Unionist in their belief and Grace has said that the influence of her Catholic and Nationalist nurse-maids had a huge affect on her and her sisters - four of the Gifford sister's later became rebels who supported the Irish struggle for freedom.

Grace began her formal education alongside her younger sister Sydney in Alexandra School, in Dublin's city centre. Grace then became a day student of Dublin Metropolitan School in 1904 aged sixteen, following in the footsteps of her older brother Gabriel Paul and sister Ada. Grace studied under the watchful eyes of William Orpen, who regarded Grace as one of his most talented pupils and who admired both her artistic talents as well as her strong and

humorous personality. Grace won two prizes in her first year studying at the school - one for "Drawing on the blackboard and Freehand drawing" the other for "Drawing on the blackboard and Model Drawing" Her prizes were presented to her by Viceroy Lord Aberdeen on 27th February 1906. Following on from this success, Grace moved to London in 1907 and 1908 and continued her studies of Art in the Slade School of Art. She was a student of their full-time Fine Arts course and resided in 113, Gower Street.

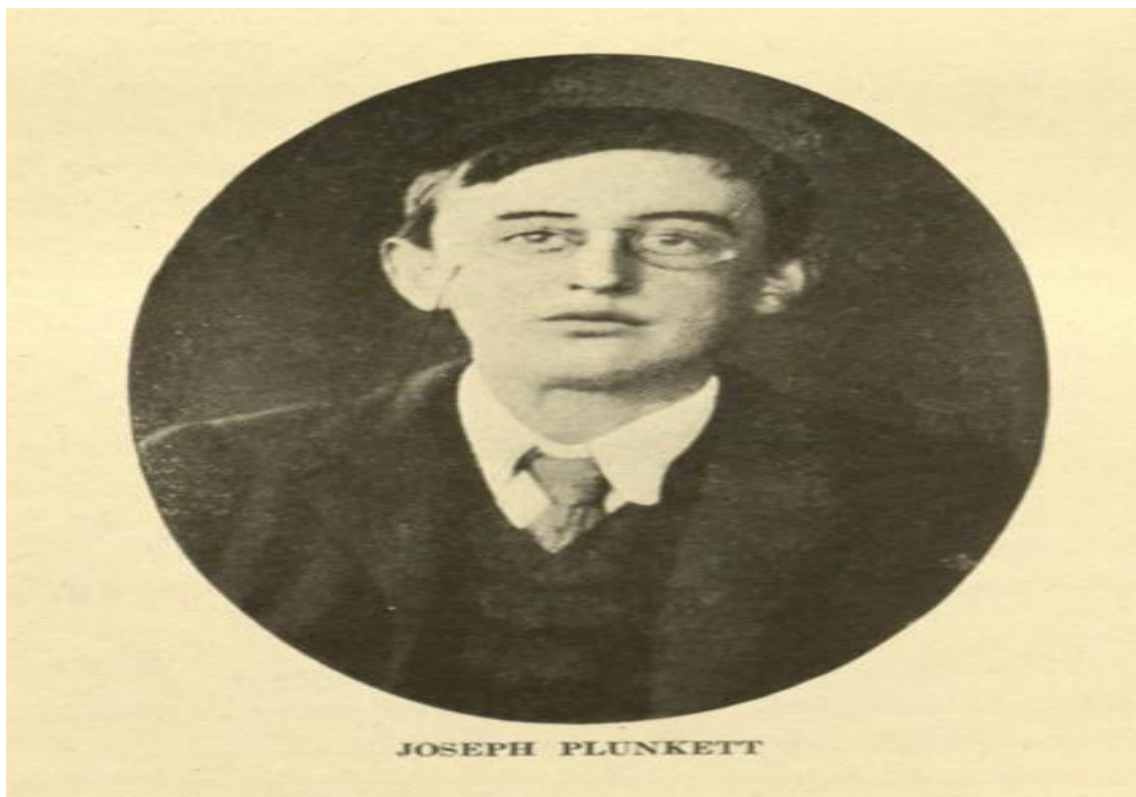
As a result of Grace's sister Sydney's writing material, the Gifford sisters were invited to meet Arthur Griffith at Martello Tower in Sandycove, by poet Seamus O' Sullivan. The sisters were seen as an attractive, stylish and lively bunch, whose presence in the Sinn Féin office on 6 Harcourt Street, Dublin was said to make it like a 'flower garden'. The girls were so popular it was said that their father Frederick would remark "What is the matter? I hope you are not ill?" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 9] should one of them remain at home for an evening. During this time Mrs Dryhurst, a female Irish journalist, began leading the Gifford girls into new social circles. The girls went along with Mrs Dryhurst to the newly opened St Enda's school on Oakley Road, Ranelagh, Dublin in 1908 and this brought them into contact with some future leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, although Grace's future husband was not in attendance. Upon their arrival they were greeted by Thomas MacDonagh, who was encouraged by Mrs Dryhurst to "fall in love with one of these girls and marry her". MacDonagh swiftly replied "that would be easy - the only difficulty is deciding which one" [Grace Gifford Plunkett and Irish Freedom, Maire O'Neill, page 10].

Following her acquaintance with Mrs. Dryhurst, Grace soon began to notice the hardships and poverty around her in the streets of Dublin. In 1910, Grace, alongside two of her sisters Muriel and Sydney, volunteered to help distribute and cook meals for starving school

children in Dublin. This campaign was established and run by James Connolly and Maud Gonne. The girls, alongside their other sister Nellie, supported the "Irish Women's Franchise League" which was founded by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in 1908 in order to use aggressive tactics to campaign for women's votes. In 1911 Grace opposed the "Loyal Address" given by the Dublin Corporation to King George V and his consort Queen Mary. During this time, Grace became a frequent visitor to United Arts Club founded by Count Casimir Markievicz and his wife Constance at their home in 44 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin. Grace struggled to find work as an artist during this period and lived at home with her parents as she was unmarried.

Joseph Mary Plunkett was born on the 21st November 1887 in 26 Upper Fitzwilliam Street to Count George and Countess Josephine (née Cranny) Plunkett. Joseph was born into a distinguished Catholic family who had played a prominent role in the history of Ireland for over six hundred years. Joseph was one of seven children and was known to his family as Joe. He was described as a "delicate child" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 19] due to his ill health during his childhood. Before 1900, Joe had suffered from both pneumonia and pleurisy and as a result of this his mother took him to France due to its warmer climate. Joe returned home to Dublin with tubercular glands, which left heavy and permanent scars upon their removal. His poor health caused him to spend a lot of time travelling abroad in countries such as Italy, France, Sicily and Malta. From his travels, Joe became a very gifted linguist and was fluent in several languages, including Arabic. In Dublin in 1910, Joe began to learn Irish in order to sit the matriculation examination of the National University which would allow him to study medicine or science. His mother found him an Irish tutor, who was Thomas MacDonagh, assistant principal of St Enda's school for boys in Ranelagh. The pair became good friends as they had "many ideals, tastes and personal qualities in common" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 21]

such as poetry, literature and the theatre. Moreover, both believed in the achievement of an Independent Ireland through armed struggle.



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In 1911 Plunkett published his first collection of poetry entitled "The Circle and The Sword" and dedicated it to MacDonagh. In his collection Joe foretold his own death when he wrote: "Rougher than death the road I choose/ Yet shall my feet not walk astray/ Through dark my way I shall not lose/ For this way is the darkest way" Joe also touched on the notion of blood sacrifice when he stated "Praise God if this my blood fulfills the doom / When you, dark rose, shall redden into bloom." By 1913 all of Joe's actions were directed towards an armed rebellion for a Free Ireland. Following the 1913 strike and lockout Joe's political views had become more solidified and he joined the Irish Volunteers stating that his health may prevent him from being "much of a soldier" but that he was willing to use his newspaper, *The Irish Review*, as a propaganda platform for the volunteers. Following this, Joe was elected to the

² www.irisheasterrising.com (cited 10.01.2016)

executive of the Volunteers and by May 1914 the organisation had about seventy five thousand members nationwide. Following the example of the Ulster Volunteers, the Irish Volunteers successfully gained arms by several gun running efforts in Howth, Dublin and Kilcoole, Wicklow between July and August 1914. This was followed by a split in the Volunteers due to the outbreak of World War One in Europe, as the majority of the Volunteers followed the Irish Parliamentary leaders, John Redmond, call for the Volunteers to go "wherever the firing line extends" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 24].

Following this call there were only eleven thousand Volunteers left in Ireland. Despite this, these men were still determined to rise and strike for Irish freedom, especially as the British were distracted with the war in Europe. The path towards revolution soon became inevitable as Plunkett became Director of Military Operations in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, with other key roles being filled by the likes of Thomas MacDonagh and Pádraig Pearse. It was this fateful role that sealed his tragic destiny.

Joe and Grace first met in late 1914 or early 1915 on the steps of St. Enda's school in Ranelagh. The pair were introduced by Mrs. Dryhurst but their romantic relationship did not begin for some time. Grace's acquaintance with Joe was deepened due to her interest in Roman Catholicism and she frequently visited the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin and listened to their Palestine choir. Joe was deeply involved with the Volunteers at this time and this led to the separation of the pair, as Joe was sent to Germany in order to assist Sir Roger Casement in getting arms and men in Berlin for the Irish cause. Joe, as a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, met with the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollwee, as well as Irish Prisoners of War who refused to join Joe due to their allegiance to the Home Rule cause

and Britain. Joe travelled under the name "James Malcolm" and following this semi successful trip to Germany, Joe travelled on to New York, where he met with members of Clan na Gael. He also met with Grace's younger sister Sydney. Following his return to Ireland, the couple exchanged multiple letters and on the 2nd December 1915, Joe proposed to Grace via letter staying "I do love you, I hope to become more worthy of you. Will you marry me?" Grace accepted this proposal but the pair decided to keep their engagement a secret due to the fact that Grace's mother, Josephine, did not approve of the match. On the 11th February an announcement of the engagement was published in the "Irish Life" magazine.

In preparation for an Easter wedding, Grace began to convert to Catholicism and on 7th April 1916 in University Church in St. Stephen's Green, she was formally received by Father James Sherwin. Their wedding was planned to be a joint one, with Joe's sister Geraldine and her fiancé and was set to take place on Easter Sunday, 23rd April. On the 19th of April, Grace helped Joe to transcribe the "Castle Document" and believed until she died that it was true. On Saturday 22nd April, one day before the Rising, Joe had an operation on his glands and left his nursing home with bandages still around his neck. Michael Collins visited Grace that night with a gun and money from Joe, with a note giving her instructions on how to use the gun should she need it. On Easter Sunday, Joe wrote a will, witnessed by his brother George, in which he "give(s) and bequeath(s) everything of which (he) is possessed or will become possessed to Grace Evelyn Gifford" [quote from copy documents received from the National Library - Grace's papers].

On Easter Monday, Joe met with the Volunteers at Liberty Hall and alongside Pádraig Pearse and James Connolly he marched to the General Post Office, where he fought, until the building was evacuated due to extensive damage. Grace's sister, Muriel, spoke with Joe in

the G.P.O. during the Rising, while searching for her husband, Thomas MacDonagh. During this conversation, Joe told Muriel that he wanted the marriage with Grace to go ahead, even if it was to take place in jail. The following Saturday morning the rebels surrendered from 16 Moore Street led by Pearse's brother Willie, to the Parnell Monument on O'Connell Street. They were then taken to the Forecourt of the Rotunda Hospital, where they spent the night. This was especially hard on Plunkett, due to his ill health, Connolly, due to his injured leg and Seán MacDermott, who had a limp due to a bout of polio in 1912.

The following day they were transferred to solitary confinement in Richmond Barracks, with the exception of Connolly who was sent to the infirmary in Dublin Castle. On the same day, Sunday 30th April, the remaining leaders, DeValera, MacDonagh and Ceannt surrendered, which led to the end of the Rising in Dublin. General John Maxwell, Military Governor of Ireland, wanted to give the rebel leaders "rapid and stern justice" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 41]. On the 3rd of May 1916 the executions began with Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh being shot at 3.30am. Upon hearing the news that Joseph was to be shot on May 4th, Grace bought two wedding rings from a jewellery shop on Grafton Street. She then went to Kilmainham Gaol, where she arrived at 6pm but was not shown to the chapel until 11.30pm.

Father Eugene McCarthy performed the jail wedding with two soldiers acting as witnesses. Grace's sister Nellie was present in the jail due to her involvement in the Rising and was not therefore allowed to be present. Joe's handcuffs were removed for the ceremony but the pair were not allowed to speak with the exception of their vows. Following the end of the ceremony, Joe was returned to his cell and Grace was not allowed to see him again until two o'clock the following morning, when the couple was given ten minutes to say goodbye. Grace

later described this moment saying "we who never had enough time to say what we wanted to each other found that in the last ten minutes we couldn't talk at all" [Easter Widows, Sinéad McCooole, pg 250]. At 3.30am Joe was shot, in a chair due to his illness, alongside Willie Pearse, Edward Daly and Michael O'Hanrahan.



The bodies of the executed were never released to their families and instead were buried in a mass grave in the military graveyard of Arbour Hill, next to Arbour Hill prison and the Royal Barracks. Following Joe's execution Grace was driven to her sister Katie's house as her mother disapproved of the marriage and banned her from living in the Gifford house. The marriage was announced on May 7th in the Irish Times and following this Grace's new father-in-law, Count Plunkett, told his daughter Geraldine to take Grace into her home in Larkfield. It was here that Geraldine claims that Grace had a miscarriage, although this cannot be confirmed as there was nobody else to witness this event.

Public opinion towards the rebels was slowly changing and there were condemnations over the shootings of both Plunkett and Connolly, due to their ill health at the time of their

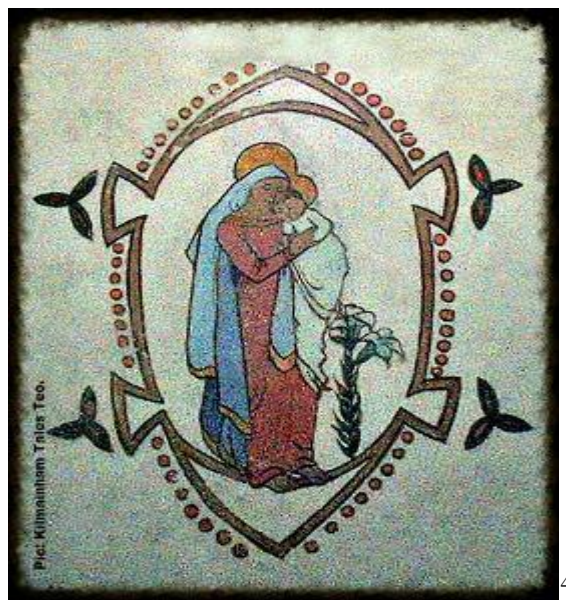
³ Stonebreakers Yard at Kilmainham Gaol, Dublin, site of the executions of the leaders of the 1916 Rising (www.hallamor.org) cited 06.01.2006

executions. The story of the prison wedding was reported all over the world and six weeks after the execution of Joe, Grace gave an interview to Eileen Moore, one of five journalists sent to Ireland in June 1916 in search of uncensored news.

This was how Grace became a tragic symbol of the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. After the Rising, Grace dedicated herself to Sinn Féin policies through her artwork, as well as working commercially in order to provide for herself. In February 1917, she campaigned for Count Plunkett through art in a by-election in North Roscommon, in which he successfully won a seat for Sinn Féin. On the 19th April 1917, Grace was elected onto the executive of the Sinn Féin convention, one of only four female electees. But tragedy struck again for Grace, when her sister Muriel drowned in August 1917 at Skerries. She left behind two orphaned children Donagh, aged five, and Barbara, not yet two years old. Her death was widely reported and Grace was deeply affected by her tragic and sudden passing. Death struck the family again that September, when Grace's father Frederick died following a stroke. He left Grace £500 in his will, which helped to finance Grace for some time. In 1919, Grace published 17 of her cartoons in a book "*To Hold As Twere*". Her collection was "widely reviewed and warmly praised" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 56] Newspapers such as the *Irish Times*, *Evening Herald* and *Irish Life* all contained reviews and Grace was compared to the famous cartoonist "Dicky" Doyle.

In the same year Grace featured in a propaganda film for the nationalist cause of a Free Ireland, in which she is seen purchasing Republican bonds from Michael Collins outside St. Enda's school in Ranelagh. Grace viewed the Treaty of 1921 as a betrayal to the Proclaimed Republic from 1916 that Joe and others had died for. The Treaty was ratified on 7th January 1922 and in that following March, Grace wrote to two newspapers, *The Republic*

and the *Irish Independent*, in which she explained her Anti-Treaty stance and "viewed the republic proclaimed in 1916 as a reality which should not be abandoned" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 69]. Despite her Anti-Treaty stance, Grace appealed to the public to remember that both Éamon De Valera and Arthur Griffith were Patriots of Ireland and expressed her hope that "there would be no recriminations against them" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 69]. This was a generous view to have at the time but over the course of the following months, Grace's view hardened to become even more staunchly opposed to the Treaty. Grace was in attendance at Cathal Brugha's funeral and afterwards handed out handwritten notes to those who had formerly supported the anti-treaty side but now favoured the Irish Free State. On February 6th 1923 Grace was arrested and imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol due to her association with the anti treaty side. She served a six month sentence and passed her time by painting on the walls of the cells. One of her most famous paintings, known as the "Kilmainham Madonna", still remains on the walls of the cell today. It depicts the image of Holy Mary with Baby Jesus in her arms.



⁴ The Kilmainham Madonna (downloaded from www.kilmainhamtales.ie) cited 06.01.2016

During her sentence, Grace commemorated the seven year anniversary of the Rising in the execution yard of Kilmainham Gaol. Grace played a prominent role in this ceremony, in which she laid a wreath adorned with the tricolour flag and spoke about her executed husband. Other women with relatives of the Rising being held in the jail, such as Nora Connolly, also played a prominent role in the ceremony. Following the ceremony, the women entered the jail where Plunkett's poem "Treason" was recited and Pearse's play "The Singer" was performed. The evening was concluded with the singing of "The Soldier's Song" (Amhrán na bhFiann) which is now the National Anthem of the Republic of Ireland.

On the 3rd May, Grace remembered Joe by sketching a short biographical picture of him from memory in which she praised his noble character and recalled what he believed a free Ireland could achieve. Grace was released on the 30th August 1923. She stayed with her sister Katie on the North Side of Dublin following her release and was bitter towards the Irish Free State as she felt they "has betrayed the cause for which her husband had given his life" [Grace Gifford and Irish Freedom, Maire O' Neill, page 74].

Grace resumed her commercial work and took a keen interest in the lives of her nieces and nephew living in Ireland, Donagh, Barbara and Maeve. Grace moved to Westmooreland Street for some time and then onto 15, Parnell Street. She had no wish to remarry despite her many admirers. Her cartoons in 1920 depicted the political events of the time. Grace kept in close contact with De Valera among other Republicans and when De Valera came to power as Taoiseach in 1932, Grace received a Civil List pension which meant she was no longer reliant on her earnings as an artist to finance her. Following this, she rented the top floor apartment of 11 Nassau Street.

As time passed, Grace's contact with the Plunkett's gradually declined. In December 1934 Grace began legal proceedings against them. This was because they refused to honour Joe's will in which he left everything to Grace. Despite Joe's will being invalid due to the fact that he only had one witness and was married to Grace after writing it, the Plunkett's settled Grace's claim outside of the courtroom and paid her £700 and her legal fees. This was possibly because the Plunkett's were embarrassed about the potential publicity of the case should it go to court. Formal consent of this settlement was approved on 30th March 1935 but this court case proved to estrange Grace even more from her in-law's.

In the same year, Grace wrote to the Irish Press saying that she was keeping all her mementos of Joe, including his diary from 1916 and the "Castle Document", until a suitable home such as a museum was provided to house them. Grace eventually donated the majority of these items to the National Library and Kilmainham Gaol. She also donated all her papers, including love letters exchanged between herself and Joe, to the National Library but this was not carried out until after her death.

In the late 1940's Grace began to suffer with health problems regarding her heart. In 1950, Ann Burke and her mother assisted Grace to St.Vincent's Hospital in St.Stephen's Green. Grace was too weak to carry her case but was reportedly in good spirits. De Valera came to visit her during this hospital stay and following this stay, Grace was transferred to a nursing home in which she was annoyed at her lack of independence. When she was discharged from the nursing home, Grace moved from her flat in Nasseu Street due to its many stairs and spent the rest of her life moving between apartments and nursing homes. Her poor health limited her working ability and Grace became more demanding and ill tempered and was reported to have fought with her close friends. Grace died suddenly and alone on 13th December 1955 aged 67 years old. She died of heart failure in her apartment at 52 South

Richmond Street. Grace had been a widow for thirty nine years. She was removed to St. Kevin's Church in Harrington Street the next day and the Venerable Archdeacon Sherwin said her requiem mass. Many people representing the various parts of Grace's life were present at her funeral. Chief mourners were her sisters Nellie, Sydney and Katie, her nephews Donagh and Finian and her nieces Barbara and Maeve. Jack, Fiona and Geraldine Plunkett were in attendance as well as President Seán. T. O'Kelly and his wife Phyllis. Other mourners included Seán MacBride, Mr Harry Colley, Judge Fawsit, Nora O'Brien (née Connolly), Rónán Ceannt and Grace's doctor Éamon O'hOgain.

Grace was buried with full military honours with the tricolour being draped over her coffin. She was buried in the Plunkett family grave in Prospect Cemetery, Glasnevin with the Irish Army giving her the final salute using a firing party and bugles. All Irish Newspapers reported her death, as well as her tragic marriage and artistic talents. In my opinion, I think her nephew, Donagh, summarised Grace's influence on the people of Ireland brilliantly when he said "What Ireland will remember longest is the scene in Kilmainham prison where she married, by the light of two guttering candles, the young man who was to be executed in a few hours. So she took her place with Sarah Curran in Ireland's romantic heart. Now she is dead, but as long as Ireland has a history, she will be remembered."

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