

SALLI LOVELARKIN ARTIST

Maud Gonne, A Terrible Beauty is Born, c. 1987

An imagist theater project based on the life of the Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne.

Produced and directed by Salli LoveLarkin

Maud Gonne (MacBride)

Irish Nationalist, Activist, Suffragette, and Actress

Born: Dec. 21, 1866, Tongham, Surrey, England.

Died: April 27, 1953, Dublin, Ireland.

Edith Maud Gonne, the English-born Irish Revolutionary, was the eldest daughter of Captain Thomas Gonne (1835-86) of the 17th Lancers, a cavalry regiment of the British Army. Born into aristocracy, her mother Edith Frith Cook was a member of the distinguished and wealthy Cook family, manufacturers of silk, linen, woolen, and other textile goods sold throughout the world. In 1868, Captain Gonne was issued a post in Ireland, and in 1871, after the family had moved to Donnybrook, a Dublin suburb, Gonne's mother died of tuberculosis. Maude was just six-years-old at the time of her mother's death, after which her father sent Maud and younger sister Kathleen to be raised and educated by a nanny in southern France. As a military attaché, Captain Gonne traveled extensively throughout Europe, and his daughters would often meet him in locales such as Switzerland, Italy, and Austria. This thoroughly cosmopolitan upbringing imbued Maud with a sense of independence and defiance, characteristics that would come to define her in later life.

In 1882, the British Army permanently posted Gonne's father in Dublin, and his daughters accompanied him, remaining with the captain in Dublin until his death from typhoid fever in 1886. After receiving a significant inheritance from her father's estate a year later, Gonne returned to France to live with her wealthy aunt, the Comtesse de la Sizeranne. It was in Paris that Gonne met and fell in love with right-wing French political activist Lucien Millevoeye, in 1887. Millevoeye, deeply committed to retaking Alsace-Lorraine from Germany for France, also harbored an intense hatred for English colonization, and urged Gonne to become involved in the fight for Irish independence.

Gonne returned to Ireland and spent the remainder of the 1880s traveling throughout the country to witness firsthand the oppression that the Irish were suffering under their English landlords. The eviction of tenants who were asking for a fair rent, and the starvation of those suffering during famines promptly drew her into relief efforts and participation in the Irish National Land League, an organization dedicated to reforming tenancy laws, and the driving force behind the civil unrest of Ireland's "Land War" with British landlords for tenants' rights. During this time, Gonne also founded the Daughters of Ireland, a nationalist organization for Irish women, and helped to organize the Irish brigades that fought against the British in the South African War.

Through her involvement with activist factions and nationalist groups, Gonne was introduced to the young poet William Butler Yeats in 1889, and Yeats quickly and decidedly fell in love with her. Though she rejected his numerous marriage proposals over the course of their nearly fifty-year relationship, Gonne was nonetheless extremely

close to Yeats, serving as his muse and inspiration for a litany of plays and poems he would go on to produce.

The death of Gonne's infant son Georges in 1891 temporarily derailed her activist ambitions, as she bitterly mourned his premature death. The secret son of Gonne and Millevoye, Georges's coffin was laid in a crypt beneath a memorial chapel in the riverside town of Samois-sur-Seine, thirty miles southeast of Paris. Over the next several years, in Dublin, London, and Paris, Gonne was drawn to the occult and spiritualist practices that Yeats was already deeply involved with. Yeats's memoirs note that Gonne repeatedly questioned his circle of friends about the reality of reincarnation, and that she became convinced of the possibility of metempsychosis, a transmigration of the soul into another host. In 1894 Gonne conceived a second child with Millevoye, their daughter Iseult, who maintained a strained relationship with her mother throughout her life, to the point that Gonne refused to acknowledge her as a daughter, choosing instead to refer to Iseult as a cousin or kinswoman.

After converting to Catholicism, Gonne married Major John MacBride of the Irish Transvaal Brigade, in 1903. Their relationship was tumultuous and divorce papers were filed in Paris in 1905, with Gonne seeking full custody of the couple's son Séan MacBride. Gonne and the boy remained in Paris while Major MacBride returned to Ireland, where the British executed him in 1916 for his part in planning and performing the Irish Republican armed insurrection known as the Easter Rising. After MacBride's execution, Gonne returned to Ireland on a permanent basis, re-taking the MacBride name in the advancement of her causes, and remained a force in political and social activism. She campaigned for women's rights and prison reform, and was briefly jailed herself in 1923 on charges of painting banners for seditious demonstrations and preparing anti-government literature.

Maud Gonne MacBride published her autobiography in 1938, entitled *A Servant of the Queen*. This title held double meaning, referencing both Gonne's devotion to Irish nationalism as embodied by the Irish queen of old, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, and an ironic jab at the British monarchy embodied by Queen Victoria, for their exploitation and subjugation of the Irish people. Gonne's son Seán MacBride became active in politics in Ireland and in the United Nations. He was a founding member of Amnesty International, served as its Chairman, and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974, the Lenin Peace Prize for 1975-76, and the UNESCO Silver Medal for Service in 1980. When she died in 1953, Maud Gonne's will bore no reference to her daughter Iseult, who had become a writer and activist in her own right. At age 86, Gonne died in Clonskeagh, and was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, with her departed son Georges's baby-shoes in her coffin.

Sources:

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