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Origins

THE STUDIO IS CLUTTERED WITH BRUSHES AND EASELS, oils and watercolors. Her own paintings and the work of her friends hang haphazardly on the walls alongside prints torn from folios and tacked-up tapestries. In the corner, a low iron stove heats a kettle. Copper, iron, and enamel pots hang from a shelf that runs along the back. Constance Gore-Booth slouches, smoking: her elbow on the table, the ash of her cigarette hanging precariously over a neglected cup of coffee. The surface is littered with dirty cups and bits of paper. A single candle stuffed into the neck of a wine bottle serves as a centerpiece. Opposite, in high-collared, austere taffeta with leg-of-lamb sleeves, the artist Althea Gyles tilts her chin upward, looking defiantly at the photographer. Constance, wearing a spattered smock thrown carelessly over a shirt, unbuttoned and showing the soft indentation at her clavicle, looks away. A hint of a smile plays across her face. She has made it to London, the place she regarded as “the centre of the Universe!”¹

Frustrated by a life in “isolation” in County Sligo on the west coast of Ireland, where she met “no people with ideas beyond our own happy little circle,” Constance Gore-Booth longed to leave her family’s estate, Lissadell, to study at the Slade School of Art. In 1892, at twenty-four years of age, she was anxious to “cut the family tie” and make a life of her own, and she believed that art was the “opening” she needed.² She had been born to a sense of adventure; her father, Sir Henry, was an Arctic explorer who was constantly setting sail from Sligo to regions unknown. Both Henry and Constance’s mother, Georgina, encouraged their children’s interests, giving Constance

¹ Constance de Markievicz, “Memories—Mr Arthur Griffith: The Sinn Féin Organisation,” *Eire* (Aug. 18, 1923).

² Diary of Countess Markievicz (1892), National Museum of Ireland (NMI), HE.EW892.

free rein to pursue her passion and skill in horsemanship and even allowing her to ride with the men in the local hunts. Josslyn, just a year younger than Constance, was sent to school at Eton and treated to expensive private tutors in London before he joined the Royal Munster Fusiliers and settled briefly in Canada, later returning to assume his duties as heir.³ Eva, two years younger than Constance and also a strong rider, accompanied her father on his travels to the West Indies and the United States and was supplied with endless books on English and German literature, poetry, philosophy, and history. Mabel, born in 1874, and their youngest sibling, Mordaunt, born in 1878, were equally indulged. Riding and painting helped to channel Constance's seemingly boundless energy, but boredom bred mischief. Not long before she left for London, she masterminded the theft of a neighbor's cow and calf and took inordinate delight in hearing the family "call 'Sucky Sucky' on the Sligo road til midnight!"⁴ Many anecdotes would circulate after her death about Constance's kindness to the Gore-Booth family's tenants, but her transgression of the boundary between the Big House and the peasant cottage was mostly a matter of fun and would give rise to "enduring jokes about pigs in Irish parlours."⁵

Impatient with the pace of life, Constance was, on the whole, insensitive to her extraordinary privilege. Constance and Eva were sent with their governess on tour to the Continent, where they rowed on the Rhine, heard Wagner at Beyreuth, and studied painting and sculpture in Italy. As a family, the Gore-Booths attended the London season each year, staying at their pied-à-terre, 7 Buckingham Gate, where Constance had been born. In Sligo, Georgina arranged for the best tuition in drawing and painting, with lessons from the Irish painter Sarah Purser, who had recently returned from the Académie Julian in Paris, and from the Swedish artist Anna Nordgren. Georgina commissioned Purser to paint Constance and Eva, then aged twelve and ten, and Purser observed an aptitude and precocity in the elder sister and urged Georgina to cultivate her talent. None of this care and generosity was evident to Constance, who complained in her adolescent diary of her insufferable and "parsimonious family."⁶

The "whirl of excitement" of family theatricals provided some relief from the constraints of daily life, and Constance relished the attention lavished on her at dances at home and in London.⁷ Beside a newspaper clipping that

³ James, *The Gore-Booths of Lissadell*.

⁴ Diary, April 16, 1892, NMI.

⁵ Morrow, *Picnic in a Foreign Land*, 297.

⁶ Diary, n.d. [May?] 1892, NMI.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1892.

praised her “fine style” during the Sligo Harriers’ latest hunt, she pasted in her diary a gossipy article about a party given by Lady Jane Lindsay, where “Prince George accompanied his brother, and they both showed considerable discrimination in giving their early dances to Miss Gore-Booth, whose beauty was universally admired.”⁸ This was the future king against whom she would later demand insurrection. For the present, she thought simply: “What Vulgar People the Royalties must be—This is the conclusion I come to after going to the Victorian Exhibition—NO taste in anything & every family event birth & marriage being celebrated by an awful Daub by an incompetent painter.”⁹

Seven years after Constance was presented at court during Queen Victoria’s golden jubilee, she had yet to meet her match. At first she had longed for a lover—“even a married one”—but now she simply longed for freedom. She had been afraid of disappointment—“So many people begin with great promise, greater hope, & end in nothing but failure & the poor house or improper”—but she finally mustered the courage to make a break and convinced her “arrogant narrow conventional unreasonable mother & soft mild milk & water father” to send her to the Slade.¹⁰

London was a study in perspective. Constance had been born there and had spent months socializing under close scrutiny, but she could now negotiate the city on her own terms. She lived lavishly at Sloane Terrace on Sloan Square and had no qualms about offering a five-shilling reward should she happen to mislay her sketchbook—compensation that was equal to more than twenty pounds in today’s money.¹¹ Despite her privileged existence, she began to notice the poor and working-class people living around her: catching in hasty lines the figure of a street hawker beside his cart and a young girl selling flowers; stopping to draw a portrait of a man, face shaded by a flat-cap, sitting on the steps of a grand terrace house, holding a baby wrapped in swaddling. The urban environment awakened her to the extreme economic disparity that had been masked by the Gore-Booths’ patronage of their tenants in Sligo. Constance was drawn toward the bourgeois, non-Marxist socialism that was fashionable among London’s artists, and she attended a lecture by Beatrice Webb on “Trades Unionism & Socialism” at the Essex Hall.¹²

⁸ “County Sligo Harriers,” *Sligo Independent*, Mar. 31, and untitled clipping, “The Oaks dance,” Diary, NMI.

⁹ Diary, Feb. 9, 1892, NMI.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, n.d.

¹¹ Sketchbook, Lissadell Papers, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), D4131/K/11.

¹² Details noted in *ibid.*

Webb's theories about the organization of labor in London were in part inspired by cooperation, an economic model of which Constance was aware owing to its popularity in Ireland. In 1894 the Eton- and Oxford-educated Sir Horace Plunkett, third son of Lord Dunsany, founded the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society. The IAOS, or the cooperative movement as it was widely known, sought to increase the profits of small farmers by eliminating middlemen and enabling producers to sell their goods directly. Constance's father, Henry, and her brother, Josslyn, established the Drumcliff Creamery Cooperative Agricultural and Dairy Society in 1895; Georgina laid the foundation stone, and Constance and Eva dressed as dairymaids to pose for promotional photographs.¹³ The local newspaper, the *Sligo Champion*, praised the family for its enthusiasm and exertions "to elevate and improve the condition of the Industrial Classes."¹⁴ The Gore-Booths' support for the cooperative movement was an extension of Anglo-Irish patronage, the sense that it was the responsibility of landlords to educate and improve the lives of their tenants. In London Constance was curious about social reform and the lives of others, but she maintained an aristocratic distance.

Constance aspired to her tutor Alphonse Legros's motto, *summa ars est celare artem*: the highest art conceals the means by which it is achieved. She experimented with portraiture, drawing sketch after sketch of Legros with various permutations of his impressive moustache. In one daring drawing, he reclines across the page dressed in an undershirt and a splendid pair of striped bathing trunks.¹⁵ She was most adept at drawing faces, sensitive to the emotion in a glance, the character of a nose. And, of course, she drew the horses that had been her lifeblood at Lissadell. Her faithful hunter Max bucks and gallops through her sketchbooks, rebellious at being left behind.

One of her closest friends in London was Althea Gyles, "a strange, red-haired girl," whom W. B. Yeats would later depict in his autobiographies as emaciated and neurotic.¹⁶ Gyles was a fellow Irishwoman from a wealthy Waterford family, who had met Yeats through the Theosophical Society in Dublin. She was also a poet, and in one of Constance's sketchbooks, she scribbled a verse that anticipates in its meter and diction the short poem "Sympathy" for which Yeats would later write an introduction.¹⁷ It may have

¹³ Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sketchbook, PRONI, D4131/K/11.

¹⁶ W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 9: *Early Articles and Reviews*, ed. Frayne and Marchaterre, 423–24.

¹⁷ The poem reads, "Of all the names that he and I / On earth have called each other by / None have been best & none been worst / None sweeter [illegible] than last nor first / But only one

been through Gyles that Constance Gore-Booth first met Yeats. He visited her in June 1893, not long after she arrived at the Slade, while she was staying with friends at 35 Bryanston Square West.¹⁸ They continued to see each other throughout the summer of 1894, and that July he inscribed a copy of his new symbolic drama, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, to her.¹⁹ Set “in the County of Sligo, and at a remote time,” Yeats’s play imagines a young countrywoman who neglects the expectations of her mother and the demands of the parish priest in favor of “a vague, mysterious world” where the wind laughs and the white waves dance. Yeats’s imagery combines Irish folklore with occultist themes, which resonate heavily with the ideas of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn into which he had been initiated in 1890.

Like Yeats, Althea Gyles had begun her experiments in mysticism with the Theosophical Society, but she had also moved on to the Golden Dawn, which was concerned with magical practice. Gyles collaborated with Yeats on his early volumes of poetry, drawing magically symbolist designs for *The Secret Rose* (1897), *Poems* (1899), and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899).²⁰ Yeats encouraged Constance to join the Golden Dawn, and he persuaded a reluctant Moina Mathers—the wife of Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, who founded the Order—to tell their fortunes. Yeats wrote to Constance:

She at first refused absolutely on the ground that she had ceased to tell them at all except when she was certain that her doing so would do good, but after a moments thought said that if either you or Miss Gyles thought you were at a great crisis of any kind & would promise to consider carefully any advice she gave, she would devine on the matter. She would however only tell the fortune of the one whose affairs were at this crisis. If there fore you write to me that one of you feels it *of great importance* I will write & tell Mrs Mathers and she will arrange a meeting before she returns to Paris within the week. She is, despite her youth a very advanced Kabalist & always busy & very little of the world so you must grant to her these exacting conditions.²¹

The results of the audience—if it ever came about—were entirely secret.

name—Love.” Sketchbook, PRONI, 4131/K/11. For Yeats’s introduction, see *Collected Works*, 9:423–24.

¹⁸ W. B. Yeats to Constance Gore-Booth [June 21, 1893], in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1: 1865–1895, ed. Kelly and Domville, 357.

¹⁹ W. B. Yeats to Augusta Gregory (June 9, 1902), in *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 3: 1901–1904, ed. Kelly and Schuchard, 198.

²⁰ Fletcher, “Poet and Designer.”

²¹ W. B. Yeats to Constance Gore-Booth (June 28 [1894]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:393.

Yeats visited the Gore-Booths in Sligo at Christmas 1894, ostensibly as part of his project to collect folklore. He bragged to his sister Lily that despite the vogue for the subject among the gentry, “Folk lore was a new experience to them. They had not thought it existed.” Constance’s childhood sketchbooks bear out Yeats’s supposition. She drew pictures of castles and ruins, but they sit in a generic rather than a discernibly Irish landscape and are indistinguishable from her drawings of scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and the *Odyssey*, and the supernatural figures that she drew were mermaids, not fairies.²² Despite the foreignness of the topic, the Gore-Booths were hospitable to the young Yeats and humored his obsessions. They took him to see their tenants, one of whom “poured out quantities of tales,” much to Yeats’s delight. On leaving Lissadell, he made sure “They have now got all my books—including a large paper copy of ‘The Countess Kathleen.’”²³ He described the Gore-Booths as a “very pleasant, kindly, inflammable family. Ever ready to take up new ideas & new things.” While Constance’s father, Henry, thought “of nothing but the north pole,” her brother Josslyn’s politics had made a strong impression: “‘theoretically’ a homeruler & practically some kind of humanitarian, much troubled by the responsibility of his wealth & almost painfully conscious. . . . He is not however particularly clever & has not, I imagine, much will.” Yeats was in terrific awe of Constance’s grandmother, a Tory who was obsessed with horses, “an invalede” and “mostly invisible” but nonetheless ruling with “an iron claw.”

The Gore-Booth matriarch’s ghostly presence disguised from Yeats the fact that her husband, Robert, had also dabbled in spiritualism. Robert had held regular séances at Buckingham Gate in London that were led by the talented and tubercular medium Daniel Douglas Home, whose followers also included Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Mark Twain, Leo Tolstoy, and the Empress Eugenie.²⁴ Home was famous for his spontaneously playing accordion, which would strike up a tune as the lights began to flicker.²⁵ According to an officer in the local branch of the Royal Irish Constabulary, Samuel Waters, who participated in the séances at Lissadell, for Robert Gore-Booth these were not party tricks but serious psychic experiences. Waters remembered sitting around a table in the dark, the group’s fingers touching to make a circle; the table moved, strange taps could be heard, but the replies from

²² PRONI, D4131/K/11.

²³ W. B. Yeats to Susan Mary Yeats (Dec. 16 [1894]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:418.

²⁴ Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 18.

²⁵ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 10–16. Home’s mediumship is enigmatic, since unlike other mediums he was willing to proceed under less than complete darkness.

the spirits were often “ridiculous, and some absolutely false.”²⁶ When Robert’s cousin was murdered during the 1868 election, Robert held séances in an attempt to identify the perpetrator, but of all the names spelled out by the spirits, none were of people who were present at the scene of the crime. This disappointment may have stymied the occultist enthusiasms of Robert’s generation at Lissadell, but Constance’s parents, Henry and Georgina, were both attracted to the positivistic mysticism that was popular at the end of the century.

Georgina Gore-Booth was a close friend of Frederic Myers, the founder of the Society for Psychical Research. Myers and his colleagues studied spiritual phenomena in an attempt to explain it scientifically and thereby—they hoped—rescue the immaterial world from the overbearing influence of Darwinism. For Henry and Georgina and some of the Gore-Booth siblings, the spirit world replicated the social hierarchies of this world. When a young Mordaunt saw the figure of the hall-boy John Blaney—who had died at his own home that morning—in Lissadell’s kitchens, Myers suggested that “something” of or from Blaney had “reverted to well-known haunts,” and perhaps “the dead boy waited to manifest until his young master reached a suitable spot.”²⁷

Constance’s and Eva’s spiritualism was of a different order. In the 1880s and 1890s socialism and occultism worked as elective affinities; spiritualist utopianism was entwined with a social utopianism in which societal change could be imagined outside of a Marxist economic paradigm. These ideas were typical of the literati who shifted between William Morris’s house in Hammersmith and Madame Blavatsky’s rooms in Holland Park.²⁸ Over the course of their lives, the politics of Yeats, Eva, and Constance would sharply diverge: Yeats would turn to Fascism, Constance to Bolshevism, while Eva’s gaze would stay fixed on the dream of poets and utopians. Yet in the 1880s

²⁶ “Memoirs of S.A.W. Waters,” PRONI, D4131/D/2 (1).

²⁷ Myers, “On Indications of Continued Terrene Knowledge.”

²⁸ Beaumont, “Socialism and Occultism at the *Fin de Siècle*.” Blavatsky, a Russian Ukrainian aristocrat, had been denounced as a charlatan by the Society for Psychical Research in 1885 and set up a theosophist circle soon afterward. Theosophists did not believe in miracles or magic but in the power of the individual soul, which they believed could transcend one’s self and reach communion with the great “oversoul,” the repository of divine wisdom. The theosophists’ prohibition on magic is what caused Yeats to turn to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which encouraged magical practice. The Golden Dawn had a Masonic structure; at the first level, apprentices studied the Kabbala, as mentioned in Yeats’s letter to Constance about Moira Mathers. The second level, to which Yeats aspired, was the Ruby Rose and the Cross of Gold. This level involved the practice of magic in the form of tarot divination and even astral travel. The third level was occupied by the Secret Chiefs, who gave instruction from the other world; see Raine, *Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn*; and Harper, *Yeats’s Golden Dawn*.

they were still very much of the same mind. When Yeats visited Lissadell again in 1895, the weather was freezing, so they arranged a skating party and “made coffey on the shore.”²⁹ Perhaps it was on one of those evenings that, sitting around the fire, he attempted to divine their futures.

Eva’s horoscope showed Taurus in the fifth house, confirming her artistic nature.³⁰ Saturn dominated the first, suggesting that work was central to her identity, and that her concern with responsibility meant that she frequently put others’ needs ahead of her own. Uranus in the eighth house also suggested that she was a psychic sensitive. All these characteristics would be borne out through her relentless campaigning for suffrage and working-class women, her devotion to writing esoteric verse, and her telepathic communications with Constance during long years of separation. In drastic contrast to her sister, Constance’s ego was ruled by the energy and aggression of Mars. Virgo in the eighth house indicated a compulsive nature, a constrained sexual life—and even susceptibility to abdominal disease. Just as striking is the presence of Uranus in her seventh house, the House of Partnership, which relates to cooperation of the self and society. There, Yeats found sudden upheaval, even revolution.

Yeats’s friendship with Constance and Eva was potentially a courtship, although toward which of the sisters his fondness most gravitated is ambiguous, and he was master at the art of “flattering the confidante while inhibiting the development of a full love-affair.”³¹ His attempt to draw Constance into the Golden Dawn is particularly telling, since it was through the society that he cavorted with his other romantic interests, Althea Gyles, Florence Farr, and Maud Gonne. In 1895 Yeats wrote to his sister, Lily, about Eva’s “delicate gazelle-like beauty [that] reflected a mind . . . subtle and distinguished,” and the image of the gazelle recurred in his poem “In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz” (1927).³² In his draft *Autobiography*, published posthumously as *Memoirs*, he wrote that Eva was “for a couple of happy weeks my close friend, and I told her of my unhappiness in love; indeed so close at once that I nearly said to her, as William Blake said to Catherine Boucher, ‘You pity me, there I love you.’ ‘But no,’ I thought, ‘this house would never accept so penniless a suitor,’ and besides I was still in love with that other.”³³

Yeats was wholly devoted to “that other,” Maud Gonne; yet as Gonne was cast as his Helen, Constance was almost his Diana. He wrote of how Con-

²⁹ W. B. Yeats to Susan Mary Yeats (Mar. 3, [1895]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:447.

³⁰ The three horoscopes are held in the Lissadell Papers, PRONI.

³¹ Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, 1:144.

³² W. B. Yeats to Susan Mary Yeats (March 3, [1895]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:447.

³³ W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, 78.

stance “all through my later boyhood had been romantic to me,” how thinking of her he had recalled more than once “Milton’s lines: Bosomed deep in tufted trees, / Where perhaps some beauty lies, / The cynosure of neighbouring eyes,” and how she “surprised me now at our first meeting by some small physical resemblance to Maud Gonno, though so much shorter and smaller, and by a very exact resemblance in voice.”³⁴ In the April following their skating party, he wrote to her: “I hear you were rather bruised at the hunt the other day. I hope the rumour is wholly untrue. Sligo is always full of rumours & the slightest one about its wild huntswoman naturally & properly echoes from mountain to mountain.”³⁵

What emerged between Yeats and the Gore-Booth sisters was a relationship of mutual patronage. Eva sought in Yeats a literary mentor, while Constance was most interested in his celebrity. She asked him to collect autographs for her, and he obliged with the signatures of his fellow poets Richard le Gallienne, W. E. Henley, and Aubrey de Vere; Helen Patterson Allingham (painter and wife of the poet William Allingham); novelist Katherine Tynan Hinkson; as well as leading figures in the Irish Revival, John O’Leary, Standish O’Grady, Douglas Hyde (who signed in Gaelic script), and George Russell, whose prestige would later establish Constance and Casimir in Dublin’s artistic elite.³⁶ Yeats used his network to connect Eva to “literary people,” since she showed ability but needed discipline, “a proper respect for craftsmanship,” which he thought “she must get in England.”³⁷ These roles would shift, when in 1899 Constance became an important guarantor of the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats’s new project with Lady Augusta Gregory and her neighbor, the playwright Edward Martyn.³⁸

In 1896 Eva fell ill with a respiratory illness and was sent to Bordighera, Italy, to convalesce. There she met the British suffrage campaigner Esther Roper, who became her lifelong partner. Roper worked for local organizations in her native Manchester as well as on a national level in England, and she inspired Eva to initiate a branch of the Irish Women’s Suffrage and Local Government Association when Eva returned to Ireland later in the year.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid. Donoghue notes Yeats’s incorrect substitution of “deep” for Milton’s “high” in the lines from “L’Allegro.”

³⁵ W. B. Yeats to Constance Gore-Booth (April 8 [1895]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:461–62.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ W. B. Yeats to Olivia Shakespear (April 12 [1895]), in *Collected Letters*, 1:463.

³⁸ W. B. Yeats to Editor of the *Irish People* (October 29, 1899), in *Collected Letters*, 2:458.

³⁹ For the circumstances of their meeting and for Roper’s role in the Special Appeals Committee and as the secretary of the North of England Society for Women’s Suffrage, see Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 28–44. The Irish Women’s Suffrage and Local Government Association was founded by the Quaker reformers Anna and Thomas Haslam in 1876; Quinlan, *Genteel Revolutionaries*.

Constance was ready for such an opportunity. In addition to public acts of rebellion—smoking conspicuously, leaving her family to study at the Slade—she expressed private frustrations about the relegation of women to a separate sphere. In her adolescent diary, she declared, “I have no God, nothing to worship & I feel the want, women are made to adore & sacrifice themselves.” She demanded that she also deserved “something to live for, something to die for.”⁴⁰ As she matured, this longing for a lover, “even a married one,” was redirected into an ambition to change the social order.

Public reforms and private relationships inspired the Gore-Booth sisters’ suffrage work. In addition to Esther’s influence, their mother, Georgina, was a quietly sustaining influence. When Constance was very young, Georgina established a school of needlework for the women on the Lissadell estate. She taught crochet, embroidery, and darning and arranged for the women to sell their work, which provided them with an independent income.⁴¹ In 1896 British and Irish suffragists believed that the United Kingdom was on the cusp of radical change. The Local Government Act of 1894 increased wealthy women’s power in the public sphere, permitting those who met specific property qualifications to serve as Poor Law guardians. In Ireland the Dublin Women’s Suffrage Association proclaimed that the act was a landmark in the women’s movement: “There is nothing which has happened in our time that has imparted so powerful a stimulus . . . to our fellow countrywomen.”⁴² Provoked by Esther’s work, Constance and Eva seized on this sense of promise.

Constance and Eva insisted that they were not going to settle for a mere extension of the vote but demand a complete parliamentary franchise. They organized a local committee of what would be just the third branch of the Irishwomen’s Suffrage and Local Government Association in the country. On Christmas Eve, 1896, Constance was elected president; Eva, honorable secretary. Mabel served on the committee composed of local men and women. Despite support from both sexes, when the Gore-Booth sisters held an open meeting two days later, the building was “packed to the doors,” mostly with men who had turned out in opposition.⁴³

The sisters had prepared to meet their opponents with the full force of a rich and subversive discourse. Eva called on “Irishwomen to follow the example of the farmers at Drumcliff, and to insist . . . on taking their affairs

⁴⁰ Diary, Mar. 20, 1892, NML.

⁴¹ Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 11.

⁴² Quoted in Owens, *Social History of Women in Ireland*, 13.

⁴³ “Women’s Suffrage Movement,” *Sligo Champion*, Dec. 26, 1896.

into their own hands.”⁴⁴ Her allusion had several possible interpretations, depending on the sympathies of the listener. Sligo farmers had recently asserted their independence through cooperation, but Sligo had also been central to the land agitation for which Constance and Eva had declared their support, riding to a meeting at Boyle where they stated unequivocally that “they were on the side of the people and against privilege.”⁴⁵ Land agitation and women’s suffrage were closely related because of the activities of the Ladies’ Land League of 1881–82, when Irishwomen took control of the mass movement to liberate tenant farmers from the oppressive rents imposed by landlords.⁴⁶ Michael Davitt, the Land League’s founder, held a meeting on the Gore-Booths’ property in the autumn of 1879, when over eight thousand people assembled to hear his warnings of “impending famine and dire misfortune.”⁴⁷ Davitt encouraged tenants to put their own family’s needs first before giving anything to the landlord, and then only “give him what you can spare.” Immediately after the meeting, Davitt was arrested on the charge of sedition and imprisoned in Sligo Jail, where he was subjected to a sensationalized trial before his release. The imprisonment of the leaders threatened to put an end to agitation, but Davitt encouraged prominent women, including Anna Parnell, the sister of Charles Stewart Parnell, to continue their work. The Ladies’ Land League was dissolved after just one year, but it had a monumental legacy in women’s exercise of political agency in the public sphere. While late Victorian Irish novelists, such as Emily Lawless, imaginatively conjoined the woman question and the land question, the Ladies’ Land League was an actual political benchmark—not just for feminism but also for the partnership of feminism and nationalism. Most women in the Ladies’ Land League were not suffragists since suffrage enjoyed a close relationship to a pro-imperialist, and even racist, position; nonetheless, the women in the league set a feminist precedent.⁴⁸ Later Constance would work in another women’s organization, Cumann na mBan, alongside Jennie Wyse Power, when similar debates over the relationship of suffrage, the British Empire, and the Irish nation arose.

The Gore-Booths had a difficult history as landlords. Constance’s grandfather, Robert, had left the management of Lissadell to an agent while he undertook his education at Westminster School and Queens College,

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ James, *Gore-Booths*, 203–4.

⁴⁶ Ward, “The Ladies’ Land League, 1881–82,” in *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 4–39; and Mulligan, “‘By a Thousand Ingenious Feminine Devices.’”

⁴⁷ “Mr Parnell in Sligo,” *Nation* (Nov. 29, 1879), quoted in Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 14.

⁴⁸ Ward, “Gendering the Union.” For a similar relationship between the Ladies’ Land League and the Ladies’ Committee for the Patriotic Children’s Treat, see Pařeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 35–37.

Cambridge. His absenteeism led to a great deal of suffering; the Royal Commission for Inquiring into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland reported in 1836, “Nothing could exceed the miserable appearance of the tenantry, living, for the most part, in wretched small cabins, clustered together without deserving the name villages” and subsisting on an illicit trade in whisky.⁴⁹ Robert’s improvements to the estate were also misguided. He consolidated small farms in order to clear large tracts, which displaced many tenants; in his munificence, he offered to send them to North America. During the famine of the 1840s, Robert redressed some measure of wrong by setting up a mill for grinding corn to distribute to the poor and by using his investments in England to concentrate his finances in the Sligo economy.⁵⁰ On the whole, Robert managed Lissadell in an attitude of fear. During the election of 1868—the year that his cousin, Captain King, was murdered and the year that Constance was born—Robert put the house in a “state of defence”: sandbagging the windows, mounting guns on the roof, cutting down trees around the house, and sending out mounted patrols from the household servants and male family members to cooperate with the police.⁵¹ Henry’s attitude was not exactly antithetical to his father’s. He spent months away from Lissadell on his Arctic excursions, “drawn by some magnetic power towards the north,” but he responded positively to the land agitations.⁵² Henry reduced rents on his estate to the most recent valuation and lowered them below their market value when tenants were suffering from particularly difficult conditions. In this way Henry and Georgina’s philanthropic attitude toward their tenants laid the foundations for Constance and Eva’s social activism.

Amid the Christmas evergreen that decorated the meeting hall, the Gore-Booth sisters hung banners proclaiming revolutionary slogans that illustrate a nexus of ideas at play among Irish nationalism, feminism, and abolitionism. One banner brandished Lord Byron’s line, “Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow,” words that Frederick Douglass adopted in his abolitionist essays and speeches in which he addressed the emancipation of Irish Catholics in conjunction with the emancipation of black slaves.⁵³ There was even a hint of republicanism. The battle cry of the American Revolution—“No taxation without representation”—was proclaimed alongside the demand for “liberality, justice, equality.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Quoted in Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 3.

⁵⁰ Thomas Kilgallon, “Memories,” PRONI, D4131/D/2 (1); and Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth*, 7.

⁵¹ Kilgallon, “Memories.”

⁵² Yeats, *Collected Letters*, 1:418–19n4.

⁵³ Douglass, “Men of Color, to Arms!”

⁵⁴ “Women’s Suffrage Movement,” *Sligo Champion*, Dec. 26, 1896.

Constance proved to be a natural public speaker, addressing the crowd with remarkable confidence. She announced that she intended to dispel the “wild gossip” that was circulating about suffrage: “that it will cause women to ape the other sex, to adopt their clothes, copy their manners and peculiarities, that it will cause women to neglect their homes and duties, and worst of all, prevent the majority marrying. (oh.) Of course this may be true; ‘Pigs might fly,’ as the old prophecy says, ‘but they are not likely birds’ (laughter).”⁵⁵ For Constance, twenty-eight years old and unmarried, with horsemanship that exceeded the abilities of most men in County Sligo, to claim that suffrage was not a threat to masculinity may have seemed tenuous. She nonetheless carried her audience through politically deft turns of argument. She claimed that Ireland—“our country”—had been at the forefront of the fight for liberty but was now “so far behind England” in the struggle to emancipate such a large portion of its population. She asked, rhetorically, “if women are so incompetent,” why had there never been an outcry against “our woman Queen?” Such a blatant appeal to reason was grounded in her reading of John Stuart Mill, whose “The Subjection of Women” (1869) she quoted to her audience. (There is a connection to the land question here, too. Mill’s stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, was a radical suffragist and served as president of the Ladies’ Land League of Great Britain and attended demonstrations in Ireland.⁵⁶) Constance reminded her listeners that it had been a generation—thirty years—since Mill and Disraeli supported suffrage in the British Parliament. She complemented reason with feeling, concluding with emotive religious rhetoric that would characterize her propaganda throughout her life: “Many of our ablest teachers are gone, they saw the Promised Land from the mountain top, then died like Moses in the wilderness, having had their glimpse of the land of Canaan, dim and faint in the distance.”

In these early days of political activity, it was easy to put campaigning aside for family and fun. The short winter days were spent on hunting and shooting parties, and amateur theatricals and concerts filled the evenings. The year culminated in the annual ball, which kept Lissadell alit until five o’clock on Christmas morning. The family’s gruff but beloved butler, Kilgallon, described the festivities: sideboards crowded with a boar’s head sporting an orange in its mouth, “game pies, boned turkeys, roast turkeys, ham, round spiced beef,” washed down with an “unthinkable” quantity of booze: “whiskey and wine. Port and Madeira, champagne of the best vintage.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ward, “Imperial Feminism,” 82. Taylor advocated land nationalization in Britain.

⁵⁷ Kilgallon, “Memories.”

The holiday spirit lapsed into an austere January, when Constance spoke about suffrage to the Sligo branch of the Women's Temperance Union. In the little schoolroom attached to the Congregational Church, she professed her full support of abstention, as a "woman who realized her position in the world." After a round of applause replete with waving handkerchiefs, the teetotalers elected Constance Gore-Booth the president of the North Sligo Women's Suffrage Association.⁵⁸ Constance proved that she was willing to do what was necessary politically, but she privately mocked asceticism. With her course at the Slade finished, she could not countenance a permanent return to Irish country life. Eva moved to Manchester, and Constance embarked for Paris to try once again for a life dedicated to art.

⁵⁸ "Miss Gore-Booth on Women's Suffrage," *Sligo Independent*, Jan. 30, 1897.