



Lady Icarus

Limerick's world-famous aviator who flew too close to the sun

RACHAEL KEALY

On Thursday, 17th May 1928, thousands of people gathered at Croydon aerodrome in London, gazing upwards, squinting in the spring sun. They were waiting to see the pioneering pilot who had traversed Africa, flying 10,000 miles on a dangerous solo trip in a tiny Avro Avian biplane, a record-breaking feat of endurance, skill and bravery.

At last, a faint buzz – no louder than a motorcycle engine – rang out, as the stacked, fixed wings and blurred propeller came into view. The wooden plane circled and descended, touching down with a heavy bump and a deafening roar from the excited crowd. It taxied across the grass airfield, a small gloved hand waving from the open

cockpit.

Flashbulbs popped as the pilot stood to climb down, lifting a shapely, silk-stockinged leg, the midi-heel dipped at a feminine angle. A fur coat followed, belted over a neat, pleated skirt. The glamorous outfit was finished with a brooch, a cloche hat and a string of pearls. Lady Mary Heath, war veteran, poet, author, award-winning athlete, world-famous aviator and native of Newcastlewest, Co. Limerick, emerged.

Not that she was a 'Lady' there, or Mrs Heath, or even Mary. Those monikers were to come later, punctuation marks in a long history of reinvention.

In Limerick, she was known as Sophie Peirce-Evans, born on 10th November 1896. Her childhood was, in the words of Lindie Naughton, who penned the authoritative

continued page 26



Portrait painted by the famous war artist Sir John Lavery.

www.ivansfoodmarket.ie

**OMNIPLEX
MOVIE
DEAL**

**1 MAIN COURSE €18
+ 1 FREE DRINK
+ 1 CINEMA TICKET**

from 4PM daily
Terms & Conditions Apply

ENNIS ROAD,
LIMERICK
T: 061 525190

Brought to you by Ivans - The Fresh Food Emporium



Lady Icarus, 31, with her husband, Sir James Heath, a colliery owner and former MP, aged 77, after competing her solo flight.

from page 25

work Lady Icarus: The Life of Irish Aviator Lady Mary Heath, 'as ineluctably grim as any Greek tragedy'. As an infant, she lived at Knockad-

erry House. She descended, on her paternal side, from well-educated, professional men who had placed the family in comfortable-bourgeoisie circumstances. Her father, however, changed all that.

John - or Jackie - Peirce-Evans was a volatile, dangerous man, constantly in trouble with the police for assaults. Many of these were levied on his wife, Kerry native, Catherine Teresa Dooling. Their

relationship suffered a catalogue of horrific events: vicious physical attacks, abortions, allegations of rape and infanticide, bankruptcy and alcoholism. It was brought to a violent end, however, with the murder of Catherine in her farmhouse kitchen.

She had sustained a beating of such force that a pair of metal fire tongs were bent and her shinbones were visible through her torn skin. A policeman found little Sophie asleep, curled up next to her mother's body.

Jackie was found guilty but insane after a sensational trial. He died in the Central Criminal Lunatic Asylum in Dublin. Sophie was taken in by her paternal grandfather and raised in genteel poverty with spinster aunts in Newcastlewest, enjoying at last a loving (if fiercely closeted) childhood.

Boarding school took her to Dublin, where she later attended the Royal College of Science. Her education was temporarily interrupted however, by two important life events: love and war. In the summer of 1916, with Dublin still pockmarked and blackened from the recent Rising, 19-year-old Sophie met Captain William Davies Elliott-Lynn. Originally from Liverpool, he was aged 41 and an officer of the Royal Engineers in the Curragh.

The First World War intervened, and the newlyweds spent much of their first year of marriage apart. Having suffered through a very brief stint in the trenches, Captain

Elliott-Lynn had no desire to go back; he was posted to Africa in 1917. His wife, however, joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps as a dispatch rider, carrying messages on her Harley Davidson motorbike. It was a role which likely gave her a taste of speed, adventure, and, more practically, the maintenance of a temperamental motor engine. She soon moved on to France, serving as an ambulance driver close to the 'Front'. While there she had her portrait painted by the famous war artist Sir John Lavery.

Demobilised in 1919, Sophie completed her college degree, finishing first in her class. At the same time, her husband became gravely ill with malaria. He too left the army, turning his attention to farming land in British East Africa he'd received in the Soldier Settlement Scheme. Sophie was to join him, but her sporting career was just taking off. With her six-foot frame, she was suited to the high jump, and skilled with the javelin. Photographs of the time show a robust, strong-boned woman in long shorts and a billowy blouse, her dark hair hidden beneath a knotted scarf. As she improved in her sport, she won prizes, broke records and challenged preconceptions. However, she soon realised that her progress was drastically curtailed by her gender, as the patriarchal authorities at the time deemed many sports at best unladylike, and at worst, damaging to female health. Together with other like-minded athletes, she

founded the Women's Amateur Athletics Association, who campaigned for equality in sport.

Sophie joined her husband near Nairobi in 1922, but continued her training, practicing with Masai warriors, studying their technique with spears. The marriage was fractious; the strong-willed, profligate Sophie clashed frequently with the conservative, thrifty William. They had no children, and there is only the briefest hint of a desire for a family in her writings. In her book of poetry, *East African Nights* (published in 1925) she wrote: 'We dreamed of little children / How children's voices thrill / Their wistful voices haunt me yet / Unborn and shapeless still'.

They parted acrimoniously in 1924 and Sophie returned to England. It was for a conference that she undertook her first airplane trip, on a flight to Prague in 1925. Whilst on board, she chatted to the pilot, who told her of a new Aeroplane Club, due to open that August in London. By October, she had made her first solo flight and by November she received her personal flying licence. She had discovered her true calling in life.

However, the prevailing sexist attitudes limited her progression. In order to make a living from flying, one had to have a commercial licence, but this was one 'privilege' that the British aviation authorities steadfastly refused to bestow upon women. Female pilots - the outlandish thinking went - were weaker

During the war, she joined the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps as a dispatch rider, carrying messages on her Harley Davidson motorbike



Ivans
Fresh Food
EMPORIUM

PREPARED WITH PASSION

CATERING & EVENTS

GOOD FOOD CALL US

BAKERY, DELI & CAFÉ
T: 061 525190

DELIVERED WITH PRIDE

www.ivansfoodmarket.ie

Her husband warned: 'she has a way of making money fly, as well as the machines'



Lady Mary Heath in her plane.



She compiled a list of the oldest, wealthiest bachelors in the British Empire, then married a former MP, aged 75

than men, a situation worsened with the onset of their menstrual cycle. Passengers' lives couldn't be risked with such a delicate, fickle creature at the helm of a plane.

Sophie's response was to create quite a stir. She took to showcasing her abilities in highly public and provocative ways, breaking altitude records and winning high-speed races. She even flew to Dublin, landing in Phoenix Park. She also took part in daring aeronautics, although her first attempt at parachute jumping ended badly with her clinging to the wings of a stalled plane while it plummeted to the ground. The press christened her 'Lady Hell-of-a-Din', a play on her married name of Elliott-Lynn. Together with some big-name lobbyists and supportive male pilots, she succeeded in changing the rules in 1926, becoming the first woman in Britain and Ireland to hold a commercial pilot's licence. In 1928 she was also the first female co-pilot with a civil airline (KLM). But the victory was not without a final humiliation. She had to undergo a physical examination before an all-male panel, at, as she would later write, 'a certain time of the month'.

In 1927, William Elliott-Lynn was found drowned in the Thames. The timing for Sophie, however, was portentous: she had a plan to pay for her expensive new career. She would later tell a friend that she compiled a list of the oldest, wealthiest bachelors in the British Empire, ruling out those who required actual nursing care. She settled on Sir James Heath, a colliery owner and former MP, aged 75. They were married in Mayfair in October, but only after the bride delayed the wedding by a day in order to negotiate her valuable marriage settlement. She was 29 years old.

The newly minted Lady Mary

Heath (she switched to a middle name) set about spending her septuagenarian husband's fortune quickly. She went on a shopping spree in London's finest boutiques and bought an Avro Avian aeroplane, bringing it with them to South Africa in November.

Charles Lindbergh's legendary trans-Atlantic flight had caused a media storm, sparking a voracious appetite for aviation. Sophie intended to capitalise on this by flying her little Avian back from South Africa to London, on her own, the first person to ever make such a trip. She flew out of Cape Town in January 1928, encountering heatstroke, inclement weather, challenging terrain, sexist bureaucrats, theft and a crash-landing. She navigated her course using pages torn out of an Atlas, peering down from the cockpit in an attempt to recognise a river or a valley. She maintained the aircraft herself, even plugging fresh bullet-holes in the fuselage (courtesy of local tribesmen). When she finally landed in Croydon on 17th May, the press lapped up every detail of her trip, and Sophie was inclined to put on a show. She listed her equipment to journalists: a silk blouse, mosquito nets and boots, a tube of morphine, mechanical tools, a bible, a gun and a tennis racquet. She had spent her free time in the air eating chocolates and reading novels, she told them, and 'powdered her nose' while steadying the joystick between her knees.

She embarked on a whirlwind publicity tour across the UK before setting off for the United States, settling in New York City. Sir James, meanwhile, dealt the marriage a death blow with the publication of a highly embarrassing letter in a national newspaper. It warned creditors that he would no longer be responsible for his wife's out-

rageous spending, explaining that 'she has a way of making money fly, as well as the machines'.

Mortified, Sophie shot back a terse response and threw herself into more positive publicity. She published a book, *Woman and Flying*, in 1929 and competed in ever more dangerous air races. It was while trying to avoid a pylon that she clipped a chimney during the National Air Races in Cleveland, Ohio in 1929, crashing through a factory roof. 'Ireland's premier woman flyer near death', ran local newspaper headlines. She would survive, but had fractured her skull and damaged her frontal lobe, losing 'a considerable amount of brain'. Her vision was severely impaired and she was disfigured.

She left hospital to be served with a divorce petition from Sir James Heath. While unable to fly, she made a decent living on the lecture circuit, but was powerless to do much but watch as her fame was eclipsed by the new 'aviatrix' in town, Amelia Earhart. In 1931, Sophie regained her personal pilot's licence, but not her commercial one - her eyesight was too badly damaged.

She met a George Williams (or 'Jack'), a diminutive but handsome jockey from a Jamaican family. They were married in November 1931 and a year later moved to Dublin. It was a short-lived period of happiness for Sophie. She had fought sexism all her life, but now she faced another form of discrimination - racism. The couple found themselves shunned by the wealthy flying 'set' and she lost her endorsements and sponsorships.

In 1934 she set up Dublin Air Ferries Limited, a private aviation company based in Kildonan aerodrome, near Dublin. Her timing was poor, however; the era of national airlines and affordable air

travel was just dawning. Her old-school skills weren't needed anymore.

For Sophie, flying had meant everything, and without it, she was lost. Still suffering the effects of the accident, she began drinking heavily, occasionally disappearing for long stretches of time, only to resurface on the brink of serious calamity. Her marriage failed and she regularly appeared in court for public order offences. These convictions were seized upon by a salacious press eager to report the downfall of a legend.

The final headlines detailed the sad demise of the woman who was 'one of the most famous women in the English-speaking world'. In May 1939, while travelling on a tramcar in London, Sophie was observed to be confused and unsteady, symptoms later attributed to an old blood clot on her brain. She fell and struck her head, dying at just 42 years of age. The coroner found no alcohol in her system.

Overcoming so many obstacles to achieve success in her life was not easy, and required a forceful spirit - today, she could be termed a 'gold-digger' - which didn't lend itself to posterity. Sophie possessed neither the polished background of Lady Mary Bailey, nor the media-savvy publicity team behind Amelia Earhart. All this may explain why such a world-famous woman has faded to obscurity, even in her own country.

A small burnished blue metal plaque in Newcastlewest depicts a woman in a flying cap, with a small biplane above her head and the image of a sporting figure beneath. Yes, she was a pioneering pilot and a record-breaking athlete, but Lady Mary Heath was also a tireless pursuer of equality and a forceful agent for change in society. And she was ours.

Ivans 
CAFE
New Extended Opening Hours
& **NEW EVENING MENU**
NOW AVAILABLE
from 4PM daily

It's 
SUMMER
Time!

**WE HAVE ALL YOU
NEED AT IVANS**

- ★ *Freshly prepared Meats*
- for your BBQ* 
- ★ *Healthy Fresh Salads*
- ★ *A great selection of Wine*
- ★ *BBQ Coals*
- ★ *Fresh Summer Fruits* 
- ★ *Take Home Ready Meals*

Ivans
Fresh  Food
EMPORIUM
BAKERY, DELI & CAFE
T: 061 525190
www.ivansfoodmarket.ie

