

NOTE FROM: The Book: Society's Queen

The Life of Edith Marchioness of Londonderry
by Anna De Courcy 2004.

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Mount Stewart was an island of joy and tranquillity in an increasingly wretched and strife-torn Ireland. The Troubles were at their height. A month after the election of December 1918, the seventy-three Sinn Fein members had met in Dublin, adopted a declaration of independence and a provisional constitution, and formed a parliament, the Dail Eireann. Michael Collins, the 28-year-old Minister for Home Affairs in the provisional Government set up by the Dail, organised the escape of De Valera from Lincoln gaol. De Valera then became the Dail's President, or *Taoiseach*. In September 1919 the Dail had been declared illegal by the British Parliament and thenceforth its meetings were held in secret. In 1920, the Irish Volunteer Organisation had proclaimed its allegiance to the ideal of a Free State. The violence against the visible signs of the 'occupying power' rose to a crescendo. By the autumn of 1921, the IRA – the active wing of Sinn Fein – had shot more than 500 British officers, soldiers and police.

To maintain law and order, the British Government recruited unemployed ex-servicemen as auxiliary policemen. These quickly became known as the Black and Tans – from their khaki uniforms and black berets – and their reprisals were as brutal as the outrages they were trying to prevent. Feelings grew increasingly embittered, more houses owned by the Protestant Anglo-Irish ascendancy were burned down, the ambushes continued and a network of gun-runners smuggled in still more arms.

Even in the 'black Protestant' county of Down, one of the few where not a single Sinn Fein member had been returned, Sinn

Fein was active. Already Edith's friend and Ark member the portrait painter Sir John Lavery, commissioned to paint the Protestant Archbishop of Armagh and staying at Mount Stewart to do so, had received an anonymous letter. Beneath the heading 'The Londonderry Air' Shelley's verse below was written in block capitals:

I met murder by the way
He had a mask like Castlereagh
Very smooth he was yet grim
Seven bloodhounds followed him.

'Do you have no sense of shame?' the letter continued. 'Parasites like you should be exterminated.' Nor had the Irish love of sport prevented 200 farmers, who sympathised with or were threatened by Sinn Fein, telling the Master of the County Down Harriers and Staghounds that they would not allow hounds on their land if anyone who had been a soldier came out with them.

As 1921 drew to its close the campaign was stepped up. Masked men marched on the undefended house of Lady Una Ross at Strangford (on the mouth of the Lough), forced Lady Una and her maids into the garden, and made them watch the burning of the house and all its contents. Nearby Castle Ward, the home of Lord Bangor and his family, was defended by the B Specials (volunteers enlisted for this purpose); and any visiting member of the Government was guarded constantly.

Edith and Charley refused to behave as if under siege. Friends and politicians still came to stay, although there were certain concessions to the situation. B Specials guarded the house, and Edith always slept with a set of day clothes by her bed and the revolver Sir John Cowans had given her in a bedside drawer. One night, with a full moon blazing into her room (she always slept with the blinds up), she was woken by a fusillade of shots. She rushed to the night nursery, where she found all three of her younger children in their nanny's bed, then tore down to the servants' quarters, where one of the maids was having hysterics.

Emerging into the hall, she met two of her male guests in their Jaeger dressing gowns, each holding a candle. Noticing that one guest did not have his false teeth in, she coolly sent him back to his bedroom to fetch them, saying that otherwise, should they all be captured, he might never see them again. Finally, as the raid appeared to have fizzled out, everyone retired to bed again – but when Edith got to her room, put out the light, and looked out of her window, a bullet whined past her ear and the branch of a rose beside her fell to the terrace below. She drew back quickly, to hear more firing . . . followed, mercifully, by the noise of men running away. It was useless to follow them: she knew that, even if terrorists were caught red-handed, it was extremely difficult to convict them, as witnesses were too frightened to give evidence.

It was not a situation that could be allowed to continue. In any case, Lloyd George had been consistently in favour of Home Rule, though even he did not envisage an Ireland completely divorced from Britain: on the eve of the 1918 General Election he had issued a joint letter with the Conservative Leader Bonar Law stating that: 'two paths are closed: the one leading to a complete severance of Ireland from the British Empire, and the other to a forcible submission of the six counties of Ulster to a Home Rule Parliament against their will'. Tentative steps towards a negotiated settlement had been taken at the end of 1920 and fresh impetus was given when the King, in his speech formally opening the new Ulster Parliament in June 1921, appealed for the strife to end, for forbearance, conciliation and forgiveness. 'May this historic gathering be the prelude', he said, 'to a day in which the Irish people, North and South, under one Parliament or two, as those Parliaments may decide, shall work in common love for Ireland upon the sure foundation of mutual justice and respect.' A truce (to be frequently violated in the coming months) was declared in July, and De Valera and Sir James Craig were invited to London to discuss a settlement.

Negotiations began in Downing Street on 10 October. De Valera remained in Dublin, but five Irish delegates, with plenipotentiary powers, met the representatives of the British

Government – three Liberals and three Conservatives – to hammer out what they hoped would be a satisfactory solution. The Irish delegates included Michael Collins, by now Minister for Finance in the Dail and a legendary figure on account of his skill, daring and brilliance in the organisation of guerrilla warfare against the British. He was extremely good-looking: tall, fit and energetic, with dark brown hair, square jaw, and a brooding, almost truculent expression that frequently gave way to an engaging grin. Women loved him.

During the months of negotiation, prolonged because so much had to be referred back to De Valera in Dublin, Collins came backwards and forwards to England, usually staying with Sir John and Lady Lavery at 5 Cromwell Place. Both the Laverys were Catholics, and Hazel Lavery was an outspoken supporter of Sinn Fein. As a glamorous figure in London society and a member of the Ark, she was on close terms with many leading or influential politicians, including Winston Churchill. In 'Hazel Hen's' white-marble dining room with its black and gold furniture, Collins met politicians of all parties on an unofficial basis, while his aura of romantic, courageous patriotism made him an attractive figure even to his political opponents.

Finally, on 6 December 1921, articles of agreement for a treaty between Great Britain and Ireland were signed. Almost at once, it became apparent that the months of hard work, bargaining and compromise had failed to bring peace to Ireland. When the negotiators returned to Dublin, De Valera repudiated the Treaty.

Once again, the sticking point was the British concept of Empire. The Treaty provided that Ireland was recognised as having 'the same constitutional status in the community of nations known as the British Empire as the Dominion of Canada, the Commonwealth of Australia, the Dominion of New Zealand and the Union of South Africa, with a Parliament having powers to make laws for the peace, order and good government of Ireland and an executive responsible to that Parliament'.

The Dail split, with a narrow majority (64 to 57) in favour of the Treaty. This more or less even balance was reflected in the

country, also split between Free Staters (those in favour of the Treaty) and Republicans (those against it). De Valera resigned, and a provisional government was formed on 14 January 1922, of which Collins became chairman. But opposition to the Treaty hardened and those against it began to organise their forces.

One of those who had met Collins at the Laverys' house was Edith. Charley had not wished to. 'I refused deliberately to meet Michael Collins in a social atmosphere and I gave as my reason that, whereas I would certainly meet him in the conference chamber, I was not willing to meet anyone who, whatever his motives and reasons may have been, had been a party to the murder, sometimes in cold blood, of brother officers of my own and many friends who lived in Ireland.'

As Collins began the task of taking over the functions of government from Westminster, he continued to visit London. At the same time, the unrest in Ireland was escalating, with deepening divisions in the South itself as well as sectarian violence. It was clearly imperative that peaceful conditions be restored, and the conference Charley had spoken of was now arranged. The leaders of the North and the South and representatives of the British Government met on 30 March 1922 in Churchill's room at the Colonial Office, with Charley as one of the two representatives of Ulster. Agreement that violence must cease and on how this was to be achieved was reached remarkably quickly – by 8.00 p.m. the same evening – but, as Churchill pointed out to the House of Commons next day, there would be those 'anxious to wreck these arrangements . . . we must be prepared for attempts to mar all this fair prospect'.

Edith believed that if Michael Collins and Charley could meet privately it would help each to understand the other's point of view, and she persuaded Churchill to suggest this to them both. Charley was captivated by Collins's fervour, directness and patriotism. 'I can say at once that I spent three of the most delightful hours that I ever spent in my life,' he wrote afterwards. ' . . . his enthusiasm was delightful as he unfolded his plans for the future in stirring phraseology. Perhaps I knew history a little

better than he did and perhaps also I knew the power which he had over his followers and also the power which I had over mine when he entreated me to join with him in a really big conception.'

Collins's relationship with Edith must have been more complicated, to judge by the following letter – the only one written to her by him to survive. From its deeply personal tone, its misery and its realisation of the gulf between their worlds, it reads as though Collins had against his will fallen in love with her. There are, of course, other interpretations but that it stemmed from any feeling of social inferiority is unlikely – Collins's background had never troubled him during the Treaty negotiations, however well bred the members of the other side. His note, written obviously under the stress of emotion, is in pencil on a piece of battered blue writing paper savagely torn across the second page – almost as if Edith had started to tear it up and then thought better of it. It runs:

'Forgive me. I bitterly regret my outburst about L. You were very kind to try to arrange the meeting and I am well aware that I was very miserably minded to listen to W [Winston Churchill].

'It is all very well to tell me as you do that he has no "interest" in you. But how can you expect me to believe that, feeling as you know well I feel? So you must forgive my bitterness, and try to imagine what it means to be a man like myself, entirely self-made, self-educated, without background and trying to cope with a man like Lord L., a man who has every advantage that I lack. This is not self-disparagement, a mean quality that I think I do not possess, but I cannot help recognising the fact that you and he speak the same language, an alien one to me, and he understands to perfection all the little superficial things that matter in your particular world. Unimportant things maybe – but oh! my God, not to be underestimated with a woman like you. I know that instinctively.

'I feel savage and unhappy and so I blame you for a situation

NOTE:

L = Lord Londonderry = Charley

for which I alone am to blame. But I contrast myself with him, my uncouthness with his distinction, my rough speech with his unconscious breeding, and the worst of it is I like and admire him and feel that he is brave and honest. On one point alone I believe myself his superior.

What this was we will never know.

Collins strove hard to pacify Ireland and to heal the breach between Free Staters and Republicans. He called an election for 22 June. But, even though 94 of the 128 newly elected deputies supported the Treaty, the Republicans refused to accept the verdict of the electorate and the civil war in the Free State continued. The Republicans seized key buildings and Collins issued an ultimatum: all buildings illegally occupied should be evacuated. When this ultimatum expired on 28 June 1922, the Free State lapsed into civil war. Collins took command of the Army and, after a battle in Dublin, broke the revolt there. 'I see that in the Dublin battle 700 or 800 were taken prisoners,' Charley wrote to Edith on 8 July. 'No doubt a few patriots will be sacrificed but after all if as I believe Michael is an IRB [a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood], this is all in the day's work. Meanwhile my firm conviction is that supported by Winston with substantial help, aeroplanes, etc, Michael will be able to raise and equip an army for use in the next two or three months.'

Michael Collins paid for the signature of the Treaty with his life. On 22 August 1922, as he was returning to Cork with some of his staff, they were ambushed in wild country near Macroom and Collins was shot dead.

In Britain, too, the political scene was changing. Discontent with the Lloyd George Coalition had been growing in Conservative circles. Without the cohesion forced by the wartime years, the growing scandal of the traffic in honours, the Prime Minister's personal control of what was supposed to be the Coalition's fighting fund, the irregularities of his private life and divergences in policy all combined to produce Conservative unrest. In peacetime, too, the essentially different qualities of the

Conservative Leader Bonar Law and the Prime Minister had begun to work against rather than complement each other as they had previously done. Bonar Law, who both as Chancellor of the Exchequer (1916-18) and then as Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons, had supported the Prime Minister unstintingly, was a moderate, kindly, balanced man, impassioned only on the subject of Ulster - he was the son of an Ulster Presbyterian minister who had emigrated to Canada - whose formidable grasp of detail and excellent memory had fitted him admirably for the chancellorship. Above all, he was a man of the utmost probity. Lloyd George was visionary, flamboyant, a brilliant orator, devious and unscrupulous. Nonetheless, when Bonar Law, exhausted after years of overwork and a heavy smoker, resigned because of ill health on 17 March 1921, the Prime Minister lost his strongest support.

Many Conservatives had begun to believe that the Party was losing its way and should return to the original concept of Conservatism - impossible if Lloyd George continued to dominate the political scene. The first to state this publicly was the influential elder statesman Lord Salisbury, who declared in a letter to the *Morning Post*, on 20 June 1921, that 'the Coalition Government no longer possesses the full confidence of the Unionist Party'. Carson expressed similar fears more strongly still to Edith in December: 'I feel so certain that the permanence of the Coalition under any name will be a disaster and indeed prohibitive of free action and criticism.' The Unionist leader was one of a small group of politicians already plotting action: their goal was the formation of a group of 'true' Conservatives within the main body of the Party. Charley, as a staunch Unionist, was one of them; and it is a mark of how deeply involved Edith had now become in the world of politics - and how respected was her judgement - that most of the men concerned confided in her, like the Duke of Northumberland, writing on 23 December:

... I quite agree about Salisbury. He has far more experience than anyone else in the Lords and would carry more weight. Also, it is a great thing to have a man one can really trust and who is