Armagh's Forgotten International Star

The Mary Connelly story

by Eric Villiers

In 1916 a mysterious street singer appeared across Ireland, her patriotic ballads feeding the nationalism roused by the Easter Rising executions. Frightened of imprisonment for begging she remained anonymous until discovered by opera lovers stirred by her beautiful voice. And so emerged a remarkable mezzo-soprano, Mary Connolly, an Armagh-born ex-pit lassie. The famed Dublin diarist Joseph Holloway, architect of the Abbey Theatre and arguably the world's greatest first-nighter described her debut as: "one of my most thrilling moments in a theatre". For a significant period in history she won a special place in the hearts of Irish people everywhere and drew bigger crowds to Gaelic Rallies than the revolutionary Countess Markievicz. Her story of triumph in the face of relentless poverty, loss and personal tragedy, has only recently been recovered from archives in the National Library of Ireland.

At 6.15pm on Monday June 18, 1917, Joseph Holloway, Dublin's best-known theatre critic, hopped on to a downtown tram and was buttoned holed by an old friend Fred Allan, the former Fenian leader. Allan wanted him to "collect in his area" for the fund that Michael Collins and Allan were raising to help the dependents of rebels. As they chatted it emerged that both men were on their way to the first house at the Empire Palace Music Hall to see the 'Dublin Street Singer'.

As they reminisced about the great entertainers they'd seen in the fast-fading music hall, Holloway couldn't remember any show being as eagerly anticipated. At Dame Street long lines of people snaked out from the theatre and as Allan left to find his wife in the crowd, Holloway was suddenly thankful that his next-door neighbour was Arthur Armstrong, manager of the Empire (now the Olympia). After a word with Arthur, who incidentally had introduced the concept of queuing to Ireland in the late 19th Century, he picked up a programme and slipped into the stalls. As the seven-piece orchestra warmed up the lifelong teetotaller watched disdainfully as people disappeared into the Empire's several bars.

From the programme he was happy to see that Mary Connolly would appear midway through the show, a billing that would ease her nerves. The word in green rooms around town was that she had been terrified at rehearsals. If she froze it would be a disaster for the cash-strapped theatre. As a hedge against this the Empire booked the best top-liner they could get: the London-based comedian Joe O'Gorman, founder of the Variety Artists' Federation and founding father of the Grand Order of Water Rats.

O'Gorman was the only Irish comic who could fill England's largest halls and was paid accordingly. He was also powerful enough to empty them: a few years earlier he and the legendary Marie Lloyd led a successful strike that closed theatres throughout Britain. As a song and dance man he conquered Broadway, yet in the capricious world of showbusiness he was now second fiddle to a newcomer. Holloway sensed that the veteran raconteur would be discomforted and noted wryly that it would be 'turn' Number 6, the 25-year-old "Dark Rosaleen" who emptied the theatre's bars.

As soon as plate 6 slid down the proscenium arch there was uproar. Connolly's new manager, Barney Armstrong, the Empire's managing director, stepped out to calm things down before the curtain could go up. The house hushed for

the first song and when it ended Holloway observed of the singer's powerful, visceral impact: "[I'm] thrilled to my heart's core... only John McCormack and Mary Connolly can bring a tear to the eye unbidden."

Dublin's response was beyond anyone's wildest hopes. Seldom in theatrical history can there have been such a synthesis across the footlights; rarely can an audience have so empathically embraced a performer. People daily confronting poverty and Westminster's wartime intransigence saw the embodiment of their suffering, triumphant. Ballads of hard times and exile soulfully delivered in a beautiful, strong, clear voice by a fragile frightened figure defied belief. At the end the whole house joined in three encores and Armstrong, leading Connolly out for her fourth curtain call, declared: "Never again will Mary sing on the streets of this city or any other."

The champagne may have been on ice in the green room but Joe Holloway, a dedicated patron of young Irish actors, painters and performers, was concerned about Mary Connolly's future with Barney Armstrong. He regarded him as the characteristic "big cigar [showman]... a buffoon, not a gentleman", and had been incensed by the description of Connolly on billposters: "AS IRISH AS THE PIGS IN DROGHEDA". Later that evening, after catching a play at the Richmond, he harangued a touring English actor who thought the pig analogy was as appropriate to Ireland as the bulldog was to England.

For Holloway the posters that had "insulted... half of Dublin" exemplified the policies decimating Dublin's theatre-going classes. Promoters were Anglicising Irish theatre and driving out audiences by reducing performers to the paddywackery of stage-Irishness. Although no 'Irish-Irelander', Holloway did introduce several managers to Connolly hoping to protect the singer's essential Irishness. The approaches, made behind Armstrong's back, were rejected.

For Holloway's friends in the Gaelic League Mary Connolly personified the cultural revival. The Drogheda Independent reported that on Sunday September 1 she drew thousands to Drogheda Aerideachts, while Countess Markievicz attracted 1,800 at Trim. However Sunday afternoon nationalists were not Armstrong's targets and his twenty-four-seven exploitation of his protégée suggests that some things in popular music never change. Her iconic status with Gaels would be short-lived.

By June 1917 the Empire, hit by post-1916 curfews, was nearing insolvency, so that Connolly's wealth-creating stardom was little short of miraculous for both the theatre and Armstrong. Early in July the company was able to lodge £2,300 (around £85,000 today) with the High Court to pay off debentures and satisfy the liquidator. Meanwhile Armstrong opened Barney Armstrong Enterprises Limited in Dublin; Barney Armstrong (Edinburgh) Limited and Variety magazine in London reported that he had bought another city theatre and several provincial concerns in Ireland to convert to cinemas. Within months he advertised talent contests countrywide and hundreds of acts were auditioned in a vain search for another 'Mary Connolly'. The judges included Walter MacNally, the opera company owner/singer and Dr Vincent O'Brien, composer and conductor of the Palestrina Choir at Dublin's Pro-Cathedral, and later head of music at Radio Eireann.

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By then it was clear that Connolly would never appear in opera. Touring the top UK circuits as Mary Connolly and Full Variety Show she was under contract to the Moss Group. In any case her voice, damaged by illness, coal dust, out door singing, and now the strain of up to 20 shows a week, often broke down. O'Brien, who famously tutored the promising tenor, James Joyce and Count John McCormack, had predicted as much. He told 'Jacques', music critic and columnist with the Evening Herald and Irish Independent, that it was a tragedy she'd come to him too late.

While in operatic terms the die had been cast that didn't stop Armstrong promoting his singer as the poor man's prima donna. A week into her career he teamed her with MacNally, 'Ireland's Favourite Baritone' and a strikingly handsome Irish-American, who went on to star in Italy with the darling of Italian opera, La Sheridan, Dublin's Margaret Burke Sheridan. MacNally was also a friend of Joe Kennedy and sang at family gatherings that included the young JFK. Practically overnight the labourer's daughter was rubbing shoulders with people more used to walking with kings.

Mary Connolly was born in 1892 at Irish Street, Armagh, and later the family moved to Lancashire in search of work. By 1910 after three years as a 'pit brow lassie' near Bolton she was saving to be married and doing extra shifts at open air picking belts. That December she collapsed with pneumonia and two days before Christmas was bedridden when an explosion at the pit killed 344 men and boys in Britain's worst mining accident. Among the victims was her fiancé, but she was so close to death herself that it was weeks before she could be told of the disaster. She never went back and for the next few years, with her mother dead; her father terminally ill and her brother James incapacitated, she supported the family as a farm labourer. Eventually their father's death forced the children home to Dublin where the funeral to Glasnevin Cemetery left them impoverished.

Having pawned or sold their possessions they starved for three days before James pressurised his sister to "sing for pennies." That night she wept as they walked several miles from their lodgings on the Gardiner estate to south Dublin. Wrapped in a shawl to hide her face she began with Mother Machree and the effect was electrifying. Residents of some of the capital's finest houses came out to press money into her hand. Recalling the first time she passed his home in Northumberland road, Holloway wrote:

"I had to hold back the sob that rose in my throat."

To evade laws that could jail strolling balladeers as beggars, the siblings kept moving around Ireland so that by early 1917 various myths about Connolly's origins had sprung up: she was a Belgian refuge... a famous European diva fulfilling a bet... a down-at-heel opera star hiding her identity.

The two returned to Dublin's wealthiest suburbs one Sunday evening in May 1917, where, at No. 41 Aylesbury road Miss A. J. Stewart was entertaining friends at her weekly 'at home'. As the top notes of The Irish Emigrant, sung by a "half-soprano" sounded in the street the party went outside to find a crowd gathering. Stewart later said that her neighbours never before deigned to come to their doors let alone into the road for a street singer. Determined to win recognition for a "voice worth culturing" she brought Connolly inside and wrote a letter setting up an interview with Mr Ryan, who wrote the 'Jacques' column.

Ryan was also a Feis Ceoil judge and the letter supported his papers' contention that the revival was all-embracing and not confined to drama and literature. Of course the mystery singer already intrigued him and his friends, Holloway and Edward Parker of Rathmines. It wasn't just for obvious reasons that Connolly politely rebuffed them, she also feared entrapment by plainclothes policemen for begging "or worse".

On June 5, 1917 the Herald published the interview and, revealing the singer's identity, confidently predicted, "...with training she would be able to compass over two octaves". What happened next is the stuff of fairy-tales: a 'Cinderella' story that would sell from London to Los Angeles, welcome relief from the daily toll of war dead. On June 6 the Empire proffered a contract and began grooming Connolly for her professional debut on June 18. By the end of June 70,000 people had packed the twice-nightly shows and matinees. Box office takings topped £2,000 and the city's oldest music hall was saved from closure. As a thank-you to their new star company chairman William Findlater announced a special Saturday 'Benefit', at which the day's proceeds, plus £20 in personal cheques from the directors, would be presented.

That afternoon as the directors took the stage for the ceremony there was a spontaneous outburst of affection from the audience. In "all parts of the house" young men could be seen collecting money. Cloth caps, bowler hats and soldiers' bonnets brimming with "sovereigns, half sovereigns, notes, cheques and coins of all sorts" were being emptied at the singer's feet. It was a show of generosity that perhaps remains unique in world theatre.

In any event it set a precedent for a forthcoming tour across Ireland. Cork and Drogheda were first to contribute; in Belfast linen, shipyard and engineering workers who patronised the Empire in Victoria Square established 'The Mary Connolly Fund' to pay for operatic training; in Derry donations gathered in shirt factories were handed over at the city's Opera House and in Armagh townspeople presented an inscribed silver necklace and matching chain.

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UK newspapers and magazines joined the Irish press in declaring the discovery of "[Ireland's] sweetest soprano". London-based "Picture Papers" ran photos, sketches, features and advertisements as they prepared a welcome for the Irish Cinderella; The Stage described her as "a phenomenal singer with a brilliant career" and after a week at the city's Olympia the Liverpool Echo dubbed her "The People's Star".

For the next seven years the singer continued to fill theatres from London to Aberdeen. However times were changing and by the mid-twenties film was replacing popular theatre. It remains a cruel irony that it was Mary Connolly, perhaps the last music hall diva, who helped bankroll Ireland's leading show-businessmen as they busily converted 'the halls' into cinemas.

In 1927 the American music hall star Al Jolson appeared in the world's first 'talkie' The Jazz Singer and it was finally over for tens of thousands of performers and theatre workers. A few, including several big names, were unable to face the future and committed suicide. Although made of sterner stuff Mary Connolly too was swept aside as a new generation took to picture-houses and dance halls, jazz and jitterbug. There is some evidence that, like her friend the English soprano Ena Dayne, she ended her working days in touring concert parties. Other than that nothing is known about her later years.

For decades the Connollys had by accident or design escaped official notice. Other than Joseph and Margaret's marriage certificate dated August 31, 1890 at Saint Mary's Cathedral, Dublin, there is no sign of the family in Irish or British public records. First communion listings (1899 and 1901) exist in Saint Joseph's Church, Leigh, Lancashire for Mary and James, yet the 1901 Census has no Joseph, Margaret, Mary or James Connolly in the town or the county.

It's a similar story at Glasnevin Cemetery where there's no record of the family plot. The Trustees point out that these weren't kept for the paupers' section, although this is unlikely to apply to Joseph and Margaret as they saved in the co-op for their funerals.

Clearly officialdom and history have overlooked Mary Connolly, but as Holloway and newspaper archives demonstrate, she was important to her contemporaries during one of the most significant periods in Ireland's development. As national independence beckoned, her rags-to-riches story was promisingly prophetic for the country's poor. The brilliant voice and heartfelt delivery of a singer who had 'lived' the songs resonated perfectly with the sufferance of her tribe: or as 'Jacques' put it, "the soul... sighs through her singing."