

# The women who preceded Maria as mayor



Current Mayor, Maria Byrne

## Limerick Post special by Marie Hobbins

AS Limerick has now settled in to enjoy having a female mayor, it may not be widely known that Ireland's very first female mayor was Kathleen Clarke, who was the niece of John Daly, Mayor of



Mayor Francis Condell

Limerick from 1899-1902, and wife of Tom Clarke, a signatory of the 1916 Proclamation, whose sculpted figure stands prominently on Sarsfield Bridge.

While Maria Byrne is the 814th Mayor of Limerick, and only the fourth female to be elected to the office, a woman named Maire O'Donovan, was the first woman ever to act as Mayor of Limerick.

In his recently published First Citizens of the Treaty City - the Mayors and Mayoralty of Limerick 1197-2007, Dr Matthew Potter of Mary Immaculate College reminds us that it was Maire O'Donovan, the principal lecturer in education at Mary Immaculate College and sister-in-law to Mayor Michael O'Callaghan (after whom O'Callaghan Strand is named), who went on to take a prominent role in the public life of her adopted city, Limerick.

She was born in Crossmahon, near Macroom, in 1876, the daughter of Cornelius Murphy, a Fenian activist and his wife, Julia. In 1905 she married Diarmuid O'Donovan.

When her brother-in-law, the former mayor, Michael O'Callaghan and the then current mayor, Seoirse Clancy were murdered on March 7, 1921, two new members were elected to the city council

to replace the murdered mayors.

Clancy was replaced by Maire O'Donovan, and O'Callaghan was replaced by Robert de Courcy (he became mayor in 1923).

When Mayor Stephen O'Mara went to the United States as principal fundraiser for Dail Eireann, a replacement for him was required, as he was to be absent from Limerick for most of his first mayoralty.

On May 21 1921, Mayor O'Mara appointed Alderman Mrs O'Donovan as his deputy during his absence and she made history by becoming the first female to be Limerick's first citizen, remaining in office until January 30, 1922.

"Mrs. O'Donovan presided over the memorable ceremony at which Eamon de Valera and Mrs. Thomas Clarke received the freedom of the city in the Theatre Royal, Henry Street, Limerick, on December 5, 1921," informs Dr Potter.

"They had been unable to accept the honour in person when it had been conferred on them in 1918, due to their having been in prison at the time.

On the night of the conferral ceremony, de Valera stayed in Strand House (on the site now occupied by the Strand Hotel) with his friends the O'Maras, and it was there that he heard news of the signing of the Treaty for the first time.

After she stepped down as deputy mayor, Maire O'Donovan, her sister, Kate O'Callaghan, and other family members all took the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War. She provided a safe house for men on the run and support for the dependants of anti-Treaty activists.

Although she was not herself imprisoned, her sisters, Kate O'Callaghan and Ellis Murphy and brother, Matt Murphy, were jailed.

She did not seek re-election to the city council in 1925 but remained active in the life of Limerick city for many years afterwards. She and her husband,

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Diarmuid were involved in the Thomond Archaeological Society and she was an examiner in the Classics for secondary schools and involved in the running of the O'Curry College in Carrigaholt, County Clare.

Maire O'Donovan died at her residence at Eden Terrace, North Circular Road, on January 20, 1961, and was buried in Mount St Lawrence Cemetery.

In 1962, Frances Condell became the first woman to be elected mayor of this city and was the first non Catholic holder of the office since James Spaight in 1877. She was elected for a second term in 1963.

The second woman to become Mayor of Limerick, Therese (usually known as Terry) Kelly was born in Cork in 1941 into a prosperous and politically prominent family. Her grandfather James J. Barry founded Barry's Tea in 1901.

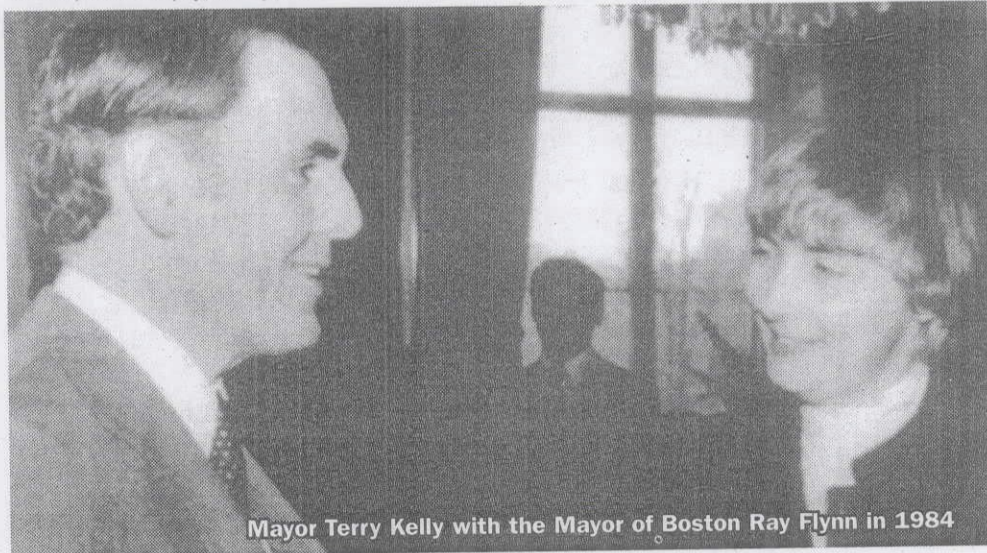


Mayor Jan O'Sullivan

Jan O'Sullivan was elected Limerick's third female mayor in 1993. Born in Limerick in 1950, she was educated at St Michael's National School, Pery Square, Villiers and Trinity College where she graduated with a BA in Modern Languages and Literature.

Her religion caused controversy in March 1994 when she was not permitted to read the lesson at the Mass held in St. John's Cathedral to mark the opening of the Civic Week Festival. This move, carried out on the instructions of the then Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Jeremiah Newman (himself a freeman of Limerick) provoked a good deal of unfavourable comment at the time. Apart from this unfortunate incident, Jan O'Sullivan's mayoralty was a very successful one and among its high points was the opening of the University Concert Hall in 1993.

Following the death of Jim Kemmy in 1997, a by-election was held in Limerick East on March 11 1998, at which Jan O'Sullivan was elected to the Dail.



Mayor Terry Kelly with the Mayor of Boston Ray Flynn in 1984