

Behind Every Great Man: John Devoy and Alice Comiskey

BY MARY ANN O'NEILL KANE

Many years ago, I had a class assignment to write a report on a biographical book. When I arrived home with a biography of the renowned human rights campaigner, Roger Casement, my father suggested I call my

great aunt, Alice Carragher Comiskey. While this puzzled me, I made the call. Her very emotional initial response to the call was “poor Roger.” Roger was the British diplomat of Irish ancestry executed in England for his role in trying



to transport German weapons to Ireland for the 1916 Rising. Although I do not remember all the details, she told me about her association with Roger Casement, which was primarily through her long-term connection with a gentleman named John Devoy. At the time, I did not realize the significant roles these individuals played in Irish and Irish American history, or the related role of my aunt. What I did quickly realize was the personal importance they had to my aunt.

Over the next twenty-five years of her life I gained a greater appreciation of her dedication to the cause of a free and united Ireland. Unfortunately, I never took the opportunity to learn more of the details of her remarkable life and her connection with John Devoy. Recent celebrations of the centennial of the 1916 Rising, and the many ceremonies, documentaries, and dedications related to John Devoy inspired me to do some more digging into my aunt's story. Luckily, my genealogy background and involvement with an Irish genealogy orga-

nization provided me access to a wealth of available resources. I was able to attain a much more complete knowledge of Alice's life, her involvement in Irish activities, her role in Irish independence, and her relationship with John Devoy.

IRISH IN NEW YORK

Alice Carragher was born in 1887 in Castleblaney, County Monaghan, the eleventh of twelve children of Francis and Margaret Carragher. Her widowed mother arrived in New York in 1898 with her four younger children, including Alice. They were met by several older sisters who had previously emigrated. The family settled in Greenwich Village, setting up a boarding house for other Irish immigrants at 59 Downing Street and later at 293 West Eleventh Street.

In Alice's younger years she became involved in the Gaelic Revival, which had

DOINGS IN THE IRISH SOCIETIES.

THE BOYS FROM FARNEY HOLD
VERY PLEASANT SOCIABLE.

The program wound up with an eight-hand reel by the Monaghan dancing class, which was splendidly executed, and loudly applauded. The team that danced it consisted of James Keelan and Miss Annie Maxwell; Patrick Lennon and Miss Sarah McKelvey; Frank McDermott and Miss Alice Carragher, and Michael Ney and Miss Susan Ward. The four ladies wore green sashes. For encore they danced a double set of the four-hand reel, and were given a big reception.

started in Ireland and rapidly spread to the Irish in the United States. The Carragher family's connection with the County Monaghan Men's Association facilitated her interest in Ireland's ancient games, language, music,

Photo (left): Alice Carragher Comiskey at the wedding of her nephew, Frank O'Neill, in 1939. Her life revolved around Ireland, church, and family. She immigrated to New York with her widowed mother and three siblings in 1898, settling in Irish enclaves in Greenwich Village. Courtesy of Mary Ann O'Neill Kane.

Illustration (opposite): An excerpt from the Irish American Weekly for April 22, 1911, which mentions Alice's involvement in one of many Irish cultural activities. Courtesy of Mary Ann O'Neill Kane.

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Illustration:

An excerpt from the Witness Statement of Frank Robbins, a sergeant in the Irish Citizen Army and husband of Alice Comiskey's niece, Mary Ward. It testifies to the importance of Cumann na mBan, and members like Alice, in supporting the fight for independence in Ireland. Courtesy of Bureau of Military History (Ireland).

A great deal of credit must be given to the Cumann na mBan of New York under the leadership of Miss Sara McKelvey, Rose McDermott, Mrs. Molony (sister-in-law of Helena Molony) and Mrs. Alice Comiskey for their many successful efforts to raise money for the purpose of obtaining arms for Irishmen in Ireland. They were prominently associated with the big bazaar held in Madison Square Gardens after the Insurrection of Easter Week, and continued to collect money in many other ways such as by holding céilís, concerts and meetings. All these functions brought money to the coffers of the organisation and this money was handed over to the higher

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Irish authorities in New York. Special mention should be made of their untiring efforts in visiting Celtic Park every Sunday, where there was always a gathering of Irish people to see football or hurling matches and other sports.

dancing, and history. I was able to find information on the Carraghers' Irish activities in numerous online newspaper archives including the *Gaelic American* and the *Irish American Weekly*. Alice's name appears frequently as does that of another young woman, her friend Sarah McKelvey, who was also from Monaghan. They were both engaged for many years in the promotion of Irish culture and freedom. In 1905 Sarah was awarded first prize and Alice second prize in an Irish history contest (*Gaelic American*: 1). In 1907 Sarah and Alice had lead roles in an Irish language play presented in Lyric Hall on Sixth Avenue and Forty-second Street by the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Monaghan Men's Association (*Irish American Weekly*: 2).

A BUSINESS CAREER & CUMANN NA MBAN

In June, 1912, Alice married Harry Comiskey, a native of Monaghan and a chief engineer in the U.S. Merchant Marine. Her wedding announcement pointed out that she was

very active in the Gaelic League. Alice and Harry took a wedding trip to Ireland, traveling first class. Seven months later, in January, 1913, Harry was part of the crew of the *El Dorado* steamship which was lost at sea. Alice never remarried and lived with her sister, Lily Carragher, from that time on. She worked her way up to a partnership in a real-estate development and investment company. In addition to achieving a successful business career, she devoted the rest of her life to family and to Ireland. She and her sister Lily were founding members of *Cumann na mBan* of New York, the Irish women's organization with the primary function of raising funds to advance the cause of Irish independence. Alice was the treasurer until 1921. Her old friend, Sarah McKelvey, was president (Conlon: 4). They collected money on Sunday mornings outside the church (*Irish Independent*: 5). "They were prominently associated with the big bazaar held in Madison Square Garden after the Insurrection of Easter Week, and continued to collect money in many other

ways such as holding céilís, concerts, and meetings” (Robbins: 6). In addition to their fund raising activities, they “...were also called upon for the more dangerously law provoking task of distributing leaflets in John Devoy’s paper protests against what seemed to him injustices in Ireland” (*Irish Independent*: 5).

A REQUEST FROM CLAN NA GAEL

In 1920 Alice and Lily agreed to a request from leaders of *Clan na Gael* to take the then aging John Devoy into their home as a boarder. Devoy was, of course, a leading member of the Irish Fenian movement who was exiled to New York in 1871 and who had devoted most of his life to the cause of Irish freedom. He was the owner and publisher of the *Gaelic American* newspaper and the leader of *Clan na Gael*, the main Irish Republican organization in the United States and the major source of financing for the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. John Devoy is widely recognized as the primary figure in the Irish American support for the Rising.

Moving to larger quarters, Alice and Lily declined *Clan na Gael*’s offers of compensation and insisted on paying the amount of their rent as before with *Clan na Gael* paying only the additional cost of the added space. John Devoy lived with them until his death in 1928.

LIVING WITH JOHN DEVOY

In 1969, Alice was a guest of the John Devoy Memorial Committee in Naas, County Kildare. While there, she was interviewed by Ita Mallon, whose article in the *Irish Independent* (see endnote 5) truly captured Alice’s personality and her interactions with John Devoy. I have relied on her article for many details that follow.

During the years Devoy spent with them, Alice continued working and Lily handled most housekeeping chores. On weekends Alice would pitch in or take over. Mallon’s interview with Alice colorfully describes Devoy’s incessant need to write, Alice and Lily’s encouragement to have him properly dress for various appearances, and his commentary on Alice’s bossiness and poor housekeeping skills. In the

interview with Ita Mallon, Alice, speaking of Devoy, said that “In his waking hours the pen was never far from his hand.” When he tired in the evening he would sometimes knock on their sitting room door and wait for an invitation to join them. Alice also reported that she had to bully him into wearing his best clothes for court appearances related to his writings in the *Gaelic American* with the result of him telling her sister Lily, “She’s a boss.” When Alice took over weekend household duties, he described her as “...no housekeeper” (*Irish Independent*: 5).

Devoy had an on-and-off relationship with the Catholic Church. He was a Catholic, but felt strongly that the Church should not be involved in state matters (Dooley: 7). During a confession in prison in 1866 he replied to a chaplain’s question regarding his Fenian oath that he did not discuss politics while on his knees (Golway: 8). This was reportedly his last confession for sixty years. However, during his later years he did attend Mass, and when too feeble to attend, the neighboring priests heard his confession and administered sacraments at home. According to my cousin, and Alice’s grandnephew, Frank MacGabhann:

Devoy had stayed away from the Church since his days as a Fenian. Some sons of Fenians had become priests and from time to time had tried to “bring him back,” in Aunt Alice’s words. He would tell them to go away saying, “I had you on my knee.” Finally, Devoy agreed to see an old Capuchin priest from Ireland. This priest visited him in my aunts’ apartment and heard his confession, his first in nearly sixty years. At the next meeting of the Clan, Cohalan remarked, “Mr. Devoy. I hear that you’re back in the state of grace.” To which Devoy shot back, “Bad news travels fast” (MacGabhann: 9).

DEVOY’S DEATH AND FUNERAL

The cares and duties of Alice and Lily did not end with John Devoy’s death on September 29, 1928. They were involved in funeral arrangements at the Church of the Ascension,

**Photo:**

The arrival of John Devoy's body in Cobh in June, 1929. Alice Comiskey and her sister, Lily Carragher, were part of the delegation that accompanied the body across the Atlantic to Ireland. Devoy was given a state funeral in Dublin and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. Courtesy of Eugene Smith.

after which his remains were temporarily placed in a vault in Calvary Cemetery in Queens. Alice and Lily then accompanied his body back to Dublin for a state funeral and burial in Glasnevin Cemetery.

John Devoy's remains were returned to Ireland in June 1929 aboard the *President Harding*. Alice Comiskey and Lily Carragher were part of the American delegation that accompanied his remains, first to Cobh, where there was a requiem Mass at the Cathedral, and then by train to Dublin for the state funeral. In Dublin they joined John Devoy's niece and nephews as chief mourners in the funeral procession and burial with full military honors in Glasnevin Cemetery.

DEVOY'S BEQUEST & VALUABLE ASSET

Devoy was apparently never interested in accumulating wealth. His will left an estimated estate of less than five thousand dollars. It specified that one thousand dollars each should go to Alice and Lily and it included a statement describing them as his good friends and expressing his appreciation "of the extraordinary care and attention

which I have received at their kindly hands" (Devoy: 10). Alice and Lily formally renounced the receipt of his bequest in a document filed in the New York Surrogates Court, citing their happiness in having contributed to his comfort and happiness. They specifically mentioned their "... deep respect for Mr. Devoy and for the principles to the advancement of which he devoted his life's work." They further stated that as they "... came to know Mr. Devoy better and to have more knowledge of his unceasing work for human liberty generally, and for Irish Freedom in particular, our appreciation of Mr. Devoy increased and we felt it an honor and a privilege to enjoy his friendship and to hear his personal assurances of comfort" (Comiskey: 11).

John Devoy's will also addressed his most cherished and valuable asset, the papers and manuscripts which he meticulously maintained throughout his life. The collection contains over 3200 items and includes letters from nearly every Irish leader in America and Ireland. These papers were bequeathed and trusted to Alice, and may be considered to be the basis of her single most

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Third: I give devise and bequest to my good friend Harry Cunningham all my right title and interest to my stock in the Gaelic American Publishing Company the same to be his absolutely and without any reservation.

Fourth: In recognition of the extraordinary care and attention which I have received at their kindly hands I give devise and bequest to my good friend Mrs Alice Comiskey of 203 W. 107th Street New York City the sum of One Thousand (\$1000⁰⁰) Dollars and to her sister Miss Lily Carragher the sum of One Thousand (\$1000⁰⁰) Dollars.

Illustration:

A page from the will of John Devoy demonstrates his appreciation of the "extraordinary care and attention" that he received from Alice Comiskey and Lily Carragher during his later years. In their renunciation of his bequest, they stated that their support grew from their deep respect for Devoy and for the principles to which he devoted his life. Courtesy of Frank MacGabhann.

important role in caring for John Devoy and her contribution to Irish and Irish-American history. Through her efforts and the efforts of her nephew-in-law, Frank Robbins, the Devoy papers were transcribed and deciphered, and two volumes of selections were published under the title *Devoy's Post Bag*. In 1954 the collection was donated to the National Library of Ireland, now one of their most significant holdings. The Devoy papers are indexed online but most can be viewed only through a visit to the Library (National Library: 12).

ALICE'S LATER DAYS

Alice never stopped working for a United Ireland. In 1947 she was very involved in arranging the Irish Race Convention in New York (*Irish*

Press: 13). In 1954 she was the assistant treasurer of the American League for an Undivided Ireland, and in 1956 she was the associate treasurer (*The Advocate*: 14). In the late 1960s or early 1970s, when she learned that I was out demonstrating with some Irish groups, she told me, "That's good Dear, but what they really need is money."

POSTSCRIPT

Lily Carragher died in 1966, and Alice Carragher Comiskey in 1979. I still regret not having spent more time with Alice, learning about her life and role in Irish American history. However, I was pleased that I was able to put my genealogy experience to use to find so much that was documented in newspapers

ALICE COMISKEY
November 11, 1979

The Carraghers are gone. Alice Carragher Comiskey, the last of a fine line in her 93rd year has left this world for a far better place. Aunt Alice, as she was respectfully known to all, was indeed a lady of great character.

She lived for all of us, worried for all of us, prayed and cried for us all.

To her adopted country she was a good American and lived by its rules. She loved Ireland, the land of her birth and made many trips to see it again and again. Her head was in New York, but her heart was in Castleblayney — her birthplace. Her friends and relations are legion in Ireland, for they knew her as a true patriot.

She was faithful to her God, and God blessed her.

She came to America as a young girl, attended school and upon graduation won an award for American History. Her marriage to Harry Comiskey was short-lived, as her husband was tragically lost at sea. She was then 25.

She worked hard for many years and was an expert on organization. She enjoyed life with an intensity seldom seen, and had the unusual facility of "lighting" any room she entered. She is watching today and we feel sure she is quite content as she was always happiest around her family. The Christian Brothers, from whom many of us received our start, would have us say each morning: "Live Jesus in our hearts forever," and let us always remember to 'Live Alice Comiskey in our hearts forever'.

Illustration:
One side of Alice's prayer card. She died in 1979.
Courtesy of Mary Ann O'Neill Kane.

and municipal records. I was also delighted to find related information on Alice's mother (my great grandmother), my grandfather, my grandmother (Alice's sister), and several other family members. They all had great interest in Irish freedom. My grandmother and grandfather were recently featured in a PBS documentary produced by Kevin Ferguson about East Durham and the Catskill mountains, "The Irish Catskills: Dancing at the Crossroads" (<http://www.narrowbackfilms.com>). But these are all stories for another day.

Endnotes

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"Doings In The Irish Societies," in *Irish American Weekly*: 22 April 1911, p.2.

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"Autumn of a Fenian," in *Irish Independent*: 17 June 1969, p.11.

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Terence Dooley, *The Greatest of the Fenians, John Devoy and Ireland*. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2003, p.93.

Terry Golway, *Irish Rebel, John Devoy and America's Fight for Irish Freedom*. Dublin: Merrion Press, 2015, p.54.

Interview with Frank MacGabhann, grandnephew of Alice Comiskey.

John Devoy, Last Will and Testament, Sept. 3, 1928.

Alice Comiskey and Lily Carragher, Waiver, Surrogate's Court, County of New York, Nov. 12, 1928.

National Library of Ireland, Devoy Papers: (<http://catalogue.nli.ie/Collection/vtIs000545345>) or (<http://catalogue.nli.ie/> and enter "Devoy Papers.")

"4,000 For Irish Race Convention," *Irish Press*: Nov. 20, 1947 p.4.

"American Anti-Partition League Certifies Books," *The Advocate*: April 3, 1954 p.2. See also "American League for an Undivided Ireland," *The Advocate*: March 3, 1956, p.4.