

Dorothy Macardle: ‘The Irish Republic’ author who was much more than de Valera’s propagandist

Dorothy Macardle was much more than de Valera's mouthpiece: she was a politically persuasive and stoically independent woman, writes Leeann Lane, the author of a new biography

Dorothy Macardle is best known for writing the first full-scale account of the Irish revolutionary period from an anti-Treaty viewpoint, *The Irish Republic* (1937). She is also known now, to an increasing extent, for the Gothic fiction she produced in the 1940s and early 1950s as a result of the republication of same by Tramp Press. A teacher, a playwright, a novelist and a political propagandist, Macardle was a multifaceted woman who has remained too often below the radar of historical recognition.

Commissioned by Éamon de Valera, *The Irish Republic* established Macardle as one of the key Irish political propagandists of her era. However, it would be reductive and historically inaccurate to conflate Macardle's political viewpoints with those of de Valera or to view her as someone who docilely served his political desire to legitimise his stance on the Treaty.

While Macardle's political relationship with de Valera was one she valued and maintained throughout her life, she was not merely a subsidiary or helpmate to him; she was a strong and principled woman never afraid to assert her point of view. By considering her political thought purely through the prism of de Valera, the paradigm of women in a supportive rather than proactive role in the history of the Irish revolution, and the state that formed in its wake, is reinforced yet again. It was significant, and it needs to be highlighted, that it was a woman who was tasked with such an important work of political propaganda by de Valera. Political influence could be achieved outside of Dáil and Seanad politics, as Macardle's life demonstrated.

For a propagandist so centrally associated with the revolutionary period, when the 1916 Rising broke out, Dorothy Macardle was in Stratford-upon-Avon, teaching and immersing herself in the world of Shakespeare. The daughter of the constitutional nationalist and Dundalk brewery owner Thomas Callan Macardle and his English wife, Minnie, Dorothy grew up in affluent surroundings. She attended Alexandra College and was one of the first cohort of female students to enter UCD. In a series of radio broadcasts on the Irish national station in 1956, Macardle was concerned with understanding what made her "a rebel", charting her trajectory from "the meekest prig of a child, accepting my English mother's orthodoxies and deep loyalties as my own" to the woman who entered Mountjoy Jail on November 9, 1922, as a republican prisoner. Her Irish 'awakening' followed the trajectory of

so many of her generation in republican politics as she moved from cultural nationalism to assume an advanced nationalist-political perspective in the period after 1916. Macardle's immersion in the world of Dublin theatre saw her come into contact with women such as Maud Gonne and Countess Markievicz, growing friendships that influenced her republican 'conversion'.

She joined Cumann na mBan and Sinn Féin in late 1918/early 1919. Adopting an anti-Treaty position, she utilised her literary abilities in the area of propaganda, writing for Irish Freedom and the Irish Bulletin. On November 9, 1922, she was arrested at the Sinn Féin headquarters and spent six months in the Civil War sites of incarceration.

Imprisonment changed the course of Macardle's life. In jail, she was dismissed from the Pfeiffer lecturing post she had held in Alexandra College since 1918 and was forced to face the vista of an uncertain future. She attempted to rationalise her loss by referring to her lack of republican credentials: this sacrifice was necessary to bear witness to her commitment to the Republic.

Following her release from prison, she, like other anti-Treaty activists such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, found herself without a job and opposed to the state that was in the process of formation. She had witnessed the suffering of her fellow inmates and experienced personal loss while her health had suffered due to hunger striking and the punitive conditions in the various sites of her incarceration. Maybe because of the extent of her sacrifice, Macardle refused to concede defeat and centrally located herself within the republican nexus.

Following her release from prison, she returned to the use of her pen and her intellect in defence of the Republic. Her short-story collection *Earth-Bound* (1924) and *Tragedies of Kerry* (1924) each provide central narratives informed by the revolutionary period, her anti-Treaty position and her experience of imprisonment. Macardle's political life and writings ran parallel with the development of Ireland from ardent separatist activism to Civil War to the establishment of Ireland as a "sovereign, independent republic in all but name" by 1937. Her work illuminates anti-Treaty politics and the political debates of the Civil War from a female perspective. Her political trajectory after the cessation of Civil War hostilities facilitates an understanding of a key political perspective in the formation of the Irish State after 1922. This transition is evident in Macardle's journalistic writings, which shift from support for Sinn Féin in the immediate aftermath of her release from prison in May 1923 to an endorsement of Fianna Fáil's gradualist, subversive approach to achieving a republic, following assumption of governmental power in 1932. Macardle was herself centrally immersed in the changing discourse and debate as to what constituted an authentic republican nation and how it could and should be achieved.

Two years after the publication of *The Irish Republic*, Macardle's willingness to dissent from de Valera when she found herself at odds with his viewpoint was evident in her move to London during World War II. She opposed the Fianna Fáil government's policy of neutrality and worked in England with those displaced as a consequence of wartime conflict. Similarly, although largely supportive of de Valera's approach to achieving independence after 1932, Macardle was critical of the way the 1936 Conditions of Employment Act and the 1937 Constitution restricted women's roles in the public sphere, most notably in the area of access to paid employment. Macardle's forceful objection to the rigid alignment of women with domestic duties was encoded in her four novels of the 1940s and 1950s. Even more than the realist *The Seed Was Kind* (1944), Macardle's three Gothic novels, *The Uninvited* (1941),

The Unforeseen (1945) and Dark Enchantment (1953), confront the confinement of women in the domestic space under the new constitution and explore the position of women under patriarchal marriage arrangements. She was particularly concerned to interrogate contemporary Irish constructions of the good and bad mother.

In Dark Enchantment, the legacy of World War II exerts a presence in the French village in the person of the Romany gypsy Terka, who together with others from the area - notably the local innkeeper, René - had been part of the Maquis, rural guerrilla bands comprising freedom fighters. In focusing on this element of the French resistance, Macardle can be seen to be making a link to the guerrilla warfare that was central to the Irish War of Independence and the Civil War. In the postwar period, Terka finds herself an outcast in the village. Former comrades isolated her, fearing what they believed were her supernatural powers. Macardle, by contrast, was in no way a forgotten activist - her writing and propaganda had placed her firmly within the political elite of her time.

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'Dark Enchantment' by Dorothy Macardle has been reissued and available for order through Tramp Press