

## Guiney, Mary

by Linde Lunney

Guiney, Mary (1901–2004), businesswoman and centenarian, was born 2 March 1901, daughter of John Leahy, a farmer of Creeves, near Shanagolden, Co. Limerick, and his wife Hannah (née Cuddihy). Mary, known as May when she was a young woman, had at least one older brother and an older sister, two younger brothers and a younger sister; another child in the family died young. The family was quite well-off, and Mary attended the Dominican College, in Eccles Street, Dublin, presumably as a boarder. She stayed on in the city to take up a job in the shop on Talbot Street owned by Denis Guiney (qv) (d. 1967). On 19 October 1938 she married her employer in a ceremony in the Pro-Cathedral, Dublin.

The couple were to develop a formidable partnership. The Talbot Street shop was flourishing, thanks to Denis Guiney's business skills and his ability to provide a mass market with good value products. In 1941, the long-established department store, Clery & Company, Ltd, on O'Connell Street, Dublin, was in receivership, and the Guineys seized the chance to buy it, forming a new private limited company in August 1941. Somewhat unusually at that time, Mary Guiney was a director of the company along with her husband; there was no one else on the board at first. A newspaper report (*Irish Times*, 14 August 1941) called her a 'keen businesswoman' and noted her active involvement in both Guiney's and Clery's. The turnover in Clery's, despite serious wartime difficulties, increased almost immediately by 1,000 per cent, and Ireland's largest department store was upgraded to include forty-two sales counters, two restaurants, a ballroom and three bars, spread over four levels, each of which covered a statute acre. The store is credited with having kept many small suppliers in Ireland in business during the war and afterwards, and even with having had a beneficial influence on the national economy. Certainly by the 1960s it was a national institution, employing in 1967 over 1,000 employees, and attracting many thousands of customers, especially from the country. The biannual sales were great events; during the first clearance sale in 1941, traffic on O'Connell Street was disrupted and the unprecedented sum of £100,000 was taken in the first week.

Clery & Co. was the first Dublin company to host charity events for elderly and lonely residents of the city; in 1954 and in subsequent years afternoon tea and entertainment for one hundred old people was provided in the shop's restaurants. Mary Guiney, always very religious, also helped several catholic charities. However, her main interest was in developing the business, and when her husband died in 1967, although she was then 66, she had no intention of surrendering control of what they had built together. She successfully contested his will, which had distributed shares to a wide circle of relatives (they had had no children) and maintained her control of the business with 52 per cent of the shares and as chairman of the board. Gradually she accepted family members and others as managers and directors, but

she retained a firm grip on all aspects of the business and refused to countenance any suggestions of selling the company or any of its assets. She rejected a takeover bid by John Teeling in 1987, and her influence on the board insured the failure of a management buyout attempt by the general manager, Tom Rea, in 1999. She continued to visit the shop and attend board meetings until she was 99, and signed annual accounts in 2004 when she was 103, still at least nominally in charge, and by then surely the oldest company director in Ireland and Britain.

In 1999 her large house on the Howth Road was sold for £4 million to be demolished for residential development, but in other ways Clery & Co. missed the opportunities presented by Ireland's Celtic Tiger boom years. She was increasingly an obstacle to changes within the store and the company, and during her later years the name of Clery lost a good deal of its lustre as profits slipped and an older generation of customers, dying off, was not being replaced by new ones.

Mary Guiney died 23 August 2004 in the Beaumont Hospital, Dublin. After a funeral mass in St Anthony's church, Clontarf, she was buried in Glasnevin cemetery with her late husband and his first wife.

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NAI: Census of Ireland 1901, 1911, [www.census.nationalarchives.ie](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie); *Ir. Times*, 12 Nov. 1938; 14 Aug. 1941; 16 Oct. 1961; 2 Dec. 1999; 24, 28 Aug. 2004; Peter Costello and Tony Farmar, *The very heart of the city. The story of Denis Guiney and Clerys* (1992) (photograph, p. 125); *Sunday Independent*, 28 Mar. 1999; 29 Aug. 2004; *Sunday Tribune*, 29 Aug. 2004; Peter Costello, 'Denis Guiney 1893–1967', DIB.