

## **The Diaries of Rosamond Jacob (1888-1960)**

### **Rosamond Jacob – Who was she?**

Rosamond Jacob (1888 – 1960) was of Quaker origin, born in Waterford. Her parents, Henrietta and Louis Jacob, had become agnostic (and perceived as atheist) and nationalist, which caused them to be regarded by some of their extended family as, in Rosamond's words, 'impious disreputable relations'.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Rosamond led a relatively solitary childhood, and throughout her life her diaries, on various occasions, record her loneliness.

She was a writer and a political activist all her life, being involved in the Gaelic League, Sinn Féin, the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), Cumann na mBan, the Irishwomen's International League (IIL), the Irish Women Citizen's and Local Government Association (IWCLGA), the Friends of the Soviet Union, the Women's Social and Progressive League, the Republican movement and, in the last years of her life, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Rosamond Jacob's political involvements, her commitment to women's rights, her intolerance of organised religion and of cruelty to animals as well as her interest in history and in nature, is reflected in her writings. They also reflect and record the turbulent events of the times she lived through – the division in Irish society and in families, caused first by the events of 1916 and subsequently by the Civil War – and the efforts of the women to try and resolve conflict without further bloodshed. They throw light on an almost forgotten generation of Irish women who made significant contributions to the formation of the independent Irish state and who, in the following decades, campaigned for the liberal principles that had promised so much in the early years of the new state.

Rosamond wrote all her life and struggled to make a living from her writings. Her principal publications were *Callaghan*, published in 1920; *The rise of the United Irishmen* (1937), written during the 1920s; *The troubled house*, published in 1938 but written in the early 1920s and set during the War of Independence; *The rebels wife*, written originally as a biography and finished

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob diary, 28 April 1905 (NLI MS 32,582 (8) [11]).

by 1950 but published as a historical novel in 1957; and *The raven's glen*, written in 1945 and published just before Jacob's death in October 1960. Jacob herself had to make financial contributions towards the cost of publishing *Callaghan*, *The troubled house* and *The raven's glen*.

The manuscripts, correspondence and drafts of these, together with notebooks and material of some of her writings which have never been published are amongst the Rosamond Jacob papers held in the National Library of Ireland.<sup>2</sup> Amongst these papers are her diaries. Rosamond Jacob kept a diary almost all of her life, and there are 171 of these diaries (NLI Jacob diaries MS 32,582/1-171) amongst her literary and political papers. They form a significant part of the collection. The first 170 diaries are in a chronological sequence and are a record from 1897, when she was a schoolgirl in Waterford, until just before her death in October 1960. The last diary (NLI MS 32,582 (171)) is a private diary from July 1915 to August 1930 and is a record of Rosamond Jacob's private hopes, dreams and experiences with regard to some of the men in her life – especially her sister-in-law's brother, Tony Farrington, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington's son Owen, and the republican Frank Ryan with whom she did have a physical relationship.

### **The diaries**

Diaries of their nature are very personal records and Rosamond Jacob's is no exception. The notebooks she used record family events, the books she has read, her friendships (and falling outs) and her literary and artistic endeavors. They chronicle a busy life.

Although principally based in her hometown of Waterford until her mother's death in 1919 (as was the usual role of an unmarried daughter) these diaries are a witness-statement to major events in Irish history. The early diaries record her daily life in Waterford, her nationalism and advocacy of women's rights attendance at Irish language classes and participation, with her brother in Waterford's Sinn Fein club. These are interspersed with domestic concerns, her first attempts at writing, concerns over money and her charitable activities on behalf of Friend's Relief in Waterford.

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<sup>2</sup> National Library of Ireland, *Collection list No. 30: papers of Rosamond Jacob (MSS 33,107-33,146; 32, 582)* (Accession No. 4726) (Dublin, [s.d.]).

Her Quaker connections gave her an entrée to Dublin's artistic and literary life on her regular visits to the city –and her description of plays, art exhibitions and visits to artists and their homes are detailed, succinct and not always kind. This practice of giving detailed descriptions of plays attended, films seen and art exhibitions visited (and her opinions of them) continued throughout her life and make the diaries a rich resource for Irish theatrical and art history for the first sixty years of the twentieth century.

Her involvement in both nationalist and suffrage movements made her acquainted with the leading figures in both of these movements. Whilst Rosamond lived in Waterford the Jacob family offered hospitality to visitors who were a veritable *Who's Who* of Irish nationalist life of the period – Liam Mellows, Bulmer Hobson, Helena Moloney, Madeleine French-Mullen, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (and Owen), Mrs and Margaret Pearse, de Valera and Griffith and Kathleen Lynn. Rosamond was also kept au fait with current events in Dublin though her constantly expanding circle of acquaintances and friends. When she visited Dublin in the decade from 1910 to 1920, she stayed at different times with Countess Markievicz, the French-Mullens, the Pearses and, increasingly frequently, with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and her son Owen. It was with the Sheehy-Skeffingtons that she first lodged after she made her permanent move to Dublin. From 1920 she was mainly resident in Dublin, staying first with Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and later sharing a flat with Dorothy Macardle. She never owned a home of her own but shared apartments with a number of acquaintances during the 1920s and 1930s and in her later years, from 1949 until her death, she shared her friend and colleague, Lucy Kingston's home in Rathmines.

The Dublin to which Rosamond Jacob moved in 1920 was a city in political turmoil and she became an active participant as well as a witness to national events – all of them clearly described and commented on. She was a representative at Sinn Fein conventions, was in Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington's house when it was raided by the British army in 1920<sup>3</sup>, was involved on republican opposition to the Treaty; witnessed the shelling of the Four Courts and was a member of the group of women (led by Maud Gonne MacBride) who attempted to broker some sort of peace between republican and Irish Free State factions in Dublin on 1 July 1922<sup>4</sup>. She was

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<sup>3</sup> Jacob diary, 24 Oct. 1920 (NLI MS 32,582 (37)).

<sup>4</sup> Jacob diary, 1 July 1922 (NLI MS 32,582 (41)).

imprisoned for a short period in Mountjoy in 1923 (where she shared a cell with Dorothy Macardle), attended the Sinn Féin Ard Fheis in March 1926 and actively involved in republican socialism after she met Frank Ryan in 1926.

As well as her day to day activities, the diaries contain detailed descriptions of political events, of meetings of the various committees of which she was a member. Her trips to Vienna (1921) and Prague (1929) as one of the Irish delegates to the WILPF conferences are well –documented as is her participation in the organisation of the 1926 WILPF conference in Dublin and there are at least two versions of her report on her visit to Russia in 1931 as an Irish representative of the Friends of the Soviet Union – although she reserved her more candid descriptions of her visit for her friend Hanna.<sup>5</sup>

The diaries are rich with word pictures of the people she met – not all of them kind. There are comments on the publishers with whom she had dealings, reports of the business and occasional internal frictions of the various committees with which she was involved, descriptions of her travels in Ireland and abroad, insights into the personal relationships of many of her friends and acquaintances, and records of the various literary endeavors from the Women Writers Club to *An Phoblacht*, with which she was involved.

However, Rosamond Jacob's diaries are more than just a chronicle of events. Even when, after 1920, when she was permanently resident in Dublin, her diaries about the events she was directly involved in are written as though she was as one remove and are not, as so many personal diaries, are, as a personal apologia – and this is one of their strengths. She admits to a curiosity, was a natural observer, a clear reporter and an accomplished writer.

## **Conclusion**

Rosamond Jacob's life time saw the establishment of the independent Irish state, adult suffrage and she was part of a generation that cut its political teeth in the heady days of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland. She lived through two World Wars and was an active campaigner against the nuclear threat of the Cold War.

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<sup>5</sup>Rosamond Jacob to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, 27 May 1931 (Sheehy-Skeffington papers (Additional) NLI MS 41,177/27).

Her diaries can be mined for specific and diverse research interests – political, social, cultural, historical and literary. However it is of critical importance to maintain the integrity of the diaries as a complete and very human and personal record of the woman whose life they document.

Rosamond Jacob died, after a traffic accident, on 11 Oct. 1960. After some dispute as to where she should be buried, her friend Lucy Kingston offered to accommodate her in the Kingston family plot in Temple Hill in Blackrock and it was here, on her 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday, that Rosamond Jacob was buried.

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