

MÁIRE COMERFORD PAPERS

LA18



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archives@ucd.ie

www.ucd.ie/archives

T + 353 1 716 7555

F + 353 1 716 1146

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CONTENTS

CONTEXT

Biographical History	iv
Archival History	v

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

Scope and Content	vi
System of Arrangement	vii

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND USE

Access	viii
Language	viii
Finding Aid	viii

DESCRIPTION CONTROL

Archivist's Note	viii
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CONTEXT

Biographical history

Máire Comerford was born in Rathdrum, County Wicklow in 1893 where she lived and was educated until going to London to study to become a secretary. It was there that she first became interested in the Irish independence movement in two diverse ways, firstly by having a unionist as a teacher at the secretarial college and secondly, by attending a performance by the Abbey Theatre Company.

On returning to Ireland, Máire witnessed the 1916 Rising in Dublin before joining her local Sinn Féin branch in Gorey. She then moved to Dublin to work for Alice Stopford-Green while continuing her roles in Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan during the War of Independence. During the Civil War, Máire took a more active role, working in the White Cross and being present in the Four Courts during its siege. She was jailed numerous times, one of the more notable spells of imprisonment being for her role in the attempted kidnap in 1923 of W.T. Cosgrave, the President of the Executive Council. She travelled to America in 1924 on behalf of Sinn Féin to raise funds for the republican cause.

In 1935 Máire was appointed a journalist for the Irish Press newspaper, for whom she worked until her retirement in 1965. Her only published work is entitled *The First Dáil* and concerns the establishment and workings of the first Dáil Éireann. Even after she had retired, Máire stayed committed to the principles of Sinn Féin and the republican cause to the point that she was arrested on a Sinn Féin platform in Dublin at the age of eighty-one. She also continued to campaign for better conditions for political prisoners at Portlaoise Prison and Long Kesh, during the H-Block hunger strikes of 1980-81.

In her own words: 'I was never a cog in the official government machine, nor a candidate to be a cog. The most I can claim is that I tried to be a small drop of oil helping to make things work' (LA18/17).

Máire Comerford died in December 1982.

Archival history

The papers of Máire Comerford (1893-1982) were deposited in the Archives Department, University College Dublin in two stages, firstly by Comerford herself in February 1974 and then by Dr John McColgan in March 1981.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

Scope and Content

This collection mainly consists of a draft of the unpublished memoirs of Máire Comerford. They are divided into numerous chapters beginning in her early childhood and finishing with the end of the Civil War. In this narrative, she details her experiences of the foundation of the Irish State, gives her opinions on the actions of the main players involved and tells of her meetings with many of the major figures of the time. Other material relates to historical research.

Comerford was in correspondence with Diarmuid Brennan and later his sister, who was his heir, regarding a manuscript Brennan was researching and writing about the death of Michael Collins. There is also a file on research relating to Anna Parnell which contains a copy of an article that Comerford wrote for the *Irish Press* on the founder of the Ladies' Land League and another on general research issues including prison conditions.

System of arrangement

1 MEMOIRS	1
2 HISTORICAL RESEARCH	
2.1 Death of Michael Collins	13
2.2 Anna Parnell	13
2.3 General	14

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND USE

Access

Available by appointment to holders of a UCDA reader's ticket. Produced for consultation in microform.

Language

English.

Finding Aid

Descriptive catalogue.

DESCRIPTION CONTROL

Archivist's Note

This descriptive catalogue was prepared by Joanna Long in 2002. The catalogue was reformatted and made ISAD(G) compliant by Sarah Poutch in January 2016.

1. MEMOIRS

LA18/1 [1956]

1 item

Draft introduction to a book entitled *The Dangerous Ground*

Written by Máire Comerford, it states that the book concerns the War of Independence and the Civil War based on Máire's own recollections of the time. "My narrative has gone on paper hot from memory", she begins. She opens with an analysis of the social and political scene of the time and how she came to be involved in this period of Irish history and finishes by analysing the reasons behind the support for the leaders of the 1916 Rising.

LA18/2 [1956]

1 item

Draft introduction to a book entitled *The Dangerous Ground*

Copy of LA18/1.

LA18/3 [1956]

1 item

"Parnell"

Chapter 1 of the *Máire Comerford Memoirs*, in which she recounts childhood memories of walks to Avondale, Parnell's residence in Wicklow. She recollects stories about the Parnell family that she heard, along with other childhood memories including that of her grandfather who was in command of RIC troops during Orange riots in Belfast in 1867.

LA18/4 [1956]

1 item

"School"

Chapter 2: Comerford discusses her childhood memories of attending boarding school and various lessons she attended while there. Includes details of a trip to London during holidays where she attended a debate on Home Rule held in the House of Commons.

- LA18/5** [1956]
1 item
“London”
Chapter 3: Comerford’s account of her visit to London which included a trip to see the Abbey Theatre Company perform a production of *Kathleen Ní Houlihan* by WB Yeats. She relates her experiences while residing in London of being a member in a Ladies’ Club and attending a secretarial course run by a fervent Unionist.
- LA18/6** [1956]
1 item
“Home”
Chapter 4: Comerford describes various members of her household in county Wexford where she returned and found a position as honorary assistant secretary to the United Irishwomen (later the Irish Countrywomen’s Association). She describes the various people involved, the attitude locally to politics, daily life for her and her family, and the outbreak of the First World War.
- LA18/7** [1956]
1 item
“Rising”
Chapter 5: Comerford relates her experience of Easter Monday 1916 as she walked around the centre of Dublin, and her return on the following days to find out the latest developments.
- LA18/8** [1956]
1 item
“Wexford”
Chapter 6: Máire relates her return to Wexford, the reaction of the local people to the Easter Rising, the Rising in Enniscorthy, and the subsequent actions of the Crown and republican forces.
- LA18/9** [1956]

1 item

“Conscription”

Chapter 7: Comerford talks of the founding of Sinn Féin in Courtown, and relates various republican activities including the arrival of a gun boat and how she was left to organise branches of Cumann na mBan around Wexford.

LA18/10 [1956]

1 item

“Sisters”

Chapter 8: Comerford relates the tensions that existed between family members, both her own and others, as different sides were taken in the years immediately after 1916.

LA18/11 [1956]

1 item

“Easter ‘17”

Chapter 9: the first anniversary commemorations of the Easter Rising held in Dublin, the return home of the final Easter Week prisoners, and Comerford’s first meeting with Countess Markievicz.

LA18/12 [1956]

1 item

“Women”

This chapter is entitled “Women” in which Comerford discusses various influential women of the time including Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington; and talks about the early days of Sinn Féin with quotes from their literature.

LA18/13 [1956]

1 item

“Ashe”

Chapter 10: Comerford recollects her first meeting with Thomas Ashe and Terence MacSwiney, and her attendance at Ashe’s funeral

- LA18/14** [1956]
1 item
“Election”
Chapter 11: covers the elections held in 1918 and the local canvassing witnessed by Comerford.
- LA18/15** [1956]
1 item
“Dáil Éireann”
Chapter 12: Comerford relates her experience of attending the first session of the Dáil and political activities of the time, including the escape of Eamon de Valera from prison and the establishment of government institutions.
- LA18/16** [1956]
1 item
“Green”
Chapter 16: Comerford recounts her first meeting with Alice Stopford Green and how she gained employment with her. As part of her new position, Máire attended Eoin MacNeill’s lectures at University College Dublin and took notes for Stopford Green, and also undertook some library research. She tells of her experiences at various venerable institutions, such as the National Library and the Royal Irish Academy
- LA18/17** [1956]
1 item
Untitled
Chapter 17 is untitled and identified as a continuation of the previous chapter. Comerford continues her tale of living with Stopford Green at St Stephen’s Green between 1919 and 1921, and of the acquaintances she made and stories she heard of the activities in that area during those years. She writes that she ‘was never a cog in the official government machine, nor a candidate to be a cog. The most I can claim is that I tried to be a small drop of oil helping to make things work’ (p12a).
- LA18/18** [1956]

1 item

“Raided”

Chapter 18: Comerford describes a raid, during which she had to hide ammunition given to her the previous day by Roger Casement’s brother, Tom. She continues describing life in Dublin while Dáil Éireann was banned by the British.

LA18/19 [1956]

1 item

“Bodenstown”

Chapter 19: Comerford tells of a republican march to Bodenstown churchyard to re-assert the principles of Wolfe Tone. She also describes a trip to Antrim when she accompanied Mrs. Stopford Green while visiting her friends Sydney and Gertrude Parry (Gertrude was a cousin of Roger Casement). She also recalls a trip to Derry and the uneasy atmosphere that pervaded the city

LA18/20 [1956]

1 item

‘North’

Chapter 20: Comerford describes all places on the northside of the city that had political connections, in particular, the activities in Mountjoy Jail are described and a visit Comerford made while the prisoners were on hunger strike.

LA18/21 [1956]

1 item

‘Standards’

Chapter 21: Comerford discusses the role that public houses and drink played in the War of Independence. Officially banned by the Provisional Government, as all substances that paid a tax to Britain, she describes her and other’s shock and disillusionment at seeing their leaders and role models drinking in pubs. She writes also of her views on Arthur Griffith, and discusses affairs in Dáil Éireann at the time such as the Belfast Boycott and the beginning of the Black and Tans’ retaliation to Irish activity.

- LA18/22** [1956]
1 item
'Affairs'
Chapter 22: she discusses the establishment of the courts and police service and quotes from Sean Condrón who was the first officer of the Republican Police and relates various incidents of court sittings and governmental activities including raids on government offices.
- LA18/23** [1956]
1 item
'Visitors'
Chapter 23: Comerford recalls the murders of the republican Lord Mayors of Cork and Limerick and raids made on the Stopford Greens' house while she was there. She also describes political discussions, including appealing to Mrs. Asquith to use her influence in Westminster for the release of an innocent man.
- LA18/24** [1956]
1 item
'Tip'
Chapter 24: Comerford's trips to various towns in Tipperary. She recites stories she heard of the attacks, threats and deaths of volunteers in the War of Independence.
- LA18/25** [1956]
1 item
'Keogh'
Chapter 25: opens with an account of activities in Wexford after Comerford's departure (she sources these stories from a diary belonging to her mother). She also recalls visiting Dublin Castle while on a mission of mercy for the rights of women prisoners. She concludes with the beginnings of negotiations for a truce that were begun while Arthur Griffith and others were in prison.

- LA18/26** [1956]
1 item
‘Spy’
Chapter 26: relates the stories of a spy who posed as a member of Cumann na mBan, a raid on Cullenswood House, the signing of the treaty, and Comerford’s meeting John Chartres, who helped in the treaty negotiations.
- LA18/27** [1956]
1 item
‘Cuala’
Chapter 27: opens with a summary of republican activities in Wicklow as Comerford comments on local government action by Dáil Éireann, including rates collections and the reaction of the British officials who could no longer collect rates.
- LA18/28** [1956]
1 item
‘White Cross’
Chapter 28: Comerford describes the foundation of the White Cross in Ireland and how she was involved with it. She describes meeting the clergy and their reaction to both the White Cross and War of Independence. She also describes travelling around Ireland to examine the extent of damage inflicted by the Black and Tans.
- LA18/29** [1956]
1 item
‘Print’
Chapter 29: Comerford covers the topic of printers and the role that they played in Ireland at this time, in printing and spreading republican news.

LA18/30

[1956]

1 item

‘Woods’

Chapter 30: Comerford discusses Mary Woods, one of the many people who gave their houses over for the accommodation of republican politicians on the run. She reveals the role that the Woods family played in helping hide these men and the aliases that they had to use. This also included the arrival of Comerford’s mother in Dublin to act as an aunt in a safe house for Michael Collins. She concludes by noting the role of Molly Childers (wife of Erskine) in the rebellion.

LA18/31

[1956]

1 item

‘Attitudes’

Chapter 31: the attitudes of many people are analysed in this chapter, including the reaction of the public to the hanging of Kevin Barry, quotes from British publications regarding the situation in Ireland, and the attitude of the Irish to the British. She also relates the lead up to the truce and the relations between various members of Dáil Éireann at that time.

LA18/32

[1956]

1 item

‘Martial Law’

Chapter 32: Comerford discusses the imposition of martial law in Munster and parts of Leinster. She continues the chapter with the Belfast elections held in 1921 and her role in them (Comerford was one of a number of Sinn Féin members sent to the north of Ireland to canvass on behalf of her party in the crucial election).

LA18/33

[1956]

1 item

‘Spider: Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly’

Chapter 33: Comerford opens by relating the start of negotiations as various individuals travelled to London for talks before the Imperial Conference. She includes memories of the time her mother acted as an ‘aunt’ to Michael Collins, as described in chapter thirty, and continues with many other anecdotes about him. She concludes with memories of the month preceding the truce.

LA18/34 [1956]

1 item

‘Truce’

Chapter 34: Comerford describes the tension in Ireland as discussions started between de Valera, Carson and Lloyd George for a peace conference. She describes being outside the Mansion House on the day the truce was discussed by the Dáil and hearing the official announcement being made by Eamon Duggan from the steps of the Mansion House. She gives her opinion on what she feels was a mistake made by de Valera not to include Labour when he was negotiating with the Unionists.

LA18/35 [1956]

1 item

‘Split’

Chapter 35: Comerford describes her reaction to the treaty and the attitude of those who attended the Mansion House in the following days. She believes that ‘some men who had given very good service to the Republic... demeaned themselves a lot when they turned bitter. Out of this some monster lies became current in the propaganda against President de Valera, personally’. She discusses the growing divisions between the various factions and her attendance at Dáil debates on the Treaty.

LA18/36 [1956]

1 item

‘Pacts’

Chapter 36: Comerford expounds her philosophy that she followed no individual or group: ‘our cause was the Republic proclaimed in Easter Week any leaders we would follow must conform to that’. She recalls her involvement in the campaign for political support against the Treaty, and she also discusses what went on between the main political figures, as she understood it.

LA18/37

[1956]

1 item

‘Suspense’

Comerford relates the outcome of the 1922 election and the resulting political negotiations, also including transcripts of contemporary newspaper articles. She continues with her analysis of the rescue of Dunne and O’Sullivan, who were arrested for the murder of Sir Henry Wilson (ex-Imperial Chief of Staff and MP for North Down) and describes the siege of the Four Courts and the beginning of the Civil War.

LA18/38

[1956]

1 item

‘Notes on Robert Barton’

Chapter 38: Robert Barton was a British army lieutenant who was elected to the first Dáil and became Minister for Agriculture. Comerford summarises his political career, which included spells in prison and being involved in the Treaty negotiations.

LA18/39

[1956]

1 item

‘Beds’

Comerford discusses how there was no longer a need for safe houses after the truce had been called and how for the first time, many of Ireland’s leading men of the time could sleep in peace. She gives her views on the partitioning of Ireland. She also discusses the attitude and outlook of the Second Dáil and the general populace, including their reaction to the situation of Catholics in Belfast.

LA18/40

[1956]

1 item

‘Conference’

This chapter opens with the days before the delegation headed to London to debate the Treaty in October 1921. Comerford quotes a speech made by Sean Etchingham in Wexford about the forthcoming negotiations. She also transcribes Countess Markievicz’s speech at a Cumann na mBan convention held in October 1921, with additional quotes from other important members of Cumann na mBan. She comments on prominent women involved in the pursuit of independence, such as Mary MacSwiney, the sister of Terence.

LA18/40 contd Finally, she also writes of the reaction of Michael Collins on learning of the assassination of General Sir Henry Wilson, MP.

LA18/41 [1956]

1 item

[Chapter Thirty Seven]

The chapter opens with an account of the departure of the Irish delegation to London, and Comerford's views on the negotiations in London and those heading to America to seek support.

LA18/42 [1956]

1 item

[Chapter Thirty Nine]

Comerford discusses the change of government due to disagreements about the Treaty. She writes about the continued support given by Cumann na mBan to the Republic, the split in the political parties and the establishment of the Third Dáil. Articles and poems published by the Anti-Treaty side are reproduced, and she describes the change from the Irish Volunteers to a national army.

LA18/43 [1956]

1 item

'Courts'

Comerford relates her experiences during the Civil War, during which time she worked in Dublin as a Red Cross volunteer, and she recalls her experiences inside the Four Courts during its siege and her memories of the explosion. She discusses how she then went to the Hammond Hotel where Eamon de Valera and Cathal Brugha were both located and she describes the situation around the city as she experienced it, while working with the Red Cross.

LA18/44 [1956]

1 item

'Courts'

With the same title as the previous chapter, in this section Comerford discusses the fates of Diarmuid Ó hEigeartaigh, relates Ernie O'Malley's reaction to the news of Collins' death, and tells of an organisation founded by Mrs Despard and Mrs MacBride called 'The

Máire Comerford Papers

LA18/44 contd Women's Prisoners Defence Committee' for women who had lost husbands and children during the conflict. Comerford also relates her own reaction on hearing of Collins' death.

LA18/45 [1956]

1 item

'Sources'

This chapter contains typescript copies of letters to and from Eamon de Valera, and circulars dating from late 1922 on the Third Dáil and how those with opposing opinions should proceed with arrangements for an alternative Dáil. It also contains reactions to decisions passed by the Third Dáil, and letters to Joseph McGarrity in America regarding support in America for both the Free State and those against it. It contains a statement from the Government Publicity Department about de Valera's reaction to the Treaty.

2. HISTORICAL RESEARCH

2.1 Death of Michael Collins

LA18/46 August 1963–January 1976

1 file

Material relating to the death of Michael Collins

Contains photocopies of newspaper articles speculating on the identity of Collins' assassins, including a British agent. Correspondence with an academic, John A. Murphy from the National Museum of Ireland, regarding the location and access to a manuscript on the Civil War and Collins' death, written and researched by Diarmuid Brennan (ex-IRA Army Council Head of Civilian Intelligence). Correspondence also with Helen O'Brien (sister of Diarmuid Brennan), who is communicating with Comerford regarding her fight as heir to the manuscripts owned by the recently deceased Diarmuid.

Also includes copies of letters to Brennan (from Comerford) written in 1971 regarding Collins' death and other events in the Civil War, including discussions of his interpretation of Collins' correspondence to W.T. Cosgrave which is the last known piece of correspondence written by Collins (a copy of this is also contained in the file). Another letter outlines the ideas Brennan holds regarding those who killed Collins and their motivation behind it. Also contains extract from an article in *Inniú* on the death of Collins, information on the Belfast Boycott and an article in the New York Law Journal on the Dáil Éireann Loan of 1922.

2.1 Anna Parnell

LA18/47 December 1964–July 1968

1 file

Anna Parnell

File contains photocopies of letters of praise for the manuscript by Anna Parnell (later to be published as *The Tale of a Great Sham*). Drafts and extracts from the book, photocopies of articles and drawings on the Land League, and an article written by Máire Comerford on the Ladies Land League. Also contains instructions for the creation of maps for publication entitled *Celtic Ireland*, written by Eoin MacNeill, and copies of research notes for a circular issued in 1881 by Colonel Hillien of the RIC to the forces in general.

2.2 General

LA18/48 June 1946–August 1970

1 file

General historical research

File contains: a report on policy and activities of the White Cross; various copies of newspaper cuttings from the Irish Press; some articles and other letters sent by readers of the paper on a debate on prison conditions, including Frank Aiken as one of the correspondents; drafts of a sixteen page letter to the Reverend Peter M. Trodden (editor, *Studies*, Leeson Street, Dublin) regarding her view of the efforts of Dáil Éireann in trying to prevent the Civil War (this letter is in reply to a series of lectures on the period being given by Professor T. Desmond Williams in University College Dublin and an article written by Professor [Michael] Hayes in the Spring issue of *Studies*); and correspondence with Trodden about her letter.

Also includes: copies of other letters, for example between Dennis Malloy (President of the Chicago Police and Firemen's Defense Association, Chicago) to Colonel Robert McCormick (editor of the *Chicago Tribune*) about the lack of support given by the paper to the situation in Ireland; notes on various aspects of Irish history including IRB Northern Divisions, Alfred Cope (Under Secretary in Dublin Castle) and a chronology of important dates from January 1919 to June 1920; copies of newspaper articles on the descent into Civil War; correspondence from James Healy of the American Committee for Relief in Ireland; an article entitled 'The Birth of Democracy in the 26 Counties'; photocopy of certificate for Seosamh O'Cleirigh for completing a course in the Irish language; and a booklet entitled "In the care of.....Her Majesty's Prisons" by Hugh Feeney.