
The Public Life of Dorothy Macardle

BY DONAL HALL

DOROTHY MACARDLE was a historian whose best-known work, *The Irish Republic*, an account of the Irish War of Independence and Civil War, is now disregarded in academia because of its pro-Éamon de Valera bias. She was a founder member of Fianna Fáil and a critic of de Valera's social legislation; a republican who broadcast pro-British propaganda during World War II; a Shakespearean scholar; a pamphleteer, poet, propagandist, journalist, socialist, internationalist, feminist, Gothic novelist; the list goes on. After her death in

1959, as the memory of her faded, her books went out of print and her reputation waned. The last decade has seen a growth of interest in Macardle: three of her novels have been republished, conferences and exhibitions on her life have been held in Dublin and in her home town of Dundalk, County Louth.

Leeann Lane.

DOROTHY MACARDLE

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Dorothy Macardle's father, Thomas, was a respected nationalist businessman

from Dundalk, her mother, Minnie, was an imperialist from England; Macardle herself maintained that her initial interest in the nationalist cause was influenced by the poetry of W. B. Yeats and the plays of the Abbey Theatre. When exactly Dorothy's conversion to republicanism occurred is not clear—it was a gradual process, and we are informed that it was influenced by her friendships with Countess Markievicz and Maude Gonne MacBride, whom she first met in Dublin's theatrical circles in 1917. An assertion in a 2007 biography of Macardle by Nadia Clare Smith, and also in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, that in late 1918 or early 1919 Dorothy became a

member of Cumann na mBan is repeated in this book. The radicalization of Dorothy's politics is fundamental to Leeann Lane's account of her rejection of her parents' political beliefs and her estrangement from her family. Writer Peter Beresford-Ellis, who has yet to produce his own long-promised biography of Macardle, is emphatic that Dorothy was not in Cumann na mBan (*Evening Echo*, 1 September, 2007), and as her name does not appear on the nominal rolls of Cumann na mBan held in the Military Archives, there must be some doubt over her membership of that organization.

According to Dr. Lane, the family

estrangement intensified when Macardle took the anti-Treaty side during the Irish Civil War and was arrested and imprisoned. Thomas and Winnie made repeated representations, much to the Dorothy's mortification, to the Irish government, pressing for her release. This does not suggest personal or total estrangement on both sides. Dr. Lane argues unconvincingly and at some length that their representations were by turn, submissive and patriarchal, missing the point that underplaying the seriousness of Dorothy's political opinions was tactically the only card that Thomas and Minnie Macardle could play. Her release was hardly going to be secured if they confirmed she was a strident republican.

Dr. Lane is more sure-footed in her exploitation of a jail journal kept by Macardle which was uncovered while researching the de Valera papers in the UCD Archives. She kept this journal while in prison in 1922-23, and in a skillful interweaving of this and other primary material, Dr. Lane constructs a convincing narrative of Macardle's experiences of the inhuman conditions that women republican prisoners endured in captivity during the Civil War, undermined by their own priggishness that made personal relationships fraught. Macardle was convinced of her own intellectual superiority over most of her fellow inmates, considering them to be "less interesting, less rich than my English friends" (38), and in return, they strongly disliked her (37). Released in May 1923, due to ill-health, according to Macardle herself, and virtually friendless, her jail sojourn strengthened her republican credentials, at least to her own satisfaction, beset as she was with self-criticism that she was a relatively late convert to the cause.

Reinvigorated, Macardle became a salaried employee of Sinn Féin, churning out, with others, republican propaganda which, Dr. Lane reveals, prompted the International Red Cross to send in 1923 a

delegation to examine the conditions under which republican prisoners were held (101). Lane does not record that the Red Cross gave the Irish government a clean bill of health, declined to look into women prisoners' conditions, and firmly repulsed a republican delegation which landed at their door in Geneva to protest. In 1924 Macardle published a short monograph: *Tragedies of Kerry*, an examination of National Army atrocities in Kerry during the Civil War. According to Dr. Lane many of the accounts were sensationalized and fictionalized, and concludes that Macardle was a politician and propagandist before she was a historian—a pointer to the later criticism of her major work, *The Irish Republic*. Appointed director of publicity on the foundation of the Fianna Fáil party in early 1926, she soon resigned that position on health grounds and then left the party executive when Fianna Fáil TDs took the oath of allegiance and entered the Dáil in August 1927. Macardle, nevertheless, remained an enthusiastic supporter and friend of de Valera while being critical of the constitutional and legislative changes introduced in the 1930s that diminished the status of women in society. Lane asserts that Macardle's superior education and exposure to culture, left her better able than others to deal with state engendered discrimination against women (13)—that the resilience of the overwhelming mass of Irish women should be dismissed in such a manner is surprising. According to Dr. Lane, one occasion when her access to de Valera might have paid dividends was during the controversy over proposals in the draft 1937 Constitution which emphasized the importance of the domestic role of women. Macardle, while publicly associating with feminist criticism, soft-pedaled in private correspondence with de Valera, aware that his obduracy would not lead to any substantive reconsideration.

Nobody's life is entirely consistent, and one example of inconsistency in Macardle's was that she was a member of the International PEN Club, founded to foster intellectual exchange among writers worldwide, yet in 1926 she was among a group of women who disrupted performances of Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* in the Abbey Theatre. Historian Maria Luddy considered that the play's realistic depiction of the slums of Dublin was too brutal for the middle-class protestors (*Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940*). As Lane points out, while the feminist campaign in the 1930s against legislative and constitutional changes was voluble, the poor polling results for feminist candidates in the 1938 and 1943 general elections showed that the concerns of this small coterie did not resonate with the public.

Although she was a harsh critic of British imperialism, Macardle campaigned against fascism in the 1930s, and during the Second World War she decamped to London to disseminate pro-British propaganda on the BBC. How this well-known republican propagandist actually managed to secure this appointment is not discussed. While in London Macardle published a popular gothic novel, *Uneasy Freehold* (1941), later renamed *The Uninvited*, which was made into a Hollywood film, and another novel set at the time of the Munich crises, *The Seed was Kind* (1944), which wasn't. Retrofitting interpretations of her fiction to fit with known events or opinions can be a hazardous occupation but Dr. Lane approaches it with confidence. A third novel, *Dark Enchantment* (1953) is discussed in some detail in the context of Macardle's views on the future of humanity. In a chapter on critiquing gender roles, *The Uninvited*, *The Seed was Kind* and *The Unforeseen* (1945) are examined in even greater detail and in these passages, the reader would benefit from having some

familiarity with Macardle's fiction. There is a missed opportunity to compare and contrast the artistic career of her brother Donald, who was a successful producer, director and actor, on stage and screen, and whose debut novel, *Thursday's Child* which was published in the same year as *The Uninvited* (1941) was also made into a successful feature film.

This biography is essentially an examination of the public Dorothy Macardle, her private and family life remains opaque, which is in part due to the destruction of her personal papers by her brother Donald after her death in 1958, Dr. Lane's close reading of Macardle's reportage, plays, fiction, poetry and what is known of her life produces a rounded examination of the development of her political and social intellect set in the context of the revolution and the lean years that followed, and is a welcome addition to the growing historiography on female activists and feminist politics in the early years of the state. There is no doubt that Dorothy Macardle was, to quote Lane, a "political propagandist, social commentator and feminist," but how great was her influence? A number of pressure groups that Macardle was active in are mentioned, but there is little analysis of the role she played in them or of the influence these organizations had, if any, on the development of societal conscience in relation to the vulnerable and deprived, consequently raises the question of whether Macardle's influence was confined solely to an arguably ineffectual intellectual elite. Whatever the answer to that question, this study serves as a timely reminder of how the equality promised to all citizens in the 1916 Proclamation or the 1919 Democratic Programme was sacrificed on the altar of economic and social conservatism in the Irish state that emerged after 1922. •

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