

National University of Ireland
St. Patrick's College,
Maynooth

Title

FENIANISM - A MALE BUSINESS?
A CASE STUDY OF MARY JANE O'DONOVAN ROSSA
(1845-1916)

by

SYLKE LEHNE

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HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: Professor R.V.Comerford
Supervisor of Research: Professor R.V.Comerford
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SUMMARY

Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa was born in Clonakilty, Co. Cork in January 1845. Her father's active involvement in the Young Ireland movement, the experience of the Famine years and her marriage to the fenian leader, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, influenced the formation of her political attitude and her ardent nationalism.

As the eldest of ten children she was to take over responsibility for her family at an early stage of her life. She considered her duty for her family always as primary to unnecessary sacrifices for political principles and strongly defended this attitude against Rossa's inconsiderate willingness to sacrifice himself and those close to him.

Although Mary Jane submitted to the fenian attitude that women were to be the helpers behind the scene, she proved, particularly in her work as Secretary of the Ladies' Committee (1865-67) that she was capable of leadership and of taking over political responsibility.

Being always a loyal, unconditional supporter of her husband and his cause and bearing severe hardship for them throughout her entire life, she left the political stage to Rossa and only took his place whenever he was unable to attend to his political duties.

Her activities show that, although she considered men more capable and experienced in the nationalist fight than women, she did not accept all decisions and attitudes of the fenian leaders and her husband without criticism. On several occasions Mary Jane was confronted with the limitations of her sex when she contradicted official fenian policy. Nevertheless she never felt the desire to step out of the shadow and refute male leadership because of her fear, female disobedience might damage the cause of Ireland's independence.

Apart from her active contribution to the fenian movement and Irish nationalism, her poetry also reflected her political perspective and became an important means for her financial support to the movement.

Mary Jane's life was but one example for the selfless contribution of nationalist Irishwomen to the cause of Ireland's independence.

She represents the countless women who, for many centuries, have played an essential part in Irish nationalism but never received an appropriate place in Irish history books.

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1.Introduction
Women in Irish Historiography

Over the last two decades it was mainly female historians, who have severely criticised the fact that women, in their own right, have been excluded from Irish recorded history.

In her essay *The Missing Sex. Putting Gender into History* (Dublin 1991) Margaret Ward comments on the example of three major reference books on Irish history, that despite some efforts which were made to recognise women's important place in Irish history, it is nevertheless, poorly recorded in reference literature as well as in history teaching. These works, F.S.L. Lyons's *Ireland since the Famine*, Roy Foster's *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* and Joe Lee's *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, although representing the contribution of the female sex to a different extent, still underestimate its importance in the making of history in general.

It is mainly due to the research of historians like Maria Luddy, Margaret MacCurtain, Nancy Curtin, Rosemary Cullen Owens, Cliona Murphy, Mary Dowd and others that a long and slow process has begun to give women their rightful place in Irish history books. The following publications of theirs have brought light into the darkness surrounding the general aspects of the life of women belonging to different social strata in the last four centuries in particular: *Women in Irish Society. The Historical Dimension* by Margaret McCurtain and Donncha O'Corrain (eds.), Margaret McCurtain's and Mary O'Dowd's (eds.) *Women in Early Modern Ireland*, *Women Surviving* by Maria Luddy and Cliona Murphy (eds.),

They also show a very interesting tendency in comparison with traditional male history writing. Whereas the

latter concentrates on the actions of personalities in the political or social spheres, women historians present a far more complex picture of their objects of interest, also covering the private sphere and aspects of every day life.

Examples of such a complex approach can be found in *Women in Irish Society. The Historical Dimension* and *Women in Early Modern Ireland*. The latter is a very comprehensive, detailed collection of articles by various authors on topics relating to women in law, politics, war, religion, education and family between the 15th and 19th centuries and analyses in a very lucid way the development of a historiography of women. This collection contains an article by Nancy J.Curtin on 'Women and Eighteenth-Century Irish Republicanism', which is especially valuable for the research on fenian women as it demonstrates an existing tradition of female nationalist organisations and of the treatment of the female sex in Irish nationalist propaganda.

Women Surviving gives a clear insight into the females' influence on national, social or domestic affairs and describes their role as breadwinners, nuns, domestic servants, prostitutes etc. It breaks the myth of the male being the sole provider as it portrays women of different social strata earning a living.

To introduce the topic of women into history other means were resorted to like the exhibition on 'Ten Dublin Women', held in Dublin in 1991. The accompanying book of the same title is beneficial particularly because of its comprehensive bibliography.

Apart from a few examples, however, these works only to a small extent refer to the significance of women's participation in nationalist movements.

The lack of appreciation of women's role becomes very clear in reference to the traditional Irish nationalism, although without their ardent and ambitious support many a nationalist movement could not have been as successful or durable as it was. The historiography of nationalism, particularly before the end of the 19th century, is marked by the absence of recorded female endeavours in this field. Female nationalist organisations and their efforts never created the same interest with historians as those of their male counterparts, although in their time they found appreciation in reminiscences of their male contemporaries. Despite the need of intensive research, publications on the 'missing sex' have concentrated mainly on the late 19th and 20th centuries. Margaret Ward in her essay on *The Missing Sex* attributes the reason for a concentration on that generation of Irish nationalism to the assumption that 'this is the period when Irishwomen were at their most active in the political arena.'¹

This statement is not quite correct and this thesis sets itself the aim to prove that women were very active at other, so far unresearched, periods like the 1860s. One reason for the choice of that time could, however, lie in the greater availability and easier access to manuscripts and other primary sources and in the existence of reminiscences by women themselves.

The publication of primary sources like the recollections of Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen*, or Constance Markievicz's *Revolutionary Women*, although subjective reports, have contributed a lot to the understanding of the time and the way of thinking of these women. Important secondary sources dealing with the life and work of female nationalists, like Margaret Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries. Women and Irish Nationalism*

(London 1983) were also instrumental in the understanding of women's contributions to Irish nationalism. This book, being one of very few works on collective female nationalist efforts, refers to a period which has to be considered as a late stage of women's participation in the nationalist fight., i.e. the Ladies' Land League in the 1880s leading to the Cumman na mBan.

It is characteristic particularly of traditional nationalist history writing that women, if mentioned at all, do not appear as individuals with their own attitudes and aspirations or their ability to make judgements independently of the men surrounding them. Instead they are reduced to mere appendices of their male relatives eg. in their mentioning by name: Kathleen Clarke is referred to as Mrs Tom Clarke, Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa as Mrs Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, or Mary an Ellen O'Leary get a mention only in connection with their brother John. The most typical example of this traditional reduction of female identity can be found in Seamus Kelly's *Sweethearts of the Irish Rebels*. In his very stereotyped description the author considers these women worth mentioning merely because of their relationship and loyalty to their male counterparts. His subjects are not individuals with their own personalities, ideas or feelings, and thus his work is a mere adulation of male heroism. As his descriptions of his heroines are sometimes incomplete or do not correspond with the facts he creates a misleading picture of them. In the case of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, who will be dealt with later in detail, O'Kelly minimises her contribution to nationalism merely to her loyal support for her husband's campaign and to her communicating his burial wish to Thomas Clarke.

The other extreme becomes evident in the eulogy of Ann Devlin in Eamon MacThomais's *The Lady at the Gate*. Trying

to emphasize Ann Devlin's own personality and outstanding work in contrast to that of Emmet, he makes his heroine a nationalist icon rather than a human being. Like Kelly's book that of MacThomais is a narrative rather than an example of scientific history writing and the accuracy of the facts presented is doubtful in many cases, particularly his literal repetition of alleged dialogues between Ann Devlin and Robert Emmet.

Although the number of works on women in Irish nationalism is increasing the material relating to the role of women in the fenian movement is almost exclusively based on primary sources and these are to a large extent still in manuscript form.

The prejudice that Fenianism was a purely male business and that women played only an unimportant, secondary role originated in the fact that they were not admitted as members of the organisation. This is, however, proved wrong by the high appreciation they received for their contribution in the reminiscences of male relatives and friends. Nevertheless the impression remained that these women were exceptional cases. But numerous references in newspaper and police reports tell of a well-organised female support on a large scale which was essential for the existence of the fenian movement.

The Presentation of Fenian Women and the Attitude of Fenianism towards Women

The fenian movement did not differ much from other, preceding Irish nationalist movements, eg. the United Irishmen, its attitude towards the role and influence of women in the fight for Ireland's independence. On the one hand, as women were not admitted as members, there is no mention of them in official fenian papers or appeals.

Neither is there much reference to them in modern secondary literature. But it would be wrong to assume that the Fenians did not attach any importance to women in nationalism and politics as the following examples show. Thanks to the reminiscences of leading Fenians such as Joseph Denieffe's *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* (Shannon 1969), John O'Leary's *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism* (London 1896), Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa's *Recollections* (New York 1898) and *Irish Rebels in English Prisons* (New York 1899) and John Devoy's *Recollections of an Irish Rebel* (New York 1929) and *Postbag. 1871-1928* (eds.W.O'Brien/D.Ryan, 2 vols., Dublin 1948 and 1953) we get information on women's activities for the movement and the appreciation they received from their male friends and relatives.

The authors, however, referred to the women to a different extent: Denieffe paid tribute to fenian women like Ellen O'Leary, Catherine Mulcahy or Mrs Butler (see chapter 3.) but, eg.in connection with the Chigago fair 1864, a large-scale fundraising event for fenian puposes, women as the main organisers were not even mentioned. O'Leary extensively honoured his sister Ellen's contribution to the cause and Rossa that of his wife. Devoy gave a more deailed and comprehensive assessment of women's activities, referring to their responsibilities and organisations.

Women's activities were also well presented in the Fenian paper *The Irish People*, among whose contributors were many women. It also gives an insight into the Fenian's attitude towards women and the way they exploited issues of the family and the female sex (like prostitution) for their propaganda.

Its publicity campaign was, after its suppression in September 1865, continued in a similar way by the *Irishman* newspaper.

The importance the Fenians attached to women's participation in the national fight is underlined by a big

propaganda campaign to attract women to the cause. Apart from reports on heroic Irishwomen many articles demonstrated the active contribution fenian women had to make to the cause.

This included discussions about certain Irishwomen's problems as well as articles about nationalist Irishwomen which were to set examples for their fellow-countrywomen. Among them were e.g. an article about Ann Devlin, the 'servant' of Robert Emmet, who had endured torture, because she would not betray his hiding-place to the English. Other articles dealt with Irishwomen selling the *Irish People* newspaper, defending the Fenians against denunciations by priests, helping the fenian cause by collecting money, and about the formation and activities of the Fenian female organisation in the United States, the Fenian Sisterhood. The discussions could be and were equally joined by women and men and they were a rare opportunity for the women to make themselves heard.

The notion of Irish women's virtue and the necessity of protecting it against the evils of English tyranny was widely used in fenian propaganda. Here we find astounding similiarities to the United Irishmen's campaign at the turn of the 18th century as regards the contradiction between women's limited opportunities of participation in the movement and their exploitation as 'symbols of an oppressed nation, and as models of republican probity' ¹ as described by Nancy Curtin.

It served the Fenians as a justification for their strategy and principles and for the rejection of any kind of compromise concerning the means employed by them to fulfil their aim.

An article by Kickham concerning the letter of the Bishop of Toronto to the Bishops of Ireland complaining about the high number of Irish female prisoners in American and Canadian towns laid the basis for the justification of the Fenians' principles in their paper. Kickham, commenting on the Bishop's statement that 'of 983 female prisoners in

the jails of Toronto, in 1863, 703 were Irishwomen! ... At this rate one out of eight Irish women in Toronto was in jail last year! ...' continued: 'Oh! Merciful God, has it come to this! Think of it, Irishmen. America's cities are polluted by our countrywomen. The women of Ireland were famed for their purity all the world over. But see what English laws can do.' ² Kickham's article was soon to start a discussion on the virtue of Irishwomen and the reason for their fall.

It was followed by one of the same kind entitled 'The Special Dispensation' describing Irish prostitution in English cities. This report by the Catholic chaplain of the Borough Jail Liverpool stated that 'the number of prostitutes committed during the year was 1,526. Of these 605 were Protestants, and nine hundred and twenty-one Catholics and Irishwomen.' And he summarized with reproach and disgust: 'More than 60 per cent of the law-breaking prostitutes of Protestant Liverpool are our own countrywomen!' ³ The reactions this article caused were different. A response defending the Irish girls came from A TIPPERARY GIRL who wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Irish People*: 'When Saxon misrule drove these poor creatures into hot-beds of vice to look for a living, they gradually became inured to wickedness, and by degrees lost that native horror they had of crime; and when assailed by poverty and temptation, they dared to be guilty of what they once trembled to think of to relieve their own immediate wants, and to send home help to their famishing friends in Ireland - a fact which I learned from reliable authority, so I think it is too true that social persecution is the chief cause of their fall, for many of these never fell through love of vice, and never would have fallen, if poor Erin, their mother, was free.' ⁴ The reaction of another female reader stated that 'virtue consists not only in possessing chastity, but in preserving it in the midst of temptations; otherwise woman would be virtuous as long as she was not tempted.' But whereas this writer, E.F., criticised the women for their

fall she condemned the opposite sex for having helped it: 'If women in general are prostitutes, or become so when not surrounded "by the influence and comforts of home", as the able writer of "The Special Dispensation" would have us believe, he ought to recollect that the sex to which he belongs was the chief cause of their fall. No man therefore, with a spark of honour in his bosom would seek to make capital of creatures exiled from society by his kind.' ⁵ The editor's answer to this letter is a clear indication of how the Fenians interpreted this topic in their propaganda: 'We are sorry to find an Irishwoman declaring that the thousand of her poor countrywomen are leading lives of sin and shame in the crowded cities of England and America, are degraded, not because they have been driven from their homes, and exposed to temptation, but because they were *bad*. ... it is a political cry and worse to proclaim that the demoralization of a people is *entirely* owing to the tyranny of their rulers.' ⁶

One aspect which makes it questionable whether this defence was really initiated for the protection of Irish women's reputation or rather for propaganda purposes is the fact that, although Irish female virginity was always advanced in fenian propaganda, the Fenians themselves used feminine attraction to seduce soldiers and to swear them into the organisation. So Rossa stated in his *United Irishman* about 'The Fenian girls of Ireland': 'We know girls that used to "swear in" men, and we know girls that used to bring men to be sworn in ...' ⁷

The discussion on women's virtue was followed by arguments on women's nationalism and patriotism. Stirred up by statements that Irishwomen.... 'deserve but very little of the praise you bestow on them, as they ... know as little of the past or present history of their unfortunate country as if they were spending their lives in some uninhabited portion of the globe, ... they are so

backward in this respect that a patriotic Irishwoman is, to my mind, a myth, never having met such an individual ...' ⁸ a lot of writers, both male and female, tried to prove the opposite.

Although the Fenians never denied that women had an important contribution to make in freeing their country from English rule and also made them an important issue in their propaganda, they never actually entertained the thought of their equality. Thus the question lies with what they regarded as being important about women's participation and what form it should take. Women's contribution was, according to their role defined by the church and society, restricted to home, educating their children as true nationalists, influencing their menfolk in that sense, making the choice between family duty and national duty easier for them, sacrificing their menfolk for the national cause. This was impressively demonstrated in a series of articles by Thomas Clarke Luby entitled 'The Women of Ireland', 'Bad Irishwomen' and 'Noble Irishwomen' which appeared in *The Irish People* vol.1, no.50 and 52 and vol.2, no.24.

The author was characterized by his friend John O'Leary thus as an 'unorthodox person, but who happened to hold ultraorthodox views on the question of marriage, believing that divorce was under no circumstances justifiable.' ⁹ Luby's series shows that women were not only regarded as victims, but could become heroines by their support for the cause: 'In most of patriotic struggles recorded in history, we find women playing a heroic part. The past history of our country has not wanted for high-hearted women who could devote all that makes life dear to their country's good.' ¹⁰ And all that meant that women were 'to display their civic virtue by freely giving up their men' to nationalist affairs, 'to ease the choice which men must often make between happy domesticity and public duty. ... Virtuous women must be prepared to sacrifice their sons, their husbands and their brothers to the public

good. Women must breed, nurture, and finally relinquish good republican men.' ¹¹ Luby put this in the following words: 'Her mission is to awaken the apathetic to a sense of duty; to shame the wavering into action; to lighten the toil of the true and the brave.' ¹² Luby expected nationalist Irishwomen to learn 'that there are times when the glorious death of a beloved one should be a source of pride and tender joy to those who love him, while his life should be a source of shame and sorrow.' ¹³ But not only 'Bad Irishwomen' were mentioned in an article, but one of the same type was dedicated to 'Bad Husbands', which underlined again that the Fenian attitude to women did not differ much from the traditional one established by the church. In it the author stated that 'marriage is, and must always be, the grand event in a woman's career, and no greater misfortune can befall her than ill-success in that venture. It shuts her out from that which constitutes the brighter ornament and blessing of her life - the power of becoming the centre of a happy and virtuous home.' ¹⁴

Here a typical fenian attitude appears, which is derived from and corresponds with the traditional Irish attitude of women's role: Women had to work through men, they were true Irishwomen and heroines only if they thought and felt the same way as their male relatives. Only then were they worth mentioning and remembering, as another regular contributor to the *Irish People*, Harvey Birch, wrote: 'But speaking of the men, I must not forget the women. They too are disgusted with these continued denunciations [by the Roman Catholic Church - S.L.] against nationality, and I have it on good authority that a great portion of them, the young women especially, long as ardently as the most enthusiastic rebel of the sterner sex, for the day reckoning.' ¹⁵ Another writer, SPES, dedicated a poem to THE IRISH WIFE underlining the unconditional loyalty and dependence of women to their husbands as God's law. Describing the fears of a woman who leaves her lonely mother behind to follow her lover into the war the author lets her finish with the words:

'I know 'tis hard for you to hear -
To bear the loneliness and woe;
But, mother dear, *God made him near,*
Nearer than you - and I must go !!' ¹⁶

This restriction of female activity to their 'natural sphere' shows that women were not regarded as equals or equally able to help the cause. They were not supposed to interfere in political matters, but just expected to receive and fulfil orders, their criticism about decisions of Fenian leaders was simply ignored. Another contradiction in the attitude of the Fenians to women's role in the movement became obvious in their discussions about the sense of marriage. Emphasizing the role of women in family relations on the one hand they regarded marriage and family as an obstacle to their full dedication to the nationalist cause. The predecessor of the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States, the Emmet Monument Association, admitted only those to membership 'who were free from family obligations, such as having a wife, mother or others, depending upon them for support. Each and every member should be ready to serve at a moment's notice.' ¹⁷ Although the Fenians did not employ this principle, marriage was only accepted if the family stood completely behind the nationalist work and supported it in every respect. James Stephens's wedding to Jane Hopper was a classic example of the Fenians' opposition against marriage as Stephens in their opinion paid 'too much attention' to his young wife and 'deserted' the cause and, of course, his wife was partly blamed on this. Although John O'Leary stated that 'she played no direct part in Fenianism whatever...' he added 'I may however say that his marriage - both the fact that he was marrying at all and the kind of marriage he was making - was anything but popular with the mass of "The Captain's" followers. They, of course, all knew the tendency of the married condition to make men subordinate public to private interests.' ¹⁸ Whereas O'Leary kept a rather moderate attitude to

Stephens's marriage other Fenians, like Devoy, Denieffe or James O'Connor reacted openly hostile to his courtship. None of them ever appreciated the fact that his wife Jane Hopper had supported the Fenian movement financially and as a courier, and despite poverty and despair always stood loyally by her husband's side.

Desmond Ryan's *The Fenian Chief* gives a very detailed and descriptive account on the Fenians' attitude towards Stephens's marriage and refers to his wife's real importance for the Fenian movement.

In contrast, Mary Jane Irwin's union with Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa was a prime example which corresponded with the fenian expectation of marriage. The reason for this may be found in the more active role and the greater importance of Mary Jane to the movement.

chapter 1: Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa in Ireland

The early years 1845-1867

Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa is but one example of the tremendous support women gave to a movement which, at least publicly, denied them their right to dedicate their imaginative ideas to the cause of Ireland's freedom.

The neglect of Mary Jane's part in this respect even nowadays is demonstrated most visibly in the fact that her name is hardly known in her home town of Clonakilty, Co.Cork. According to local newspaper reports attempts to honour her in the form of a plaque to be erected on the house of her birth failed miserably, as 'due to some misunderstanding, or lack of communication the permission once given for the erection of the plaque was withdrawn.'

¹⁹

Despite the unsuccessful efforts to publicly honour Mary Jane, several people from the area attempted to revive her memory by the publication of their private research in local papers. *The Southern Star and Cork County Chronicle* (Skibbereen) of 3 April 1982 and 4 August 1984 printed two anonymous articles on Mary Jane's life and work. The first, giving reference to other material about her, requested support and assistance for further research on the subject. The second article contained a resume of her life, activities and her relationship to Rossa.

The lack of secondary literature on the subject of female involvement in the fenian movement, logically also applies to the presentation of Mary Jane's life. With Seamus O'Kelly's *Sweethearts of the Irish Rebels* we already mentioned one work that paid tribute to Mary Jane's achievements, although in a traditional and one-sided way.

The Catholic Bulletin used her death as an opportunity to draw attention to the role and significance of her

existence ²⁰. Of two articles published, one by MAIRE includes an interview with Mary Jane on numerous aspects of her life and labours for the cause of Irish freedom, paying tribute to her as an outstanding personality and individual. The other one refers to her in the conventional way as the loyal companion and supporter of her husband.

One of the very few works that pays an appropriate accolade to Mary Jane is Sean O'Luing's *O Donnobhain Rosa*. Due to O'Luing's intensive research and his relationship to the Rossa daughter Eileen McGowan, his work also gives a very detailed account of Mary Jane's life and work written in the Irish language. Unfortunately there is no published English translation of this very explicit and comprehensive work available.

Primary sources on Mary Jane, however, are accessible in great number and variety. Being well-known to leading Fenians, she was mentioned in their reminiscences, but mostly referred to as the heroic wife of Rossa, and was never treated as an outstanding individual in her own right. John O'Leary's *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism* refer to her only briefly in connection with her poetry for the *Irish People*.

John Devoy, however, having been a close friend of the Rossa family, mentioned her among numerous other women and their valuable contributions to the cause. His high regard for Mary Jane was part of his general appreciation of women's activities for the movement.

The following chapters about the life and work of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa, which are mainly based on newspaper and police reports as well as her correspondence and reminiscences, will prove those wrong who only saw her in the shadow of Rossa and his work. It will show that Mary Jane was more than just the faithful partner,

advisor, consoler and critic of Rossa, but in truth an outstanding individual, and an extraordinary woman. It will also demonstrate that Mary Jane's criticism enriched the way of thinking in her surroundings, although she often had to face strong opposition particularly from her male counterparts.

1.1. Mary Jane's Childhood and Youth

Mary Jane Irwin, like her future husband Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, descended from the Cork area which was known to be a stronghold of Irish nationalism. The English occupation, the Union of 1801 and the Famine of 1845 to 1850, which caused the deaths of one million people and forced another million to emigrate, had left its mark in the minds of the Irish.

Works like S.F.Pettit's *This City of Cork 1700-1900* (Cork 1977) and *Clonakilty and District. Past and Present* (Publication Clonakilty C.Y.M.S., 1959) give an impressive picture of the area and its history. The latter is a collection of material about places and people, and although Mary Jane's father is mentioned there, his poetess daughter is not given any reference. The terrifying images drawn in Edward Garner's *To die by inches. The Famine in North East Cork* (Middleton, Co.Cork, 1986) impressively and vividly explain the impact of this period on public memory: 'No one will ever know for certain how many died. ... Everyone knew about Skibbereen. So much that when other centres of suffering passed from all but local knowledge the memory of that Cork union remained to epitomise Ireland's sufferings. Skibbereen tales could be repeated anywhere. Cabins populated with the dead. Dogs eating the dead. Hurried burials, often just anywhere in frantic attempts to ward off pestilence.'

Cabins being burned to the ground, their fever victims dead within. Stories of coffin shortages, the ghastly utilitarian coffin with hinged bottom, were common currency. So too tales of those wretches found by the roadside, lips and teeth green stained from gnawing grass and nettles. And accounts of bodies wrapped in just a rough shroud and carted off to the graveyard ... ²¹ Skibbereen is situated about 20 miles (ca.32km) southwest of Clonakilty and Mary Jane's birth place was affected by the Famine in a similar way. Many famine-stricken people made their way from Rosscarberry and Skibbereen to board a coffin-ship. In Clonakilty town itself as a result of starvation and emigration the population decreased between 1845 to 1847 from 3,993 to 3,297, whereas the number of unoccupied houses increased from 63 to 184. ²²

Although the Irwin family was not directly affected by the starvation, the public experience of those shocking scenes left their mark on its members.

Mary Jane's parents, Maxwell Irwin and Margaret Keohane of Rosscarberry, had married in 1844 and had settled in Clonakilty. There the groom had built a house for his new family in which Mary Jane was born one year later. Maxwell Irwin, who was the local shopkeeper and publican, had been one of the '48 men, since when he had been known to Rossa, and his convictions led him to later sympathise with the fenian movement.

He was known and respected as an honest and straightforward man, and he educated his children in this manner. This honesty, respect and trust in him was manifested by his election as Town Commissioner of Clonakilty in March 1874. *The Irishman* newspaper remarked on the occasion of his death in May 1879: 'Long and earnestly had he laboured for his people and his country. Wise and sincere were his words, and many of them were the works of his brain and hands in the cause of the distressed and the sorrowing.'²³

Mary Jane was born in January 1845 as the eldest of ten children of the Irwin family. Her birthdate, as well as that of some of her brothers and sisters is not definitely known. In several sources and on her gravestone the 27 January 1846 is given. It is, however, more likely that she was born in January 1845, as the Catholic Parish Register names the 25th January 1845 as the day of her Christening. Generally these registers are regarded as very reliable sources. Other sources are divided in their reference to her birth. Whereas the author of the above article in the *Southern Star* of 4 August 1984 claims 1846 to be the year of her birth, refernces to Mary Jane's life in the *Irish Book Lover* of December 1916/January 1917 named 27 January 1845 ²⁴. Another fact that points to the latter date is the birth of Mary Jane's brother James Charles in August 1846, which would have been unlikely if Mary Jane herself was born in January of the same year. The other brothers and sisters named in the Catholic Parish Register of Clonakilty are as follows:

name	date of Christening	date/place of death
James Charles	12/08/1846	Clonakilty
(Timothy Warren	1847/1849	California)
William Henry	24/12/1850	California
Alfred	01/02/1852	1894/Brooklyn
Isabella Maria	29/01/1854	01/04/1938/Staten Island
Kate	15/05/1856	Clonakilty
Eliza Anne	13/03/1858	Clonakilty
Amelia	17/07/1859	1884/1885/Clonakilty
Albert	27/01/1861	Australia

There is, however, evidence of another brother, Timothy Warren, who does not appear there. He was presumably born between 1847 and 1849 as there is a gap in the sequence of births in the Irwin family.

Of Maxwell Irwin's children Mary Jane and two of her brothers, James and Timothy Warren, followed the nationalist tradition of the family, and police reports give numerous evidence of their arrests or surveillance. For Mary Jane it was mainly her father, besides Rossa, who strongly influenced the young girl in the formation of her political and moral attitudes. There is little or no evidence on the role or influence of her mother on her. It can, however, be assumed that Mary Jane had a very close bond to her, as expressed in some of her poetry of later years dedicated to her mother.

As Mary Jane's parents were reasonably well-off they could afford a good education for their children. Mary Jane enrolled as a pupil at the Sacred Heart Convent in Roscrea on 4 October 1860 and the entry states that a fee of £ 35 was paid. Although she excelled in poetry and had a music master, singing and drawing in addition to the normal curriculum, it was her literary talent in particular that attracted attention, and in December 1861 she was awarded a 'prix d'application'. Describing Mary Jane's literary ability, her fellow-pupil and lifelong friend, Margaret Moore, said that she was 'endowed with wondrous mental gifts that needed but time and opportunity to win for her a foremost place among those whom the world delights with honor.'²⁵

Mary Jane's education and schooling imposed other visible traits in her behaviour and attitude. From a conversation with Mary Jane's granddaughter Eileen Molloy in November 1992 in her home in Staten Island, New York, we learned that she was very strict in teaching her own children correct grammar, pronunciation and clear speech.

It is interesting that Mary Jane, although an ardent supporter of the national cause, always confined her activities to a certain standard of behaviour that

corresponded with her social rank. In a letter to Rossa during the early days of their marriage she expressed her outrage about the behaviour of a personal friend and fenian supporter, Ellen Eliza Callanan. The latter had stirred up the anti-English feelings of a mob that had gathered in front of her house, by joining her father in burning a picture of King William in her window. The fact that she had only been wearing a nightdress at the time caused Mary Jane's critical outburst of 'such unfeminine boldness' and 'such wickedness' and her threat to 'cut her without further delay'.²⁶

A few months after the end of her schooling Mary Jane met the man to whom she was to devote the rest of her life, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. He had come to the Cork area on fenian business in April 1864 and attended the wake of one of Mary Jane's cousins. Mary Jane recalled the night of the wake as the occasion of their first meeting, but Rossa declared in his reminiscences that he had seen her about five or six years before when he had gone to her father's house and she had opened the door to him. Rossa was said to be 'very popular with women'²⁷ and he was a well-known man in this area of his birth. Being about fifteen years older than Mary Jane he had been widowed twice leaving him with five sons who were in the care of friends and relatives. The notion of getting married had been associated in Rossa's mind 'with the picture of a pretty poetess', and he had been 'unable to get the image of the little woman out of his head.'²⁸

At the time of their meeting Rossa was working as business manager of the Fenian organ *The Irish People* in Dublin. Shortly after their meeting Mary Jane commenced writing poems for the paper. Due to Rossa's fenian activities they were unable to spend much time together, which was a major point of complaint in Mary Jane's correspondence to Rossa.

Despite their admiration for Rossa and his political attitude Mary Jane's parents disapproved of their close relationship, as to them it presaged a lot of trouble for their daughter. They wanted her to marry a settled, wealthy man, who would provide her with solid support and already had a hotelkeeper in Brisbane, Queensland, in mind for her, whom her aunt had recommended to them. ²⁹

Due to the opposition of Mary Jane's parents the young couple became engaged secretly, and they only became aware of this fact when they discovered the engagement ring on their daughter's finger. They told Mary Jane to break off her engagement and despite her own feelings she obeyed their wish out of humble duty. Realising, however, how fond their daughter and Rossa were of each other, Mary Jane's parents eventually agreed to the marriage and helped to arrange it despite the apparent difficulties with the church. The Catholic hierarchy was very hostile to the fenian movement and refused to give sacraments to its members and those suspected of cooperating with it. As Rossa was known to belong to the organisation the parish priest, Fr Leader, objected to marrying the young couple. Later, however, realising that Mary Jane was adamant in her resolve to be united with Rossa regardless of circumstances, he relented and gave them the sacraments. This conversation between the priest and the young couple is described in detail in Rossa's *Irish Rebels*. ³⁰

On 22 October 1864, half a year after they had met, Mary Jane and Rossa married. This marriage and its significance for the latter's fenian connections is interesting from the point that he had had 'little connection with the Clonakilty district until his marriage with the daughter of Maxwell Irwin, publican of this town

about the year 1864 ...' ³¹ as described in the report of a fenian informer.

Mary Jane's correspondence with Rossa, now in the possession of the National Archives as part of the Fenian Briefs, also reveals that she kept him informed on fenian matters or arrests in the area, and that she had to lie frequently about his whereabouts, even to her parents. Immediately after their marriage Rossa, acting on Stephens's orders, took Mary Jane to England to combine fenian business with their honeymoon.

After their return at Christmas 1864 Mary Jane tried hard to assume responsibility for Rossa's five sons by his earlier marriages. She and Rossa had visited Skibbereen a few times for the purpose of seeing his four eldest sons, Dennis (*1854), John (*1855), Jeremiah (*1857) and Cornelius (*1858) who had been in the care of a widow, a Mrs. Healy, since their mother's death. The son of Rossa's second marriage was in the care of his maternal grandparents. Despite the opposition from her parents and husband Mary Jane insisted on adopting the boys as she regarded them as part of her own family. In 1865 she wrote to Rossa about his eldest sons: '... I feel you are keeping them from me only because you would not wish me the trouble of them. I put trouble out of the question when you are concerned, love, and I would rather have them. Of course I could not have such an easy life as I have had and have. I would not expect that. It grieves me to think they are not fairly treated by either of us and the trouble of them would be less than the trouble of my mind about them. ... the boys are running about idle. That's a bad state of things, Cariss. I wish you would tell me how to remedy it. If you had taken a house and left them with me in Dublin twould have been as little expensive as the present state of things. Besides they'd

have proper schooling and the sooner be fit to take care of themselves..' ³²

Mary Jane's single-minded stubbornness finally won the day for her when she was allowed to take the boys to her father's house in Clonakilty in April 1866 after Mrs Healy had become unable to cope with them.

1.2. Mary Jane as Secretary of the Ladies' Committee

In September 1865 the English government had started their offensive against the fenian movement by arresting the staff of the *Irish People* and leading members of the organisation all over the country. Rossa was among the first to be arrested. He was taken into custody on 15 September 1865 and tried by the Special Commission on 9 to 11 December. Being sentenced to penal servitude for life he was imprisoned in Mountjoy, but later transferred to Pentonville (Christmas 1865), Portland (May 1866), Millbank (1867) and Chatham (1868). Between his arrest and the trial Mary Jane was not allowed to see her husband, contrary to a report about an alleged interview with him in the *Dublin Evening Mail* of 14 December 1865. Contradicting this statement, Mary Jane declared to the press: 'Such an interview, I humbled myself to ask at the Attorney-General, through Mr Lawless, and was refused. Further, from the day of Mr Stephens's escape to the day my husband was put forward to trial I was not allowed to see or speak to him. Permission was accorded on Friday evening that I might sit by him, but such permission was publicly withdrawn. My offence was merely this: I saw my husband weak from fasting, and I brought him brandy. That was all. I have been kept from him since.' ³³

Rossa was not the only member of Mary Jane's family who fell victim to the wave of arrests. Her brother James Charles was arrested in March 1866 for fenian activities and his membership of the I.R.B. In prison his health declined so seriously, that his life was in danger, and due to medical advice he was released on bail on 10 November 1866. Returning to his father's house, however, he was suddenly rearrested on 1 December and his requests for his freedom were rejected because of Mary Jane's selling of the *Irishman*. Being the eldest of the Irwin family Mary Jane felt responsible for her younger brothers and sisters. In a letter of 1 December 1866 she strongly attacked the authorities by attributing James's rearrest to 'the malice of a magistrate named Francis Evans Bennett who may have bitter memory of my father's assistance to him in less wealthy days.'³⁴ Due to his ill-health James was released in May 1867 on condition of leaving the country and emigrated to America.

Releases of this kind, however, were rare and the prison sentences for conspiracy very long. The arrests left many families without a breadwinner and an income, thus putting them into a destitute state. A few active women, decided to take matters into their own hands and help the families of those arrested. These ladies were mostly relatives or friends of Fenians, with Mary Jane, Thomas Clarke Luby's wife Letitia, the sisters of John O'Leary, Ellen and Mary, Denis Dowling Mulcahy's sister Catherine, and the wife of William Francis Roantree, Isabella playing a major part. James Stephens's wife Jane was also involved in the work of their committee, although her membership could not be proved. In October 1865, soon after the first trials had started, this so-called 'Ladies' Committee for the Relief of the State Prisoners' Families' published its first 'Appeal to the Women of Ireland', in which they asked for financial support for the destitute families of the imprisoned Fenians.

Mary Jane as the Committee's Secretary, and Letitia Luby (Treasurer) played major roles in the foundation of the committee, and in their functions had to account to the public for its work.

Due to Rossa's arrest Mary Jane soon found herself in a similar situation as those families she cared for, depending on financial help from outside. Her need for financial support became crucial after the birth of her son James Maxwell on 30 April 1866. About Letitia Luby's and her own share in the funds Mary Jane explained to the public: 'We gave our services freely and without the slightest remuneration until August '66, when our private means failing, we were necessitated to accept from the committee funds a salary of £ 2 per week each; always when funds grew straitened reducing our allowance proportionally with the reduction imposed on all other families.' ³⁵

Early in 1867 severe differences of opinion between Mary Jane and some of the American subscribers surfaced. According to Mary Jane the support from America was very inadequate. Although the newspapers were full of reports about large funds collected in the States at fairs, bazaars and picnics in aid of the prisoners and their families, the amounts of money that reached the Ladies' Committee were relatively small.

In January 1867 Mary Jane decided to make the matter public.

In a letter to Anna J. McDonald, Secretary of the Detroit Fenian Sisterhood, referring to the subscriptions up to November 1866, she stated that they 'were expecting these past months contributions from America; but up to this time have met disappointment, as none except yours arrived.' ³⁶

The Ladies' Committee, following numerous inquiries about the whereabouts of funds raised by other American contributors, published the total of receipts from the United States up to February 1867, amounting to £ 448 15s 1d. ³⁷

In another appeal 'To the Subscribers of the Relief Fund for the State Prisoners' Families' she stated that her faith had been 'disappointed not only by the sudden and almost limitless re-arrests made by the Government, but also by the treachery of the trustees of money in America, subscribed by the Irish-American people for the relief of their suffering brethren here.' ³⁸

It was particularly Mary Jane's remark about the 'treachery of the trustees of money' that caused considerable excitement among the organisers of those charitable events in America. It did, however, not refer to them, but to James Stephens, who had been entrusted with money subscribed for the families of the State prisoners at a fenian picnic in Jones' Wood, New York, in October 1866. As only a small portion of the funds reached the ladies in Dublin they believed Stephens to have different plans for them. Due to many indignant letters from America they published a statement in the *Irishman* explaining that they had learned since then 'that the proceeds of the pic-nic, which from the exaggerated accounts we saw in the American newspapers of that time, we fancied amounted to a very large sum, in reality was only £ 50. Half of that was sent to us last January, and the remainder, sent some months previous, was (we were told by the gentleman who sent it) embezzled with some other moneys entrusted to the messenger.' ³⁹ It is hard to tell, however, whether this explanation or the initial suspicion is closer to the truth.

In May 1867 Mary Jane announced her resignation as Secretary of the Ladies' Committee giving as one reason her own dependence on a public fund of which she was one of the trustees. She explained further that 'feeling that my own allowance (£ 2 per week), while barely sufficient for the needs of my family, would more than relieve the families of two or three working men, I find myself ill at ease.'⁴⁰

Her suspicion of Stephens's misappropriation of funds and the following remarks in her letter to Anna J. McDonald indicate that the dissent was much deeper and concerned more than personal matters only. The tense relationship between Mary Jane and the Ladies' Committee was further highlighted by the announcement of the new Secretary, Catherine Mulcahy, without recognition or appreciation of Mary Jane's active and devoted work.⁴¹

In her letter Anna McDonald had proposed to Mary Jane to come to America. Mary Jane had then declared that they clung 'too fondly still to Ireland and the promises of James Stephens. If these should all fail us, doubtless many of the sufferers will avail themselves of the kind offer of the Sisterhood in Detroit, and seek their homes in America, myself among the number.'⁴²

As Stephens's promise of a successful rising did not materialise, Mary Jane made up her mind to follow Mrs McDonald's proposition.

Even after her resignation and emigration to New York she remained very interested and well-informed about the work of the Committee. In a letter to her husband she continued complaining about the lack of support from America: '...let me tell you, the American people, after four weeks of the publishing of Miss Mulcahy's petition, have given

not a single cent. That speaks volumes. The families have joined in an appeal, and nothing goes home in answer to it, and the West of Ireland is famine-stricken again, and America sends no relief there.' ⁴³ Mary Jane here referred to another article written by Catherine Mulcahy and Letitia Luby, entitled 'Appeal on the Behalf of the Wives and Families of the State Prisoners - To the Irish and Friends of Ireland in America.' In this appeal the ladies connected their request for money with an account of their work for the prisoners and the 110 families they had to look after at the time. The article was republished in *The Irishman* of 20 July 1867.

Although there is no proof of any direct contact between Mary Jane and the Ladies' Committee after her emigration, it is very likely that she used her contacts in America, particularly those with the leader of the fenian Senate wing, Colonel Roberts, to support its work. After Mary Jane's stay with the Roberts family, the Colonel wrote a letter to the Ladies' Committee in September 1867 enclosing remittances of £ 200 Sterling. His letter was published in the *Irish-American* of 27 September 1867. The work of the Committee seemed to have been well-known to the American Fenians, as already in May 1867 Roberts had published an appeal to the members of the Brotherhood demanding from each circle 'a sum equal to one dollar for each and every member of the circle' to be paid before the 26 May to the headquarters. Roberts emphasized that it would be 'judiciously expended for the purpose for which it was subscribed, and for none other ...' ⁴⁴

In May 1868 the relationship between the Committee and Mary Jane grew more strained when the former tried to get control over Rossa's children. According to Mary Jane they 'pretended to assume a vivid interest in these

children and worked up a false charge against my father ... that he had ill-treated these children, that I had neglected them and that they required to be protected by the committee. They did not condescend to consult me on that matter, but in terms of cutting insolence required my father sent them up to Dublin, paid him £ 15 for their clothing (thus coming to assume their responsibility), expenses of journey, the first and last sum he ever received for them from the committee or any other national body or individual.' ⁴⁵

As Mary Jane stated further that her father, having no money for a court case, sent the boys to Dublin, where the ladies placed them with different families to look after them.

A letter in *The Irishman* in September 1868 leads to the assumption that the person who initiated all the trouble about Rossa's sons was Catherine Mulcahy, the new Secretary of the Committee after Mary Jane's resignation. The unnamed writer praised her in his article thus: 'I know that one of the Ladies' Committee, the most gracious-hearted woman I have ever met, and whom I have known so many and such pleasant years, looked after those children with the heart of a mother and the solitude of a saint. ... If ever a woman can be canonised for her devotion to Irish interests my patroness shall be, not St. Catherine of Sienna but St. Catherine of Clonmel.' ⁴⁶

chapter 2: Driven into exile 1867-1871

2.1. The First Years in Exile

When in early 1867 rumours about the ill-treatment of the political prisoners started to circulate, Mary Jane wrote to the Governor of Portland Prison to inquire about Rossa's health and why he was not allowed to write letters to his family. She had only been permitted to visit him once since his conviction in 1865. The reply from the prison authorities was very unsatisfactory, as it only stated that 'Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa is in good health and has no ground of complaint against the prison authorities' ⁴⁷ and that he has forfeited the privilege of writing, receiving letters, or visits.' ⁴⁸ All legal means having failed, Mary Jane resorted to clandestine channels to obtain her husband's release. According to Rossa she borrowed £ 100 to bribe the wardens and had wax impressions made of the prison door keys. The plan failed, however, due to Rossa's frequent transfers to different cells because of his provocative behaviour towards the wardens. ⁴⁹

On her second visit to Rossa in spring 1867 she informed him of her intention to leave Ireland in order to regain her independence and to start a new life. On 30 May 1867 she sailed for New York, which had become one of the most important centres of Irish revolutionary activity after the failure of the rising of 1848.

Mary Jane had to leave Rossa's five sons, three of whom then stayed in her father's house, and her own little boy behind.

The following years, marked by separation and loneliness, were to become the hardest in a life full of hardship and a touchstone of their marriage. As before she hardly

received any message from Rossa due to censorship or suppression, and if she learned something about him it was mostly through the newspapers. The separation from her infant son and her uncertain future increased her feeling of despair.

Adding to the difficulties was the fact that she obviously had problems in adjusting to the different climate which at first had a 'pernicious effect' on her and left her in a 'truly lamentable condition.'⁵⁰ In the first few months Mary Jane had to move several times: first she stayed in a boarding house in 13th street, but as it became too expensive she boarded with some acquaintances of her father's in Dominick street.

Mary Jane's letters to Rossa and her diary bear witness to that difficult time. They not only vividly demonstrate her worries and despair, including thoughts of death, but also her little joys, her strong desire to live, to withstand all the trials and the struggle against her own self.

Despite this heartbreaking existence she found strength to carry on from the following sources: The first was her desire to be independent. Secondly James Maxwell's existence meant hope and a future for her as she had described in a letter to Rossa shortly after her arrival in New York: 'I have one good angel far across the water that looks through the eyes of my child, my bright little boy. This angel smiles on me through my sleep, stretches his tiny little hands across the sea, lisping my name; and with tiny feet tries to tread the waves that divide me from him and the sunlight: The spray gleams on his child hair and over the ruddy little face. While this angel appears, a firm anchor holds me to life; but if he goes, my heart will sicken; and I pray to God spare me so deep a grief and leave me one object to live for.'⁵¹

Another source of Mary Jane's mental strength was her ardent belief in God. According to her daughter Margaret, 'every joy that came to her was a blessing from the Lord, every sorrow a cross to be borne as bravely as possible in His name. Her religion was as vital a part of her as her backbone; ...' ⁵²

Finally, her work helped her to overcome the adversities of that time.

Initially she did not get the help she had expected. Instead she found herself in the middle of the fenian faction fights between the O'Mahony wing and the Roberts party. Mary Jane entreated Colonel O'Mahony and the leaders of his wing to get help in finding a job. O'Mahony promised her a position as a governess or teacher in one of the public schools, but told her it would be a long time before a vacancy occurred. The only position he could offer her immediately was to write poetry and sketches for their paper, the *New York Irish People* for \$10 a week.

When Colonel Roberts returned from Europe on 13 August 1867, Mary Jane approached him for help. It was a vagary of fortune that Roberts, whose policy had caused the fenian split, was willing and able to help Mary Jane to make a new start. He provided Mary Jane with the necessary connections to his friends in the Senate; he took her into his home in Bloomingdale where she spent seven weeks, and where she found the time and tranquility to write her collection of *Irish Lyrical Poems* (1868). She later defended Roberts against Rossa's attacks on him and they could never reconcile their different opinions.

One of Mary Jane's greatest and most important supporters at that time was General Charles G. Halpine, or 'Miles O'Reilly' as he was known to his friends. Halpine, a prominent Fenian himself, was editor of newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *New York Citizen*, a participant

in the American Civil War and a well-known poet, 'who ever since Mrs.O'Donovan Rossa first thought of embracing what must now be called a brilliant and remarkable career, has interested himself in her success with a generosity and enthusiasm that "Private Miles" alone is capable of bringing to bear on any movement of the kind.' ⁵³

It was him who persuaded Mary Jane to take elocution lessons with one of New York's most famous elocutionists at that time, Professor Frobisher, so as to adopt the profession of a public reader. Frobisher was Professor of Elocution at St.Xavier's College and New York College.

In summer 1868, a few months after she had started her course of training with Frobisher, the New York correspondent of the *Dublin Irishman* wrote of her success in a slightly exaggerated way that 'so rapidly has she progressed that she is now regarded by men and women of taste and culture as the best reader in America.' ⁵⁴

In June 1868 Mary Jane began a tour of readings to display her burgeoning talent.

2.2. Lecture Tour through the States

Mary Jane began her tour of readings with a successful performance in the Cooper Institute in New York on 16 June 1868. General Halpine himself delivered the opening address and the demand for tickets was so great that newspapers stated 'that those who can find standing room in the hall may call themselves fortunate.' ⁵⁵

Her tour had three main aims: first of all it was, of course, to provide May Jane with the necessary means for her own life and to pay back all her debts; secondly it was a huge propaganda campaign for the fenian cause, Irish independence and the fenian prisoners; and thirdly, as

Mary Jane wrote to Rossa, she intended 'to aquire 'a sufficient sum of money to justify me in engaging counsel to re-open your case and appeal to the House of Lords.'⁵⁶ In the following fourteen months she travelled through many states of the Union and Canada receiving ovations everywhere. Her readings were highly praised in the American newspapers, and she was invited to read in some cities twice. Her repertoire included Irish poetry like THE BELLS OF SHANDON, FONTENOY or WE'RE IRISH EVERYWHERE as well as poems of her own, eg. IRISH MISSIONERS - THE BRIDGE.

In the beginning people mainly respected her because of her name and the cause it represented. But Mary Jane was very demanding of herself. Her dissatisfaction with an appreciation that she owed to her surname and her search for recognition for her own ability and talent became evident in her following lines to Rossa: 'You need not think that I am "begging" in your name; even if I could descend to that, people's hearts are closed, and I'd be losing time in trying to open them. I am earning honestly my income and have gone through a careful training, have studied my role scrupulously, so that at least no one could call me an amateur reader or a very inferior one ...'⁵⁷

But slowly people's attitude towards her changed and they came to see her because of her talent. She attracted even those who did not necessarily support the fenian cause, although her choice of poems and her clothing, mostly a black dress with green ribbons, left no doubt about her political attitude. Her readings were considered as occasions where the hostile fenian factions 'could meet in peace and harmony ... and remember for the moment that they had a common cause to serve and a common enemy to fight.'⁵⁸ The great succes of her tour made her

financially independent and enabled her to give readings for charitable and fenian purposes only, as eg. in Chicago where the proceeds went to the families of the Irish State prisoners.

The countless newspaper reports about Mary Jane's readings also bear witness to the great impression that she left with the Irish-American population. These reports resemble each other very much as regards their contents: they repeatedly mention her beauty, her black 'eyes full of poetry and tenderness', her voice as 'rich and musical' and her lyrics as 'of no ordinary merit, those which come directly from the heart being full of tender pathos, and indicating the sensibility of a young imaginative mind of a woman subdued by suffering and tried in the furnace of sorrow.'⁵⁹ The greatest compliment, however, was paid to her by the sceptical report about her readings in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in September 1868: 'We had been led to suppose that she was a good reader from the reports from other places, and when she arose before us last night, tall, gaceful, handsome, vivacious, we were prepared to be pleased with whatever she might read to us. But great was our astonishment to recognize in the handsome lively lady before us one of the best elocutionists we ever heard, ...'⁶⁰

2.3. The Fight for the Fenian Belmont Money

In September 1865 John O'Mahony, Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood, had lodged certain amounts of money in a New York bank, which was intended to support the fenian organisation in Ireland. With the seizure of papers and manuscripts at the *Irish People* office the English government also seized letters containing the money orders for this money. They directed the payment to be refused by the bank in Dublin where the orders were made payable. John O'Mahony demanded the money back from the New York bankers and as the latter refused, brought the case to court. This case against August Belmont, who represented the bankers, was to last for about seven years with the Fenians failing to recover the money. However, when O'Mahony seemed to gain the upper hand in the fight for the \$ 20,000 in September 1869, his political opponents tried to find persons who had a legal claim on the money and turned to Mary Jane.

Not realising the main intention of her advisers, she agreed to claim \$ 8,000 of the fund, the equivalent of a sum that the fenian organisation still owed to Rossa for the establishment of the *Irish People* newspaper in Dublin in 1863.

The reason for Mary Jane's claim was to enable her to give Rossa's sons by his first two marriages a home and to finance their education. There is no evidence in a political motive behind her claim, as she never intended to interfere in the discussion about fenian principles or policy and had friendly relations with Fenians of both parties.

In a statement in the press concerning her intention Mary Jane emphasized that 'personally I am uninterested in the

success of my suit, except in so far as it benefits my husband and children.' ⁶¹

Mary Jane's claim caused a storm of outrage among O'Mahony's supporters, and she was attacked in the strongest possible terms. One of the most malicious critics was Denis Holland, a Fenian and important contributor to the *New York Irish People*. In a letter published by several Irish American newspapers he accused Mary Jane of lying and denied her righteous claim: 'But the most monstrous case of all, and one which has excited sorrow and indignation among those who have hitherto been her friends, is the astounding claim put forward by Mrs. O'Donovan Rossa through her lawyers. ... How false and frivolous, how utterly preposterous this claim is, a few words will show. First of all, the Fenian Association in America had no connection with the Dublin newspaper, and did not originate it: the paper was simply a political and mercantile speculation of a number of persons in Ireland. O'Mahony, as Chief of the Fenian Society, was not in favor of its establishment and the connecting of its name with the Society.' ⁶²

Holland is probably referring to the general differences of opinion between Stephen and O'Mahony which, according to John Devoy, had surfaced in the early 1860s. The relationship between O'Mahony and other members of the *Irish People* staff, eg. Luby, Kickham and Devoy, were marked by mutual respect and sympathy. (see: John O'Leary, *Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism*, chs. XVII and XXVIII).

Some further comments in Holland's letter show, however, that it was less the financial side of the issue as rather the fact that it was a woman who according to her own judgement dared to interfere in fenian policy: '... of course, she has no authority from her noble husband in the

matter. She cannot recover a dollar of her outrageous claim - no man would readily scout such a claim than O'Donovan Rossa himself and she is merely a cat's-paw in the hands of knaves. I am sorry for the plight this lady has got into.' ⁶³

If Holland might have been wrong in other matters, he was certainly right in the following: first of all that Mary Jane's lawyers were more concerned with harming O'Mahony than in her interests and rights. Secondly, that Rossa would have never accepted the money even though it was a righteous claim. In a letter to Mary Jane he wrote about the case: 'How you engaged in this Belmont-O'Mahony lawsuit, influenced by anyone who could use such contemptible reasons to influence me, is what I cannot understand. ... But though it may make you self-opinionated, let it be a caution to you to be aware of acting on the advice of others against your inclination. If you are led much by others, it is ten to one you will be led astray.' ⁶⁴

Mary Jane was well aware of Rossa's disapproval as she herself admitted that 'if Rossa were at liberty he would not put in a claim for this money.' ⁶⁵

Another critic was James Cody of Callan, who claimed that Rossa had been paid back his expenses with ten per cent interest. Although Rossa initially intended to stay away from the conflict about the fund he emphatically contradicted Callan's claim and denied having been paid back any money at all. He, however, once more emphasized that he had no interest in the Belmont Fund. ⁶⁶

Mary Jane was very surprised and rattled at this severe criticism, but she did not think of giving in that easy. Answering to the allegations she defended her viewpoint in a letter to the editors of the *Irish American*: 'On my arrival in America I applied to Mr

Anthony A.Griffin, the Executive of what is now the Savage Branch of the F.B., for payment in part or whole of this debt. But as he declared that, even with the best intentions, his party would be powerless to assist me, their exchequer being then empty, I did not push the matter. I do so now by advice of some of the highest legal authority in New York. The Belmont money, long turned from the channel in which it should have flowed, is again in the market awaiting the claims of all who can prove their right to it. On the part of my husband, and for the benefit of his children, I have put in my claim; and I do not believe that any impartial jury will set it aside, as either fraudulent or ungenerous, or any of the other unpleasant names by which men ignorant of the facts stigmatise it.' ⁶⁷

When Rossa learned about Mary Jane's involvement in the fight about the funds he advised his wife strongly to stay withdraw her claim. In his reminiscences he wrote about his reaction to this news: 'Some people say that some things made me mad in prison. Well, if anything made me mad it was that, and I wrote to my living widow to have nothing whatever to do with law suits about Belmont money or other Fenian money. I was proud of my life in connection with Fenian affairs, and I did not want to have this pride killed. It was what was keeping the life in me.' ⁶⁸ Mary Jane, then realising the intention of her advisers herself, followed Rossa's orders and withdrew her claim a few months later.

2.4. Mary Jane vs.the British Authorities

After Rossa's election as Member of Parliament for Tipperary in November 1869, Mary Jane thought it time to undertake new efforts to effect his release. She went to Washington to meet important and influential men in American political life many of whom, including President Grant, assured her of their support. She received an official letter to the American ambassador to Britain, J.L.Motley, requesting support for her endeavour to obtain her husband's release. In January 1870 she left for England, willing to undertake all measures to get Rossa free.

As already mentioned Mary Jane intended to reopen Rossa's case before the House of Lords. Rossa himself did not approve at all of what he called 'the foolish notion of getting me out of prison by going to law with the devil ...' ⁶⁹ What Rossa was worried about most was that 'when one so near to me as my wife was to write or speak in the matter, it would, of course, be taken for granted that she spoke with authority; and though I did not doubt her ability to state her case honourably, I had very uncomfortable anxiety lest things be said that would give my enemies satisfaction.'⁷⁰ This shows that, particularly after the Belmont affair, Rossa did not trust Mary Jane as much as he always professed and thus he made her promise 'that she would do or say nothing that was not Irish or principled.'⁷¹

The efforts of the Amnesty Movement, its support by Irish MPs, eg. George Henry Moore and others, rumours about the ill-treatment of the prisoners and Rossa's election had increased the probability of a general amnesty which probably led Mary Jane to the naive conclusion 'that it

only needed an approach from the prisoners' friends, with a request for release'⁷², to get a favourable answer from Gladstone. She was soon to learn that things were not that easy. After her arrival she sent a letter to Gladstone asking for an interview which was refused. In February and June 1870 she was allowed to visit Rossa in prison. On her latter visit she was only permitted to talk to her husband through an iron fence and he had to refrain from all reference to his treatment. Disappointed and in a disturbed state of mind she turned to her old friend, the editor of the *Irishman*, Richard Pigott. Her letter to him bears witness to her changed opinion about the easy achievement of an amnesty and her despair in realising the fraud behind the Commission of Inquiry into the Treatment of the Irish Political Prisoners and that 'it is more likely that the discomfiture of the prisoners and a fraudulent governmental triumph will be the result.'⁷³

When Rossa learned about the Commission of Inquiry he decided to give evidence and employ his wife as counsellor. But Mary Jane, now very doubtful about the purpose and success of such a mission, initially refused to assist. The publication of her letter had the consequence that she did not receive permission to visit Rossa to discuss his statement to the Commission with him on Friday, 1 July 1870. As the inquiry was due to begin on Monday, 4 July and there was no permission of visits at weekends, this single visit was insufficient to serve its purpose and so Mary Jane rejected the offer.

But she was not to give in and explained to Rossa: 'I want no compromises. "All or nothing" have become my watch-words. So will I have all of my husband or none of him; and will have all of its promises from the Crown or none of them.'⁷⁴

She turned to the press again, sending her personal correspondence to Pigott. Other Irish nationalist

newspapers, reacting very indignantly about Mary Jane's nasty treatment by the British authorities, copied her letters from the *Irishman*. As the honesty of the Commission and the inquiry was very controversial due to previous Government reports which had proved to be incorrect, this disclosure had the desired effect: Mary Jane was informed by the authorities that 'she would be allowed free access to her husband, to assist in the preparation of his case, and that the Commission had been adjourned over the 19th inst., so that she would have ample time to avail of the new offer.' ⁷⁵

2.5. Lecturing in Ireland and Britain

On her tour through Ireland and England Mary Jane added to the success and reputation of her itinerary through the States one year earlier. Statements in the *Irishman* several weeks prior to her return to Ireland that '... she ... will appear before such large audiences, as I am sure she will obtain, in all the principal towns of Ireland and Great Britain, to listen to her charming readings' ⁷⁶ led to the assumption that this tour had already been set up and arranged in the United States.

Like the newspapers in America it was now the Irish nationalist ones who fell over themselves in praising Mary Jane's enthusiastic appearances.

The program of Mary Jane's readings did not differ much from that of her tour through the United States although there were slight alterations which helped its success. Thus she included Rossa's 'Entombed' into her repertoire, which had been written during his imprisonment in Chatham. This poem consists of two parts and was published in the *Irishman* on 19 February and 5 March 1870. Whereas the first part deals with Rossa's 'dead past' which

' ... only mirrors now the memories of life -
The Fatherland, the hope of years, the friend,
the child and wife.' ⁷⁷

'Entombed II' describes Rossa's ill-treatment in prison. The poem has an implicit appeal not to forget Rossa ('Am I dead to the world or is the world dead to me?') and Mary Jane stirred up the feelings of the Irish for him by her enthusiastic and impressive recitation.

Stops of her tour in Ireland were Cork, Limerick, Ennis and Waterford. At her readings at the National School in Tipperary the Committee presented her with the proceeds of those readings and stated in their address that they were 'more than repaid by the delight and instruction they have afforded us, and your thrice welcomes amongst us.' ⁷⁸

She also followed a request of the Rossa and Kickham Committee who had approached her as she stated in a letter to Rossa: 'It seems they are heavily in debt and they naturally turn to me to get assistance in the shape of a few readings. I couldn't easily refuse so I have at once consented.' ⁷⁹

Due to her success in Ireland she extended her tour to England. Starting in London in August 1870, she continued her 3-months itinerary through North and Central England including major cities like Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Sheffield etc., as well as smaller towns such as Wigan or Bradford.

No matter where Mary Jane made an appearance she always received a hearty and enthusiastic welcome. Due to his different political viewpoint the following remarks by the churchwarden of Chatham probably make it the most impressive recognition of Mary Jane's talents. In a letter to her Mr. Millis wrote referring to her performance on 19 September 1870 in the town of Rossa's imprisonment at that

time: 'I do not presume to enter into the causes that have made it necessary for you to enter into the position of a public reader, but I cannot refrain from saying that the public are largely benefited by having the opportunity of hearing a lady, willing and able to give a high class entertainment.' ⁸⁰

Another form of respect and appreciation of her talent can be found in the poem WEDDED LOVE by DUNCATHAIL dedicated to Mary Jane

'To her who moves before our view,
On platform pleading well,
With courage, modesty and grace -
Playful, or tragic spell.

.
. .
.

O'Donovan, himself, must once,
Have, by some rath-crowned mould,
Captured the Lepracaun, and found
The far-famed crock of gold:

For her's the chest with heart of gold,
And air to breathe a spell,
And linger in each hidden fold,
In camp, or hall, or dell!

.
. .
.

Oh! Erin, lift thy drooping brow -
For she - beyond the sea -
Thy fairy godmother, with wand,
Hath not forgotten thee! ... ' ⁸¹

As before in the States her appearances in Ireland and England were also carefully watched by the police. ⁸²

In December 1870 the British Government decided to grant a general amnesty as the pressure from the public and even within the parliament itself had become too strong. Due to the conditions attached to their release the fenian prisoners were not allowed to remain or return to Britain for a certain period of time, which in Rossa's case was twenty years. Despite extensive public criticism of the conditions attached to the prisoners' release, Mary Jane seemed to have been one of very few people who publicly expressed their gratitude and happiness about the amnesty. Learning about the government decision she finished her tour of readings remarking on the amnesty at one of her last appearances in Sheffield in December 1870: 'We are all glad of it and my husband among the rest will no doubt accept the terms. To do so, he will have to make up his mind to leave dear old Ireland, and wherever he goes, of course, I shall go too; but no matter where we go, to America, Australia or elsewhere, we shall ever be proud to remember that we're Irish everywhere.'⁸³

chapter 3: Reunited 1871-1915

3.1. The Woman and her Family

Rossa was released from Chatham prison in January 1871, together with his fellow-Fenians John Devoy, Henry S. Mulleda, Charles Underwood O'Connell and John McClure. Complying with the conditions of his release Rossa, his wife and their son James Maxwell boarded the 'Cuba' for New York along with the other four Fenians. After their arrival Rossa applied for American citizenship and due to Mary Jane's five years residence in New York in time was duly granted an American passport. ⁸⁴ Resuming the role of breadwinner for his family, Rossa tried to make a living as newspaper editor of the *Era* and as manager of the Great Northern and Chatham hotels. Not being successful in business matters, however, both these ventures failed and as his son Denis commented in a letter to Mary Jane about his father that 'he'll never be a success in the business - the patriots have too much 'vantage ground. Father is peculiarly unfitted for the business, anyhow.' ⁸⁵ Later Rossa obtained a position as a ticket agent for the White Star Line and the National Line of Steamers.

Despite several business opportunities Rossa's earnings were very meagre, and his expenditure greatly exceeded his income, as it also financed various political adventures: His newspaper *United Irishman*, founded in 1880, was a great financial gamble and his Skirmishing policy was probably also supported by his private funds. Due to this Mary Jane frequently had to tighten the financial belt to make ends meet, but despite the problems and hardship of those years her unquestioning loyalty to Rossa became proverbial.

Coinciding with his business efforts Rossa wholeheartedly involved himself in politics again, standing as a candidate for the New York Senate, opposing

Tammany Hall. Also being involved in several law suits he earned himself a reputation as a trouble maker.

Rossa was often referred to as the 'man of two loves': his dedication to Ireland's freedom and his love for Mary Jane and his family. Mary Jane herself referred to these two loves in her poem MY LOVE written 1862 just before their marriage, whose lines according to John O'Leary 'are perhaps not of her best, but at least direct and forcible and lend themselves easily to quotation' ⁸⁶:

'When first he called me "Mollis" he sighed,
And told me he loved one other beside -
One other who was already his bride,
And I should love her for him - I cried;
Then he told me that other was Erin.' ⁸⁷

Admitting to her acceptance of Rossa's devotion for Ireland she refers to her husband as 'My Lover and thine, Oh Erin' ⁸⁸ in her poem.

The importance of either love in Rossa's life is, however, a matter of argument among those close to him.

His daughter Margaret Rossa Cole indicated that they had equal importance for her father as she always emphasized the significance of the two loves ⁸⁹. She contradicted this assumption, however, by saying that her mother 'never questioned (nor did we) that Ireland was first in his heart, and our family life was arranged to allow him the greatest possible peace and quiet for his constant reading and writing and the receiving of his many associates in the Great Cause.' ⁹⁰

Rossa's life-long friend and one of his most ardent critics, John Devoy, however, coined the phrase that 'in the exercise of this predominant Fenian quality of self-sacrifice O'Donovan Rossa was the most typical Fenian of them all.' In his *Recollections* Devoy criticised Rossa as

beginning 'to sacrifice himself, his family and his interests at the very inception of the movement, and he continued it to his last conscious hour. Often the sacrifice was wholly unnecessary, even unwise, but Rossa believed it was called for and never hesitated or counted the costs.' ⁹¹ This criticism of the primary importance of Rossa's political fight is further proved by his attitude to the Belmont Money and his venture, the *United Irishman* (see: chapter 3.3). The criticism of Rossa sacrificing his family for his political aims was also shared by members of the family. Rossa's sons by his first marriage were very critical of their father's fulfilment of his family duty. His son Denis, in a letter to Mary Jane in 1876, turned down her request for financial help claiming that Rossa 'has always been careless of his own family...' ⁹²

When in 1891 Rossa's banishment ended, he was allowed to return to Ireland, but at the time was financially unable to do so. The Rossa Testimonial Committee was then especially founded to raise funds thus enabling him to go back. In May 1894 Rossa left New York and his family, without having provided for them as the harsh criticism of Mary Jane's sister Isabella proves: 'You tell me that Rossa is to sail for Ireland on the 30th but you do not give me the least idea as to what assignments he has made for your and the children's support. I feel very uneasy at that point as I know quite well that should he be arrested when he landed or later, the excitement would either cause paralysis of the whole or part of the body. ... In the meantime what is to become of you and your children? If Rossa thinks for one moment that you will be taken care of by the public he had better put this idea out of his head. ... surely he owes you something in return for your years of unceasing devotion and faith in him.' ⁹³

Margaret O'Donovan Rossa stated in her reminiscences that her mother approved of Rossa's sacrifices and quoted her as laughingly saying to him: "Tis a good thing your heart is so big, dear,... "God made it extra large to harbor both your loves, Ireland first and then the rest of us."'

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This contradicts the facts as on several occasions Devoy's criticism of Rossa's unnecessary sacrifices was shared by Mary Jane herself. So, eg., did she severely criticise him for his provocative behaviour during his imprisonment in the late 1860s by which he brought additional punishment on himself. After having read the Knox Pollock Report on the treatment of political prisoners she wrote to him: 'What is the use of bringing so much successive punishments on yourself by impotent defiance of a rule that holds you in its grasp? ... Need I remind you that you have six sons - four of them in my father's house - and likely to remain there if the poor man can keep a house over them, for I have failed in getting any provision for them here. Need I remind you that you have a wife - a sorely wronged girl whom you took in her inexperience and world-ignorance whom you afterwards with open eyes left unprovided for ...' ⁹⁵

The objectivity of the Knox-Pollock report was highly doubtful and Rossa's statement that it intended to 'whitewash the Government and blackwash' him ⁹⁶ bears a lot of truth. Sean O'Luing's statement in his introduction to *Irish Rebels* which attributed Mary Jane's acceptance of the report to a lack of information from Rossa's side is also irrefutable, although it denies the completely different attitudes of Mary Jane and Rossa about the degree of self-sacrifice. Mary Jane rejected unnecessary and unreasonable self-sacrifice, which becomes obvious in her pointing out that other Fenian leaders, as ardent supporters of the cause as Rossa himself, did not follow his example. She remarked: 'O'Leary is a proud, sensitive,

high-spirited man; so also is Luby. Yet, with admirable dignity, they hold up their heads and take no insult from creatures who are beneath their contempt. This is wise in every sense. They have less reason to be far-seeing and politic than you, for think what reasons have you?' ⁹⁷
Their dissent being a matter of principle on both sides they published their private correspondence about the issue as some things in it 'are calculated to give a lesson to "patriots"...' ⁹⁸

For Mary Jane, despite her ardent support of the national cause for which she sacrificed so much, her family and her children always took precedence. She tried to make compromises to suit both, whereas for Rossa there was never any doubt about the priority. Although Mary Jane allowed her husband a free hand and tried to compensate for the losses herself, in certain issues, along with his sons, she severely criticised him for his attitude in the early stages of their relationship: 'They [the boys - S.L.] ought not to be neglected for any cause, no matter how pressing. They are your first duty - ought to be at any rate. That is not too hard for you Cariss for being so careless of them.' ⁹⁹

How deep this life-long dissent between Mary Jane and Rossa regarding his family duties was, becomes obvious in Devoy's description of the family crisis in the late 1870s. In a letter to James Reynolds, a member of the Committee for the Catalpa rescue operation, he wrote on 10 March 1878: 'She also said that Ford can't afford to keep him and that he'll soon be without any means of living. She described herself as sitting on a rock with the tide gradually rising around her with an inevitable fate before her if she remained.' ¹⁰⁰

The danger to Mary Jane's existence, however, was to become evident in a direct threat to her life. It is well

known and documented that in 1885 an attempt was made by a Mrs Dudley, daughter of a British Cavalry officer, to kill Rossa. Generally not known is, however, that Mary Jane shared a similar experience because of her relationship to Rossa and her loyal support for him. While she was reading in Montreal on 21 February 1881 a shot was fired through the window at her. Fortunately nobody was injured. ¹⁰¹

The Children

Apart from occasional readings, Mary Jane almost completely retired into her private life after Rossa's release and the family's settlement in New York. The reasons for this lie in Rossa's reappearance on the political scene and their rapidly growing family.

Mary Jane had known the meaning of an intact family life since her childhood and it played an essential part throughout her life. Apart from her own thirteen children, she now also took responsibility for her brothers and sisters, many of whom emigrated to the States and helped them to found an existence. Rossa's four sons by his first marriage, who followed him to America, were also taken care of by Mary Jane.

She had been in constant contact with Rossa's boys while they were looked after and apprenticed under the care of the Ladies' Committee.

According to Rossa's son John the Ladies' Committee paid for his and his brother Cornelius's upkeep 'the rate of £ 0.12.0 per week, but then it fully costs them £ 1 or £ 1.5.0 per week when our clothing is taken into consideration. I get 7/6 per week from Mr Lawless of which sum I give 6/6 to the Ladies' Committee towards our

support and they allow me the other 1/0 as pocket money.'

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In 1869 Denis, in a letter to Mary Jane, complained about the bad treatment he received in his apprenticeship and asked her for permission to come over to America. Mary Jane agreed eventually after having arranged for his apprenticeship to the *Irish People* office in New York.¹⁰³ John also followed his father to New York where he attended a course in jurisprudence at the local university. He graduated from New York University Law School in May 1877.

Despite Mary Jane's care for the boys there always remained a tension between them and the rest of the family, as they did not feel they owed anything to their father and did not support him when he needed help.

Despite her deep and unconditional love for her own children, Mary Jane was known as 'the disciplinarian and she did not believe in sparing the rod and spoiling the child ...'.¹⁰⁴ Of the thirteen children born to her only seven reached adulthood. They were as follows:

name	born	died
James Maxwell	30/04/1866 Clonakilty	22/11/1893 New York
Kate Ellen	28/12/1871 New York	12/07/1872 New York
Frank Daniel	26/01/1873 New York	05/09/1873 New York
Maurice	19/05/1874 New York	12/07/1874 New York
Sheela Mary	29/02/1876 New York	25/03/1951
Eileen	08/04/1878 New York	1963
Amelia	1880 Philadelphia	1881 New York
Jeremiah	29/07/1881 New York	November 1956
Isabel	25/03/1883 New York	June 1972
Mary Jane	28/12/1884 New York	March 1973
Margaret Mary	04/04/1887 New York	September 1968
Joseph Ivor	19/01/1889 New York	29/01/1889 New York
Alexander Aeneas	22/08/1890 New York	28/03/1891 New York

The closeness of the bonds between the Rossa's and their children certainly contributed much to their nationalist attitudes. But Mary Jane herself attached great importance to a nationalist education of her children, part of which was their learning Irish. Mary Jane did not speak Irish herself and always regretted this fact. Referring to Rossa as a 'great Gaelic scholar' who 'could read and write and speak the language fluently' she stated about herself in a letter to Devoy on 3 February 1914: 'I'm an ignoramus except that I learnt a poem in Irish to recite like a parrot when required. I started to study Gaelic many years ago, but got discouraged on finding it so difficult. I was very much ashamed of the deficiency when I went back to Ireland in 1906 until I met Alice Milligan and that brilliant and charming lady though lecturing and travelling for the Gaelic League did not know how to speak Irish either.' ¹⁰⁵

The closest relationship, however, was to James Maxwell, her first child, whose existence had helped her to get through the years of separation from Rossa. He symbolized for her everything that Rossa was: she wanted him to become as great a fighter for Ireland as his father. That her vision of James Maxwell as successor of his father's political legacy was shared by the public as well can be seen from a newspaper report about the arrival of the Rossas in New York in 1871, which described the four year old boy as 'the youngest rebel of the lot ... who ... "being Irish since he was born" may do good work for Ireland before he dies.' ¹⁰⁶

Most poems that Mary Jane dedicated to a person revolved around her eldest child. Her pride of her son speaks also from her memories described in a poem that she dedicated to him on the occasion of his 25th birthday:

'Our little knicker-bockered boy
Would climb some nearby highland
And hands in pocket gazing
Upon a ship in motion
Would softly murmur "When a man
I'll sail upon the ocean!
I'll take my ship to Ireland home
I'll fly a green flag o'er her
And when I beat her cruel foes
To glory I'll restore her!' ¹⁰⁷

James Maxwell joined the U.S.Navy, qualified as an engineer and was stationed in New Orleans. Mary Jane's letters to him during that time reveal much more than merely a mother-son relationship. She confided in him about all her trials and tribulations and he became one of her closest allies. In spring 1893, however, tragedy struck when James Maxwell was involved in an accident on board his ship which severely damaged his lungs from steam inhalation, resulting in his death on 22 November 1893. Not surprisingly, it took her a long time and strong support from her family to gradually recover from it. In her book Mary Jane's daughter Margaret states that 'not without a bitter struggle did my mother recover from the overwhelming shock of Maxwell's death, but day by day she fought her battle, throwing herself whole-heartedly into anything that might occupy her mind and tire her body.' ¹⁰⁸ The family even moved house to spare Mary Jane the pain of his memory.

Although the other children were aware of her obvious preference for James Maxwell, they accepted it without feeling neglected and admired him in a similar way as their mother did.

The environment that Mary Jane created for her children to grow up in was not just important to them, but was essential for Rossa as it fortified him in his numerous battles and supported him when all seemed lost. Mary Jane was well aware of how essential it was for Rossa's cause to keep a loyal and strong home, especially in times of crisis as in the late 1880s when Rossa faced his severest trials: 'I think if he did not find faith and sympathy and encouragement at home his heart would break. As it is I never remember seeing him so frustrated as he has been this week.'¹⁰⁹

3.2. Mary Jane and Politics in America

Some of the severe criticism Rossa faced in America due to his behaviour was because he sympathised with the Reds. Rossa had received great support from Marx's International Workingman's Association who 'had fought hardest for the amnesty in Great Britain ...'¹¹⁰

Marx, in connection with his colonial studies, had carefully followed the developments and the situation in Ireland and was a strong supporter of the Manchester Martyrs. His studies at the time resulted in excerpts from the *Economist*, the *Money Market Review*, *The Times* and the *Courrier Francais* on the Irish economy, Irish - English economic relations and tenant right issues in Ireland as well as from Michael Thomas Sadleir's *Ireland - Its evils and their Remedies* and John Leslie Foster's *An Essay on the Principle of Commercial Exchange*. These excerpts are in possession of the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

It was particularly Marx's daughter Jenny and the French communard Gustave Flourens, who had written many articles

about Rossa's imprisonment and ill-treatment in French newspapers (especially *The Marseillaise*) and thus helped the cause of his release. When Flourens was killed in the rising of the French Commune of 1871, Rossa publicly defended the Communards and stated that 'he certainly did not believe that the French were behaving as badly as newspaper reports pretended: he thought that the English Government had possession of the telegraph wires and were using them in the interest of the monarchist party, and, consequently, the French might be as much misrepresented as the Irish were during the Fenian rising.'¹¹¹

Rossa's (although not formal) participation in Flourens's funeral in New York in 1871 caused a lot of criticism and outrage.

Mary Jane had had contact with the Reds since 1865, when the paper of the International Workingman's Association, the *Workman's Advocate*, had republished the Ladies' Committee's appeal for funds on January 6th, 1866. At the meeting of the Central Council on 16 January Marx announced that Mary Jane had thanked his friend Peter Fox in a letter for their support. In this letter she also congratulated him on three articles about the Irish question, which had appeared in the *Workman's Advocate* of 14, 21 and 28 October 1865.

In 1870 Marx's daughter Jenny tried, in connection with the publication in Hanover in 1870 of a collection of Irish folk songs by Thomas Moore, entitled 'Erin's Harp', to obtain Rossa's photograph to precede the work. For this purpose she contacted Richard Pigott only to be told that he was not able to help her as the British Government prohibited the sale of fenian photographs, but that he had forwarded her letter to Mary Jane.¹¹² However, as Mary Jane never replied to this request the contact ceased.

Rossa, who undoubtedly was no follower of Marx's doctrine, pursued his own political strategy. In the early 1880s he, as ringleader of violent nationalism, became very disputed and unpopular with many Irish-Americans because of his support and involvement in a series of bombings in England. His most ardent critics included his former friends James Stephens, who considered Rossa's dynamite campaign as 'either inspired by fools or by miscreants' and John O'Leary, who denounced it as criminal'.¹¹³

Rossa's call for a Skirmishing Fund found such great response and the collections reached such dimensions that three months after the publication of his appeal the collection reached the \$ 10,000 mark.

The Clan na Gael leadership decided to bring it under its control and Rossa was appointed one of the trustees, but as his financial dealings were not very business-like and accusations of his embezzling money were voiced, he was later forced to resign. Several public remarks that Rossa made about the Skirmishing Policy which did not have the backing of the Clan na Gael leadership and Rossa's drinking problem at the time furthered his downfall. When Rossa suddenly fell ill with paralysis in summer 1878 Clan na Gael took over the fund.

Rossa's severe illness caused serious problems for Mary Jane who, being left without any support, had to sell their belongings and brought her three children to Ireland to be taken care of by her parents with whom they stayed for more than a year. Police, suspecting some kind of plot behind her return to Ireland, watched her movements carefully, but got the impression that 'the efforts made in Dublin to raise money for O'Donovan Rossa, have failed, and if Mrs Rossa is in Ireland no notice is taken of her.'¹¹⁴ A political motivation is not evident in her journey to her home land.

However disputed Rossas's bombing activities were with the public, he received unconditional support from his family. Although there is very little direct reference some remarks by his son James Maxwell leave no doubt about the family's loyalty. In a letter to Mary Jane he expressed his hope that 'the Skirmishing Fund is increasing, and that it may make the light shine so brilliant in England, that you will see perfidious Albion going down and regenerated Ireland rising over her ruins ...' ¹¹⁵

It is difficult to say in how far Mary Jane was aware of the details of Rossa's activities. Although there is very little direct evidence about her attitude to the bombings and the endangering of innocent life, some comments by her point to her support for Rossa's policy as a matter of principle. She was very interested in the success of the Skirmishing Fund and seems to have approved of its being taken over by Devoy and his friends. Referring to Mary Jane Devoy reported in his letter to James Reynolds on 10 March 1878: 'She has been over here complaining to us and warning us of danger to the fund and our talk with him on Thursday satisfied us she was right in this respect whatever she may be in others.' ¹¹⁶

Mary Jane's approval of physical force also becomes evident in the following lines of her poem FIGHT FOR IT:

And said they not to cast aside
As useless evermore
All foolish faith in Parliament
Our freedom to restore?

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. .
.

Tis twenty weary years ago
Since fighting was the fashion,
And now the tide of hope returns
To patriotic passion!

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Too long misled, false prophet-fed,
By Will-o'Wisp deluded,
We dreamed that in Westminster Halls
Our goodess was secluded;
But now awake we break the spell
By knaves or cowards planned,
And pledge again the arms of men
To free our native land!' ¹¹⁷

As the signs of a resurgence to militancy began to surface, Mary Jane, who shared her husband's long nurtured ambitions for this action, grieved for his inability to share in this new age of Irish nationalism, as she wrote on 30 November 1913 in a letter to Devoy: 'Oh, how sad it is to think he is not in condition to realise what he always hoped for and believed sure to come and what is actually in the air at the present time, the return of the Irish people to the old doctrine of physical force!' ¹¹⁸

3.3. The United Irishman

After the breakdown of Rossa's political connections to Clan na Gael and the severance of relations with many of his former friends, he tried to find an organ to make his political opinion heard and in 1881 founded the *United Irishman* as a mouthpiece for his own political attitudes. The paper, which was referred to by his daughter Margaret as a 'one man paper' ¹¹⁹ and by John Devoy as the 'queerest Irish paper evr published' ¹²⁰ played a major role in Rossa's defence against his political opponents.

But it was not only Rossa who dedicated a lot of work and efforts to the paper, but also Mary Jane, not only for her poetical contributions.

During the time of Rossa's stay in Ireland in 1894/95 he transferred all responsibility, including publication of the *United Irishman*, to Mary Jane. Nevertheless Mary Jane, as many times before, had to combat the disrespect shown to her because of her sex. How severe this problem was for her can be concluded from the following complaint in a letter to Rossa at that time: 'I suppose you have given Mr Connolly to understand that I am the Arbiter of your destinies and can imperatively say "stay there" or "come her" and you must accordingly.'¹²¹

The paper was initially also intended to contribute to Rossa's income, but in this respect failed as it cost more than it yielded. Rossa's lax way of handling money matters, which contributed to its financial failure becomes obvious in his daughters statement that 'if anyone ordered the paper and could afford to pay for it, pappa was greatly pleased, and if anyone wanted the paper but could not pay for it, pappa was still greatly pleased and sent the paper without the bill.'¹²²

This problem was a major point of contention between Rossa and Mary Jane, who on several occasions tried to convince him to discontinue publication. In June 1894 she wrote to him: 'Regarding the *United Irishman* I think if the receipts for the paper do not sum up more satisfactorily it had better be discontinued. The few friends who send in more than two dollars would do so outside the paper altogether and if you count them out the receipts would not half pay for printing and mailing, much less pay the time of an editor or office boy. You know my time is of value at home and I am worried into uselessness by the profitless responsibility of the office.'¹²³



Whereas Rossa did not strictly observe the payment of subscription fees, Mary Jane used his absence in Europe to repeatedly criticise subscribers for not paying their contribution: 'The United Irishman did not come out last week because we have not so much patience as the real Editor and we are tired of loosing money by it. But as Rossa is coming home in May we make a mighty effort to keep up the connection lest his reception be embittered by the thought the United Irishman was let starve in his absence. He can deal with the delinquents himself ...' ¹²⁴ When Rossa involved himself in a lot of trouble and court proceedings against Patrick Sarsfield Cassidy in the late 1880s and had no other means of expressing himself publicly than through his paper, Mary Jane withdrew her demands for the discontinuation of the *United Irishman*.

The Cassidy case was the most important and most nerve-wracking of several cases, which Rossa was involved in and which were mainly charges of criminal libel due to mutual accusations of spying and embezzlement of money on Rossa's part.

Worth mentioning are in this connection the case of Denis Dowling Mulcahy against Rossa in 1885 to recover \$ 480 allegedly due to him for his services to the fenian organisation, Rossa's legal action against the editor of the *Catholic News*, Herrman Ridder, for libel and difamation of character in 1889, and Henri LeCaron's accusations of Rossa's misapprehension of money fom the Skirmishing Fund in the same year.

In the spring of 1889 Patrick Sarsfield Cassidy brought a charge of criminal libel against Rossa for his accusations he was a British spy in several articles in the *United Irishman* which had appeared in the paper since 1887. Mary Jane, obviously not convinced of her husband's ability to

substantiate his accusation, wrote to James Maxwell: 'Your father feels quite confident of his ability to prove Cassidy all he has called him. I have seen none of his proofs and have a horrible fear he will find himself overmatched and in the grip of National Law.' ¹²⁵

Despite the obvious lack of Rossa's business talent her support for him was unconditional: 'Cassidy knows in his heart your father had no more of the informer as the political thief in his blood than the angel Gabriel but seconded by your father's deplorable want of method and order in his business habits he opens a series of libellous charges against him and when the unfortunate man clumsily tries without science or craft to get the law to punish Cassidy the fox turns the tables like greased lightning on the unsophisticated plaintiff and comes out on top of the heap grinning.' ¹²⁶

Cassidy further accused Rossa of not repaying a debt of \$ 130. He claimed that some of the *United Irishman* money belonged to him and demanded Rossa to present his books which the latter refused.

This trial did not only affect Rossa's mental stability, but also the entire family, and Mary Jane in particular suffered greatly under the pressure. Her letters to James Maxwell give the reader a very good impression of the scars this case left with her caused by the pressures of the trial and her desire to support and comfort Rossa. In June 1889 she wrote to her son about Cassidy's further accusations: '... your father is the man without any documents at all! He has no receipts for his payments to put his hands on when needed. They're somewhere surely; ... but he don't know where to find them and to go through all those bags and boxes is a task which I have no time to undertake for him.' ¹²⁷

As Rossa could not prove his point, but refused to withdraw his claim, he was found guilty in autumn 1890 and fined \$ 100.

The United Irishman was essential in representing Rossa's side in the trial. It was, however, not before long until he was ordered to refrain in his paper from any reference to the trial. Realising the importance of the *United Irishman* for Rossa in this particular situation she considered it 'a mistake and a misfortune' to discontinue publication at a time 'when his enemies have the field and misrepresent him so foully and his own [paper] is the only might left to defend him ...' ¹²⁸ Thus the paper was published with interruptions until 1910, when Rossa became totally unable to attend to it because of his illness.

We already mentioned that, apart from his political enterprises, Rossa made several attempts to find a secure position to give himself and his family a reliable income. In May 1896 he had applied to the Civil Service Board of New York for a clerkship in one of the city's departments, but was informed that the Board would not consider his application because of his prison record.

For many years his friends had also tried to combine the necessity for Rossa to earn a living with his desire to return to his native land. The fruits of their efforts resulted in Rossa being offered a position as correspondence secretary to the Cork County Council in September 1905. This position had been especially created for him and yielded £ 100 per year. According to the *Cork Constitution* the Young Ireland Society had been 'instrumental in getting the County Council to create a nominal office, with a real salary, for Rossa's benefit...' ¹²⁹

It was Rossa's 'declared intention ... to spend his remaining days on the old sod' ¹³⁰ and thus himself, Mary Jane and two of their daughters set out for Ireland. They arrived in Queenstown on 19 November 1905 and proceeded to Blackrock, Co.Cork, where the Cork Young Ireland Society had 'secured a cosy dwelling for the Rossa family.' ¹³¹ Rossa, worshipped and welcomed by his friends as a hero and a living symbol of Irish nationalism, immediately attended to his political duties. One

day after his arrival he attended the commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs in Cork. Many other public appearances followed, as his position in the Cork County Council allowed him the freedom to give public readings from his books in England, Scotland and Wales. Rossa himself obviously did not place any great importance to his position as his reply to a query about his duties implied: 'I'm a sort of a secretary to the Board; then again, I'm not. I guess I'm an adviser.' ¹³²

Mary Jane's activities at that time are not known in detail, but she presumably used the opportunity to visit friends and relatives in Ireland, whenever she did not accompany Rossa.

Rossa's daughters decided to return to New York in January 1906. In the spring Mary Jane suddenly fell ill with pneumonia, the disease by which she had lost most of her children. Her condition grew much worse as her heart became affected, and friends and relatives feared for her life.

Following medical advice, Rossa, according to his daughter Margaret, 'made the greatest sacrifice of a life of much self-denial' ¹³³, resigned his position and took Mary Jane back to New York. His own version of the situation and his resignation was that 'Tis no wonder she got sick, separated as she was from her six children in Staten Island and from seven more of them living in one graveyard in Staten Island. An eminent doctor - Doctor Edward Magner - was attending her while ill, ..., recommended that she go to some seaside place for a few weeks - as soon as she was able to travel. ... We live on the seashore road at New Brighton, within fifty yards of the salt sea, and the expense of coming home to a seaside place in America is not much more than would be the expense of living for some time at a seaside place in Ireland.' ¹³⁴.

That this was not the whole truth can be seen from an interview he gave American newspapers on his return. Asked if he intended to return to Ireland in the near future he declared: 'I don't know how soon I'll be going back. ... I won't be in a hurry'. And he continued referring to his salary in Cork: 'I only get 17

dollars a week ...and my daughters make more at typewriting than I do.' ¹³⁵

Another reason was obviously his disappointment about the situation in Ireland and the obvious lack of intention for an imminent rising: ' I don't want to say this too loud ... but Ireland is going to the bad. The poor deluded people - God help them - think they're going to get Home Rule, but it will never come.' ¹³⁶

The Rossas returned to America in June 1906 where Mary Jane's condition slowly improved.

3.4.The Last Years of Rossa's Life

Four years after Mary Jane's severe illness Rossa's condition declined rapidly. In October 1910 the *Gaelic American* declared that Rossa 'lies stricken in his last illness at his home in Staten Island. - As he is 79 years of age on September 11, and has been rapidly failing for a year it is not possible that he can recover.' ¹³⁷

Rossa's health was very delicate and had failed several times before which was attributed to his prison treatment in the late 1860s.

Mary Jane tried to nurse Rossa at home, but in September 1913 she broke down from the strain of having nursed him for the past three years, so that he had to be removed to St. Vincent's Hospital, Staten Island. 'She was averse to letting him go to the hospital, but had to consent when she broke down...' ¹³⁸

Apart from his failing physical health his mental condition had worsened as well. Nevertheless Mary Jane was 'determined to take him home as soon as she recovers sufficient strength to be able to nurse him ... '. ¹³⁹

Devoy, who was very much concerned about her health, warned in his paper that her friends 'ought not allow her to do so, on account of his hallucination that he is in

prison again and his efforts to escape.' ¹⁴⁰ and that if she undertook to do so after her recovery would speedily break down again.' ¹⁴¹

That his friend were willing to support Rossa and his family was proved by the foundation of the Rossa Fund in 1911, which was funded by private subscriptions. Mary Jane, although in need of the money, was very much concerned not to appear as a beggar. In October 1913 she wrote to Devoy in relation to new requests for support: 'I'm just as afraid of getting to much as too little ...' and that the authors of the circular should only 'send an appeal to personal friends who can well afford to be generous.' ¹⁴²

To keep Rossa's friends in America and Ireland informed and the memory of him alive Mary Jane decided to give regular reports on his condition in the *Gaelic American*.

Soon after Rossa's illness became known and it appeared to be terminal, the fight over the responsibility for his burial started.

Just about one year after the decline in his health and three and a half years before his actual death a movement was founded in Cork to arrange for his burial place. In December 1911 the *Gaelic American* reported on a meeting in Clonakilty, Mary Jane's birth place, at which the speakers advocated the position 'that when O'Donovan Rossa died his body should be taken to Ireland and buried in Rosscarberry, and that the demonstration should be "non-partisan" - that is not confined to men who believe in the principles of Fenianism but participated in by men of all shades and political opinions. ¹⁴³

Despite Rossa's wish to be buried in Ireland, he answered to questions about his burial wishes: '... take your time

in bringing me over. I am to wait here until ye have at least Home Rule, if not absolute freedom from England.' ¹⁴⁴

After his death on 19 June 1915 Mary Jane handed over responsibility for the funeral preparations to the Clan na Gael and left it to Thomas Clarke in Ireland to choose a plot in Glasnevin.

Rossa's remains were sent to Ireland in early July 1915 and Mary Jane and her daughter Eileen followed on 10 July. They were met at Liverpool by representatives of the Irish Volunteers, among them Kathleen Clarke.

Strangely enough Kathleen Clarke only briefly mentioned her meeting with Mary Jane, whereas the latter described Kathleen Clarke with great admiration: 'Mrs Clarke is a young woman of great dignity and personal grace ... She looks like one's ideal of a poetess, but she has a fund of practical good sense in stock and a very firm mind of her own with all her gentleness and youth' ¹⁴⁵

A detailed description of Mary Jane's activities in Ireland is contained in her report in the *Gaelic American* (see: chapter 4.2.), but particularly two issues of her stay deserve a mention.

As Mary Jane herself reports she and her daughter 'were constantly shadowed by detectives and Secret Service men and during our absence from our rooms in the Gresham Hotel, in Dublin, our wardrobe and personal letters, mostly telegrams and letters of condolence from prominent citizens of the United States were stolen.'¹⁴⁶ To add to the troubles she had to endure because of her mission was the attempt by the authorities to confiscate their American passports when they were leaving Ireland but failed in doing so.

Due to the character of the event and the police surveillance particular measures had to be taken to secure the success of Rossa's funeral. As Mary Jane was obviously not aware of the precariousness of the situation she freely gave away information to the press and consequently was reprimanded by Thomas Clarke: 'It was in the back of my mind that Mr Clarke would disapprove of my giving any information to the *Freeman's Journal* and here I was in the midst of what was really an interview Mr Clarke ... took occasion to remonstrate with me for the ease with which people could interview me. He would not give interviews to people of whom he was doubtful or disapproving. I professed myself ready and willing to follow his counsel literally from that moment though it would not be in accord with my own judgement or disposition, as I felt everyone who held out the hand in friendship and looked at me with a kindly eye was a welcome guest whose reasonable questions I would freely and honestly answer, with due regard to safety and propriety.' ¹⁴⁷

Despite all the difficulties and harassment she was deeply impressed by the tremendous support the event received and having fulfilled her mission successfully left Liverpool on 7 August 1915.

chapter 4: The final year June 1915-August 1916

4.1. Making Rossa a Symbol of Irish Nationalism

Since Rossa's illness Mary Jane had reappeared on the political stage, to continue his mission for Ireland's freedom.

These efforts included her reports on Rossa's condition in the *Gaelic American* (see: chapter 3.5.), her defence of Rossa's principles and his reputation and to her attempt to make him immortal by giving him a respected place in an encyclopedia. According to Mary Jane's daughter Eileen MacGowan her father 'was in one of the standard dictionaries of biography, but shortly before his death they wrote for a new sketch because Mamma had complained about the item they were carrying. Mamma intended to write up an item, but Pappa died and then a year later Mamma died so that the matter was never attended to.' ¹⁴⁸

More successful was Mary Jane's fight to present and defend Rossa's true ideas and principles. On 1 July 1915 the New York correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* had published an article, declaring himself to be a close friend of Rossa's and quoting Rossa with the words: 'When I die ... you might tell the English people I have fought a good fight according to my views, and long ago lost all hatred let alone prejudice, against the British Government.' ¹⁴⁹

Mary Jane learned about this article on her way to Ireland. According to her own statement about the claim she first 'would not take it seriously, but laughed to scorn the idea that it was necessary to justify Rossa in face of the persistent and insistent rumors of his "change of heart". ... But gradually I realized the necessity of stemming the false tide' ¹⁵⁰ and to write a contradiction, demanding the correspondent's name. Quoting his famous

phrase from the dock in 1865 she made it unmistakably clear that 'Rossa was, as he said of himself in the dock, an Irishman since he was born, and I can testify that he was the same unconquerable Irishman, breathing the same unalterable desire for the absolute freedom of his country and its separation from England that he breathed in the dock.'¹⁵¹

On the other hand the Redmonites in Ireland had claimed 'that Rossa was a devoted follower of John Redmond and resumed them two days later, notwithstanding the emphatic contradiction made by the dead patriot's wife.'¹⁵²

After Mary Jane's return from Ireland she wrote a detailed account of the events and her impressions during her stay in Ireland. This series was published in twelve issues of the *Gaelic American* between September 1915 and January 1916. In this very lengthy report she described in detail Rossa's last illness and his death, the funeral arrangements in America and Ireland, her journey to Ireland and the funeral itself.

It is a piece of nationalist propoganda, promoting the cause of Ireland's independence. On the one hand she emphasized the great support in fulfilling Rossa's burial wish and the organisational ability of the Irish Volunteers to make Rossa's funeral a success. On the other hand she launched severe attacks on the British government and the Irish authorities for her treatment. This contrast stretches through the entire series and becomes especially obvious in her remarks about the 'governing folk of Britain', who 'as we all know, have souls of such mean and stealthy predative diminutiveness that no mouse could contract itself to such small possibilities to entry and possession as they.'¹⁵³ Relating to her departure from Liverpool she contrasts the British officials who 'were very surly (they couldn't look pleasant for their lives),'

and who 'did not enjoy their surliness either' ¹⁵⁴ with the warm reception she received from the Irish Volunteers. Mary Jane's propagandist intention becomes obvious also in relation to several political issues referred to, eg. the participation of Irishmen in the First World War as soldiers in the British Army and remarks on the freedom of the press. It can also be seen in her reminder to the American public of their duty to serve Ireland: 'But should not rich Irishmen of America do as much, in proportion, to prove your love to your motherland as well? Let me aid the still small voice of conscience to suggest to you the joy of duty fulfilled to God, your neighbor and your motherland.' ¹⁵⁵

4.2. Back in Politics

After an absence of forty five years Mary Jane finally reappeared on the political stage and dedicated the last months of her life actively to the campaign for Ireland's independence.

She was invited as speaker and reciter to numerous public events and political meetings. In her speech at the Irish Race Convention, which took place in New York on 4 and 5 March 1916, she decided to 'speak principally in order to be a witness to the fact that the Irish people in Ireland are not loyal to England'. ¹⁵⁶ Reporting about her stay in Ireland for Rossa's funeral she further vindicated her fellow-countrymen by declaring that 'when Rossa's remains were taken to Ireland ... the Irish people received them with reference and devotion, and with all the honors that could have been accorded to an Irish king if he had been one. ... Very few of the Irish people entered into the [British] army, and those who did were pressed by extraordinary circumstances. ... The Irish women

supplement their men ... I saw among the families in Ireland many of the women training their little children in the old Irish customs. I saw the women represented in societies, the Cumman na mBan, pledged to support their brothers, The Irish Volunteers, in every manner ... ¹⁵⁷

The poem she chose to recite at the Convention, 'We're Irish everywhere', had played a major role in her tours of readings through America, Ireland and England.

For her appearance at a mass meeting in New York on 30 April 1916 Mary Jane recited poetry particularly written for the occasion and dedicated to THE MEN OF IRELAND THE IRISH VOLUNTEERS.

At every opportunity she used her considerable influence and contributed her share to various events organised in America to support the impending rising in Ireland. According to a report in the *Gaelic American*, at a big nationalist meeting in New York's Carnegie Hall a Green-White-Orange flag was spread over the chairman's table. It was a donation of Mary Jane's, had covered Rossa's coffin at his funeral and was given to her by the Irish Volunteers. ¹⁵⁸

Apart from her moral support for the cause, she also contributed to it financially by the sale of Rossa's books and her participation, along with her daughters, in many fundraising events.

Mary Jane gave her services without being attached to any organisation. Nevertheless she was often invited to speak at Cumman na mBan meetings and her opinion was highly appreciated.

'She never missed one of the latter until two days before her death.' ¹⁴⁹

4.3. The Little Poetess

Poetry for *The Irish People*

Poetry always played an important part in Mary Jane's life. It was not only a means of earning a living or supporting herself and her family in times of need, but it was also a medium of communication with herself and her surroundings, of expressing her inner feelings, a friend to talk to in all the years of trouble and loneliness. Her poems speak of the hardship of her life, the strength of her character, people and events that impressed and moved her - her poems are in themselves a story of Mary Jane's life. But most of all they emphasize her ardent desire to see Ireland free.

Although Mary Jane's verse did not compete with the renowned poets, it was very picturesque, emotive and populist and therefore favoured by the general public.

A great part of Mary Jane's poems were published by Irish and later by Irish-American newspapers, eg. *The Irishman* (Dublin), *The Irish People* (Dublin) and its namesake in New York, *Rossa's United Irishman*, *Devoy's Gaelic American* and others. But many of her poems have never been brought to the public eye. This concerned mostly verse written for private and family purposes.

We can distinguish between seven periods in Mary Jane's literary activity which do not differ from the point of style or contents of her poems, but depended on Mary Jane's personal situation and her political activity.

They cover the years:

- 1) 1864-September 1865
- 2) October 1865-May 1867
- 3) June 1867-beginning of 1868
- 4) mid 1868-end of 1869
- 5) 1870
- 6) 1871-1915 and
- 7) beginning-August 1916

The first period covers Mary Jane's work for the fenian organ *The Irish People*, which she started in May 1864 shortly after she had met its business manager Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. *The Irish People* had been established in 1863 and was issued on a weekly basis 'but up to this was not bringing in enough to pay expenses, although it had a fine circulation. Most of its subscribers had already advanced money to put it on its feet, and the returns were very slim.'¹⁶⁰ Among those who advanced a large sum of money to establish the paper was Rossa.

Mary Jane was publicly, although anonymously, introduced to the readers as a new contributor in May 1864 and judging her talent the editor wrote: 'All our poetry this week comes from our fair contributors. here is still another fair lady demanding a hearing. She evidently has fancy and feeling, but we would recommend her to take more pains to be correct in future. We have omitted a very few defective lines, which we think she might have easily avoided.'¹⁶¹

Before her marriage to Rossa Mary Jane signed her poems with her initials, ie. 'M.J.I.' whereas later she used the nome de plume 'Cliodhna'. Mary Jane used this female christian name probably to express her opposition against English rule in Ireland and her loyalty to her motherland,

as the emphasis on anything Irish always symbolised antagonism to everything English.

There was always a close link between Mary Jane's poetry for *The Irish People* and her relationship to Rossa which becomes particularly obvious in her letters to him. In one of them written before their marriage Mary Jane referred to a rumour that Rossa was regularly seeing a rich, older woman in Dublin. Out of anger and jealousy she even rejected Rossa's praise for her first poem in the paper, THE RUIN. At the same time she made it clear that she did not want to copy anybody in her poetry but follow her own style: 'So Mr. E[ditor] wishes a continuation of "the Ruin" style, I did not think he called that national ... I was puzzled to know what you did think national and you modestly sent me your own [poem - ie. THE SOLDIER'S TALE - S.L.] as a model! ... I was not at all surprised you undertook to mould me after your own pattern.' ¹⁶²

Like most of poetry at that level this poem described the desperate situation in Ireland, the misery of its people and in the strongest possible terms criticised English rule in Ireland. In it Mary Jane drew the comparison between happy childhood days with rich fields and cattle on the one hand and the dilapidated lonely house of present days on the other. As reason for this worsened situation she saw the the policy of absentee-landlordism which left the Irish peasants with nothing but ruin while

'On foreign soil their splendthrift lord
Scattered the wealth their year long toil
Had gathered from the yielding soil.' ¹⁶³

Mary Jane's poetry was particularly welcome with the Fenians as it in an impressive way supported their agitation. Further examples for that are her poems about the tragedy of Irish emigration. The Fenians had

introduced this element into Irish nationalist agitation to demonstrate the inhumanity of English rule which left the Irish with the choice between starvation and emigration. The most impressive piece about this topic and probably one of Mary Jane's best poems was her IRISH MISSIONERS - THE BRIDGE. In it she described in a very emotional way the fate of a young Irish girl who emigrated to America but failed there. The only way for her to survive was prostitution, but she kept it a secret to her family in Ireland and left them in the belief that she did well in the New World. When her brother decided to visit her, she found only one way to escape the shame of the discovery of her real status - suicide:

'Gainst the span of the dark-tinted bridge,
Where the rough severed waters unite in a ridge
Like a furrow of snow, when the late morning sun
Looked down thro' the city smoke misty and and
dun -

A chill form was floating there, a white face
appearing there,
Lost, doubtly lost, and no being in hearing
there,

Under the arch of the dark-tinted bridge!' ¹⁶⁴

This period of Mary Jane's contributions to the *Irish People* ended with the suppression of the paper in September 1865. In its office the police seized Mary Jane's letters and many manuscripts of her poems which, because of their contents, were classified as 'manuscripts selected by reason of their seditious tendency'. ¹⁶⁵ Among those were eg. THE DROUCHTEEN, IN MEMORIAM, THE TEMPEST and A SONG OF FREEDOM, which had appeared in the *Irish People* vol.1, 14 May 1864, p.392; 28 May 1864, p.424; 11 June 1864, p.459 and 16 July 1864, p.539

Although the first one had no political content, the other

three highlighted the plight of the Irish people under English domination. In her poem IN MEMORIAM Mary Jane described the fading away of a young beautiful girl which might possibly refer to the death of one of her relatives, at whose funeral she met Rossa. THE TEMPEST depicts that spectacle of nature and the following dawning of the new day may also refer to Ireland and its emergent freedom. In her SONG OF FREEDOM her wish for Irish independence is directly expressed as she demands:

'Arise! our exiled brothers call.
Arise! uplift the tearful pall
From Erin! ¹⁶⁶

One of her unpublished poems of that period, entitled OUR BRIDAL OCTOBER 22nd 1864, described her memory of that day, which was to change her life completely. This poem was found among Mary Jane's letters to Rossa which were seized at the police raid at the *Irish People* office. It was written on their honeymoon in England or Scotland about a week after their marriage.

Although it is not obvious from the document itself that the poem was written by Mary Jane, comparisons of her handwriting as well as the particular occasion described in it leave little doubt about its author.

Although Mary Jane was very young at the time the poem shows that she knew very well about the hardship that this marriage would bring to her life, and she was willing to face it. Its words prove the depth of her feelings for Rossa and her intelligence, maturity and realism at this early stage of her life:

'Mine, since I wed thee is a span of peace -
Crowding a lifetime's joys in moment's flight -
Yet well I know they may cost years of pain
A lifetime's weeping - aye, - a life of night!

Still would I yield them not
As too unworthy of such heavy cost
For days like these are very leaves of time
When happy thoughts are writ, rewrit, and crost
When future reading - years cannot steal their
memory,
Grief cannot blot their pages,
Nor with them life be joyless, though each hour
Seemed burthened with the gathered grief of
ages.' ¹⁶⁷

And indeed, these few weeks, in which she was often left alone, were a happy time for her - the last for many years to come in which she, having been left alone and unprovided for and forced to leave Ireland to make a living, led the life of a 'widowed wife'.

Poetry 1866-1868

There is no evidence of any poetic activity by Mary Jane during her work as Secretary of the Ladies' Committee. When she came to New York, however, she was forced to make a living by writing poetry for Irish American newspapers, eg. the *New York Irish People*, which had previously printed her appeals and correspondence on behalf of the Ladies' Committee. Her most important poems of the period, TWILIGHT THOUGHTS, IN THE PRISON, THE STEWART'S BROWN-CHEEKED BOY, THE WIDOW WAIN, THE SAILOR'S BRIDE, DORA DUNREEN, appeared in the *Irish People* between 6 July and 31 August 1867.

All of these poems, except one, revolve thematically around the topic of the pitiable deserted or widowed wife. They reflect Mary Jane's feelings at that time as well as her political convictions. In TWILIGHT THOUGHTS Mary Jane described her own thoughts and feelings at nightfall:

'I love the brooding stars that smile their
brilliance to the night,
They 'mind me of thine eyes, my love, with glory
dreamings bright,
They 'mind me of thy soul, my love, that dared to
be as free,
And in the dungeon glitters still for Land and
Liberty.' ¹⁶⁸

Mary Jane's IN THE PRISON deals with the betrayed hope of an imprisoned Fenian that his 'lady-love' would wait for him and pleaded guilty and thus escaped with a light sentence. The issue of pleading guilty to one's membership of the I.R.B. as betrayal of the cause seems to have been a problem that particularly moved the female relatives of imprisoned Fenians. In another case Isabella Roantree, wife of William Francis Roantree, left the Ladies' Committee claiming that she could not work together with the wife of such a traitor. In contrast to the fenian expectation of 'female patriotism, sacrifice and restraint' which always held the woman responsible if a man left fenian business for his family, in Mary Jane's attitude blame lies with the Fenian himself as she let him state:

'For weakness wore my soul and body chains,
And weakness shall dissolve the pledge you plighted,
Till all the recompense of wrong is blighted
By wrong's first cause - so slighted -
Miriam, I blame you not, 'tis fair, 'tis just,
the acme of my pains.' ¹⁶⁹

Unlike these poems THE STEWART'S BROWN-CHEEKED BOY is a memory of home, an eulogy to the beauty of Rosscarberry on a day in spring.

Most of the poems written for the *Irish People* in Dublin and its namesake in New York up to that time are contained in the only volume of her poems ever published, her *Irish Lyrical Poems*. The publication notices were carefully watched and collected by the British authorities, as police files show ¹⁷⁰. Colonel Roberts and his friends supported Mary Jane financially in publishing her little volume, as she herself described: 'I was enabled to put my idea in execution for Col. Roberts and a few wealthy members of the Irish Senate quietly made up a purse of \$ 300 for me and as quietly presented it. This money published an edition of my "Irish Lyrical Poems" ...' ¹⁷¹

Although the book was widely advertised and distributed Mary Jane had to admit that for her personally it did not have the expected financial success 'owing to the shabby manner in which many people calling themselves patriots ordered and forgot to pay for them. The book was widely circulated, but there is hardly a state in the union in which I could not find a goodly number unpaid for.' ¹⁷²

Apart from her poetry the *Irish People* published two pieces in prose by Mary Jane on 20 July and 24 August 1867. Both stories play in the Irish countryside and the main characters come either from the landed gentry and their servants or the more prosperous country people, among whom Mary Jane herself grew up - the milieu she knew well from her childhood.

Its character is underlined by a lot of Irish colloquial terms and expressions like 'Wisha'.

The first of the stories, MARY KELEHER, AN IRISH STORY, deals with the cliché of unhappy love and has a glorious ending where the prince, a landlord's son, Dan, wins his princess, the neighbouring landlord Keleher's only daughter Mary, against the intrigues of Mary's aunt, Mrs Carrigan.

Unlike in her poems, the problems that appear in Mary Jane's prose were not caused by economic or social reasons nor by English rule, but by lack of personal integrity of the characters concerned. The relationship between gentry and peasantry that Mary Jane described is characterized by friendliness, mutual respect and acceptance of each others status.

The second piece of prose, THE TWO LOVES. MARY CONNELLY'S STORY, could be considered as a kind of moralistic story, a warning of unfaithfulness in marriage which would be punished by God. The story is told by the betrayed wife, Martha, who lost her husband Sam to a young girl, she had taken into her house out of mercy. Sam falls ill the very day he wants to leave Martha and recovering from his illness regrets his sin and makes up for all the wrong he had done to his wife.

The author puts the moral of her one-sided, unsophisticated story in the following of Martha's words: '... but alas! ma'am, his health was ruined and his fortune melted, scattered, and, perhaps, it was a mercy that God took him in a short time, for his heart was broken grieving for the past. Blessed be God who has helped me to bear my troubles with resignation, and to look forward to a better world in which is our reward for all our sufferings, our "heart trials of this".'¹⁷³

Neither story can be regarded as of high quality because of their simplicity and one-sided presentation of the problems, so that it seems the main purpose for their creation was Mary Jane's need for money. Their contents obviously correspond with the expectations on female writers at that time. Another fact that points to a superficial storyline is that many points are unclear or confusing to the reader. In MARY KELEHER it remains unknown why the servant, Taid Canty, delayed his revelation of the intrigue for so many years. Furthermore it seems paradoxical that the second story is entitled MARY CONNELLY'S STORY while the narrator is Martha Connelly.

Another paper for which Mary Jane wrote after her arrival in New York was the *Dublin Irishman*, which published a report by 'CLIODHNA', Mary Jane's nome de plume, on a fenian pic-nic in New York. The actual print in the paper states the author as 'CLOIDHNA', which is very likely a spelling mistake. The assumption of Mary Jane's authorship is supported by the following statements introducing the sketch: 'An esteemed correspondent, lately arrived in New York, sends us the following sketch ...' ¹⁷⁴ The report also contains a detailed report of Colonel Roberts's wife, with whom Mary Jane very likely boarded at that time, as well as of the surroundings of Millbank Prison, where Rossa was imprisoned then.

Mary Jane's Poetry in 1870

As Mary Jane did not want to spend the time idly waiting for Rossa's release, she had decided to continue her literary activity in Ireland and write poetry for the paper that she had supported after Rossa's arrest, Pigott's *Irishman*. Most of the poems written by her at that time are retained in a small diary.

The diary itself is a very interesting and important witness of Mary Jane's feelings, thoughts and activities during that time. Apart from numerous poems it contains quotations regarding biblical topics, her attitude and remarks about political events, eg. the Franco-Prussian war and a memorandum in which she looked back at the years from her marriage in 1864 to her return to England in early 1870. It was presumably written between 1869 and early 1871. The fact that none of the poems in the diary appeared in Mary Jane's *Irish Lyrical Poems*, nor refers to a time earlier than 1868 define the preobable beginning of the diary. Mary Jane's lines:

'Tis past! 'Tis Over!

The power is gone

That well nigh destroy me.

Thanks be to God! -' 175

which possibly refer to the announcement of Rossa's release in late 1870, supports the assumption about the date of completion of the diary.

It is very likely that this diary was not the only one that Mary Jane wrote. Rossa stated that in 1865 his wife sewed an important fenian document inside her notebook to hide it from the police in the case of his arrest. ¹⁷⁶ There is, however, no information about the whereabouts of this notebook or any other document of that kind. They may have been destroyed or lost, and even from the maintained diary several pages are missing. The following remarks by

Mary Jane's daughter, Eileen MacGowan, in a letter to the Rossa biographer, Sean O'Luing show how narrowly the diary escaped destruction: 'I haven't yet had the time to copy from the diary and I don't want to send the whole book to you because Mamma in her lonesomeness talked to the book and she didn't hesitate to write in what she thought of some people; if I find I can't copy it I will tear out some pages because eventually the book must be destroyed before it falls into the hands of an unscrupulous person.'

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The following is a choice of the most significant poetry and remarks from the diary giving a deep insight into Mary Jane's outstanding personality and strength of character. Seven of these poems were published in the *Irishman* between 4 June and 9 July 1870. Several of them were dedicated to persons that impressed Mary Jane, like the Marchioness of Queensbury or to whom she had a very close relationship eg. her mother and her son, James Maxwell. In CAROLINE, MARCHIONESS OF QUEENSBURG Mary Jane paid tribute to this active supporter of the Ladies' Committee and close friend of the Rossa family. This friendship seems to have been based on close political views between Rossa and the Marchioness, who obviously favoured the former's Skirmishing policy rather than Parnell's constitutionalism. In the late 1880s she became an interested reader of Rossa's paper, the *United Irishman*.

Mary Jane's mother, although not mentioned in her correspondence nor her diary, was the addressee of two poems, ROSSCARBERRY and MY MOTHER'S GRAVE, both written after her death on 12 May 1870. Margaret Keohane was, like Rossa, a native of Rosscarberry, a fact that seemed to have tightened the bonds between Mary Jane's family and Rossa, as expressed in ROSSCARBERRY:

'And from that fair town by the sea,
 Rosscarberry, Rosscarberry!
Came forth two beings dear to me,
The mother of my infancy,
And from it also forth came he,
My husband, son of Liberty.' 178

The detailed description of James Maxwell in SHALL WE TELL HIM SO MY BOY was meant to remind of the fact that four years previously the prison authorities of Portland had refused to give Rossa a picture of his newly-born son.

As the diary was a mirror of Mary Jane's most intimate thoughts and emotions it is hardly surprising that it expresses a wide range of feelings, from the deepest despair to moments of joy and happiness.

APPROACH OF DEATH, one of the many unpublished poems in the diary, is a quiet farewell to a life that seemed senseless without the beloved:

'Sad is my bosom,
 Loth to look forth
To the incoming Bridegroom
 Like blast of the North.
His cold breath has chilled me
 Has frozen the glow
Of my heart in its summer
 And chilled my veins flow.' 179

Her poem THE COQUETTE - the description of the flirtation of a young girl and her admirer - represents the joy of life. Expressing the desire of a pretty, intelligent, young girl, confident of her own youth and beauty, it might refer to Mary Jane herself.

The depth of Mary Jane's religious belief is another issue that plays a major role in the diary and the poems in it. Apart from poems like A PRAYER OF MANASSES the diary contains several quotes relating to biblical topics.

'Many sheep there are that are not of my fold,
these also shall I bring together
and there shall be one fold and one Shepherd.'

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Taking into account that Mary Jane's poetry also expressed an inseparable unity between her belief in God and her devotion to Ireland this quote might refer to people's attitudes towards Irish freedom and her vision of the conversion of its opponents.

The same unity between religious and political ambitions becomes clear in the following lines of Mary Jane's

A PRAYER FOR IRELAND:

'We pray Thee guide us still, that free of crime
And Heaven-sustained we reach a peaceful time,
Put Thou our enemies to shame and flight,
And lead our nation into Freedom's light.' 181

One topic that frequently featured in Mary Jane's apolitical poetry was Ireland's beauty or Irish sights like the Bells of Shandon to which she dedicated two of her poems in the diary. Mary Jane had included the picture of these famous bells of Cork city in her tour of readings through the U.S.A. and Canada by choosing Father Prout's 'Bells of Shandon' as part of her permanent repertoire. The poem also played a major role in her tour of reading through Ireland and England in 1870.

The diary contains one untitled poem which combines the three major issues of Mary Jane's poetry described above: the beauty of nature and the countryside are embodied in a little bird she caught to let it sing for her alone. Using this picture she expresses her plea for freedom thus:

'Tame he grew content, and happy too
within his prison,
Carolling his grateful notes mid flowers
all day long,
but never to my ear he seemed the same
gay magic minstrel
That charmed me on the maple bough
that morning long gone by.' ¹⁸²

Her personal relationship is expressed in the advice given to her little son, James Maxwell:

'- Son take heed! And moral draw from this
the singer's story.
Else in after years you may have fretful
cause to sigh...' ¹⁸³

The diary is also very interesting from another point of view as it very impressively expresses the importance of moral standars like gratitude, honesty, or feelings like love or friendship for its author. In the retrospect of her life Mary Jane wrote in the diary: 'One of my first writing exercises at school happened to be "there is no more monstrous vice than ingratitude", and the lesson sank deeply into my not naturally ungrateful nature.' ¹⁸⁴ In this respect two of her poems were dedicated to theme of friendship describing her disappointment and sadness about the loss of a friend:

'Perhaps for the best, yet I cannot be still
Nor on my heart shall I press the4 rude will,
After long years one expects the years' friend
At a final "good bye" some warmth to expend.
One hopes with the word some regret be
expressed,
But perhaps it is all for the best.' ¹⁸⁵

Poetry 1871-1915

In chapter 2.5. we referred to Mary Jane's retirement into her private life after her return to New York. Due to her disappearance from the public stage and the fact that much of her poetry of those forty years was written for private occasions and never published. This led people like John O'Leary to the assessment of her literary talent which in the early 1860s gave 'great promise of a future which, I am sorry to say, has never arrived.'¹⁸⁶

Her poetry, as the majority of poems written in those forty years relate to private matters, events that moved her or people who impressed or were close to her.

Among the latter were James Maxwell and Rossa.

Among the poems witten for her son are the following:

TO MAXWELL, A WISH and her birthday poem to Maxwell on his 25th birthday. The first of these poems speaks of the great pain because of his death and her regret that

'He snatched but one leaf of the laurels

I hoped for his brow'¹⁸⁷

All three poems, however, are witness to her pride of her first-born and her special relationship to him.

Two of the poems are dedicated to her husband. In the first, A RETROSPECT - ROSSA, she tells the story of their relationship and characterises him as

'Too loyal to make capital of public honors won,
He chose a thorny path to walk, unaided and alone.
Unspoiled by flattery, unchanged, "head-level",
modest, true,

His heart remained the boy's heart still,

His oldest comrades knew.'¹⁸⁸

OFF TO IRELAND was written on the occasion of Rossa's return to Ireland in 1894 describing the importance of this event to him.

It is difficult to say how much poetry she actually wrote, as presumably many of her poems were written for private purposes and occasions and remained unpublished. Most of her published poems, however, appeared in Rossa's *United Irishman*, some others in Devoy's *Gaelic-American*.

Despite her withdrawal from the political stage some of her poems in the *United Irishman* were dedicated to political issues, eg. one poem on the Boer War.

This poem was written as a response to a letter written from an Irish priest, Father Moloney, to Rossa in December 1899, in which the former hoped for the victory of the Boers against the English. In her verse Mary Jane advises her fellow-Irishmen to learn the lessons and fight for their own freedom.¹⁸⁹ Two other poems, entitled FIGHT FOR IT and HOME, BOYS, HOME voice the same call to arms and to fight for Ireland's independence.

Mary Jane continued to appear as a public reader on very few occasions during this period. Her performances were mainly dedicated to charitable purposes, eg. her readings in support of the family of the Fenian J.J.Geary, who died in an accident. These readings are described in more detail in Rev.M.B.Buckley. *Diary of a Tour in America*, Dublin 1889.¹⁹⁰

It is not Mary Jane's own literary activity that should be taken into account here, but also the help she gave to Rossa to become literary active and to write his memoirs. As described by Rossa himself in his *Recollections* it was his friends who inspired him to write

about his life and advised him to ask for Mary Jane's help in compiling it, and 'as she has been urging me these years past to write that book' ¹⁹¹, Mary Jane was happy to assist him. According to her daughter Eileen MacGowan Mary Jane 'was always trying to get him to write the second part of the book ...' but obviously failed in her endeavour. ¹⁹²

As regards her own reminiscences Mary Jane was urged by friends and relatives to write down her experiences, as they, like her daughter Eileen, believed that her life 'would make a good motion picture.' ¹⁹³

Mary Jane herself was torn between her wish to hand over her knowledge over to the next generation but unfortunately in the end was obviously afraid to offend certain people with her statements, as she described herself on that issue: 'I thought to write my own experiences of these old times, but I am the greatest coward living. All I want is to be let live in the shade and have nobody look cross at me.' ¹⁹⁴

Poetry of the last Months of her Life

Once again her political activity was reflected in her poetry, as she dedicated the poems of the last months of her life almost completely to Ireland's cause. Characteristic of her political poetry of that time is that it is exclusively dedicated to personalities who played a major role in the fight for Ireland's independence, eg. John Mitchel, Constance Markievicz, Patrick Pearse and the Irish Volunteers.

These poems, most of which appeared in the *Gaelic American*, give an idealistic description of the persons concerned and their contribution to the nationalist movement.

The Irish Volunteers represented for Mary Jane the men of Ireland

'Who fight to make her free,
The gallant men, the generous,
Who stand for you and me
And all the scattered race who dream
Her victory to see!'¹⁹⁵

In John Mitchel she saw a symbol of Irish nationalism because he dared to oppose English rule in Ireland as he

' ... raised his dauntless forehead in the air,
The soil beneath his foot, his motto still "I dare".

Not once regretted or forgot the bold impetuous vow,
That sealed his fate in '48 and ruled his impulse
now.'¹⁹⁶

Mary Jane opposed the notion of independent nationalist female organisations and their interference in what was considered men's business, eg. military actions.

Her poem about Constance Markievicz, however, makes no reference to the fact that in her own attitude women had to remain behind the scenes. On the contrary, she praises the Countess for her bravery, reliability and loyalty.

IN MEMORY OF PATRICK PEARSE is a combination of memories she shared with Pearse, of a tribute to his sacrifices for Ireland and reference to his endeavours in the field of education.

One of Mary Jane's few poems of that time concerning private matters, A NEW YEAR'S WISH TO OUR CHRISTMAS BABY, published in Margaret O'Donovan Rossa's reminiscences ¹⁹⁷, was written on the event of her grandchild's birth on 25 December 1916.

Mary Jane's poetry included also one poem in which she deals with the thought of her own death, entitled WHEN I'M GONE. In contrast to her thoughts of death in her APPROACH OF DEATH, this poem is the resume of a long, fulfilled life and the plea, not to forget her when she is gone.

Mary Jane died on 17 August 1916 in her home in Richmond Terrace, New Brighton, Staten Island. She had failed to attend a meeting of the Cumman na mBan at Tuxedo Hall, 59th street and Madison Avenue, Manhattan, on August 15th, to which she had been invited. Her daughter Eileen, who was a member of the organisation and attended the same meeting phoned her mother only to learn that Mary Jane was unwell due to a minor stomach complaint, and that it was nothing serious. Two days later, on the morning of August 17th, her son Jeremiah found her dead in her bed. 'It was a shock and a surprise' ¹⁹⁸, as John Devoy described it. She was survived by five of her daughters, Sheela MacIntyre, Eileen MacGowan, Daisy Cole, Isabel and Jane O'Donovan Rossa, and her son Jeremiah. Mary Jane was buried in St. Peter's Cemetery, Staten Island, New York, in a grave together with her son James Maxwell.

Her gravestone, which contains inscriptions for her, Rossa and James Maxwell, can be seen as a symbol of modesty and selflessness that were characteristic of Mary

Jane's life. The stone is situated near the path and approaching it, the visitor faces the inscription for Rossa. Going around the stone to the left James Maxwell's inscription follows and only if the visitor goes around the stone to the back will Mary Jane's inscription be found - not visible at first sight, and even in death leaving the limelight to the men.

4.4. Mary Jane's Legacy

Mary Jane was well aware of the importance women played in the nationalist cause and had 'a great respect for women's work in general' ¹⁹⁹, as she wrote to Devoy in autumn 1915. This also becomes apparent in the tribute she paid in her poetry to women like Maud Gonne or Constance Markievicz, or her visit to Ann Devlin's grave while in Ireland for Rossa's funeral. ²⁰⁰

In general, however, and Mary Jane's life itself is the best proof of it, she expected women to do their duties under male leadership, to be loyal, unconditional and reliable supporters of their menfolk's cause, and thus in principle followed the official fenian attitude on women's role in the nationalist movement.

Her attitude in this respect becomes, however, most obvious in the above mentioned letter to John Devoy, and needs no further explanation: 'While women's societies can be a great auxiliary help to the plans of men, I don't believe in giving unlimited licence or permitting them a chance to go into competition with men in men's work. I believe in votes for women, of course. Every woman does these days, and I have always done so, for every individual woman, no matter how silly or perverse, can think to the point where her affections or interests are concerned. But I am old-fashioned enough still to cling to the notion that men are the lords of creation and women at their best when kindly cooperating in all that reason and conscience approve, and under guidance with modesty, not self-asserting. Maybe you don't want to hear my ideas about women's societies - I approve of them for as much good as they do for women and particularly for as much

help as they can give men in patriotic matters. But they must be absolutely under obedience to the authorised men and take willing guidance from them if they profess to be patriotic societies. If they are social or church or charity societies, they are sufficiently competent to manage their own concerns independently of men. But patriotic - I would give the men a *despotism* over them and ban who ever murmured.' ²⁰¹

Mary Jane became known as a symbol of loyalty and a living example that without the strong support of women it would have been impossible for the men to succeed in their nationalist aims.

The public recognition of that importance at the end of the century was the result of tremendous efforts by generations of women to contribute their share to the cause of Irish independence, Mary Jane being but one of them. She led a life of much self-denial and sacrifices as is aptly summarized in Eileen MacGowan's statement 'that Mamma was as great a heroine and made as many sacrifices for the cause as Papa did as a man.' ²⁰² and that Rossa 'could not have devoted his life to the Irish Cause if she hadn't been willing to make the necessary sacrifices to enable him to follow his wishes; she aided and encouraged him at every step. She believed in him and was proud of him, and she was willing to remain in the background despite all her charm, beauty and talent.' ²⁰³

It was not only the work behind the scenes that had earned her public recognition. By her activities at times when she had to fill the gap for Rossa's absence she proved that women were capable of performing nationalist duties beyond the limits set to them by society.

Her arguments, eg. in her work as Secretary of the Ladies' Committee, her claim for the Fenian Belmont money and her

controversy with Rossa about the role of sacrifices show that she was not merely an appendix to Rossa's work, but had ideas and principles of her own which not only kept her family together but gave Rossa the strength and support he needed.

Her criticism, in a more developed form added to by the understanding that women needed their own platform to express themselves, as well as the confidence to be capable of political leadership, can be found in later generations of nationalist women.

Unfortunately Mary Jane would not have taken this step. Exposed to the limelight when Rossa was unable to attend to his nationalist business, she severely felt the restrictions of her sex if she dared to contradict the male attitude. Torn between her aspirations and convictions and the fear of being ostracized she did not take the step of separation, but of adjustment, possibly because of her fear of harming the cause by not conforming.

As seen in the previous chapter she did not approve of female leadership in opposition to men's, which she believed would split the nationalist movement and was therefore a danger to its success.

For that reason it would be wrong to describe Mary Jane as a defender of women's rights or an advocate of their emancipation. As described, she was loyal to her husband as a matter of principle even when he was wrong, and although at times criticising him severely she would never have deserted him.

For her family, of course, Mary Jane had a vital function - it was she who gave her children a home, comfort and security in an uncertain time and compensated for Rossa's absences and sacrifices. She found the balance for him to follow his nationalist aspirations and nevertheless

support his big family. The love and appreciation her children felt for her are described in a poem dedicated to her by her son-in-law John MacIntyre:

Unspoken

To Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa

The grave now enfolds you; we'll see nevermore
The light of your face and the smiles that it wore -
Now closed are your eyes, bright as fire, black as
coal,

And stilled are the lips of your eloquent soul.
How much would we say, could you hear us again -
My daughters' Grandmother of three-score-and-ten!
How your radiant influence upon all you shed! -
But I've waited to say this until you are dead!

How much like a mother have you been to me!
Your kindness as tender as Love seemed to be -
How fondly I cherish the words said by you,
Expressed with an elegance equalled by few -
How often some compliment I thought to pay
To the woman whose youth lived until her last day,
For long from my heart loving thoughts to you sped -
But I've waited to say this until you are dead!

You lie in the ground, but your soul will live long,
And your memory cheer like the charm of a song.
In the fairest of spots in all fair Staten Isle
They laid you, and still on your face beamed its
smile.

As fair as a girl and as lovely were you
And your heart was as pure and as good as 'twas
true -

Ah, long like a son could I kiss your dear head,
But I've waited to say this until you are dead! ²⁰⁴

chapter 5: The Role of Women in the Fenian Movement

The male Fenian organisations in Ireland and America found tremendous support from women. In Ireland there were two main categories of women's activities: the first included all those women who worked on a separate and occasional basis. The second one included the Ladies' Committee which was the unofficial female branch of the Fenian movement in Ireland.

There is little evidence about women's activities for the movement in the first years of its existence (1858 to 1863) as they were more or less unknown to those major sources that later reported about them (eg. police and newspaper reports).

Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa is an example of the third category of women who worked on both an organised and individual basis.

The following chapter gives an analysis of these different ways of women's contribution to the nationalist cause.

5.1. Fenian Sisters in Action

Because of their sex women were much less suspect and thus were ideally suited to fulfilling the secret tasks of Fenian business. The dilemma police had to face sometimes in searching and arresting them is demonstrated in statements by Wodehouse to Sir Thomas Larcom. Regarding a possible arrest and search of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa and Ellen O'Leary which he considered 'a doubtful measure'²⁰⁵ he advised the police to be 'very careful that they are subjected to no annoyance beyond what is absolutely inseparable from their arrest ... and beg that if anything is done polite policemen may be employed and every respect

paid to their sex. ... It is very ticklish work to meddle with women.' ²⁰⁶

Their work became increasingly important especially after the beginning of the government initiative against Fenianism in September 1865 and the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in February 1866 as described in the following statement by John Devoy:

'Connections were soon partially restored, however, by a small band of devoted women, mostly the wives and sisters of the leading male members, and they were efficiently aided by the women friends of the men throughout the country.' ²⁰⁷

Official fenian propaganda stresses the fact that women's participation was based on the support of male family members and the nationalist education of their children, friends and relatives. Rossa in his *Recollections* emphasizes the work of 'many girls who refused to continue acquaintance of courtship with young men who would not join the society.' ²⁰⁸

Despite the restrictions imposed on them the tasks women fulfilled for the I.R.B. were much wider and included the smuggling and hiding of propaganda material, money and weapons as well as giving refuge to wanted or escaped Fenians. Reference to this kind of work is given in numerous police reports.

Cases of smuggling and hiding of weapons by women became increasingly important in the year and the months before the rising of 1867, and many women were arrested when their activities were discovered. The following extract from a letter of a Fenian informer to the British Consul in Philadelphia, Charles Kortright, has to be seen in the context of the importance of the connection of the

IRB with the Fenian Brotherhood in America which supplied them with funds and weapons. He wrote in October 1865 that 'several thousand women have gone home bearing on their persons parts of rifles or revolvers ... Within the past few weeks four bullet moulding machines have been manufactured in this city, and are now on their way to Ireland in parts, taken there by women.' ²⁰⁹

Although the numbers might be exaggerated the report is presumably based on fact. Similar incidents were reported up to 1878, long after the abortive rising. In May 1878 the reports state that Mrs. Carroll of Dublin, who dealt in American beef, was involved in the illegal import of rifles and ammunition which were frequently packed in the casks and containers containing the meat shipped to Ireland. ²¹⁰

The most famous example of women giving refuge to escaped Fenians is that of the Fenian Head Centre, James Stephens, who after his escape from Richmond Bridewell in November 1865 found a hiding place with Mrs. Butler until he could leave for France in March 1866. Mrs. Butler was a dressmaker who worked for loyalist circles and was therefore above suspicion of cooperating with the Fenians. She was also one of the best examples to show that women were prepared to suffer for their nationalism: Mrs. Butler's customers deserted her, her business broke down after the news of her sheltering Stephens leaked out and she died in poverty. ²¹¹

The threat of financial ruin was not the only danger that women faced when their activities were discovered.

Reports of the Dublin Metropolitan Police between 1865 and 1868 refer to several cases where women had been arrested for Fenian activities. Examples of arrests are numerous: a Margaret Slattery of Ballyvreena and a Mary Sullivan were taken into custody in July 1868 for smuggling nationalist newspapers from America into

Ireland, ²¹² *The Cork Examiner* of 17 October 1865 reported under the headline ARREST OF A FEMALE FENIAN that an unnamed young woman was arrested in Mallow on 13 October 'on suspicion of having some knowledge of the movement. On her box being searched there was found a military belt, and some sheet lead.' ²¹³

Although in the majority of instances these women were released after a relatively short time, in others, due to prolonged arrest irreparable damage was caused to the prisoner's health, as eg. in the case of Adelaide McDonald who was released in November 1868, 'her sentence having been commuted to twelve months imprisonment ... through her health becoming shattered.' ²¹⁴

Regarding their social background the fenian women, due to their relations to male Fenians, came from the same social strata: many of them helped in their husband's small businesses, but the vast majority belonged to working class families, as the following quote in Luby's article 'The Women of Ireland' in the *Dublin Irish People* demonstrates: 'The women who have been educated in convents are often well fitted to render good service to their country. Slavishness does not appear to be taught in convents, as it seemingly is in religious establishments for the education of men. ... But, after all, the truest Irish womanhood is to be found - as well as the truest Irish manhood - in the homes of labour.' ²¹⁵

The support of the movement by female school teachers was an intriguing factor at that time. On 23 July 1867 the *Limerick Reporter* reported about an investigation into the actions of a Miss Anne Manahan and a Miss Margaret Gilhooly by the National Board of Education. These teachers had sworn false testimony to protect Fenians, who had taken part in the rising at Kilkee. ²¹⁶

The following statement by Devoy impressively summarizes the role of these independently working women for the movement: 'In Ireland there was no regular organization of Fenian women, but a large number of them worked as well as if they had been organized. They took no pledge, but were trusted by the men, were the keepers of important secrets, travelled from point to point bearing important messages, and were the chief agents in keeping the organization alive in Ireland from the time that Stephens left for America early in 1866 until the Rising of March 5, 1867. And not one woman betrayed a secret, proved false to the trust reposed in her, or by carelessness or indiscretion was responsible for any injury to the cause. It was a fine record for Irish womanhood.' ²¹⁷

These women, however, were not just carrying out orders, but were also very critical of certain aspects of fenian policy, eg. Irishmen's participation in the American Civil War. The most ardent critics were Ellen Eliza Callanan and Ellen O'Leary. In a letter to the editor of the *Dublin Irish People* the former wrote: 'I feel pained when I see Irishmen so recklessly sacrificed in a cause which can be of no interest to them ... I should think they have no right to bestow the thought and energy which they have drawn from Ireland in a cause which is not Ireland's.' ²¹⁸

Ellen O'Leary expressed her criticism in the following lines of her poem A LAMENT in which she described the despair of a mother at the death her son in the American Civil War:

'What right had they to 'list my boy -
A widow's only son -
Small comfort to my breaking heart
To know the Northerns won.

Oh, was it for poor Ireland,
That this young blood was shed,
Like the brave men of '98
'tis high I'd hold my head. ²¹⁹

5.2. Fenian Women's Organisations in America and Ireland The Fenian Sisterhood

The Fenian Sisterhood in America was considered by leading fenians like Devoy 'the first organization of women on a large scale for political purposes in the history of the world.' ²²⁰ It was, however, not the first organisation of this kind as, according to Nancy Curtin's research at the times of the United Irishmen in Ireland women 'participated in oath-bound societies of United Irishwomen, a kind of female auxiliary which attended to fund raising and providing amenities for imprisoned United Irishmen and their families. ... gathering information and carrying secret messages within the vast network of United Irish societies. ... were certainly required to take the United Irish oath of secrecy, forbidding the swearer to reveal the secrets of the organisation and the identity of its members.' had an organisation to raise funds for revolutionary purposes. ²²¹

Due to the different situation in America, where the Fenian Brotherhood could operate freely and without restrictions, the women's activities in the Fenian Sisterhood were confined mainly to the organisation of social events and fund raising. The Sisterhood is much less known than its counterpart in Ireland, the Ladies' Committee. Occasionally their letters and appeals appeared in newspapers, but inquiries in

archives and libraries in towns where its branches were active, failed to reveal any records of its existence. This is all the more surprising as, although the Sisterhood was far less independent than the Ladies' Committee, its contribution to the cause was far from negligible.

Due to its dependence on the Fenian Brotherhood the Sisterhood did not, however, find much recognition up to the present days. In fact, the only authorities that seem to have taken the Sisterhood's work seriously were English officials and diplomats in America, who in their reports frequently warned about the tremendous financial support the women gave to the Fenians.

The only comprehensive account of the Sisterhood can be found in the reminiscences of its Head Mistress, Ellen O'Mahony, published in the *Sunday News* in early 1867, and reprinted in the *Irishman* at about the same time.

The few contemporary sources which refer to the Fenian Sisterhood, eg. Mary Ann Clawson's Nineteen-Century Women's Auxiliaries and Fraternal Orders (in: *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1986, vol.12, no.1, pp.40-60) and Hasia R.Diner's Erin's Daughters in America support the opinion that the Sisterhood was neither very important nor popular in the United States. They clearly refer to its dependence and subordination to its male counterpart, but in my opinion underestimate its great financial support for the movement. The Sisterhood's main function was to collect money by the organisation of picnics, balls, fairs etc. and through this became the main supplier of money for the implementation of Fenian plans. Among the subscribers of funds the poor Irish servant girls in America seemed to have been of special importance. According to Devoy 'the Irish servant girls contributed a fairly good portion of the Fenian funds, as they did of every other Irish fund, but their contribution

to their families in Ireland to enable them to pay the rackrents imposed by the Anglo-Irish landlords, were many times greater than what they gave to fenianism.' ²²²

The Sisterhood had an established structure, a Constitution and By-Laws. The following of its articles, however, demonstrate the complete subordination of this body to the Brotherhood:

'§ 8 The Head Directress shall be appointed by the chief officer of the F.B.

§ 11 The Treasurer is elected by the branch. She will receive all initiation fees and dues, pay all bills approved by the branch, and remit the balance on hand to the H.C.F.B. upon the 25th day of each month.' ²²³

The members of the Sisterhood had to take a pledge of honour to be admitted to the movement, which corresponded with the oath taken by men for their admission to the Brotherhood.

The organisation came into existence in early 1864 under the influence of the Brotherhood and it was they that sealed its fate. When the Fenian Brotherhood split in late 1865 over strategy questions it was not long before the same rift appeared within the Sisterhood.

The Head Mistress of the Fenian Sisterhood in America, Ellen O'Mahony, a school teacher from Quincey, Illinois, seems to have been a very self-confident determined young woman. As can be seen from her reminiscences she highly appreciated the work done by Letitia Luby and Mary Jane whom she characterized as 'the active, indefatigable, and invincible wife of O'Donovan Rossa'. ²²⁴

On the other hand she was very critical about several personalities in the America fenian movement, eg. Colonel Roberts or J.P.Meehan, and developments within the

Brotherhood, eg. the desertion of the fundraising cause to sponsor the Campobello expedition.

However, her critical remarks in official statements never went beyond the limits of what was allowed, and she never condemned the absolute dependence of the Sisterhood on its male counterpart.

Because of the dependence of the Sisterhood on the Fenian Brotherhood it was not surprising that because women almost exclusively supported the attitudes of their male relatives the split could not be avoided.

Later sporadic efforts were made to revive a type of Sisterhood for the purpose of fund collections, but did not seem to have been successful or lasting.

The Ladies' Committee

The foundation of the Ladies' Committee in October 1865 gave women's support for the movement a new quality. Its leading members were Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (Secretary October 1865-May 1867), Letitia Luby (Treasurer), Isabella Roantree, Catherine Mulcahy (Secretary since May 1867), and Ellen and Mary O'Leary.

The work of these ladies is documented in numerous sources, the great majority being primary sources. The only detailed and valuable account in secondary literature in connection with its cooperation with the amnesty movement is given in Maurice Johnson's M.A.thesis *The Fenian Amnesty Movement 1868-79*. Maynooth 1980. During the raid of the Irish People office on 15 September 1865 the police seized important papers, manuscripts and letters, which sufficed to send the Fenians involved to

prison for many years, but ironically, these documents were saved for posterity in the files of the State Paper Office. Other sources that report on the Committee's work are articles in Irish American and Irish newspapers eg. the *Irish American*, the *New York Irish People* or *The Irishman*. The latter, having become the mouthpiece of Fenian business after the suppression of the *Irish People*, published brief statements about the Committee's weekly income by subscriptions, often also naming the donors. This account of the ladies' work gives a very good insight into the background of the subscribers.

References to the Ladies' Committee were also given in the reminiscences of some leading Fenians like Denieffe's *A Personal Narrative of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* and John Devoy. *Recollections*. The latter is one of a few detailed accounts on the Ladies' Committee's work stating that 'the Ladies' Committee which collected funds to provide counsel for the prisoners on trial, fed those who were sick and did other work of a benevolent character. ... The committee's meeting rooms were rented from a Mrs Shaw, both of whose daughters, Maria and Kate, were ardent workers for the cause, although they had no Fenian relatives.'²²⁵

The most comprehensive and factual summary of the history and work of the Ladies' Committee was given in the following police report of 22 October 1869. It stated 'that the fund ... is not new as such a fund was established immediately after the first Fenian prisoners were dealt with by the Government and has continued without intermission up to the present time. As circumstances altered from time to time it was found necessary to adopt measures to collect for the fund, suitable to the occasions, and also to vest the powers of collecting and disposing of such funds in the hands of persons best capable of carrying out the views of the

contributors under the different circumstances. Raffles, bazaars, concerts and excursions were resorted to. Regular collecting cards were also placed in the hands of collectors who went about among their friends and took sums as small as a penny. Subscriptions were also solicited thru those newspapers published in Great Britain and Ireland, professing to constitute what they are pleased to call the "National Press", especially The Irishman in Dublin, and the Universal News in London. The collecting of money first commenced in Ireland, and subsequently extended to Great Britain, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The funds raised were dispensed by the Ladies' Committee thru the offices of the newspapers alluded to, and more recently the Amnesty Association. ... In the course of last summer there was very little money being raised in Ireland ... and at the present time more money is being raised than there was at that period.'²²⁶ Although this statement needs no further explanation the following comments are intended to give a deeper insight into the tendencies of the ladies' work.

It is unknown exactly how many women were actually involved in the work of the Ladies' Committee, as only the names of the leading organisers or female relatives of leading Fenians got a mention in appeals or personal reminiscences.

As mentioned shortly after the first trials had started the ladies decided to organise help for the families of those arrested, who, in most cases deprived of their breadwinner, had to suffer severely. The committee they founded was, unlike the American female fenian organisation, a rather loosely organized body and its members were not required to take any kind of oath. The committee was headed by the Secretary and financial matters lay in the hands of the Treasurer.

In October 1865 the ladies published their first address, entitled 'An Appeal to the Women of Ireland' in which they 'ask no men to subscribe, but we ask the Women of Ireland of every creed and and station, to come forward and prove they have women's hearts in their bosoms full of pity for the helpless.'²²⁷ It was their intention to organise a wide-spread net of committees, and indeed, in the months following the appeal committees were formed in many Irish and English towns. Although the appeal found great response among the Irish, the contributions were very small, as the contributors almost exclusively belonged to the poorer classes. The funds raised (£ 530 10s 5d until the beginning of 1866)²²⁸ were too little to meet the needs of the increasing number of families concerned. In Ireland the Committee addressed the women of Ireland again, stating that many have responded liberally and cheerfully to the call we made upon them. The poor have come with

open hands and loving hearts to give a little of their little all. We have the widow's mite and the whole week's earnings of poor working girls. Some, too, have been untiring in their exertions, but for the most part the rich, the well-to-do have stood aloof.'²²⁹ The reserved reaction of the richer classes can be explained by the class structure of the movement itself. Throughout its existence, however, the committee had to combat the lack of finances in a permanently growing demand for support.

In Mary Jane's critical address 'To the Subscribers of the Relief Fund for the State Prisoners' Families' in the *Irishman* of 26 January 1867 the ladies gave the public an insight into their distribution scheme of the funds: 'To the family of a tradesman or mechanic - to the wife or mother, 5s per week; eldest child, 2s 6d; every succeeding child, 1s6d per week. To those in a higher position in society a proportionally higher rate of relief.'²³⁰

In chapter 1.2. we referred to the tension between the Committee and the American subscribers because of their poor financial support. The main subscriptions were sent from Australia and New Zealand, always amounting to several thousand pounds at a time.

Due to several appeals between October 1865 and 1872, when the Committee finally ended its work, the ladies' efforts had raised and distributed about £ 10,000 to the prisoners and their dependents by the organisation of bazaars, fairs, etc.

It is very difficult to establish exactly the role of the Ladies' Committee, as the majority of statements and newspaper reports point to the humanitarian task only. Although the ladies themselves always emphasized their charitable goal of helping the weak and innocent wives and children of the prisoners, there can be no doubt that their sympathies lay with the Fenians themselves and their political aims.

In police reports it was suspected that the Ladies Committee was merely a front organisation for the collection of money for revolutionary purposes and that women like Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa or Ellen O'Leary acted as "paymistresses" ²³¹ for the movement, smuggling funds from France and America to Ireland.

Remarks by Devoy that 'while the women were not organized for purely Fenian purposes, there was a central organization for a subsidiary object which accomplished that end' ²³² and Mary Jane that they 'received orders from Headquarters and obeyed them.' ²³³ indicate that police suspicion was not completely without a foundation. The police suspicion resulted in the constant surveillance of Committee members, their harassment and attempts to boycott their work. *The Nation* reported on 3 February 1866

about the prohibition by the Commissioners of the Dublin Metropolitan Police of a fun fair and concert organised on the 31 January : 'And whereas the said Commissioners have received information that such meetings are designed and intended for the purpose of assembling a number of persons engaged in treasonable practices, and that such meetings, if permitted, are likely to endanger the public peace.' ²³⁴

While obviously working without much control or interference from the Fenian movement in the first two years of its existence, the Ladies' Committee later came increasingly under the influence of the Amnesty Movement and the Fenians. Part of the ladies' tasks was the provision of food and clothes to prisoners. They became deeply involved in the controversy about the prisoners' ill-treatment by requesting an investigation into prisoners' health by Dr Lyons, who, as Fellow of the Irish College of Physicians, and of the Physicians in Maynooth, was a highly respected authority in sanitary matters. His report which was published in *The Irishman*, 5 March 1870, ²³⁵ points to severe neglect of the prisoners diet, living conditions and health.

The authority of the Amnesty Movement in affairs concerning the Ladies' Committee is, however, indicated by an incident in September 1869 when the ladies had to account to the Honorary Secretary of the Amnesty Association, John Nolan, for their rejection of several persons' claims to the fund. ²³⁶

There is proof of severe dissent among the ladies which, however, did not influence the course of their work. We already referred to the differences between Mary Jane and the committee. Further disagreement is indicated by the resignation of Isabella Roantree from the committee, due to her refusal to 'work with the wife of a man who showed the white feather.' ²³⁷

Having fulfilled their goal with the amnesty, the ladies' final task before the disbanding of the committee in 1872 was to pay for the journeys home and clothing of the released Fenians.

Looking back, the *Irishman* was to write in estimation of the Committee's work: 'Terrorism prevailed, and whilst every man with a heart in his breast in Ireland desired to see prompt relief extended to the children of the confessors of patriotism, none came to take the responsibility of the post of danger of the distribution of funds which might be obtained for such a holy purpose. It was then that women came forward to show that if men had heroism in Ireland their countrywomen had the courage which, where the interests of those who attested their love for Ireland were involved, dreaded no danger and even braved it.' ²³⁸

Apart from its support for the imprisoned Fenians and their families the great publicity that the Committee gave to the Movement has to be mentioned. By their activities and appeals the ladies invoked sympathy for the prisoners' plight. It thus laid fertile ground for the work of the Amnesty Movement which resulted in the amnesty of 1871/72.

As becomes obvious from the above statements women played a more or less auxiliary role to both male Fenian organisations and in general they accepted it. But in some cases, when they felt that their work was undermined by the Fenian leaders, they strongly criticised them (see: Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa's criticism of Stephens's misapprehension of funds collected in America.)

Despite their dependence on the male organisations the work of nationalist women had a great influence on later women's movements like the Ladies' Land League of the 1870's and even the suffrage movement, although at first sight there seems to be no direct link between them.

In the 1850s the national fight was the only field where women could achieve recognition and appreciation for their strenuous efforts and tireless work, and if not publicly their contribution was appreciated in private accounts by Fenians.

It was their successful work that gave them the self-confidence which became the most important precondition for later women's movements. Their work in organisations like the Ladies' Committee gave them the courage and the experience for independent actions of later generations of women.

And the national fight was the field where they collectively felt the restrictions their sex set them. It was the only opportunity which allowed them, at least temporarily, to break those limitations without being treated as outcasts.

The tradition of fundraising for political purposes and imprisoned nationalists was continued up into the 20th century. In his *Recollections* Devoy stated that 'the London Ladies' Subcommittee (Mrs Alice Stopford Green, chairwoman) has collected £ 500; the Ladies' Com[mittee] here nearly the same amount. It has been officially decided that all the monies collected by the Ladies' Vol[unteer] Committees will be returned over the Provisional (Men's) Committee with the expressed stipulation that this will only be used for the purchase of arms.' ²³⁹ In the early 1920s nationalist women supported imprisoned co-workers by the collection of funds and fight for improved conditions of their imprisonment through the Prisoners' Defence Association.

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List of Abbreviations

DMP	Dublin Metropolitan Police
HD	Head Directress
HCFB	Head Centre of the Fenian Brotherhood
NA	National Archives, Bishop street, Dublin
NLI	National Library of Ireland, Kildare street, Dublin

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