

Clare Sheridan in Galway

She was born Clare Frewen in 1885, the only daughter among the children of the highly talented three Jerome sisters. She was a cousin of Winston Churchill. She married Wilfred Sheridan, a descendant of Richard Brinsley Sheridan. He was killed in World War 1. They had 3 children, Margaret, Elizabeth and Dick. Elizabeth died very young, and in her grief, Clare decided to make some kind of memorial to her. A talent for sculpture became evident and a career was launched.

She produced various types of images, but it was her portrait heads that made her reputation. She became a successful society artist, but then she decided to travel to Russia where she succeeded in getting Lenin and Trotsky to sit for her. This infuriated Churchill who was very anti-Bolshevik and it caused the first of the 'scandals' that would keep her name buzzing on the world's press wires for the next 30 years.

She set forth in search of dangerous adventures, interesting men and artistic fulfilment. She travelled most of the world and met people like Gandhi, Charlie Chaplin, Primo De Rivera, Gorky, H.G. Wells, Kemal Ataturk, Mussolini, Marconi, Rudyard Kipling etc. Clare had affairs with some of these while others sat for her while she worked on their portrait. She was a very good journalist and interviewed many world leaders including Michael Collins. She was the only journalist to get into the occupied Four Courts in Dublin and interview Rory O'Connor.

She made homes for herself in many strange and exotic places. She came to Galway in 1947 and lived in the house beside the Spanish Arch. She was by now doing a lot of carving in wood as well as stone. She spent a lot of time working in the grounds of Oranmore Castle, the home of her cousin Anita Leslie and Anita's husband, Bill King. She got the castle mason to rough out big blocks of stone, which she could then hew into form. Clare was a well-known figure in Galway 'floating around in her violet shaded tweed cloaks of ecclesiastical design'. These cloaks were made by her good friend Cis O'Máille of O'Máille's Shop in Dominick Street, who regularly entertained Clare to Sunday lunch. Clare got on well with Claddagh fisherwomen who brought her baskets of fish when the boats came in. She was a regular visitor to the Poor Clares, and also to Kennys Bookshop.

Clare was still strong enough to carve, not only in wood but in stone, but she was very disappointed at the dearth of orders from the Church for her carvings. She had high hopes that the Bishop might buy the Madonna and Child (that you see in our photograph) for his new cathedral. She was not impressed when she saw the mosaics of JFK and Padraic Pearse, and she railed against the poor taste of those who had the power to spend. She offered the statue to a convent guest-house, but it was pointed out to her that as the Holy Child wore no trousers, some people might be offended. Her retort was 'The renaissance did not consider underwear necessary, why should you?'

She has a crucifix in Salthill Church and a Madonna and Child on top of the Spanish Arch. By October 1st, 1952, she had

sold Spanish Arch House and “so comes to an end another five year span on which the pattern of my life is so inadvertently composed ….. one five year span after another”.

Clare Sheridan died in 1970. Anita Leslie has written an outstanding biography of her cousin entitled “Cousin Clare”, probably the most definitive book on this remarkable life.

The Galway Archeological and Historical Society are hosting a lecture on Monday next, November 8th at 8pm. It will be held in the Harbour Hotel and the title is “The Castles of Lough Derg – A Pictorial Survey”. It will be given by Patrick Larkin and all are welcome.

TK

Please forward any queries/comments to oldgalway@kennys.ie

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