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[Compte-rendu] Eva Gore-Booth:An Image of Such Politics

Olivier Coquelin

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Eva Gore-Booth: An Image of Such Politics. By Sonja Tiernan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), xviii + 277 pp. £17.99 paper; £65.00 cloth.

Published in : *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms*, Journal of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas, Haifa University (Israel), vol. 20, n° 1, p. 80-82

Sonja Tiernan's present book is above all meant to do justice to Eva Gore-Booth whose talent and prominent role in history have hitherto not been duly recognized. This neglect is corroborated by the fact that it is the very first biographical work ever devoted to this iconoclastic Irish figure since her death in 1926—at least the very first that is exclusively dedicated to her (see Gifford Lewis, *Eva Gore Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1988)). And to carry out such a comprehensive exploration of Gore-Booth's fascinating life a wide range of materials, including private collections and state archives, was necessary and thoroughly used.

Eva Gore-Booth's public life was characterized by eclectic activities and commitments in the political, social, economic, literary and spiritual fields. Tiernan first helps us understand how all these involvements came into being (see the introduction and chap. 1) before examining each of them in subsequent chapters. She traces their origins to Gore-Booth's childhood and youth spent in the aristocratic and luxurious family estate of Lyssadell House, County Sligo, Ireland, where she was born in 1870. Thus her family environment and history had an indisputable impact on her future ideas and endeavours, starting with the nationalist feelings and social guilt she developed over time. And this, owing to the way her Protestant ancestors had acquired their land and titles in the seventeenth century and the dire poverty in which many indigenous tenant farmers lived under the yoke of the Anglo-Irish landowning class to which she belonged—even though her grandfather and father had been looked upon as most charitable landlords.

Gore-Booth would eventually reject her privileged family background to live close to the poorest workers of industrial England and to fight for their cause (chap. 3). This rejection also found political expression in her support of the Irish separatist movement—although she had taken part in pacifist campaigns since the beginning of World War I (chaps. 7–8)—especially after the abortive 1916 Easter Rebellion in which her more famous sister, Constance Markievicz, had featured prominently. The Dublin uprising and

the ensuing repression strongly affected Gore-Booth as many of her friends or figures she admired, like Francis Sheehy Skeffington and James Connolly, had lost their lives in the course of these events. She therefore became very active in the campaigns for the reprieve of her sister and that of Roger Casement and, thereafter, in the 1918 anti-conscription campaign (chaps. 8–10).

Another major campaign in which Gore-Booth was involved was the movement for women's suffrage in the United Kingdom through which she became acquainted with notorious suffragists and suffragettes, including Christabel Pankhurst (chap. 5). She was indeed a staunch feminist who, along with her lover and lifelong friend Esther Roper, struggled for women's rights and gender equality not only in the political sphere but also in the workplace. Here too, her feminist inclinations can be traced to her early life in Lyssadell House, at the time when she was portrayed by the Irish artist, Sarah Purser, whose independent lifestyle she most probably emulated. As for the socioeconomic dimension of her militant career, it was greatly inspired by her mother's work in teaching women how to gain financial independence. The trade union campaigns she would later orchestrate to improve the conditions of barmaids, circus performers, flower sellers and pit-brow lasses were thus motivated by such financially egalitarian considerations (chaps. 3–4, 6–7).

However, Gore-Booth was not only a social and political activist. She was also a poet, dramatist and novelist whose writings were pervaded with Celtic mythology and legends, with which she had become familiar from her frequent contacts with the local tenant farmers in Sligo and with the great Irish poet, William Butler Yeats, whom she had met in Lyssadell on two occasions, and who was fascinated by her to the point of even contemplating marrying her. She instilled in her later plays a spiritual dimension, closely associated with the theosophical philosophy she had endorsed, the natural outcome of being immersed in spiritualism since her youth (chap. 11). The high quality of her works was generally acknowledged, despite the liberties she sometimes took with the traditional versions of Celtic mythology which she imbued with feminist principles, notably featuring women as protagonists (chaps. 4 and 6).

Having lived such a rich and complex life, one may wonder why Eva Gore-Booth never really made a place for herself in history. Tiernan holds that the cause of this partly

lies in the ambiguous nature of Gore-Booth's relationship with Esther Roper or, to put it bluntly, in the "homophobic embarrassment about her life-long partnership with another woman" (Sonja Tiernan, "Challenging Presumptions of Heterosexuality: Eva Gore-Booth, a Biographical Case Study," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 37.2 [2011]: 59). Another reason was obviously that Gore-Booth was overshadowed by her older sister, Constance Markievicz, who had earned a place of honour in Ireland's Hall of Fame for the part she played in the 1916–23 Irish Revolution. To this one may add that Gore-Booth lived and campaigned mostly in Britain, which probably contributed to her not being regarded as a genuine compatriot in either country.

In sum, despite a few minor factual inaccuracies, Tiernan's *Eva Gore-Booth* is a comprehensive and enthralling book that will be an invaluable source for future investigations into the social and political history of early-twentieth-century Ireland and Britain.

Olivier Coquelin, University of Rennes 2, France

o.coquelin@wanadoo.fr