

Kitty O'Shea

A talk to The Eltham Society by Frances Ward
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Katherine 'Katie' O'Shea (she was never called Kitty by family or friends) was born in 1845 in Essex, the thirteenth and last child of Emma and Sir John Page Wood, baronet and vicar of Cressing. She received no formal education, being taught by her family at home, Rivenhall Place. There she developed a talent for music and amateur theatricals, which led to her meeting Willie O'Shea when she was 17. He was a young captain of Hussars with a rich and generous father; he was attractive (although financially inept) and married Katie in 1867 at a C of E ceremony, in spite of being a lifelong Catholic.

Katie's father, Sir John, had died in 1865 and his large family was only saved from poverty by the generosity of Kate's Aunt Ben (actually Anna Maria Wood), a very wealthy widow who lived in a fine 1660s house in Court Road, called Eltham Lodge, now home to the Royal Blackheath Golf Club. Katie and Willie lived for a while on the continent, returning to England moderately well off until Willie's disastrous investment in a stud-farm. Other schemes also flopped and Katie became pregnant. Again Aunt Ben (plus Uncle William) rallied round to put them back on their feet but Willie's financial incompetence reduced them to living in a dingy house in the Harrow Road.

By the time Katie had four children Aunt Ben yet again waved her magic wand and bought them a house, Wonersh Lodge, in North Park Eltham with the proviso that Katie visited her several times a day, usually via a gate at the back of Ben's rear garden. Willie continued his career of failed ventures, often abandoning Katie for days at a time and things deteriorated further for her with the death of her mother, Lady Emma, in 1879.

Then Willie decided to enter politics as a means of making his fortune and sought the support of Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irishman educated in England who was making a spectacular rise to political eminence; he was leader of the Irish Party at Westminster, dedicated to Irish Home Rule and an expert in disruption of parliamentary proceedings without breaking the law. Willie got himself elected MP for County Clare (at Aunt Ben's expense naturally) and asked Katie to invite Parnell to dinner. Several invitations elicited no reply but when she actually met CSP at Westminster they were both irrevocably smitten. She thought 'this man is different, wonderful' while he picked up a rose that had fallen from her bodice and cherished it for the rest of his life (in fact the faded remains of the flower were eventually interred with him).

He visited Wonersh regularly and initially they just enjoyed touring the local countryside but as the relationship developed he spent long periods in the house creating a ménage à trois. She would wait up for him after late night sittings at Westminster and occasionally went to the Lady's Gallery there to hear him speak. CSP was consolidating his mass appeal as a Home Rule politician, while his personal life centred on Katie and he spent Christmas of 1880 at Eltham. But a violent clash with Gladstone in October next year led to his imprisonment with consequent distress to the two lovers.

On his eventual release the affair resumed and in 1883 and 1884 Katie gave birth to two more daughters, the first tragically dying only six weeks old, amazingly Willie accepting that they were both his. His political career stalled when he lost his seat at County Clare but he 'persuaded' Parnell, against all advice, to offer him the Galway constituency, which he surprisingly won.

Rumours of Katie's affair with Parnell were rife (more in Ireland than England) but Katie had become a great friend and companion to Aunt Ben, who changed her will to make Katie the sole beneficiary. The rest of the family fought back claiming that Ben was insane and bribing doctors to have her so certified but Katie had PM Gladstone's doctor certify that she was quite sane and her new will therefore valid. But Ben died in May 1889 and Willie filed for divorce; Katie tried to buy him off in order to protect Parnell from career-destroying scandal. Sadly probate had not yet been granted and she was unable to buy off the venal Willie. After Aunt Ben's death Katie found Eltham intolerable and they moved first to Mottingham a mile away and then to Walsingham Terrace, Brighton.

The divorce proceedings created a furore, particularly in Ireland where divorce was not recognised, but at least the two long-term lovers could marry, which they did in June 1891 in Sussex, the divorce having become absolute on 26 May. The ceremony took place in a Registry Office as no vicar could be found to sanctify the union. The press were skilfully avoided after the ceremony and invented their own versions of the event, but Parnell, who was very ill, did speak to them later.

His reputation also declined (especially in Ireland), as did his wealth, and it was no surprise that he died on 6 October 1891, his last words being 'Kiss me sweet wife, and I will try to sleep a little' not 'let my love be conveyed to the Irish people' as has been claimed.

The probate action regarding Aunt Ben's will remained unsettled and Katie's personal well-being suffered from her consequent lack of money (having no income for two-and-a-half years). Also at stake was the custody of two of Katie's daughters who were in Willie O'Shea's control. The case was decided in March 1882 when the Wood family acquired one half of Ben's estate and Katie the other half, minus the court costs. Most important to Katie was that she assumed custody of the two girls. Sadly much of the wealth was lost to a dishonest trustee and an unfortunate investment and, in desperate financial straits, she published her memoirs in 1914 but she was 'in a period of delusion' and her son Gerard edited and doctored them.

'Kitty' O'Shea died in 1921 aged 76, her funeral attended by two horse-drawn carriages, one with a few mourners, the other empty; Willie had died in 1905, aged 65.

The above is derived from an outstanding, comprehensive lecture to the Eltham Society by Frances Ward; with an added acknowledgement to *The Uncrowned Queen of Ireland* by Joyce Marlow

Les Murrell