

Mary M. and Sexual Violence: Ordinary Voices and the Irish Civil War: Mná100
Script (15 mins)

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Mná100 is the online resource of the Women's Strand of the Irish Government's Decade of Centenaries Programme.

As we mark this period of Ireland's Civil War Lindsey Earner Byrne, Professor of Irish Gender History at University College Cork looks to a primary document that details the rape of a women in County Westmeath in January of nineteen twenty-three.

By using this key piece source material Lindsey Earner Byrne helps us understand events of the Irish Civil War, violence against women, both then and also in the period of the next 100 years.

Viewer discretion is advised.

In January 1923 the Irish Civil War was a year old. The population was weary and many feared the violence may never end.¹ The nature of civil war meant there was little distinction between the battle field and the home front, the enemy and friend were often indistinguishable. It was a profoundly disorienting and destabilising period. Irish newspapers carried regular reports of raids on farmsteads and isolated homes, on 20 January, for example, the *Connacht Tribune* reported on “a gang of marauders” who had been targeting homes “mainly occupied by defenseless people.”²

While we are very well served by the amount of official sources relating to the Irish Civil War, accessing the private experience of violence, in particular violence that may have been taboo like gender or sexual violence, is much more challenging.³

¹ For a study specifically focused on the impact of this violence on citizens. G. Clark, *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)

² “Callous Conduct: Extraordinary Story of Brutality from Crannagh, Gort,” *Connacht Tribune*, 20 January 1923.

³ Some work that has been done on this topic thus far include: Sarah Benton, “Women Disarmed: The Militarisation of Politics in Ireland, 1913–1923,” *Feminist Review* 50 (1995): 148–72; Susan Byrne, ‘Keeping company with the enemy’: gender and sexual violence against women during the Irish War of Independence and Civil War, 1919–1923’, *Women's History Review*, (2020), pp 108–125; Marie Coleman, ‘Violence against women in the Irish War of Independence, 1919–1921,’ in *Years of Turbulence: The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath* (UCD Press, 2015), pp. 137–156; Linda Connolly, Sexual violence in the Irish Civil War: a forgotten war crime?, *Women's History Review*, 30: 1 (2020), pp. 126–143; Seán Keating, “Sexual Crime in the Irish Free State 1922–23: Its Nature, Extent and Reporting,” *Irish Studies Review* 20, no. 2 (May 2012): 135–55; Robert Lynch, “Explaining the Altnaveigh Massacre,” *Éire-Ireland* 45, nos. 3 and 4 (2010): 184–210; Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women, 1900– 1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2010), 266–79; Mary McAuliffe, 22 May 1922: The forcible hair cutting of the Cullen sisters of

In 1998, I was reading through an extensive collection of over 4,000 letters written to the Archbishop of Dublin, Edward Byrne, by people from all over Ireland between 1922 and 1940, seeking his advice and financial assistance.⁴ In the midst of this collection I came across a letter, written on 3 July 1924, by a woman in Westmeath named Mary.⁵ The first thing that struck me was how long this letter was in comparison to the others and how beautiful the handwriting was. I was totally unprepared for its contents. It began:

My Lord,

May it please your grace to spare me a few moments of your most valuable time. To each other we are perfect strangers but I appeal to your charity to listen to my pitiful tale and beg your forgiveness if I seem to intrude.

During the Political trouble when looting and robbing & raiding were carried on to such an extent in our country district my trouble began. In January 1923 a party of men armed to the teeth & calling themselves Republicans forced their entrance into our house where in three people resided. My Aunt who is totally blind and is over 70 years, my Uncle 70 and I their neice (sic) an orphan. The object of their visit was money or lives. When I strove to save my Aunt from being dragged from her bed and they were furious when they did not get money one brute satisfied his duty passion on me. I was then in a dangerous state of health and thro' his conduct I became Pregnant. Oh God could any pen describe what I have gone thro'

It was not until I got to the word 'Pregnant' that I realised she was describing a rape. What a difficult letter it must have been to write at a time when sex, never mind rape, was an issue rarely discussed in personal terms or in a public. How profoundly she must have meant the words: 'Oh God could any pen describe what I have gone thro'.⁶

In the process of enlisting the archbishop's assistance, Mary explained what had happened to her since she discovered she was pregnant. She had concealed this

Keenaghan, Co. Tyrone: Gendered Violence Against Women', *Ireland 1922*, pp. 136-139; Louise Ryan, "'Drunken Tans': Representation of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-21," *Feminist Review* 66 (2000): 73-94.

⁴ Archbishop Byrne Papers, Charity Cases, Dublin Diocesan Archives (cited hereafter as DDA).

⁵ Drawn from L. Earner-Byrne, 'The rape of Mary M.: A microhistory of sexual violence and moral redemption in 1920s Ireland,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 24: 1 (Jan. 2015), pp. 75-98.

⁶ All extracts from this letter are drawn from Mary M., Moate, Co. Westmeath, to Archbishop Byrne, Archbishop's Palace, Drumcondra Co. Dublin, 3 July 1924, AB 7, Charity Cases, box 1, 1921-26, Byrne Papers, DDA.

knowledge from everyone close to her, apart from a Franciscan friar, who had acted as her confidante and sent a separate letter to the Archbishop vouching for her and the truth of her story. As she explained:

when 3 months had passed I confided my secret outside the confessional to a Holy Franciscan Priest in Athlone who kept me thro, his prayers, from ending my miserable life I craved the S. Heart & His Blessed Mother to screen me from exposure and God granted me this request. As time was drawing to its close. I felt almost a lunatic. I borrowed as much money as took me to Dublin with the intentions of ending this terrible life in the bed of the Liffey.

Mary was steeped in the moral universe of her country and moment in history. Through 1922 and 1923, religious leaders had been expressing concern about the damage done by war and violence to the morality of the country. The so-called ‘unmarried mother problem’ was repeatedly framed as a risk to the nation. Three months before Mary wrote her letter to the Archbishop, she would have read, if not heard at Sunday mass, the Bishop of Galway’s lament that the ‘Irish love of the virtue of chastity appears to be growing cold’ because there were six cases in the parish of ‘lapses in virtue’, by which he meant pregnant outside marriage.⁷

Almost a hundred years after it was written, Mary’s letter continues to be a visceral expression of the fear that moral condemnation caused. Such was her terror at the prospect of becoming the subject of public shame that she would rather have died than have had her pregnancy discovered. The fact that she conceived as a result of rape, did not seem to assuage her fear that she would be judged, in fact, she referred to herself as having ‘fallen’. Her rape gets only one brief mention in her letter, the rest of her words are used to convey the meaning of her pregnancy and her fears concerning her son’s and her own future. Her rape and pregnancy merge into one trauma.

When in Dublin, Mary told the archbishop she met ‘a miserable old woman who asked for a copper. She saw I was in trouble I told her its cause.’ This woman directed her to one of the main Catholic rescue societies in Dublin called the Saint Patrick’s Guild, which was run by Miss Josephine Cruice.⁸ Mary’s account of this is full of the Catholic mysticism of her time, she wrote:

⁷ ‘Evil Tendency: Immorality in Galway Deplored by Bishop: Warning to Girls – Influence of Dancing and Bad Literature, *Freeman’s Journal*, 11 April 1924.

⁸ Josephine Mary Cruice established the Saint Patrick’s Guild in 1910 to cater for the children of single mothers via fostering or private adoption. She was well-known for the high fees she charged single mothers to take their children into care.

I turned to speak to her [the old lady] & she had gone I took it as a message from Our Lady of Sorrows to hear my sufferings bravely and also that I was to be saved from Hells torments I went to Miss Cruice who was kindness itself may the SH of Jesus bless her. She also addressed me to return home which I did I went back when in Oct and gave birth to a baby boy in Holles St Hospital.

Mary was just one of over 2,000 single pregnant women Cruice's agency had advised or helped that year. It is clear she told Mary to return to Westmeath and to continue to live as normally as possible until her due date. She was then to return to Dublin and once her baby was born hand it over to Cruice's rescue agency. It seems Mary believed Cruice was doing this out of the goodness of her heart and so when, after giving birth, it was made clear to her that she would have to pay for her son's maintenance in Cruice's home, she was devastated. She recalled:

It was only when 9 days expired & I held this tiny soul in my arms that I realised my position. I didn't know that I was to pay for its support and what harder blow could be struck than that I craved & begged of the S Heart & the Holy Face of Jesus to take it to Heaven but to my request a deaf ear has been turned—God must want to punish me still. There are days when my mind seems paralysed & refuses to work. I can't feel as I used to I can't pray & confess & Communion seems useless to me and leaves me no happier with almighty God. I can't think of anything only my one terrible sorrow and that God has turned from me

Mary's articulation of the paralysis of stress and worry that had come to govern her life since her rape rings as true today as it must have done a hundred years ago.

Her anxiety and torment was daily and isolated her from her family from whom she had to steal:

For the past 9 months,' she went on, 'each month I had to send Miss Cruice 25/ for its support. In order to obtain this I had to lie, steal & borrow & the most of it comes from my Aunts old age pension. By taking this from her I know I'm doing wrong and depriving her of many necessaries of Life I ask myself the question why do I call myself a Catholic I can't be & have to do all this.

And it was only at this point in Mary's long letter did it become clear what she was asking for. "Miss Cruice,' she wrote, 'has offered to take the Baby completely off my hands for £20. This I could not give I don't possess it." The £20 was to pay for the private adoption of Mary's infant son. There was no legislation governing adoption in Ireland until 1952; thus, women in Mary's situation were vulnerable to the financial

exploitation of adoption brokers like Cruice. £20 pounds was a very significant sum of money at the time.

Mary concluded her letter with a reflection on how trauma had changed her, alienated her from her faith and family:

when I compare my life now with a couple of years past I can't believe I'm the same person... I have been brought up well and came of decent parents R.I.P. I was a child of Mary a member of St Francis 3^d Order besides been (sic) a weekly Communicant. Now there is no thought for there in my heart only [one] my terrible misery. Would to God I had words to make you understand how a nature like mine bends under such a burden. There are nights when sleep never visits my heavy tear swollen eyes and I ask Our Lord if it pleases His Holy Will to let me rest in the quiet grave and I'll never cease to crave Him to take that Angel among his Angels where Sorrow may never cross its path as it has done mine. To you my Lord it may seem almost unpardonable that I write but each time I kneel before the S. Heart it speaks to me of you. I don't even know your name My Lord the greatest and heaviest cross God can send any one is such as mine

Within two weeks of receiving Mary's letter, the Archbishop sent her the £20 to pay for her son's adoption.

If her son survived infancy, it is highly likely she never saw him again.

When I came across this case I was struck immediately by the fact that both the Catholic Archbishop and the friar Mary had confided in never questioned her story, never did they appear surprised by it. Remember this was a time when single mothers had very little social traction and were subject to suspicion and shaming.

This begs the obvious question: was she believed and were they not surprised because they had heard of such attacks before? We know that the Catholic church was concerned about violence against women.

What does Mary's case tell us about sexual violence and rape during the Irish Civil War? While we cannot know who the culprits were in Mary's case, if the men calling themselves Republicans were in fact connected to the Civil War, as opposed to opportunistic criminals, it is likely they were anti-treaty. There is no evidence that sexual violence and rape were ordered from above or employed strategically at command level. However, the evidence we have suggests a few things about the nature, purpose and use of sexual violence. One, gender specific violence and intimidation, such as sexualised insults, threats, stripping, and hair cutting were relatively routine and employed by all sides. Two, the four cases of rape we know

about that are connected to the Civil War, and this includes Mary's case, testify to the fact that cohorts of armed men representing the Ulster Special Constabulary, anti-treaty forces and the Free State National army weaponised sexual violence and rape in particular local situations and contexts. Meaning all sides were implicated in this. Of course, we don't know what proportion these cases represent, in other words, how many victims and perpetrators took evidence rape and sexual violence with them on an emigrant ship and/or to their graves.

The contemporary response to these rapes confirms a strong cultural pattern that was to be reinforced after the Civil War. While there was general revulsion at sexual violence, there was a stronger cultural tendency to protect masculinised institutions of power and to sacrifice the victims of abuse to a larger narrative of national coherence and morality. Even in Mary's case, where she received sympathy and significant financial assistance from the Catholic church, it was ultimately in the aid of silencing what had happened.

Why is Mary's letter so important? Personal accounts of the Irish Civil War in diaries and memoirs rarely contain references to sexual violence or rape. When we encounter rape it is usually in court or official records and given the disruption to all institutional structures during the Civil War few examples survive. Thus, Mary's is a very unusual first-person account of a rape and its consequences from the perspective of the victim. Nonetheless, her purpose in disclosing her rape to the archbishop was primarily to assure him of her honour and victimhood, not to seek justice or an understanding of what happened to her. In fact, it is the consequences of the rape – the pregnancy – rather than the rape itself that was the focus of her letter and her anxiety.

The boundaries between sexual violence and sexual immorality were blurred in many contemporary accounts and we see this in Mary's belief that her rape did not absolve her of the moral responsibility of a pregnancy outside marriage. She had clearly internalised the widespread conviction that a woman was morally tainted by rape. When she described the birth of her son, she used the image of falling: "When in my agonies I fell I was justly punished yes scourged."

If we listen to her framing of the rape, her understanding was also shaped by the contemporary conviction that male sexual appetites were brutish and uncontrollable: "One brute satisfied his duty passion on me." This understanding of male sexuality lasted well into the twentieth century and had the insidious effect of absolving men of responsibility for their actions and of obscuring the real purpose of rape - a violent and gendered exercise of power and control. Interestingly, Mary described her rape as an act of perverted male passion, but she also clearly linked it

with anger and violence. She was raped when her attacker became furious because he did not get any money and because she tried to prevent him from harming her aunt. Thus, while her words described male brutish appetite, the contextual understanding was clearly one of an abuse of power—a punishment for her refusal to comply with demands quite separate from sex. This representation of her rape indicates that she perceived it as connected with male sexuality *and* the violence of war.

The fact that she gave so little space to the wrongdoing of her attackers indicates not just the sensitivity of the topic but the ambivalence of her position as victim. Instead, in a society that was beginning to interpret the meaning of independence in terms of a breakdown in the social and moral order, she framed her violation as part of a general attack on the morality of Irish women. Encouraging her reader to regard her attack as part of a continuous tale of women and war since the revolutionary period, she begged the archbishop to “pray for the purity of Our Irish Girls,” connecting her plight to her church’s wider self-declared moral mission to rehabilitate the Irish moral character in the wake of political independence.

Which brings me to my final reflection and that is on the role and place of religion in Mary’s story. Her letter gives us a sense of the complexity of the role of faith and religion in people’s lives during this period. Her faith appeared to be pivotal to her sense of guilt, providing context for her feelings of shame, but it also offered her a place for her secrets, concrete moral and financial support, and a chance of redemption. How she described her faith should not, I don’t think, be read merely as a ploy to exact charity; it was also the context for her life and how she understood what had happened to her. She had been tested and in her “agonies” had “fallen”, was being “punished”, but believed the Archbishop could return God to her and protect her soul and the soul of her infant son. Gender and religion intermeshed in her experience of rape and unmarried motherhood; as a result of sexual violence she understood herself to be morally compromised, and she firmly believed that her condemnation *and* salvation lay in the hands of her society and religion. The final indication of the centrality of faith to her understanding of life and what had happened to her can be found on her son’s birth’s certificate: she named him after the friar who had believed and helped her.

A detailed reading of one individual’s story like Mary’s, helps us to understand broader patterns and explore difficult histories such as that of sexual violence and rape during the Irish Civil War, while reminding us of the uniqueness of each person’s experiences.

*For further information on the Women's Strand of Decade of Centenaries Programme 2012-2023 please visit www.mna100.ie
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On this online resource you can also find details of ongoing research in this field of study from scholars both in Ireland and abroad and selection of publications for further reading on this topic.*

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Links to her biography, publications and research interests can be found on www.mna100.ie.