

Papers of Mary Spring Rice

P235



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CONTEXT

Biographical history

Rice, Mary Ellen Spring (1880–1924), nationalist, was born 14 September 1880, second child and only daughter of Thomas Spring Rice, 2nd Baron Monteagle of Brandon, Co. Kerry, and his wife, Elizabeth (d. 1908), eldest daughter of Samuel Butcher, bishop of Meath. The family's principal estate was at Mount Trenchard, Foynes, Co. Kerry, where Mary Ellen grew up and learned fluent Irish. Influenced by her cousin, Nelly O'Brien, an enthusiastic follower of Douglas Hyde, she joined the Gaelic League in Dublin and London, organised festivals on the banks of the Shannon, and hired a native speaker from Kerry to teach classes in the local national school. She was on the board of her cousin Nelly's Coláiste Uí Chomhraí, an Irish summer school established (1912) in Carrigaholt, Co. Clare. Nicknamed 'a kind of parish providence' (West, 239), she was involved in every endeavour of the local community and was an early member of the United Irishwomen, founded in 1910 as a sister organisation to the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society (IAOS) of Horace Plunkett, to encourage countrywomen's industries and handicrafts. In 1911 she was on the executive of the Limerick branch of the Irish Countrywomen's Association.

At an agricultural fair in Westminster Hall, London, where she was selling Limerick lace, she was introduced to Erskine Childers, who helped foster her growing nationalism. She was on the Anglo-Irish committee formed in London in May 1914 to help the Irish Volunteers—Alice Stopford Green was chairman, and Childers, Sir Roger Casement, and Spring Rice's cousins Conor and Hugh O'Brien were members. Chief among the committee's problems was how to transport arms from Germany to Ireland; it was Spring Rice who suggested using private yachts for this purpose. Her first suggestion was that they use her fishing smack, the Santa Cruz, but as this was in need of repair, they eventually settled on Childers' yacht, the Asgard, and Conor O'Brien's Kelpie. The Asgard left Conway, north Wales, on 1 July 1914 with Childers as skipper and five crew, one of whom reported: 'Miss Spring Rice is a wonder. She has never been far to sea before, yet she was hardly ill at all and looks and is most useful' (Martin, 67). She kept a meticulous diary of the journey, which was afterwards published; it reveals her as practical and optimistic. After picking up its cargo of 900 rifles by the Ruytigen lightship off the Belgian coast, the Asgard reached Howth, Co. Dublin, on Sunday 26 July, where it was met by a file of Volunteers led by Cathal Brugha, who conveyed the arms back to Dublin.

Spring Rice continued giving practical assistance to the nationalist movement, nursing Volunteers during the war of independence and setting up first-aid classes. However, her later years were troubled by tuberculosis; she entered a sanitarium in Clwdy, north Wales, in 1923, and died there 1 December 1924. Her funeral took place at home in Foynes, where she was given a guard of honour by the local IRA, the Gaelic League, and trade unionists. Her Asgard diary was published in Martin, *Howth gun running* (1964).

Bridget Hourican

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Archival history

These papers were deposited by John Knox, nephew of Dorothea Knox, in November 2008.

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

Scope and Content

Holograph letters from Mary Ellen Spring-Rice to her cousin Dorothea Knox. Most are unsigned but in those which are, she uses the Irish 'Maíre Rísach' or a variation thereof. Dates and greetings are generally in Irish. Substantial Irish usage is noted in individual item descriptions.

Small amount of other material kept with this correspondence.

System of arrangement

1 Letters to Dorothea Knox, 1921-22	1
2 Other Material, 1921-22	8

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND USE

Access

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

Language

English and Irish

Finding Aid

Descriptive catalogue

DESCRIPTION CONTROL

Archivist's Note

This descriptive catalogue was prepared by Sarah Poutch in October 2009.

1. Letters to Dorothea Knox, 1921-22

P235/1 17 December 1921

2pp

Postcard sent from Glendalough, county Wicklow

Spring-Rice writes in Irish to her cousin Dorothea Knox in Dorking, Surrey. Is sorry she didn't see Knox when she was at Mount Trenchard on Wednesday but mentions that she may perhaps come another day.

P235/2 19 January 1922

2pp

Letter

Spring-Rice dined with the [Erskine] Childers the previous Tuesday and mentions that she agrees with their current political position 'except as regards opposing the Provisional Govt. and upsetting the Treaty now that it has been signed'.

P235/3 20 January 1922

3pp

Letter

She has recently spoken with John Nolan of Sinn Féin, who attended a meeting at the Newcastle West comhairle ceantair. Nolan and the local clerics (Fathers Hayes, Wall and Punch) have decided the best thing to do is accept the Irish Free State government, although they disagree with the [1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty]. Spring-Rice also wonders if De Valera will enter candidates in the elections due to his disagreement with taking an oath of allegiance. She encloses a copied list of the instructions given to delegates of the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis, which she thinks will interest Knox.

P235/4 26 January 1922

2pp

Letter sent from Mount Trenchard, Foynes, county Limerick

Reports that the Foynes Sinn Féin club voted against the Treaty by nine votes to six, while the Foynes Cumann na mBan voted for it, eleven votes to two. Part of the letter is in Irish.

P235/5

28 January 1922

6pp

Letter

Writes while on the train to Dublin where she plans to attend a Public Health Reform Committee meeting. Mentions a dispute over the occupation of the local barracks in Foynes. The police had given it up but 'Hennessy' refused to allow the I.R.A. to occupy it, referring the matter back to Richard Mulcahy and 'O Duffy' [Eoin O'Duffy] in Dublin. Mentions that South African Republicans also had to take a similar oath to that laid out by the Treaty and wonders how they 'got over' doing so.

P235/6

4 February 1922

2pp

Letter sent from Mount Trenchard

Writes that the arguments of Erskine Childers and Robert (Bob) Barton would have convinced her to take an anti-Treaty position had it not been for the influence of her local clerics and her friend John Nolan, who are all afraid of national 'chaos' should the provisional government not make a start as soon as possible.

P235/7

7 February 1922

4pp

Letter

Discusses some family matters. A paragraph of text is written in Irish.

P235/8

25 February 1922

2pp

Letter

Spring-Rice writes: 'what a blessing the agreement is – if England objects it will weld our people together'.

Mary Spring-Rice Papers

P235/9 28 February 1922

4pp

Letter

Asks Knox's opinion of her setting up a co-op in the community as the family's farming trade is currently too small to survive alone. Fears they may not receive their compensation claim after hearing Churchill's speech about all claims being reviewed again.

P235/10 7 March 1922

2pp

Letter sent from Mount Trenchard

Asks if Knox knows the location of a report written at the time of the burning of the store, for which the family is claiming compensation (see P235/9). They need the report as they may have to defend their case.

P235/11 10 March 1922

4pp

Letter

The pro- and anti- Treaty sides in the Foynes Cumann na mBan have 'crystallised' and the Free-Staters have had to leave the organization. Spring-Rice has decided to join the women's organization set up by 'Miss Mulcahy and Miss Gavan Duffy' to support the Treaty. She writes that Knox 'will be disgusted' at her and she has been miserable deliberating over what to do, but feels that 'on the whole I believe it will get us independence with less bloodshed'.

P235/12 13 March 1922

2pp

Letter

Mentions a play and concert to be put on in Foynes on St Patrick's Day in aid of the I.R.A.

Mary Spring-Rice Papers

- P235/13** 17 March 1922
2pp
Letter
Spring-Rice is attending the I.R.A. benefit play in the local school that evening, entitled *Gleann na Síochog*.
- P235/14** 11 April 1922
4pp
Letter
Mentions her opinion that all Irish classes currently operating in the county ought to be inspected.
- P235/15** 7 April 1922
2pp
Letter sent from Mount Trenchard
Discusses some family matters and briefly mentions Knox's trip to Ypres.
- P235/16** 18 April 1922
4pp
Letter
Discusses family bills and writes that she has no hope of raising any money locally now that she is out of Cumann na mBan.
- P235/17** 24 April 1922
4pp
Letter sent from Mount Trenchard
They are having a one-day peace strike in the locality.

Mary Spring-Rice Papers

- P235/18** 6 May 1922
2pp
Letter
Writes of the difficulties she is having in trying to secure a nurse for the locality.
- P235/19** 13 May 1922
2pp
Letter
Spring-Rice is going on a 'jaunt' to Dublin for the Royal Dublin Society's spring show.
- P235/20** 18–19 May 1922
4pp
Letter sent from the United Arts Club, 3 Upper Fitzwilliam Street, Dublin
Stayed longer in Dublin than she had planned in the hopes of seeing Erskine Childers but was unable to. She met Rory O'Connor by chance, to whom she had extended her hospitality in 1919 when introduced by Lily O'Brennan, and mentions that 'Dick' Mulcahy was another such person. She finishes the letter the next day on the train home, writing that the De Valera–Collins meeting may offer a chance of peace.
- P235/21** 27 May 1922
2pp
Letter sent from Mount Trenchard
Spring-Rice is glad of the recent pact which has 'put down the hooliganism', although she feels that it may only 'be putting off the evil day'.
- P235/22** 4 June 1922
2pp
Letter
Reports that the barracks are still under Republican control and have received reinforcements from Ballyhahill, county Limerick.

P235/23 10 July 1922

2pp

Letter sent from Mount Trenchard

Writes that Dublin is reportedly 'fairly normal again' but that 'the situation in Lim[eric]k looked very threatening'. She mentions the death of 'poor Ca[t]hal Brugha'.

P235/24 14 July 1922

2pp

Letter

Spring-Rice gets to see the *Cork Examiner* most days but it is heavily censored by the Republicans. Mentions a long diary letter she has written for Knox and will send soon.

P235/25 16 July 1922

44p

Letter

Sends the long diary letter with an accompanying note. The letter is related to events during 29 June–17 August 1922 in the local area and beyond. Spring-Rice mentions the Republican occupation of the local post office (29 June), their looting in Limerick (6 July), and the reports she has heard of their fleeing to the Wicklow Mountains (8 July). She again mentions the 'heroic death' of Cathal Brugha, whom she felt was 'a thorough militant' when she met him (8 July). Arranges the removal of furniture from the courthouse to prevent the I.R.A. from taking it (12 July). Supplies Cumann na mBan members with first aid uniforms to assist the Republican soldiers, and prepares first aid supplies of her own, to treat Free State troops (3 August). Reports the evacuation of the I.R.A., who set fire to the barracks as they departed (5 August), and the arrival of Free State troops (17 August). This item also includes two pages of a typed transcript of this memoir (29 June–3 July).

P235/26 19 July 1922

2pp

Letter

Writes that having a visitor now is a 'godsend' as they are deprived of company and the postal service is very unreliable.

Mary Spring-Rice Papers

P235/27 2 August 1922

2pp

Letter

Reports the death of their relation Minnie from anthrax.

P235/28 6 September

4pp

Letter

Mentions her idea of a 'parish police' to 'keep young hooligans in check'. Part of the letter is written in Irish.

P235/29 11 September 1922

1p

Letter

Informs Knox that they will be unable to write for some time as there is a postal strike due. Reports that the fire station in Goleen, county Cork was attacked by Republicans and captured, but no deaths occurred.

P235/30 28 September 1922

4pp

Letter sent from Mount Trenchard

Writes that 'this horrible civil war is poisoning everything' and expresses a desire for Knox to visit her later in the year. She points out though that there may be some conflict as she knows that Knox would feel bound to actively work for Cumann na mBan. Part of the letter is written in Irish.

P235/31 7 October 1922

6pp

Letter

Writes of statements from prisoners that she was given by Dr Kathleen Lynn, mentioning that she 'can't believe Irishmen w[oul]d do that to each other'. She talked with Desmond Fitzgerald about it but he was unsympathetic, believing it to be 'a put up job on the part of the Republicans'. Spring-Rice 'begins to think the Black and Tans were no worse than anyone else after all'.

P235/32 19 October 1922

2pp

Letter

Fears she will miss the forthcoming Ard Fheis in Dublin and asks Knox to take her place as teachtaire [messenger]. This letter is partially written in Irish.

2. Other Material, 1921-22

P235/33 30 March 1921

3pp

Memoriam of Commandant Seán Finn

Two printed songs written to memorialize the commandant of the West Limerick Brigade, I.R.A. on 30 March 1921 near White River, near Mount Trenchard. Includes the envelope in which they were stored by Dorothea Knox, who has handwritten the circumstances of his death on it.

P235/34 5 July 1922

1p

Typed note

Presumably from Mary Spring-Rice to Dorothea Knox; however, there is no greeting or signature. Gives a brief account of conditions in Foynes, with the Republicans who are occupying the barracks commandeering food and motors. No news from Dublin has been had.

P235/35 Undated

1p

American advertisement for the Irish Relief Fund

Insert from the *New York American* appealing for donations to the Irish Relief Fund. Includes recommendations within the text from President Warren G. Harding and Vice-President Calvin Coolidge about the efforts made by the fund, and an explanation to the American people about the situation in Ireland, stressing the non-sectarian nature of the fund.