

“Imagine them ...”

Evelyn Conlon

Mary Lee took a look over the big days in her life as she folded her documents carefully. It was hard to believe that such a short glance, such a minor intake, and almost unnoticeable holding, of breath could cover all of a lifetime so far. It scanned birth, Mary Walsh, 1821, marriage and seven givings of birth as if they were any old dates. The bits in between and after weren't on the papers. Nor indeed were they in her head at this precise moment, due to the more immediate concerns that had to be bedded. She tucked her husband's death certificate in the middle, it would be safe there.

“I was born on St. Valentine's day. You know they put him in place of Lupercalia of Fertility”

She thought they might have done that because love seemed a cleaner thing than passion. Mary had read poetry all her life. It had fitted with the hills around her. They folded on top of each other in a vague sort of way, defying absolute definition. Sometimes it was better to be uncertain. When she married George she hadn't minded taking the name Lee, which was a sideways translation for a working poet.

She put the folded papers in an envelope and packed them in the midst of her clothes.

“Maybe you should put them in your bag” her daughter Evelyn said, “we'll be able to keep our handbags with us won't we?”

Evelyn was nineteen years old and hadn't had enough time to imagine how far away Australia was, never mind what a ship journey there would be like.

“They'll be alright here in the trunk, one less thing to have to mind, until we get there”.

They were nearly ready to go, waiting on the horseman. Evelyn walked about so as not to fidget. There was a tone to the day, Mary thought, but that was because her recently dead husband had been an organist, so words like that came to mind easily. Well, she was leaving the music now. And maybe she could depart the livid sorrow too, leave it behind as if it was an animate thing. Maybe the sea would swallow up the ghostly pain that was wracking her small enough frame.

“We're all set then”, she said, as the carriage drew up to take them to the ship. No-one thinks of what it was like for her to close the door. But she

had done it before, when leaving Monaghan to go to England, and in its own way that had been every bit as hard and as easy. It had taken a full day to get from Monaghan to Drogheda port for the boat across the Irish Sea. She wasn't sure how long it would take to-day but thought that their heads would be around their long journey ahead by the time they got to London. Surely.

It was only a week since Mary had told her neighbours that she had decided to go to Australia, Adelaide to be exact. Her son, Ben, who had gone there three years ago, had got ill. It was a good excuse.

"I'll go to mind him, get him better, and Evelyn will come too."

Not one to like the idea of lying down with the horrors of grief, the thought had come to her very soon after George, her husband, had died. She said the word husband a lot, more often than she'd ever done when he was alive.

"You're thinking of going where?"

They couldn't wait to get home to toss that one about.

"She is not. She couldn't be. Not at her age."

At the other end of the world they were waiting for her to match her history with theirs.

That first time, when they got to the Drogheda quay, Bertie Chambers had put their belongings side by side. Mary had stared in wonder, she had never seen a boat before. They stood for some time, listening to horses snorting at the ferocious noise of it all. A boy walked over, checked the name on the trunk, and hoisted it on to his shoulder.

"You can take the rest with you", he said, looking at the two other bags which looked small out here in the open.

"Well, I'll leave you to it now. Go néirí an bóthar libh", Bertie said with fake heartiness, peering suspiciously at the boat, glad he was turning the horses for home. He looked back once but couldn't make out the shapes of Mary and George.

Along with the other journeyers Mary and Evelyn were getting the gist of travel by the time they got to the boarding point in London. If Bertie had been there he would have had some right words. With one foot on the brand new Orient and one still on land they suspended belief in time, that would be the best way to be. And they did manage the journey well enough, give or take a few nights best forgotten. When they put the same foot off the boat in Port Adelaide, only thirty seven days and twenty two hours later, they both squinted as if they might see the place better by doing so. They would need new hats for sure to keep this light at bay. They made their way to Ben's house, legs a bit shaky, as they felt the thud of their feet on terra firma, the words meaning something only to those who know different.

Mary set to diligent caring but neither that, nor praying, nor hoping, nor her coming this far made her son better. They buried him out under the trees in Walkerville, Mary wrote to the others.

“Will we go home now?” Evelyn asked, not saying what she wanted, simply waiting to hear what was going to happen next.

“I’m afraid we can’t, the money is gone, but for now we’ll say that we love it here.”

Not one to like the idea of lying down with the horrors of this new grief Mary turned her head to public things. She needed to move and do. Firstly she put on her coat and set out to be a volunteer worker in the Female Refuge, a place for distressed women and children they told her. It took her some days to know who was there.

“Former prostitutes and unmarried mothers, that’s who”, she told Evelyn. She absorbed the truth of it and began to see the world another way. The women here were not bad, unlucky yes, as if God had spilt salt on their lives. She had had some of that herself.

Evelyn settled into her job, being a flume for telegraphs, words travelling by sound on wire, words about all sorts of things, ships arriving, gold being found, children being born, miners revolting. The messages sizzled through with their Morse overcoat and she converted them into sentences long enough to be understood. She didn’t write home much, she saw little point in exchanging notes about things that could not be known so far away, and less in trying to explain what the task of looking after their mother now included. She tried once to write what Mary had become, the speeches, the letters, the travelling to wild towns, her love of the notion of women with votes. But it looked flat on the page, it couldn’t lift into what it was, it couldn’t paint the fight. Evelyn was watching a revolt, a fit of fury working itself into reasonable language. It was like nothing she had ever imagined.

Mary joined the Women’s Committee of the Social Purity Society. It fitted well with thoughts she had about making life better for girls, raising the age of consent for one thing. A passerby, looking at the notice of their meetings, would not have guessed what was being said inside. And when that talk grew into other things as talk will, looking for the vote seemed not such an outlandish thing, seemed natural really, a small something to upgrade women.

“It’s not too much to ask. We had that in the Brehon laws, a long time ago,” Mary said.

“What are they?”

“Old Irish. It doesn’t matter. Not here anyway.”

They wrote The Suffrage League on a piece of paper and liked the look of it.

“Fair play is a jewel”, she said when she came home.

“Why do you say that?” Evelyn asked, fiddling with her brooch, as she thought about what it might mean.

“I saw famine and what happened. I saw women making their minds up. They sometimes had to decide who would die. If they can do that they should be able to vote.”

“But some of them don’t want the vote”, Evelyn said.

“Ah yes, it has taken centuries to make us the fools we are – it will take time to wade out of our slough”.

Mary still read poetry, when there was time. It gave her the backbone to answer the deluge that sometimes threatened to swamp her after one of her letters. She wrote about a man, one in a righteous rage, who claimed the gospels on his side.

“Will he hold up his hands in holy horror if I tell him that though St. Paul’s learning is unquestioned, and his inspired doctrine unassailable, his social rules are decidedly behind the age! Who cares whether I had my bonnet on or off while I spoke on Friday? Where was the ‘shame’ if my hair were long or short any more than if it were black or brown or grey?”

“Do you think that reply is alright?”, Mary asked.

Evelyn wasn’t sure, but thought that by now her mother knew what she doing. Wasn’t she already on the road, going to faraway places, getting names written on paper sheets, a petition that would show it wasn’t just a few mad women who wanted the vote. She spoke in all sorts of places, Port Augusta, Port Pirie and Quorn.

“That’s a funny name Evelyn, isn’t it? Quorn. It’s a railway place. There were 500 at Port Pirie, imagine that. ”.???

Sometimes on her journeys she would see a turn in the road that looked like home, a dead ringer for the road to Ballybay, and she would shake her head and wonder where she was and what she was doing shouting from the back of trailers. It didn’t happen often, which was just as well, and coming out of the bend she would see a bleached shade and perhaps an extravagant bird, things that could only be in her new place.

The petition grew in length, the pages began to stack up. Not one signature looked like another. Mary wrote pamphlets as well as letters, which were sent to more and more newspapers, again and again, and to members of parliament and whoever else might do with having their minds changed. She learned the patience for repetition. Unlike others she could sign her own name, no fears. There had to be some advantages to being a widow she thought.

“I’ll talk to the Temperance people too, although I don’t trust total abstinence,” she said, getting tired at the idea of it.

The women poured a glass on the night they stuck together the pages of eleven thousand six hundred penned names, then rolled the four hundred foot long scroll and tied it with gold ribbon.

Mary dated her letter December 1894 and wrote home that on last Tuesday morning the triumphant cry had gone up from the packed gallery. After years of work, only six in the end, South Australian women had won the right to vote by 31 votes to 14.

“And it was such a margin too, we’re made even more joyous by that,” she said.

“One operator thought to add the right to sit in parliament, thinking that would get the whole shebang scuppered, oh how we laughed and cried with joy when it didn’t work. Not this time.”

“I wonder what they’ll make of that,” Evelyn said, wondering herself what her mother would do now.

One son had no intentions of telling anyone what his mother was at; he had always been like that, had let her voice go over his head like a kite disappearing. He looked up a lot. And he’d married a fool of a girl who knew next to nothing. At least not the things Mary knew. The other son was proud enough and knew some people whom he would tell.

“I remember when you were a small boy, you told me your dream one morning but stopped half way and said, oh, no need, you were in it. I had to tell you that your dreams were your own. Only you knew what happened in them. Stay well.”

On the morning of the first vote they turned out in droves, dressed in many shades as well as black. Mary Lee wore her best frock, a crimson shade with familiar ruffles and puffs on the shoulder. Evelyn’s dress had a bell-like flow to it. She had bought it thinking that it would suit the new drop frame bicycle, if she could ever get one. After they’d marked their papers they gathered outside and talked excitedly. Some men snorted as they passed them, others pretended not to see them, and yet more doffed their hats and said enthusiastic things like Good Morning Ladies.

On their way home Mary said, “You go ahead” and Evelyn did, wanting to walk a bit on her own to think what history is.

Mary Lee found a spot in off the path and lay down under the everlasting sky; no-one would find her here. She sighed with gratitude, and imagined all the roads she had taken. The shouting from hall stages might have been easier if she had known that it would indeed succeed. She spoke to her George, as she often did. There was nothing helpless about this, she did it most days. She told him that without his fate she would have been at home,

with nothing to do with all this, but that she couldn't stay where she had lost him. And that as long as she was here in this bigger place with this bigger thing to do she could sometimes forget the long missing of him. She told him of the trees in the back yard, lemons, oranges and the like, not just Ar-magh apples. She got up and dusted herself off.

And Evelyn was right to wonder what she would do next. The fritillaries would have been coming out in her Irish garden on the morning she got ready for Broken Hill. There weren't the same ones here but there was one called Snake's Head, well that would make sense, not so much at home of course. Mary had become a campaign sort of soul. At the age of seventy three she set out, in searing heat, to see what she could do for miners on strike, miners and their families not coated in gold. She would use what she had now learned for another good, there was no reason yet to sleep the day away. The poverty shocked her, there was much to do. She would need to lie down under that sky again, looking up into it to shut out the grime.

Evelyn did eventually write the long letter home, when it was necessary to do so. She told them that their mother was buried with Ben, to the left of some lush trees. She would now try to let them know about the last years of her life. She didn't say anything about the lack of money, they would have been surprised by that. She told them about Mary writing in support of children being able to swim naked together. In reply to the outrage she had written "I don't believe that Eve ever had petticoats and if Adam had britches they left us no pattern – and they were both naked and not ashamed. Does not half the moral dirt of the world spring from dirty suggestion?" Evelyn wondered if her siblings would understand the notion of how heat could cause you to throw your clothes off. She told them about the Unions asking Mary to stand for Parliament, an astonishing thing to happen so soon after the vote was achieved. She called her Mary when she wrote these things, not Mother. She explained that Mary declined the request on the grounds that she wanted to work undeterred by allegiance to any party. She explained that when she died people were surprised at her age, they thought her much younger surely. Mary herself hadn't dwelt much on her age but one day she had remarked that she had spent almost the same number of years in Monaghan and here, and neither place knew what she did in the other. Evelyn wrote that she knew then Mary was dying, she had returned to her youth.

"You may find it hard to imagine her, all that dedication, you may not remember any of that from before. Our mother was a great woman, you know."

Evelyn posted it on her way to work. When the letter dropped into the box she wondered about writing the last sentence, maybe she should have left it out. It was hard to know what to say really, in the circumstances. And hard to know what road to take herself now. She got back on her new bicycle and pedaled up Wakefield Street, enjoying the breeze that the speed created around her face.



Portrait of Mary Lee (1884), State Library of South Australia,
Creative Commons Attribuzione 2.0 Generico
(<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.it>>)