

Dirrane, Bridget (née Gillan)

by Linde Lunney

Dirrane, Bridget (née Gillan) (1894–2003), nurse, centenarian and memoirist, was born 15 November 1894 in Oatquarter in the townland of Kilmurvey on Inishmore, one of the Aran islands, Co. Galway, the youngest of four boys and four girls born to Joseph Gillan, who wove flannel cloth for local use and also had a small farm, and his wife Maggie (née Walsh). The traditional subsistence farming, culture and customs typical of the community in Aran were still very much alive in Bridget's childhood, and the piety of rural catholicism shaped social as well as spiritual life. Bridget's eldest and favourite brother was a fisherman, but he died aged 21 in 1901, and the father also died relatively young before 1911. Despite the difficulties, Maggie Gillan gave her children a good upbringing; they all went to school, and one of the sons was able to train as an Irish teacher, and eventually became an inspector of Irish. Irish had been the language of the home, but parents and children could all speak English.

Bridget attended a national school in Oatquarter until she was 14, and left to work with local households, looking after children. In her memoirs, written in extreme old age, Dirrane claimed that visitors to Aran, including Patrick Pearse (qv), Thomas Ashe (qv), Éamonn Ceannt (qv), Joseph Mary Plunkett (qv), and Thomas MacDonagh (qv), often visited a house where she was working as a childminder, and that she heard discussions about politics and plans for a rising. She was a lifelong republican; in 1918, when she was working in Knockavilla, Co. Tipperary, as housekeeper for a priest, Fr Matthew Ryan (qv), he encouraged her to become a member of Cumann na mBan. She remembered being actively involved in drilling, and assisting men on the run from the authorities. The hated Black and Tan force raided the family home in Oatquarter, as the family was known to have republican sympathies. Even after she moved to Dublin in 1919, to train as a nurse in St Ultan's Hospital (under Dr Kathleen Lynn (qv)), Bridget was under suspicion, and on one occasion, while a nurse in the household of a somewhat eccentric English supporter of the Irish language, Claud Chavasse (1886–1971), she and her employer were both arrested. She spent two days in the Dublin bridewell, and then was transferred to Mountjoy prison. She was not charged or put on trial, but her defiance and her refusal to speak English angered the guards; she was on hunger strike for a few days in 1920 until released.

For two years Gillan lived as a nursemaid in the household of Richard Mulcahy (qv), but in 1927 she decided to emigrate to work as a nurse in America; she worked in hospitals in Boston, Massachusetts, where she participated in the life of a large community of Irish emigrants, including many from Aran, former neighbours as well as her own relatives. For a time she worked in a hotel, but after her marriage to Edward 'Ned' Dirrane in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston in November 1932,

she went back to nursing. Her husband was also from Inishmore, and worked as a labourer in Boston until his death from heart failure after only eight years of marriage. There were no children, and Durrane continued to work as a nurse in hospitals and as a district nurse. She became a naturalised US citizen on 13 May 1940. During the second world war, she had a job as nurse in a munitions factory, and also worked for the US Army Air Forces at a bomber base in Mississippi. She supported John F. Kennedy's candidature for the American presidency in 1960, canvassing for him in the Irish community in South Boston. In 1997, his sister, the US ambassador to Ireland, Jean Kennedy Smith, visited the centenarian in Galway to acknowledge the connection; Bridget also met US Senator Edward Kennedy, the deceased president's brother.

After her retirement, Bridget lived for a time with a nephew, but in 1966, aged 72, she came back home to her native townland in Aran. She went to live with her late husband's younger brother Pat Durrane, a widower with three grown-up sons. To preserve the proprieties, they were married in a private ceremony on 27 April 1966. Together they renovated a house (Bridget active even in slating the roof), and enjoyed the community life on Inishmore, until Pat died on 28 February 1990. His son's family lived with her until she needed more care, when she moved into a nursing home in Newcastle, a suburb of Galway city. Bridget Durrane lived in three centuries and outlived her siblings and the friends of her youth, but all her life retained the faith of her childhood. To give thanks for reaching her 100th birthday, she paid for a statue of Our Lady to be placed at a holy well in Corough on Inishmore. When Durrane was 103, the matron of the nursing home, Rose O'Connor, arranged for a local writer, Jack Mahon, to record her reminiscences and prepare a book, *A woman of Aran*. It was published in 1997, and remained on the bestseller list for several weeks. In May 1998, Durrane was the oldest person ever to receive an honorary degree, when NUI Galway awarded her an MA, *honoris causa*, and she lived to be the second oldest Irishwoman.

She died in Galway, aged 109, on 31 December 2003, and was buried in Killeany graveyard on Aran.

NAI: Census of Ireland 1901, 1911, www.census.nationalarchives.ie; USA naturalisation record for Bridget Durrane, accessed online at www.ancestry.com; Bridget Durrane, Rose O'Connor, and Jack Mahon, *A woman of Aran* (1997); *Ir. Times*, 15 Nov. 1999; 2, 3 Jan. 2004