

EILEEN CRONIN for women's history evening 11 Sept 2019 - Ann Tierney

Eileen Cronin was born at Ballingeary, Co Cork in 1879. Her parents were Cornelius Cronin, a farmer, and his wife Abby Lucy. In the census of 1901, twenty-one years later, the family house is recorded as a small 4-roomed one. Ellie is still a scholar at 21 and is the eldest of the children living at home. There are four younger daughters: Mary, Hannah, Kate and Bridget, the youngest of whom is 9 years of age. The family is Roman Catholic. Ellie is a Monitor or teaching assistant in the nearby school at Killnamartra, Co Cork.

But to take a step back and look at what was happening here in Kilkenny around that time. Four years earlier, in 1897, a branch of the Gaelic League had been formed by a group of locals. They included solicitor, Tim O'Hanrahan, civil servant Tom Barry, cooper, Jim Nolan. The Gaelic League itself had been set up in Dublin in 1893 by Douglas Hyde, Eoin MacNeill and others.

For that first meeting of the Kilkenny branch in 1897, Gaelic League people came from Dublin, Cork, Waterford and Belfast. The meeting was held in the Tholsel.

Shortly afterwards, Irish classes were started. Patrick Kangley, an Irish teacher from Co Meath then living in Johnswell gave the lessons. But the Tholsel was only a temporary solution.

Tim O'Hanrahan had premises in mind for the League. Like Eileen Cronin, he originated in Co Cork. He had been reared in Mitchelstown and completed his secondary education in Kilkenny. He had developed a great love for the Irish language through his uncle William Williams who was a noted Gaelic scholar in Dungarvan.

In 1896 Tim O'Hanrahan purchased Rothe House, or Wolfe's Arch as it was called then. This was one of several properties he and his brothers owned in the town. His refurbishment of the middle or second house at Rothe House was completed in 1898. The Gaelic League now had its own room in which to meet.

By 1900 there was an Irish-Ireland revolution underway throughout the country. This was a cultural revolution not political. Things in Kilkenny were changing in leaps and bounds. Douglas Hyde came to Kilkenny that year. He had published a paper on 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland'. He spoke at the Court House and was entertained at Sheestown House by Otway Cuffe, a man keen to encourage native industry in Kilkenny. The minutes of the Gaelic League record that its members were urged at the time to purchase Irish manufactures whenever possible.

The next year, 1901, saw Thomas Mac Donagh, a teacher at St Kieran's, join the Gaelic League committee in Kilkenny. That March, he and Tim O'Hanrahan make a door-to-door canvas around the town to encourage shops to close on St Patrick's Day. The 17 March became a national public holiday two years later but in Kilkenny in 1901 there was general compliance regarding closure - J P Smithwick, for example, was the first signatory to the petition.

In 1901 too, Otway Cuffe organised an open-air pageant on the banks of the Nore at Sheestown. It focused on the life of Aodh Rua O'Domhnaill - nearly 2000 people walked out from Kilkenny and sat on the grassy slopes of the river to watch.

By that autumn, the Kilkenny Branch of the League was ready to look for a native speaker for their classes. They decided to advertise the post of teacher. Tim O'Hanrahan may have used his contacts in Cork to engage Eileen Cronin from Ballingeary in the Muskerri Gaeltacht as teacher to the League classes. The committee proposed an annual salary of £40.

Eileen arrived in Kilkenny in late 1901. She boarded with Monica McDonald at 16 William Street. Although she is noted in the census at Ballingearry as speaking English as well as Irish, it seems that her English was limited.

It was probably to rectify this that Tim O'Hanrahan arranged for Eileen to attend the Presentation School for her first 6 months in Kilkenny. In addition, he paid all her expenses during the period out of his own pocket.

By the autumn of 1902 Eileen was ready to begin teaching at Rothe's Arch. Her schedule included classes there each evening from 6-10pm. She taught in five city schools, either before 10 am or after 3 pm. She cycled to classes in towns around Kilkenny where Gaelic League groups had been established, including Sheestown, Urlingford, the Callan Technical School. By this stage, branches were being set up throughout the county.

In 1904 Otway Cuffe was chosen as president of the Kilkenny branch of the Gaelic League. He went ahead with his industrial plans which saw Kilkenny Woodworkers established in 1905 and the Woollen Mills open at Greenvale on the Bleach Road in 1906.

There were many ebbs and flows in the image that Kilkenny was now making of itself. A couple of examples: there was a motion to the Kilkenny branch from Fintan Phelan, to remove the phrase 'On His Majesty's Service' from the notepaper of public bodies in Kilkenny. Otway Cuffe threatened to resign if that motion went ahead so the branch quietly dropped it.

Another example: the branch decided to perform a Nativity play in the Theatre. The Nativity play was written by Douglas Hyde, a Protestant, and translated by Lady Gregory. However a meeting of local priests condemned the play and wrote about the matter to the Freeman's Journal. The letter was then read at all masses. The Gaelic League withdrew the play.

Each year the Gaelic League organised a Feis and various concerts. Eileen Cronin was at the heart of it. In 1904 the Feis was held in the Market Yard. The following year, special trains came from Dublin for it. There were competitions with prizes in needlework, carpentry, map drawing, photography, butter, honey, to name a few. The Feis attracted support from all sectors of the community. Subscribers included Lady Ormonde, the Misses Butler of Kilmurry, Wandesford, Tighe, Loftus, Power of Kilfane, Mosse.

From 1903 Lady Desart made a yearly subscription to the League. The amount rose over the following decade from £20 to £30 a year. She presented silver watches to Feis prizewinners. She purchased a gramophone, violin, uilleann pipes and much more for the League.

Miss Cronin organised Irish dancing in the evenings at Rothe House. Classes took place on the ground floor, now the MacDonagh room. There was singing too, sometimes live with musical instruments, or with the black box which played 78 records. Everyone was expected to do a turn. They would go upstairs afterwards for a cup of tea and refreshments.

Miss Cronin tried to provide an alternative to the popular culture of the time and would criticize anyone who had been off to the Mayfair ballroom instead of coming to the Irish dancing. At Rothe House, she provided a social life for adults and teenagers alike. Some older people came regularly. People with cars brought others from afar. Dr Bannon from Durrow used to bring a group each week.

Many people in Kilkenny today still remember Eileen from the 1940s, 50s and early 60s. Maire Dunne, Stephen Quigley, Tom Coyle and Padraic Begley have spoken of her. Ann Cantwell wrote about her as did Liam Bolger. These young people were delighted with the social opportunities

that a class after school or a scoireacht in the evening offered to 14 or 15 year olds. Many of the young people also took part in the one-day annual Feis at St James's Park. They speak of the singing competitions. Tom Coyle remembers helping to build the stage. From what we know, she was strict and could be cross but she commanded the loyalty of her pupils.

In later years, Eileen taught an Irish class at the Technical school. Ann Cantwell remembered being sent out of her class in the late 1940s to go to the school principal, for whatever misdemeanour - anyone who remembers Ann will vouch for the fact that indeed she might get up to divilment. The Principal told Ann not to mind Miss Cronin but to go back to the classroom and to pretend she had been properly chastised. Ann spoke fondly of Miss Cronin. She said her pupils often ran messages for her. Ann remembered herself being summoned by Miss Cronin to Rothe House by telegram. Ann, I should add, was then living in James Street.

Tony Patterson has written of difficulties that arose in her final decades over a pension. From 1914, Eileen was employed as a part-time teacher by the VEC or its predecessor. In 1933, the post became a fulltime one but the department refused to make her permanent on the grounds that she was then over the age of fifty-four. Two years later they relented and made her permanent.

What it meant, though, was that in 1947 when she was 68 years of age, she was judged to have reached the upper age limit for VEC employment. It was then that the department announced she had only thirteen years of pensionable service and awarded her an annual pension of £155. The local committee fought hard to get ten extra years of service added to that pension but didn't succeed.

So, for the 15 years after this official retirement, the VEC employed her as a temporary teacher of Irish. This allowed her to supplement the meagre pension by teaching some hours in Rothe House. Then in 1962 there is a note in the minutes to say that Miss Cronin has not returned to work after a recent illness. She was then 83 years of age, and still working.

Eileen Cronin went back to Cork the following year. She died in St Anthony's Hospital, Dunmanway a year later on 9th October 1964 at the age of 85. Tony Patterson remembers travelling with others from Kilkenny to her funeral. She is buried in Inchegeelagh. Maire Dunne, who visits the grave each year, provided us with her memory card.

In 1970, a plaque executed by artist Oisín Kelly and honouring both herself and Tim O'Hanrahan, was erected in the Cronin Room at Rothe House. A few years ago, her nephew Tadhg Creed of Ballingearry sent Rothe House her teaching books. Her scrapbook is still kept in the house. Both are on display here this evening if you care to look at them afterwards.

Finally, I want to add a word from Margaret Phelan, past president of Kilkenny Archaeological Society, who was born the year Eileen Cronin commenced teaching in Kilkenny. Margaret Phelan lived her own first years in William Street. Perhaps Eileen even stopped the pram to admire the new baby on William Street.

Fifteen years after Eileen's death Margaret Phelan wrote an article about William Street in the Old Kilkenny Review. She had these words to say about Eileen:

When Eileen, from Ballingearry arrived in Kilkenny, 21 years of age, she was met at the station by Mrs. Lennon (nee McCarthy) of No. 9 William St and went to stay in No. 16 and stayed there all her long years in Kilkenny (sixty at least). Something of her loyalty and rocklike stability emerges from this fact of residence, never changing. To Eileen is due much of the success of the Gaelic League in Kilkenny and the warm love of the people for the native language. [MMP OKR WILLIAM ST 1979]