

Trench, Cesca (Trinseach, Sadhbh)

by Patrick Maume

Trench, Cesca (Trinseach, Sadhbh) (1891–1918), artist and cultural-political activist, was born Frances Georgiana Chenevix Trench in Liverpool on 3 February 1891, fourth child (of three sons and two daughters) of Francis Chenevix Trench, perpetual curate at the anglican church of St John the Baptist and grandson of Richard Chenevix Trench (qv), and his wife Isabella Catherine (née Trench). The Conservative MP, classicist and Munster landlord Samuel Henry Butcher (qv) was an uncle by marriage, who introduced Cesca to some of his artistic acquaintances and argued tolerantly over her developing 'narrow' nationalist sympathies.

After Revd Trench died from TB in 1900 the family were left dependent on elderly members of the extended family living in Britain and Ireland, with whom they resided for long periods. The family also spent a long time in Switzerland during Cesca's childhood; here she attended her first schools. Their mother encouraged the children to think of themselves as Irish, while remaining strongly unionist (as did her three sons, who made careers in the British army, and most of the extended family, whose political arguments with Cesca are regularly described in her papers). Although Cesca remained fond of her family (the death of her favourite brother Reginald, whom she called 'Reggie' or 'Ragnall', in action on 21 March 1918 was to have a devastating effect on her), she commented in December 1913 that she felt she did not like her relatives because of their disagreement with her deepest beliefs, and dreamt of marrying and having a husband and large family who would be in sympathy with her (Pyle, 76).

Cesca developed nationalist sympathies from the age of 15, as did her sister Margot. These tendencies were encouraged by Cesca's experience of an English public school, Malvern, where the other pupils' attitudes to Ireland were both ignorant and unsympathetic (though Cesca's artistic talents – notably drawing – were encouraged there), and by the influence of a cousin, Dermot Trench, who gave the sisters their first lessons in the Irish language (c.1907) and encouraged them to join the London branch of the Gaelic League in 1908. The family now lived at Folkestone, Kent, where their cousin Elizabeth Bowen (qv) was attending school; Bowen found the sisters' flamboyant 'Celtic' dress and nationalist propaganda a considerable embarrassment. The family's financial position improved after Butcher's death in 1910, when the Trench children inherited significant legacies.

From 1909 Cesca Trench attended Irish-language summer colleges in the west of Ireland (notably in Achill, Aran and Connemara), which she, like others, experienced as places of release from the social constraints of Edwardian middle-class life (she liked to go barefoot, swim, dance on the sands, and wear 'peasant' dress; when studying in Paris she was excited to be mistaken for a peasant girl when on country

walks). At these colleges she made the acquaintance of prominent Gaelic Leaguers, including Patrick Pearse (qv).

Trench also carried on intense flirtations with the protestant Gaelic Leaguers Claud Chevasse and Diarmid Coffey (qv), both of whom feature in her drawings and paintings. From 1915 she committed herself to Coffey despite disagreements over his adherence, even after 1916, to a more conciliatory form of Sinn Féin nationalism than her committed separatism, his opposition to women's suffrage (which she supported), and her self-doubt about whether she could call herself really Irish because of her birth and long residence outside Ireland. (In *Vivid faces*, Roy Foster mistakenly refers to these doubts as based on religious differences and Coffey as 'securely catholic' (p. 53).)

From 1910 Trench adopted a gaelicised form of her name, Sadhbh Trinseach, under which she exhibited (signing her work – when she signed it – with variants of the initials 'ST') and engaged in political activities, but was known to friends and family as 'Cesca'. She also began writing unpublished stories and essays on political topics. From 1913 to 1918 she designed postcards and publicity posters for the Gaelic League. One of her best-known Gaelic League posters, from 1913, visually contrasts a future Gaelic Ireland (a warrior queen standing upright, holding shipping routes like dog leashes in her hand) and West Britain (a beggar woman squatting on her island, wrapping herself in a ragged union jack and holding out a hand to the imperial shipping routes which graze her harbours). After the revival of *An Claidheamh Soluis* in 1913 under the supervision of Michael O'Rahilly (qv), Trench contributed occasional political cartoons (often on lines specified by O'Rahilly) and a fashion page reporting Paris fashions and promoting supposedly 'Celtic' styles of women's dress such as she herself regularly wore (in everyday life and in Gaelic League pageants).

Visiting India (December 1911–April 1912), Trench stayed with the bishop of Calcutta, who was a relative by marriage (she found the country fascinating, but disagreed with the bishop's unionism). She spent lengthy periods in 1912–14 as an art student in Paris, mainly at the atelier of Émile-René Ménard; she expressed identification with the French as 'feminine' fellow Celts facing 'masculine' Teutonic oppression in Alsace-Lorraine, and took a particular interest in the Bretons (then subject to much romantic-primitive fascination). She also befriended Czechs and Poles as fellow-sufferers of national oppression, while privately regretting that none of the art students whom she liked so much 'had any morals' (Pyle, 53). Although she recorded her dislike of the work of the fauvist painter Henri Matisse, her Parisian sojourn gave her an increased interest in colour, which continued to develop for the remainder of her life.

Trench identified with the 'pan-Celtic' tendency in the Gaelic League, which had particular attractions for protestants seeking a version of Irish identity not coterminous with catholicism (and was correspondingly attacked by chauvinists

such as D. P. Moran (qv)). Like many pan-Celts, she combined continuing self-identification as Christian (from 1914 she participated in the newly formed Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise, an association that promoted the use of Irish within the Church of Ireland, and a story by her was serialised in its paper, the *Gaelic Churchman*, in 1922) with the belief that Christianity needed to be reinvented through occult exploration and syncretism to suit the instinctive spirituality of the Celts. She records a conversation with her future husband in which they agreed that they had severe difficulty in believing in the atonement (i.e., that it was necessary for Jesus to die to redeem mankind), and she firmly believed in reincarnation, which she maintained had given her greater respect for people in general. After 1914 she attended meetings of the Dublin Hermetic Society and associated with Ella Young (qv), though she privately thought some of Young's 'Celtic' spirituality a bit high-flown for those overwhelmed with everyday concerns.

Trench spent much of the spring and summer of 1914 in Ireland, and was present at the landing of arms for the Irish Volunteers at Howth on 26 July 1914, recording a vivid description in her diary. On the outbreak of war in August 1914, her brothers prepared for active service and she moved permanently to Terenure (in the south Dublin suburbs) with her mother and sister, while continuing her studies at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. She joined Cumann na mBan, rapidly becoming a member of its executive and one of three secretaries, and remained active in it until her death. Also an active member of the Gaelic League's Craobh na gCúig gCúigí (Branch of the Five Provinces), she was elected to the league executive in 1915. (In later years she was sometimes included on lists of protestant Gaelic Leaguers cited to counter claims that the 'compulsory Irish' policy was sectarian – eg., a *Southern Star* article of 29 October 1955, which mistakenly describes her as a niece of the ultra-unionist Lord Ashtown (qv)). Her biographer Hilary Pyle believes that she avoided prosecution after the Easter rising (she was arrested once in autumn 1916 but released within two hours) only because of her family connections and the memory of Archbishop Trench.

Initially appalled at the carnage of the 1916 rising, Trench sympathised with the position of Eoin MacNeill (qv), but her separatism rapidly revived in response to the repression of the rebellion. She joined the Irish National Aid Association (set up soon after the rising to support prisoners' dependants) and in late 1916 designed the emblem of the short-lived anti-partitionist Irish Nation League at the commission of Kevin O'Shiel (qv). She also displayed increasing commitment to building an artistic career (despite her political commitments, she grew more aware that art and nationalist politics could not necessarily be equated). In the summer of 1917 she was commissioned to paint murals at the Irish college at Carrigaholt, Co. Clare, which she greatly loved (the murals faded but were restored in the 1930s and again in 1982), and during her stay reacted ecstatically to the victory of Éamon de Valera (qv) in the East Clare by-election.

Cesca Trench married Diarmid Coffey on 17 April 1918. They lived at her family residence in Terenure, Dublin, where she died of 'Spanish' influenza on 30 October 1918. Coffey's eldest child by his second marriage was called Saive; she inherited Cesca's papers (now in the NLI); the NLI also has twelve of her sketchbooks. In 1966 Coffey's second wife presented a collection of Cesca's drawings to the NLI. Other works are in private hands, and some may survive unidentified. (Pyle's book, *Cesca's diary*, contains a provisional catalogue.) Two portraits of Cesca by George Russell (qv) ('Æ') survive in private ownership. Some of Cesca's portrait drawings (notably of Douglas Hyde (qv), with whom she had a mildly uneasy friendship, and Eoin MacNeill) and Gaelic League designs are often reproduced in accounts of the period and display her unfulfilled talents.

Since the publication in 2005 of Hilary Pyle's study based on Cesca's diaries and letters, Trench has attracted increased attention as a representative of a subculture of early-twentieth-century semi-bohemian Celtic revivalists. Her writings bear witness to the dreams, frustrations and expectations of that milieu and its interrelation with the cultural and political ferments of the pre-1914 era in its reaction against Victorian constraints, and she died before those dreams could be disappointed.

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*Kerryman*, 27 Mar. 1937; *Southern Star*, 29 Oct. 1955; *Ir. Independent*, 4 July 1966; Snoddy (2002 ed.), 667–8; Hilary Pyle, *Cesca's diary, 1913–1916: where art and nationalism meet* (2005); R. F. Foster, *Vivid faces: the revolutionary generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (2014); information from Petra Coffey