WOMEN'S HISTORY

LIVES & LEGACIES OF IRISH DIASPORA WOMEN

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INTRODUCTION

Irish women blazed trails across the globe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, innovating in every area from science to sports, and from the arts to politics. This document highlights the lives and legacies of five of these women, just a fraction of the many who made lasting contributions in their fields. From the beginning, the movement for equality was a global one. It was fought both by suffrage campaigners, and by individual pioneering women who defied convention.

These incredible women featured in one of our past temporary exhibitions, 'Blazing A Trail: Lives and Legacies of Irish Diaspora Women' which marked the centenary of when Irish women were first given the right to run for parliament in 1918. It was a collaboration between EPIC The Irish Emigration Museum, Herstory and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the exhibition celebrated the lives of 21 pioneering diaspora women from the 19th and 20th centuries, who each blazed a trail in a wide range of fields.

LADY MARY HEATH
1896 – 1939

Record-breaking aviator, athlete
and campaigner from Limerick

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LADY MARY HEATH

This pioneering aviator's early life was marked by tragic circumstances that, in all likelihood, shaped her character as a person who always resisted gender inequality.

Sophie Peirce-Evans was born in Limerick to violent alcoholic John Peirce-Evans, and his housekeeper, Teresa Dooling. When Sophie was 13 months old, Evans brutally murdered Dooling. He spent the rest of his life in Dublin's Central Mental Hospital, while Sophie was raised by her grandparents.

In 1914, Sophie enrolled in Dublin's Royal College of Science. She was an excellent student, active in the hockey club and the Agricultural Debating Club, and edited the school magazine, The Torch.

In 1916, she met and married Captain William Davies Eliott-Lynn. She postponed her studies to become a motor dispatch rider in France in 1917–19, while her husband recovered from malaria contracted on service in South Africa.

In 1919, she returned to Dublin to complete her studies while her husband established a farm in east Africa. He ordered her to find paid employment, so she worked briefly as a zoology demonstrator in Aberdeen before moving to London. She visited east Africa for several months in 1922–3 and 1924.

In London, she became involved in athletics and by 1921 was ranked 2nd in Britain and Ireland in the high jump. In 1922, she became a founding member of the British Women's Amateur Athletic Association; by 1924, it had 23,000 members, and Sophie was its president. She represented Britain in the Women's Modern Olympic Games in Paris in 1922, competing in front of over 30,000 spectators.

By late 1923, Sophie shared the women's world record for high jump (1.485m) with American Elizabeth Stine.

She published articles on athletics and, in 1925, read the preface to her book, Athletics for Girls and Women in a BBC radio broadcast. She presented papers on women's sport at the 8th Olympic Congress in Prague, citing childbearing as evidence of the capabilities of women's bodies.

A turning-point came in August 1925, when she became one of the first members of the London Aeroplane Club. She persisted with flying lessons despite financial difficulties, and received her private pilot's licence on 4 November.

However, in April 1924 the International Commission for Air Navigation had passed a resolution banning women from operating commercial aircraft, treating menstruation as a disability. Sophie joined forces with journalist Stella Wolfe Murray to win a difficult campaign against the resolution, detailed in their book, Women and Flying (1929). Sophie thereby became Britain's first officially recognised female commercial pilot, paving the way for other women to follow and performing public flight demonstrations and stunts. She was elected a member of the Royal Aeronautical Society, but as a woman was not permitted to attend meetings. The Society brushed off her letters of complaint. After the death of her first husband, she married 75-year-old Sir James Heath, a wealthy collier owner and MP. She was henceforth known as Lady Mary Heath.

In autumn 1927, the pair set off by steam liner for Cape Town with her brand new Avro Avian safely stowed in the hold. She launched her famous south–north flyover of Africa on 5 Jan 1928, landing in Croydon on 18 May. For this feat she was elected Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, an honour reserved for the most intrepid explorers. Thereafter, her star went into decline. In 1931, she divorced Sir James and married her Jamaican lover Reginald 'Jack' Williams, who she met in America; the marriage lasted only four years.

In August 1929, Lady Mary was seriously injured when her plane crashed through a factory roof in Ohio. She never fully recovered, and it was probably as a result of long-term head injury that she died after falling from a London tram in May 1939. The tenacity of her early victories for women in athletics and aviation remain, however, to secure her pioneering legacy.

KAY MCNULTY
1921–2006

Ground-breaking computer programmer from Donegal

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KAY MCNULTY

In 2004, the pioneering computer programmer Kay McNulty Mauchly Antonelli reflected on her career: 'All the years I gave talks about the ENIAC, I always talked about it as John [Mauchly]'s story, not my story.' She was invited to give those talks as the widow of the co-inventor of the world's first electronic general-purpose computer – not as an expert in her own right.

For centuries, couples have collaborated in scientific research; the Curies are a famous example. McNulty's passion for mathematics pre-dated her marriage to an eminent scientist in 1948, but social norms obliged her to continue her pioneering programming work unpaid, confined to the family home.

She was born in the shadow of Muckish Mountain, Co. Donegal in February 1921, during the Irish War of Independence. Her father was arrested on the night of her birth for IRA membership and spent the first two years of her life in prison. A year after his release, the family left Ireland for Pennsylvania.

At the time, Irish women were more likely to emigrate than Irish men, and early in life McNulty enjoyed the opportunities that emigration presented. In 1929, only 37% of all Irish girls aged 14–16 were enrolled in a primary or secondary school. In Philadelphia, however, McNulty attended High School, something that most Donegal girls could only dream of. She was a brilliant student, and won a scholarship to Chestnut Hill College for Women. Her mother had encouraged her to do her best, 'to prove that Irish immigrants could be as good, if not better, than anybody.'

She graduated from Chestnut Hill in 1942 with outstanding grades in maths. She longed for a job that would allow her to use maths, but dreaded teaching. Again, war intervened. The US Army urgently needed mathematicians, and she was hired as a 'computer', calculating missile trajectories. She excelled at the slow, painstaking work and in 1945 was selected, with five other women, to work at Aberdeen military base in Maryland, developing the processor for a top-secret 30-ton machine called the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC).

ENIAC was the world's first electronic general-purpose computer and a huge step forward in technology, but when it was publicly launched on 15 February 1946, the women who meticulously brought it to fruition were asked to act as hostesses, 'to greet all the big shots and show them around'.

McNulty was assigned another programming job in 1945, the details of which were beyond her security clearance. She discovered later that her team had been testing the feasibility of the H-bomb.

She left paid employment when she married John Mauchly in February 1948. Her mother objected to the union on the grounds that Mauchly was not Irish or Catholic, was 14 years her senior, and was a widower with two children. On their honeymoon, he presented her with a cookbook, saying, 'You are our new cook.' While cooking and raising seven children, she continued, uncredited, to programme his new computers.

Despite her ongoing contributions to programming, the Derry People and Donegal News reported her 1968 visit to Donegal as that of 'One of America's leading scientists, with his Donegal-born wife'. Again, in 1999, the newspaper emphasised her father's IRA membership, not her contributions to science.

McNulty's pioneering work was finally acknowledged in 1997, when the six ENIAC women were inducted into the Women in Technology International Hall of Fame. In 1999, a computer science prize in her honour was established at Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

MARY ‘MOTHER’ JONES
C. 1837–1930

Labour activist and campaigner
from Cork

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MARY 'MOTHER' JONES

Little is known of the early life of the woman whose iconic status as an activist and social justice campaigner endures 170 years after her birth. Mary Harris was baptised in Cork in 1837, and was brought to North America as a small child. She was educated in Catholic schools and worked as a teacher in Toronto and in Michigan but preferred dressmaking to 'bossing little children'.

She suffered great hardship in her personal life, which undoubtedly energised her activism. In 1867, tragedy struck when her husband and four children all died during a yellow fever epidemic.

This terrible loss led her to relocate to boomtown Chicago, where she worked as a seamstress and became active in the Knights of Labour. Chicago was then the fastest-growing city in the USA, and the gap between rich and poor was a gaping chasm.

She was visited once more by misfortune, when her shop was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, which was accidentally started by another Irishwoman. Having risen from the ashes, Chicago was struck in the 1870s and 1880s by economic depression. In 1877, 100,000 workers participated in nationwide strikes in a two-week period after a cut in rail workers' wages. Trade unions grew stronger.

The infamous Haymarket incident of 1886 marked a turning-point, both for the American trade union movement, and for Jones herself. From then, she dedicated herself to the cause of labour and began to celebrate her birthday on May Day, as a symbolic rebirth.

So emerged the firebrand itinerant trade unionist and activist now remembered as Mother Jones. In 1901, New York Herald journalist Dorothy Adams accompanied her around the mines of Colorado, publishing carefully crafted reports that emphasised Jones's virtuous poverty. Contemporary accounts of her life unquestioningly mixed myth and biography, contributing in no small measure to her enduring reputation.

Her trademark was peaceful mass action. She directed the 1903 crusade against child labour, leading a 145-kilometre children's march from Philadelphia to New York City. Child labour was a blight on industrial America – in 1900, at least 1-in-6 children was in paid employment, meaning they were not at school. Jones took a mill job to observe the conditions in which girls worked. She saw 6- and 7-year-old children working from 5.30am to 7pm; she saw them suffer horrific workplace accidents while operating the dangerous machinery. She reported all of this in the International Socialist Review in March 1901. Jones's campaign did not end child labour, but was an important early moment in a long process of change.

She positioned herself dangerously in relation to the political establishment by campaigning for the release of Mexican revolutionaries from American jails, and by testifying, in 1915, at the congressional hearings against the abuse of corporate power by Rockefeller interests.She was arrested on several occasions. The first time was in 1902, during the West Virginia miners' strike, and the last was in 1919, at the age of 82, for defending freedom of speech and the right to union representation during a Pennsylvania steelworkers' strike.

Jones remains controversial. Feminists have debated her commitment to women's suffrage, mainly because of her off-the-cuff statement, 'You don't need the vote to raise hell.' Jones was a firebrand public speaker who courted publicity by impulsively making outrageous statements. In practical terms, she encouraged the wives of striking workers to become involved in unions, and helped Chicago dressmakers reduce their working week to 50 hours. Writing in support of the women bottle-washers of Milwaukee in 1910, she stated that they had been 'Deserted by the press [...] Had they a vote, however, their case would likely have attracted more attention from all sides.'

EILEEN GRAY
1878–1976

Luminary of modernist design and the finest western proponent of Japanese lacquer technique, she designed the iconic Côte d'Azur house, E.1027

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EILEEN GRAY

Eileen Gray lived in Paris for most of her life. She moved there in 1907, when the city was a hot-spot for writers and artists, but she was too modest, and perhaps even shy, to break into those bohemian circles. She deservedly gained a reputation as the finest Western exponent of the Japanese lacquer technique and, later, was internationally acclaimed as a pioneering furniture designer and self-taught architect.

Gray was born into comfortable circumstances in Co. Wexford and, as a child, adored her artist father. She was raised between Wexford and Kensington. In 1905, she enrolled in London's fashionable Slade School –where Eva Gore-Booth also studied – and dedicated herself to Japanese lacquer technique. The laborious process of applying 20 layers of lacquer, one-by-one, in a humid room over the course of three days, demands extraordinary patience, and the toxic substance can cause a painful skin rash. In 1972 her lacquer screen 'le destin' attracted a record price for 20th-century furniture, catapulting the reticent modernist back into the international limelight after decades in the shadows. Her response to the sale was characteristically self-effacing – 'c'est absurde.'

While she did not break into Paris's dazzling Anglophone literary and artistic circles, she did find flamboyant company; her friend Jessie Gavin regularly donned men's clothing so that the two of them could go 'to places where you can't go without a man.'

Her Parisian life was turned upside-down with the outbreak of war in 1914. She packed her Japanese lacquer master, Seizo Sugawara and their unfinished pieces into her car – but wartime London was no place to sell expensive furniture, and her work was not to British taste. She returned to Paris, and in 1923, the Salon des Artistes exhibited an entire room of her work. This was a major turning-point. It was her first full-scale exhibition, and was acclaimed in the press. The publicity led friends to encourage her to take up architecture.

Her love of Mediterranean coast seems to have developed when she convalesced from typhoid there in the early 1900s, and it was there that she chose to build her celebrated white cubist home, E.1027, in 1926–9.

The house's name is testament to the help Gray received from young Romanian architect Jean Badovici: E for Eileen; 10 for the letter 'J'; 2 for the letter 'B'; 7 for the letter 'G'. Each room of the house has its own external space because, in Gray's words, 'There must be still the impression of being alone, and if desired, entirely alone.'

This concern for solitude is revealing. Gray was extremely private, and before her death burned most of her personal papers. Peter Adam, author of her most reliable and complete biography, states that she had a series of affairs with men and women, and never settled with any one long-term partner. She was unafraid to be considered 'improper' or 'eccentric' for her desire to live independently.

One of her closest friends was Louise Dany, who worked as her maid from 1927 until Gray's death. During World War II, resident aliens were forbidden to live on the coast, so Dany accompanied Gray to her new, temporary, inland residence. They returned to E.1027 to find it looted and stripped bare. Gray slowly rebuilt the house, completing it in 1953.

FANNY DURACK
1889–1956

World record-breaking Irish-Australian winner of the first Olympic gold medal in women's swimming in 1912.

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FANNY DURACK

In July 1912, four Irish suffragettes went on trial for breaking windows of Dublin's public buildings. In the same week, the daughter of Irish immigrants to Australia won the first gold medal in women's Olympic swimming, creating a scandal of her own when she rejected a thick, modest woollen swimsuit with 'as much drag as a seaanchor' in favour of a close-fitting suit in which she won the 100m freestyle.

Votes for women had been won state-by-state in Australia, thanks to the efforts of women like Monaghan-born Mary Lee (also featured in this exhibition). However, the advances in women's participation in political life did not translate into other areas of Australian life.

Sarah 'Fanny' Durack won her first State swimming title in 1906, aged 17. At that time, the New South Wales Amateur Swimming Association banned women from competitions where men were present. However, Fanny's many successes inspired the public, who demanded that she be allowed to compete in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm. The Barrier Miner editorialised, 'if there is any athlete in Australasia who should go to the great contests it is this young Sydney swimmer,' and, listing her constellation of 56 medals and 100 trophies, noted, 'If this formidable array is not a record that Australia should be proud of in one of her daughters, then there is no such thing, as national pride.' The ban was lifted, and a public appeal raised the funds necessary for her to make the journey.

In Stockholm, Durack broke the record for the 100 metres free-style with a time of 19.8 seconds. She also won gold for the 100 metres, the only individual event for women, setting a new record time for the event. She made a triumphant return to Sydney. When she stepped onto the platform at a Ladies' Swimming Carnival in February 1913, draped in an 'Australasian cloak of green', spectators burst into applause; on this occasion she broke the world record for the 100 yard crawl. She now held the world record for all distances in women's swimming.

In March 1914, she broke the record for swimming a crawl in a mile of open water, 52 seconds better than the existing New South Wales' men's record.

In 1912–18, Durack broke 12 world records. This success took her on tours of Europe and the USA, accompanied by fellow Irish-Australian swimmer Mina Wylie. However, they were dogged by controversy. Arriving in the USA in 1918 without official sanction, they were then banned by the Amateur Swimming Union of Australia. In 1919, the pair refused to swim until their manager's expenses were paid – in response, the USA Amateur Athletic Union threatened to suspend their amateur status. Other athletes protested their treatment.

A week before the Australian team were to travel to the 1920 Antwerp Olympics, Durack underwent an appendectomy. Her recovery was marred by typhoid fever and pneumonia, forcing her to withdraw from the competition.

In January 1921, Durack retired from competitive swimming due to long-term ill-health. Shortly afterwards, she married Bernard Martin Gately, a horse-trainer, and thereafter dedicated herself to coaching children. She died of cancer at her home in March 1956.

A self-taught swimmer, she pursued the sport despite an enduring nervousness about the dangers of deep water.

Nevertheless, together, she and Mina Wylie blazed a trail in the early days of women's international competitive swimming.