Clarke, Kathleen (Caitlín Bean Uí Chléirigh)

by Frances Clarke

Clarke, Kathleen (Caitlín Bean Uí Chléirigh) (1878–1972), republican activist, was born 11 April 1878 in Limerick, the third daughter of Edward Daly (d. 1890), a timber measurer, and Catherine Daly (née O'Mara), a dressmaker. The Daly family were prominent republicans; her father and, more notably, her uncle John Daly (qv) were Fenian activists. Educated locally, she was apprenticed to a seamstress, and, at the age of eighteen, started her own dressmaking business; this venture was highly successful, and by 1901 she was manager of a thriving dressmaking firm in Limerick. She met Tom Clarke (qv), a close friend of her uncle, in 1899, after his release from Portland prison, and in July 1901 she left Ireland to marry him in New York. For a time they ran a shop in the city and later farmed a market garden at Manorville, Long Island. However, the desire to renew his Fenian activities made Tom Clarke eager to return to Ireland, and in 1907, after some persuasion, his wife agreed to leave the USA. They settled in Dublin, opening a tobacconist's shop at 55 Amiens St., and later a second at 75a Parnell St., which they ran together.

Kathleen Clarke immersed herself in the republican cause, assisting with the production of Irish Freedom, the IRB newspaper founded in 1910. She was among those who attended the first meeting of Cumann na mBan in April 1914, and, as president of its central branch, ran first-aid classes and rifle and signalling practice. She also organised the publishing of successful pamphlets on Irish rebels. Before the Easter rising the supreme council of the IRB chose her as confidant for their plans; in the event of their arrest she was responsible for maintaining contact with John Devoy (qv) in America. After the collapse of the rising she was arrested and imprisoned briefly in Dublin castle (1–3 May). Her husband was executed 3 May and her brother Edward Daly (qv) the day after; she visited both men at Kilmainham jail. Her husband had entrusted her with £3,100 of the IRB's funds to relieve distressed republicans, and within days of his death she had established the Volunteer Dependants' Fund and was distributing assistance. Impressed by Michael Collins (qv), she appointed him secretary to the fund, giving him his first position of administrative responsibility within the republican movement. She also continued to liaise with Clan na Gael associates in the USA. However, in late 1916 ill health resulting from a miscarriage and from the effects of mental strain led her temporarily to abandon her work.

As a vice-president of Cumann na mBan and a member of Sinn Féin's executive, Clarke addressed the question of women's rights during Sinn Féin's 1917 convention. With Jenny Wyse Power (qv) she presented a successful motion which ensured that equal rights for women became party policy. Her involvement with these groups led to her arrest during the 'German plot' scare of May 1918, when republicans were arrested on suspicion of conspiracy with Germany. She was held...
in Holloway prison with Maud Gonne MacBride (qv) and Constance Markievicz (qv). As she was the mother of three children her detention caused considerable outcry, and during her imprisonment she was granted the freedom of Limerick City. She was also nominated by the Dublin City constituency council for election as a Sinn Féin candidate for the Clontarf division, though her nomination was subsequently blocked by Harry Boland (qv) in favour of Richard Mulcahy (qv). Poor health led to her release from prison on 18 February 1919.

In that year she was first returned to Dublin corporation as a councillor, representing both the Wood Quay and Mountjoy wards. In this role she campaigned for the official recognition of the Sinn Féin government, and played an active role on various committees, including the Harcourt Street Children’s Hospital board, and the school meals committee, of which she was chairman. She was a member of the Sinn Féin Dublin north city judiciary, and in 1920 was appointed president of the court of conscience and the children's court. In her capacity as a founder member of the Irish White Cross (1920), she was influential in the establishment of the Orphans' Care Committee. Throughout the war of independence her home was regularly raided by the Black and Tans.

Usually known as Mrs Tom Clarke, she fought hard to promote and defend her husband's memory, believing that he had not been given due recognition for his part in organising the 1916 rising; she constantly maintained that he, rather than Patrick Pearse (qv), had been president of the provisional government. Elected to the dálí for Dublin Mid in 1921, she voted against the treaty. Unyielding in her republican principles, she declared she would accept nothing less than the republic for which her husband had died, and was dismissive of plans launched by Éamon de Valera (qv) for ‘external association’ with the British commonwealth. She later chaired negotiations aimed at avoiding civil war, but maintained her fierce opposition to the treaty. Having lost her seat in 1922, she continued to work for the Dependants’ Fund, and in 1924 travelled to the USA to raise funds. A member of Fianna Fáil from its inception, she was re-elected as a TD for Dublin North in June 1927, and, after initial reservations, entered the dálí, only to lose her seat the following September. She accepted a nomination for the senate in 1928, and clashed with de Valera, whom she regarded as duplicitous and manipulative, when he asked her to stand down on the grounds that too many women had Fianna Fáil nominations; she refused, was elected, and remained in the senate until its abolition in 1936.

During these years her alienation from the party leadership increased. As a senator she opposed section 16 of the 1935 Conditions of Employment Bill, on the grounds that many of its provisions conflicted with women's rights as granted in the 1916 proclamation of the Irish republic. She again found herself expressing a minority view when, on the death of George V in 1936, she opposed the senate's motion of condolence to the British royal family. Her adherence to women's rights led her openly to criticise the 1937 constitution, thus making her a target of attack for many of the party rank and file. In 1939 she became the first woman lord mayor of Dublin.
She served in this capacity until 1941, during which time she removed all traces of past British authority from the office, including having portraits of British monarchs carted away from the Mansion House. While lord mayor, she played a leading role in founding the Irish Red Cross, chairing its first meeting in the Mansion House in 1939.

Believing that de Valera's repression of the IRA during the second world war was excessively severe, she broke with Fianna Fáil in 1941, and, as an independent with no organisational support, lost her seat on Dublin corporation. In 1948 she stood unsuccessfully as a Clann na Poblachta candidate for Dublin North East, after which she concentrated on her work for various humanitarian causes. She also kept up her associations with both the Wolfe Tone Memorial Fund and the National Graves Association. She received an honorary LLD from the NUI in 1966, along with other relatives of the signatories of the 1916 proclamation. In 1965 she settled with her son Emmet in Liverpool, where she was a prominent and popular member of the Irish community. She died 29 September 1972, and, after a state funeral in the pro-cathedral in Dublin, was buried at Deansgrange cemetery.