Constructing Constance
(and some other women)

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The relationships between class, gender and political commitment in Ireland at the turn of the twentieth century were never clear-cut. In the years that followed their unstable boundaries shifted and reconfigured in ways that were not entirely predictable at this earlier moment. This was certainly the case for Constance de Markievicz: born Constance Gore-Booth, throughout her life she was variously a daughter of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy who married into the Polish nobility, a bohemian artist in London and Paris, a militant revolutionary and finally a politician. These many shifts can be tracked through her writings and oratory, or the historical accounts of her military and political role. She is remembered as the only female leader of the Easter Rising in 1916, and as the first woman to be elected as a Member of the British Parliament two years later – even though, as an abstentionist, she refused to take her seat. Instead she became the first Minister for Labour for the Irish Republic, one of several women across Europe who made history by taking on ministerial roles at this time [1]. Yet Markievicz' extraordinary trajectory through the political and cultural turbulence of Ireland's revolution and reconstruction is also seared into its visual imagery in the many photographs that also trace protean shifts across her various identities.

The construction of Constance in her many incarnations was facilitated by her awareness of the power of the visual. She was an artist who had trained at the Slade and the Acadèmie Julian, experiences that expanded the range of subjects and techniques evidenced in her earlier sketchbooks from Lissadell. Yet in many of the images that were made of her, whether painted portraits or photographs, she also comes across as someone who, rather than being the passive object of the

camera's gaze, took an active role in determining the meanings of her own representation. Both dress and an awareness of the power of spectacle played a part, especially in those images intended for public display and consumption. Yet the success of Markievicz' fashioning of her own visual identity takes on a more complex role in relation to representations of other women who occupied this world. Too often, the depiction of the sole female heroine is sustained by the (relative) invisibility of the many other women also active in the same cause, particularly in circumstances such as the Irish Revolution. The availability of state documents such as the Bureau of Military History's Witness Statements, however, has helped to support a new generation of feminist scholarship, intersecting with the avalanche of published material commemorating the Rising's centenary. Yet most of the archival material on Ireland's revolutionary women consists of written sources rather than visual, which only helps to fuel the construction of Markievicz as spectacular heroine across the range of representations that were made of her. This essay looks at three photographs of Constance de Markievicz that construct her identity in a range of different ways and which suggest a subtle play with other images of women, both in their presence and absence.

Femininity as Masquerade

In 1895 Constance and her younger sister Eva posed together for a photograph to promote the Drumcliffe Creamery Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society, set up by their brother Josslyn to improve economic conditions for small farmers in the area near the Gore-Booth family home at Lissadell in Sligo. The co-operative movement had recently been established in Ireland by another Anglo-Irish landowner, Horace Plunkett, as an initiative that would benefit small dairy farmers by giving them a share of the profits from the sale of their milk. In

adopting the movement's principles Josslyn Gore-Booth was continuing the philanthropic aims for which his family had recently become known. Yet in relation to both Constance and Eva, who subsequently became a significant social reformer and suffragist in addition to a poet and dramatist, this photograph takes on a significance that belies its apparent decorativeness.

The romantic idyll posed by the two sisters in a photographer's studio in front of a standard backdrop was far removed from the impoverished realities of agricultural life; the natural world intrudes only in the form of a potted palm glimpsed at the bottom right beneath where Eva leans across a fence-like studio prop to face Constance. The two women are wearing matching dresses cinched closely at the waist; Constance's tight lacing is emphasised by her left arm, awkwardly bent out from her body at the elbow to better reveal the Drumcliffe Creamery armband worn by both sisters. Shepherdess costume was an accepted part of the repertoire of Victorian fancy dress, evoking the fashions of the previous century, although the tightness of the two women's corseting situates them firmly in the 1890s. Tableaux and dramatic performance were a fundamental part of life in a late nineteenth century country house such as Lissadell; Constance's awareness of the political impact of theatricality was to develop further when she and her husband Casimir (who she married in 1900) became involved first with the Abbey Theatre some years later.

The decorative artifice of this photograph also implies an instability, a repeated deferral of meaning. Constance and Eva play the roles of young upper class Anglo-Irish women, staging a fantasy of French rococo femininity for the consuming gaze of the camera; Marie Antoinette with her court in the gardens of the Petit Trianon, also playing at shepherdesses on the eve of Revolution. Yet it is too much to read into this image any prefiguration of the end of another old order, even though

Constance would actively contribute to its demise. Despite its evocation of an idealised, impossible past the photograph's purpose was to draw attention to contemporary necessity. The clue is in Eva's alert, urgent gaze at her sister's face, a Barthesian punctum that shatters the idyll even though Constance plays her part well, complicit in the staging of this stylised tableau. The decorative femininity of their dress and pose becomes visible as a masquerade that only partially disguises their true purpose, which the Creamery armbands remind us of. Rather than the doomed French aristocracy of the late eighteenth century a further set of allusions are set in play that are more recent and more relevant. In 1881 another pair of sisters, Anna and Fanny Parnell, had been responsible for the formation of the Ladies' Land League to support the rights of tenant farmers facing eviction. Coincidentally Anna also trained as an artist and Fanny became a poet, although both died very young. Yet the staging of late Victorian upper class decorative femininity vis-à-vis political activism, with all its resonances, is also an early example of Constance's awareness of the power of both photography and spectacle.

The Legs of the Countess

If the Creamery photograph of the two sisters is staged as masquerade, a further image of Markievicz also uses disruptive elements of dress and performativity in order to destabilise accepted representations of femininity. Over twenty years later and several days before the Rising took place in Dublin, Constance paid a visit to the studio of the Keogh Brothers in Lower Dorset St. Unlike the Lafayette studio, another Dublin firm that made its name as photographers to the British establishment and the royal family, the surviving Keogh Brothers archive shows them to have been actively

involved in photographing both the rebels themselves and the subsequent effects of the Rising on the city's shattered streets.

In front of another studio backdrop, the photographs posed by Markievicz appear to deviate from and in turn undermine the status and power invested in more normative representations of aristocratic women. This is not just because she is holding a revolver. Rather than contemporary fashionable dress she wears a customised version of Irish Citizen Army uniform. Although the tailored military jacket complete with Sam Browne belt was the same as that worn by ICA men (and was probably borrowed from Michael Mallin), unlike their full-length trousers this is accompanied by breeches tucked into puttees similar to those worn both by the Irish Volunteers and the British army at the time. Changes in women's dress were also signs of the upheavals of normative gender roles in the social upheavals of war and revolution, yet by 1916 trouser-wearing was still very unusual; photographs of women undertaking difficult and dangerous work in wartime munitions factories, with few exceptions, show that they are still wearing long skirts. This was also generally the case for women's military uniforms in revolutionary Ireland at this time, as is evident from Cumann na mBan photographs. However the practicalities of women's dress were a matter of some consideration. Some days before Easter Sunday, Markievicz and her friend Kathleen Lynn, the ICA's Chief Medical Officer during the Rising, discussed whether women in the Citizens' Army should wear trousers to facilitate their role as combatants. Constance agreed to disguise the breeches of her own uniform with a covering skirt so as not to attract unwanted attention before the Rising itself [2].

And this, in turn, is something that indicates the enclosed space of the Keogh Brothers' Studio as a place where Markievicz could experiment with the staging of her own identity beyond

the public gaze. The skirt is off: she stands there, breeches-clad and holding a gun, to later eyes a symbol of Ireland's lurch into the cataclysmic modernity of the early twentieth century. Yet there is also an evocation of an earlier aristocratic woman's use of a photographic studio to experiment with her own representation in fashioning a femininity very different from the expectations of her class. Sometime between 1861 and 1867, Pierre-Louis Pierson photographed the lower legs of the Comtesse de Castiglione in his Paris studio. Similar to Markievicz, Castiglione was renowned for her disregard of social convention regulating women of her class, particularly with regard to behaviour and appearance. In the majority of Pierson's photographs in this series, however, Castiglione's calves and feet are bare, a degree of eroticised exhibitionism associated in mid-nineteenth century representation with prostitutes and working class women alike. By comparison the cut of Constance's breeches simultaneously both reveals and conceals the appearance of her legs, modestly refusing any explicit definition of her body as *female*. Yet this idiosyncratic uniform still retains a persistent element of fashionable femininity. Instead of the regular ICA slouch hat, Markievicz wears something altogether more stylish and topped with flamboyant plumes; some time later, however, when the hat reappeared in a pair of mugshots, the feathers were starting to look a bit bedraggled.

These were not the only photographs of a uniformed, trouser-wearing woman at this time[3]. In another image, Nora Connolly stands stiffly to attention, her military body language at odds with the slight smile that plays across her face. Unlike Markievicz' combination of both masculine and feminine dress, Connolly's uniform with its peaked hat can be much more securely identified as that of an Irish Volunteer. This may at first appear unusual, and indeed elements of subversion are more subtly encoded than in Markievicz' flamboyant disruptiveness.

Unlike the Citizen Army, commanded by Nora's father James Connolly since 1914, the Volunteers excluded women. Prior to 1916 Cumann na mBan took shape as an organisation of women supporting the Volunteers' intended military role through a training in first aid and signals, rather than through concentrating on preparation for combat themselves. There were exceptions however, with some branches providing weapons training; the women of Cumann na mBan in Belfast became particularly renowned for their proficiency. These included Winnie Carney, James Connolly's secretary, who brought both her typewriter and her Webley revolver into the GPO on Easter Monday. The organiser of Cumann na mBan in Belfast before the Rising was Nora Connolly, who had fiercely opposed the exclusion of women from male organisations since at least 1912 when she and her sister Ina had successfully argued for girls to be admitted into the Fianna. And once we have that knowledge, something happens to a reading of the image of Nora in the uniform of another organisation from which she was excluded on grounds of her sex, but to which she clearly knew herself to be equal. A century after this photograph was taken I sense her gaze playfully avoiding mine, yet inviting my complicity in her subversion.

Today, the streets are ours

Photographs of Markievicz in Citizen Army uniform exoticised by her plumed headgear have had a considerable afterlife, emerging regularly whenever evidence for the role of a woman in the Rising is required. Beyond the spectacle of slightly dangerous femininity, however, there were numerous other women whose presence remains only semi-visible. This is quite literally the case in the photograph of Pearse surrendering to General Lowe on Friday 28 April accompanied by Elizabeth O'Farrell, the nurse who had the difficult and dangerous task

of carrying the notice of surrender to General Lowe at the top of Moore St. and then later to all the rebel garrisons. Only the bottom part of O'Farrell's skirt is visible in the first version of this photograph as she stands beside Pearse. In later versions, however, even this evidence of O'Farrell's presence has been removed; Pearse's surrender thus becomes restaged as a narrative of heroic masculine self-sacrifice in keeping with his own mythologizing of the Rising.

Women's role as nurses during the Rising in Dublin was similar to that of women during the First World War where they also played an important part as ambulance drivers whose embrace of speed, technology and danger were frequently seen as a challenge to existing gender stereotypes [4]. Ambulance driving on the Western front meant that these women, who included Oscar Wilde's niece Dolly, were close to the battle even if, unlike some Irish women in 1916, they were excluded from active participation. In Ireland itself women were also involved as drivers both in preparation for, and during the course of, a very different military struggle. Cars were becoming increasingly widely available since their introduction into Ireland in 1896 and played an important role in the Rising, transporting arms and people rapidly and covertly to wherever they were needed [5]. Interestingly, the commemorative Sinn Féin Rebellion Handbook published the following year contains several car-related advertisements in its opening pages. Sanderson's Motor Works of Upper Dorset Street specifically reminded Ford owners that their car 'is a good friend. Don't abuse it!' while offering their services in repairing the 'small cuts in covers (that) allow water, grit and other road matter to penetrate into the canvas foundation...' [6] This may even have been where Kathleen Lynn took her own Ford for repair. It had been through a lot in the Rising, taking Connolly out to Howth on a reconnaissance expedition in early April, transporting ammunition down from St. Enda's

in Rathfarnham to Liberty Hall during Holy Week and finally conveying both Markievicz and Lynn with her medical equipment to the City Hall on Easter Monday, after which she 'did not see it again for months' [7].

Kathleen Lynn's car, however, makes another appearance in this final photograph of Markievicz, in which she and her sister Eva are being driven slowly through the streets of Dublin some fourteen months later. This was the occasion of Constance's heroic homecoming from imprisonment in England. The death sentence for her part in the Rising was commuted to life imprisonment, however she was released from her Aylesbury Gaol in June 1917 as part of a general amnesty for prisoners, returning to Dublin on the 18th. For the entire day the streets had been lined with crowds greeting the returning prisoners. Her long journey from London by rail to Holyhead and then by sea to Kingstown, accompanied by Eva and Eva's partner Esther Roper, ensured that Markievicz was the last to arrive. It also meant that her slow progress from Westland Row Station to Liberty Hall was a culmination to the rest of the celebrations. The Keogh Brothers were kept busy that day: numerous photographs, many from a high vantage point similar to this one, document the prisoners' return.

As Esther Roper noted, the event was 'controlled by the 'rebel' band; the police most sensibly remaining in the background' [8]. And there, perched on the railway bridge at roughly the same level as the photographer, are two pairs of men carefully observing the procession beneath. It is hard to tell from this distance, but if these are the figures of policemen their coercive gaze as a sinister counterpoint to triumphant spectacle adds a further depth to the meanings of this image. Kathleen Lynn's car surmounted by a tricolour and containing Constance and Eva is barely visible at the heart of the multitude; Eva stands in front of Constance, who, in her new hat, receives the adulation

of the masses. However, as is evident from a surviving Pathé newsreel, Kathleen Lynn was not actually at the steering wheel. Filmed from a point much closer to the level of the cheering crowds, it becomes apparent that the driver is actually a man in military uniform. In the camera's remaking of Markievicz as a public figure other women – and not just those in the crowds surrounding her – become increasingly blurred and indistinct.

In the documentation of this event, whether photograph or news footage, the intersection of different processes of looking combine to construct composite and at times contradictory meanings of Markievicz. At first she appears submerged in the sea of people surrounding her, a part of the crowd as a force in revolutionary history. Yet the images made of her will always continue to suggest other persistent readings, those of a heroic female individualism both supported by and yet continually separate from the masses she continually worked to represent.

Notes

1. Both Sofia Panina and Alexandra Kollontai were appointed to ministerial roles after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the same year that Eugenia Bosh became Minister for the Interior in Ukraine's Soviet government.

2. Anne Marreco, The Rebel Countess: the Life and times of Constance Markievicz, London: Phoenix Press 2000, 197

3. A further, and more overt, image of gender transgression through dress exists in the photograph of Margaret Skinnider that first appeared in her autobiography *Doing My Bit for Ireland* (1917). Here Skinnider is wearing full male drag, hands defiantly tucked into the pockets of her jacket and with a cigarette at the corner of her mouth. There is increasing recognition of the role played by Skinnider; she not only smuggled bomb detonators to Dublin in her hat, but she was a crack shot who fought for the Citizen Army during which she was seriously wounded. With regret, space here does not permit the development of a comparative reading of drag and female masculinity in relation to these specific photographs of Skinnider, Connolly and Markievicz. However an incisive analysis of Skinnider's gender performativity can be found in Lisa Weihmann, 'Doing My Bit for Ireland: Transgressing Gender in the Easter Rising', Eire-Ireland 39.3 and 4, (2004), 228-249. See also Lucy McDiarmid *At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916,* Dublin: Royal Irish Academy 2015, 129-133 and Jane Tynan 'The unmilitary appearance of the 1916 rebels' in Lisa Godson and Joanna Bruck eds. *Making 1916: Material and Visual Culture of the Easter Rising*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2015, 25-33

4. Laura Doan 'Primum Mobile: Women and Auto/mobility in the Era of the Great War, Women: A Cultural Review, 17:1, (2006), 26-41

5. Leanne Blaney, 'Transporting Rebellion: How the Motorcar Shaped the Rising' http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-role-of-the-motorcar-during-the-1916-rising accessed 16 March 2016

6. *Sinn Féin Rebellion Handbook*, Dublin: The Irish Times Ltd. 1917, ii

7. Kathleen Lynn, Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 357, 2-5

8. Esther Roper, 'Biographical Sketch' in *The Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* with a new introduction by Amanda Sebestyen, London: Virago 1987, 73

Colophon:

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Constance and Eva Gore-Booth, Drumcliffe Creamery Co-operative Agricultural and Dairy Society, (1895). Image courtesy of Adams Auctioneers
Nora Connolly, daughter of James Connolly (c1916). Image courtesy of the Connolly family and Kilmainham Jail Archive
Countess Markievicz on her return to Dublin from prison in England accompanied by her sister Eva on the 17th June (1917). Image courtesy of Deputy Keeper of the Records, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and Sir Josslyn Gore-Booth
Studio portrait of Countess Constance Markievicz (née Gore-Booth) in uniform with a gun. (c1915). Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

Beyond the Pale: The art of Revolution