

Margaret Eagar; the Tsar's Nanny

by Sharon Slater

Margaret Alexandra [also known as Margareta] Eagar was born in Limerick on 12 August 1863. When her father placed the birth announcement for his fifth child in the *Limerick Chronicle* he could not have known the impact that this baby girl would have on the daughters of the last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas II.⁽¹⁾ Her father, Francis McGillicuddy Eagar [born Kerry 1823-died Clare 1902],⁽²⁾ was Governor of Limerick County Gaol from 1853 until at least 1880.⁽³⁾ He had previously worked as the Governor of Naas Gaol and Deputy Governor of Spike Island, Cork.⁽⁴⁾

Margaret's mother, Frances Holden [born Monaghan 1831-died Wicklow 1913],⁽⁵⁾ came from a musical family. She met her husband at Spike Island, where her uncle Richard Grace served as Governor and young Francis Eagar was Deputy Governor.⁽⁶⁾ Francis and Frances were married on 18 April 1855 in Kings County [Offaly].

They went on to have eleven children in total: Alexander Richard [b.1856], Anna Margaret [b.1859], James [b.1860], Jane Mathilda Grace [b.1862], Margaret Alexandra [b.1863], Frances Thomasina Rosanna [b.1864], Richard McGillicuddy [b.1866], Frances [b.1867], Mary Jane Eusebia [b.1868], Elizabeth Roche [b.1871] and Theodora Clara [b.1872]. In later life the couple retired to the West End, Kilkee, County Clare.⁽⁷⁾

Following the death of Francis Eagar, his wife Frances moved to live with their daughter Jane and her husband Alister Macleod in Wicklow, where he worked as a bank manager.

Margaret was well educated and could speak both French and English. She qualified as a medical nurse in Belfast and was employed as a Matron in a girl's orphanage. Some time later she came to the attention of Emily Loch, who was a friend of one of Margaret's sisters.⁽⁸⁾ Loch was a lady-in-waiting, from 1883 to 1923, to the German Princess Helena, later known as Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein. During the winter months of 1897-1898, Loch travelled to Russia with Princess Christian's eldest daughter Helena, to visit



Margaret Eagar with the four daughters of Tsar Nicholas II



Margaret Eagar with Olga, the eldest of the Russian Royal children

her cousin the Tsarina Alexandra.⁽⁹⁾ It was during this visit that Loch learned that the Tsarina needed a nanny.

Loch sent a personal report to Alexandra recommending Margaret Eagar for the position. She pointed out that Eagar had good domestic skills as a cook, housekeeper and needlewoman, as well as considerable experience in looking after children. Loch emphasized that Miss Eagar was straightforward and unsophisticated and had no interest in court intrigues. At first Margaret was nervous about taking up the position of nanny to the Tsarina's two young daughters and a new born baby. When she decided to accept the position she took additional training in baby care before travelling to Russia.⁽¹⁰⁾ We know very little about her terms of employment except that she was precluded from taking up another post, while in the Tsarina's service and on leaving she would be given a pension for life.⁽¹¹⁾

On 2 February 1899, Margaret Eagar arrived at the Winter Palace, in St. Petersburg, after travelling by train from Berlin and after resting she was taken by

the Tsarina to meet the children. From then on Margaret was responsible for the day to day lives of the Royal children, Olga (b.1895), Tatiana (b.1897), Maria (b.1899) and Anastasia (b.1901). The daughters of the Tsar Nicholas II began learning the English language with tuition by Margaret; some would say that the children spoke English with an Irish accent. She travelled widely during her time with the Romanovs, not only within Russia, but she also visited Denmark, Germany and Russian Poland. She would occasionally meet and speak with Royalty, including Queen Victoria's son Bertie, who became King Edward VII on the death of Victoria in 1901. She recalled in her memoir that the Prince of Siam came to visit the Empress and that she was interested to see his Highness as she had met him before in Kilkee, County Clare, when he was a young boy on holiday there. Even though the Prince did not recognise Eagar, she felt he had that same interested expression that he had when she saw him in Kilkee. She also recalled that Prince Louis of Battenberg visited Kilkee when she was living there. Louis, a British Naval Officer at the time, was stationed on the Shannon Estuary and he went ashore to



Margaret Eagar with two of the children

Kilkee to spend a night. The Prince booked a room in a hotel and when he took his bag to the room, before going for a stroll, he noticed that there were two beds. When he returned he found a commercial traveller in one of the beds. He sent for the manageress, and asked for a room for himself. While verbally abusing Louis the manageress wanted to know, "who are you to object to anyone, I'm sure you are no better than a commercial traveller yourself". Louis replied that "all that might be true, but I still want a room to myself". Eventually the manageress agreed to give him a room in a small cottage that she had outside the hotel. The next morning, when Prince Louis signed his name in the visitors' book, the manageress nearly had a stroke. She was afraid that Queen Victoria would have her arrested for being so impertinent to her son-in-law, as she called him. Margaret met Prince Louis, in later years when he was on a visit to Russia and he confirmed the story was true.⁽¹²⁾

On 20 January 1902 Britain signed a treaty with Japan following the Boxer Rebellion in China, as they feared a German threat to its interests in China, while the Japanese were not happy about Russian advances, in Manchuria and Korea which they believed were within their sphere of influence. This may, or may not, have had consequences for Margaret Eagar, who was a British subject.

Hostilities between Russia and Japan erupted in January 1904 triggered by Russia continuing its expansionist policies in southern Manchuria. The Tsar's children were exposed to racist and xenophobic dialogue within the Tsar's household.⁽¹³⁾ Margaret often intervened to prevent the children using racist or disparaging remarks about the Japanese; Nicholas referred in his diary to Eagar's presence at court causing 'trouble and dissension'. Margaret left the Tsarina's service on 29 September

1904, a little over a month after the birth of the Tsar's last child and only son Alexei Nikolaevich. In her autobiography, Eagar revealed her reasons for leaving were of a private and personal nature.

Soon after Eagar returned to England British newspapers reported under headlines such as 'Spy in the Tsar's Household' and that an English nurse had been caught stealing papers from the Emperor of Russia's study, and had been conveyed across the frontier. Eagar was highly indignant and felt compelled to write to the newspapers and clear her name. In one letter to the *Times of London* she wrote:-

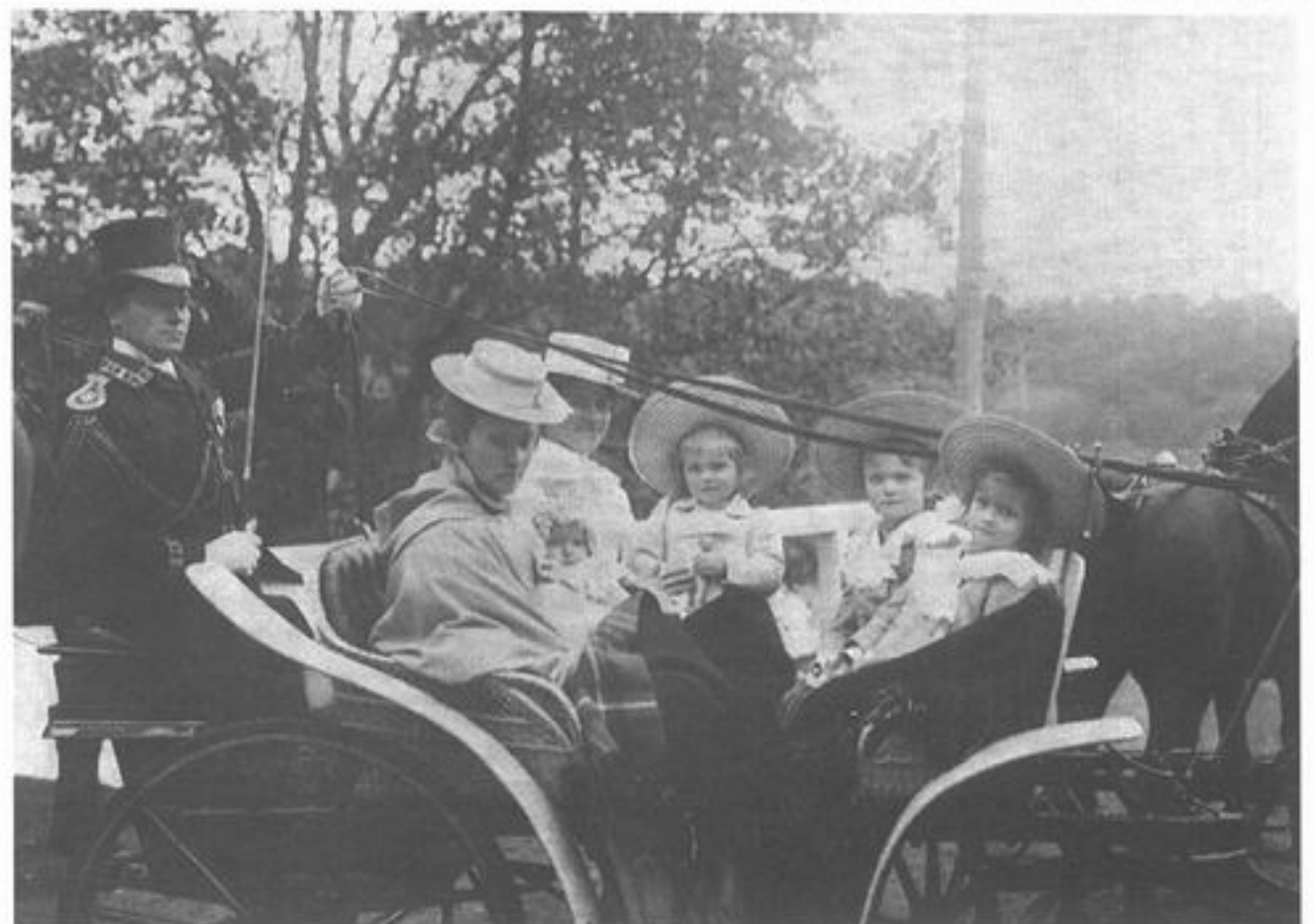
I now write, as I am the only English nurse who has lately left Russia, to emphatically deny the truth of the story. I left Russia last October. So far from being ignominiously dismissed, I received from the Empress a handsome money present, and a pension for my life was settled upon me. At Christmas I was the recipient of letters, cards, and a gift from the Empress and the Imperial children. I need not say that the falsehood current in the papers has given much pain, not only to me, but to my friends. Inquiries at the Consulate or the Russian Embassy will confirm my statement. I am at present staying with my brother-in-law, whose card in enclose, but not for publication.

I am yours faithfully

Margaretta Eagar.⁽¹⁴⁾

In 1906 Margaret wrote a short account of her time as governess to the daughters of the Tsar with the title *Six years at the Russian Court*. In the book she wrote not only of her life as a governess, but also life in general in Russia as she saw it. She also wrote a number of articles for women's magazines. Edward VII sent a green enamelled brooch to his 'Irish subject', as he jokingly referred to Margaret, in memory of the Tsarovitch's birth.⁽¹⁵⁾ She still kept in contact with Tsar's daughters, exchanging letters with them for many years after leaving Russia, describing her work as a governess for other families, and reminiscing of her time there. She also sent them presents on their birthdays⁽¹⁶⁾. On the London Electoral Registers for 1911, she is recorded as living at 27, Holland Park Gardens, in the Kensington area, where she ran a boarding house; in 1909 she took a woman to court for unpaid rents amounting to £3 5s 9d.⁽¹⁷⁾

In August 1914, the Great War began in Europe, which involved the major powers of the time, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, France and England. Other countries were drawn into the conflict, as the war progressed, making it a World War. By 1917, Russia was suffering from war weariness. Revolution swept the country and the Tsar was forced to abdicate. In October Vladimir Lenin and his Bolshevik party seized power in Russia. On 9 March, 1918 a decision was taken by Lenin and the government to move Nicholas II and his family to Yekaterinburg, in western Siberia. The house, which the local Bolsheviks picked for the family was surrounded by a six to seven foot [two metre] high palisade fence and it has become known to history as Ipatiev House. Here, in the early hours of 17 July 1918, Nicholas and his wife and defenceless family were shot and bayoneted, suffering horrific deaths at the hands of their



Margaret Eagar on an outing with the Royal children

drunken executioners. After the murder of the Royal family Margaret Eagar's pension, from the Russian government, ceased. The memory of the Royal family and the mystery surrounding their horrific deaths has endured well in to the present. In 1920s Germany Franziska Schanzkowska, also known as Anna Anderson, claimed that she was the Tsar's daughter Anastasia. Margaret Eagar's personal affinity with the girls was utilised and after she studied photographs of Schanzkowska and confirmed that the woman was not the Grand Duchess Anastasia. Anna Anderson died in America in 1984. Comparisons with DNA samples taken in later years after the remains of the Tsar and his family were discovered proved that Anderson was not Anastasia.

Margaret Eagar died at the Grange Nursing Home, Keynsham, near Bristol on 2 August 1936. A theory first shared by Charlotte Zeepvat claimed that Margaret was in debt in her later years,⁽¹⁸⁾ but this is disproved as records show that Margaret left £218-12s-6d in her will⁽¹⁹⁾ to Jane Muriel Grace Forrester, a widow.

In 2011 a silver enamelled spoon, given to Margaret in 1904 by Empress Alexandra as a souvenir of the birth of the Tsarovitch Alexei, was offered at auction at James Adam & Sons Ltd, Dublin. It was stamped with the Russian Imperial Coat of Arms;

a crowned double-headed eagle. It was made in St. Petersburg by the Imperial goldsmiths, the Grachev Brothers and was sold for €2,600.⁽²⁰⁾

Even though Margaret Eagar did not write extensively about her time in Russia, it is obvious that her brief six years with the Romanovs was overshadowed by their untimely deaths in July 1918, which undoubtedly had a profound effect on her. Family members stated that she remained haunted by the brutal murder of the girls she had grown so fond of until her own death.

References:

1. *Limerick Chronicle*, 13 August, 1863
2. Census of Ireland 1901, National Archives of Ireland, available online at: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie>
3. *Thom's Irish Almanac and Official Directory of Ireland, 1868. Thom's Irish Almanac 1880.* Francis Eagar retired to Kilkee, where he served as a J.P. in the 1890s
4. *Dublin Evening Mail*, 18 April 1853.
5. Census of Ireland 1901 and 1911, available online at: <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie> On the 1911 Census return Frances was recorded as born in California and her daughter Clare (Grace) in Scotland.
6. *Saga of the Holdens*, attributed to Frances Margaret Holden, private collection.
7. *Limerick Leader*, Monday, 6 May 1946.
8. Helen Rappaport, *Four Sisters: The Lost Lives of the Romanov Grand Duchesses* (London 2014).
9. Judith Poore, *The memoirs of Emily Loch: discretion in waiting: Tsarina Alexandra and the Christian family* (Kinloss, 2007). Emily Loch continued to correspond with the Russian Royal family and received many letters, cards and presents from Nicholas and Alexandra until their demise in 1917.
10. *Four Sisters* (op. cit).
11. *Limerick Leader*, Monday, 6 May 1946
12. Margaret Eagar, *Six Years at the Russian Court*, (London, 1906).
13. *Four Sisters* (op. cit).
14. *The Times* (London) 2 January 1905.
15. Charlotte Zeepvat, *From Cradle to Crown: British Nannies and Governesses at the World's Royal Courts* (Stroud, 2006).
16. *Four Sisters* (op. cit).
17. Old Baily Proceedings, 19 July 1909, available online at: <http://www.oldbailyonline.org>
18. *From Cradle to Crown* (op. cit).
19. England & Wales, National Probate Calender (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1937.
20. Lot 416. James Adam & Sons Ltd, Fine Art Auctioneers & Valuers, Dublin, 11 October 2011.

I am grateful to Des Ryan for references 8-10, 13 and 14 and Thomas J. Byrne, Kilkee, for additional information.



Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia in 1906

Sharon Slater holds an MA in Local History from the University of Limerick. Sharon owns and operates the Limerick's Life website, where she posts interesting stories and chronicles from Limerick's past. An internationally published author of *The Little Book of Limerick* and keen genealogist, she loves to discover the thread intertwines through many local families. She has worked in conjunction with Limerick Museum and Archives on a number of projects since 2013. Sharon writes a monthly article on Limerick history for Fusion Magazine.