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INTRODUCTION

LADY SPENDER'S PAPERS

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Lady Spender's Papers (D1633)

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Summary

Lady Spender's correspondence and diaries comprise c.3100 documents and c.65 volumes, 1888-1966.

The greater part of the correspondence consists of letters between Lillian Spender (née Dean) and her husband Wilfrid Spender, mostly dating between 1915 and 1918 when Spender was serving with the army in France. During this period the Spender's wrote to each other nearly every day. Lady Spender's diaries run from 1899 to 1966 (with gaps) and number 64 volumes, of which the first c.15 and the last few are perfunctory in content and of limited interest. They are accompanied by some correspondence and printed matter, 1911 and 1943-1961.



The Diaries

The diarist, Miss Lillian Dean, later Lady Spender, was born in 1880 at a house in Wimbledon Common, the youngest of five daughters of a comfortably placed so-called 'Russia merchant' in London. Her style as a diarist is straightforward and detailed, yet rhythmic, and her diaries are germane to life and events in Ulster during the heady days from 1913 to the early 1920s and beyond. The first extant diary started on Boxing Day 1898, when Lillian was 18 and living in Lancaster Gate, and they continue, largely unbroken, for 67 years until 1966, when she lodged the series in PRONI.

Lillian Dean was well placed as an observer because, returning from a visit to Canada in May 1913 - where her aunt Lady Williams was the wife of the Governor of Newfoundland, Sir Hugo Williams - and at the age of 32, she met Captain Wilfrid Spender, already 37 years old and on leave from his post in India, and they were married on 9 September 1913 in London. After honeymooning in Norfolk they came to Belfast - Spender had been drawn to Ulster because of his strong support of the Unionist cause. By February 1914, they were ensconced in a rented house in Adelaide Park from where, and later other houses, Lillian continued with her diary.

At the time of her marriage Lillian already had a broken engagement (to a Tipperary man) behind her. For this marriage, and for transplantation to rural Ireland, she had prepared herself by studying at the British Dairy Institute at Reading College and obtaining diplomas in butter and cheese-making and the bacteriological testing of milk, followed by practical farm experience. There is a thoroughness in her diaries, and a personal discipline in the almost continuous entries for 67 years, which a science-based observer might attribute to this training.

Equal or greater weight should be given to the fact that the diaries were written primarily for circulation within the family. This is evident in their content. While they cover stirring political times, with leading figures – at least Unionist ones – daily crossing her path, the diaries are not essentially political diaries: rather, they describe social events and daily domestic occurrences, houses, gardens, people, social functions, dogs, and above all music - for music was the delight of Lillian's life and she herself was a keen singer, if not on the concert stage, at least in more sheltered soirées.

The diaries evidence her quintessential style and interests and include many terse descriptions of the well-known personages who flit across Lillian's stage. Thus we have Ewart, 'a pompous old thing'; Sir Thomas and Lady Dixon 'very nouveaux riches'; Sir George Richardson, 'the rebel chief'; Lady Londonderry, 'charming'; Lady Maureen [the Londonderrys' daughter], whom 'I couldn't bear – a tiny edition of her father ... with tired, rather dissipated eyes ... and no manners which I could discern'; and many others of the contemporary Ulster haute monde, aristocrat, nouveau riche and parvenu. A main interest is the grand houses and particularly the great gardens, with horticulture and animals preferred to people – certainly to political people – though musical ones always find a place. There are comments on visits of Fritz

Kreisler, Walter Rummel, the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, the Carl Rosa Company, and such local luminaries as Charles Blackmore, Oliver Warnock, and Mrs Seeds.

Nevertheless, because of her husband's high position in the new régime installed in Northern Ireland (Wilfrid Spender was Secretary to the Northern Ireland Cabinet, 1921-1925, Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Finance, 1925-1944, and was knighted in 1929), political figures (and their wives) inevitably find a place in the diaries. Mrs George Clarke is dressed 'beyond description in jewels and satins far too gorgeous for an empress'; Sir Robert Kennedy of Cultra is 'quite amusing when you get to know him'; his sister is a 'a dear old thing'; Hugh O'Neill is 'very legal and precise, but quite nice'; Mrs Sharman Crawford is 'a distinctly fascinating person in spite of her sharp tongue'; J.M. Andrews is 'straight and simple and kindly'; Milne Barbour 'a curious man who looks like a stage Mephistopheles but is given to preaching in dissenting chapels'; and, second hand from her husband, Michael Collins 'is the Caruso type ... like the hero of an American film drama ... admitting responsibility for outrages in Ulster and Belfast, and indeed boasting of them'; and so on - not much of a mine for the quarrying historian but a delightful read.

In a lengthy description of 30 June 1923 about a town over the Fermanagh border in the Belleek/Clady area, Lillian records the moods and plight of landed Unionists caught by partition on 'the wrong side' as accurately and plaintively as many professional narrators, especially in the sad case of Major Moore of Clift. On 17 March 1923 the Spenders' only child was born - Patricia Daffodil Heather Spender - which prompted a diary description of a phone call from J.M. Andrews in exculpatory mood about it and the 'flower-names'.

These are unusual diaries, which are important for their style and vigour and for their detailed and often charming descriptions of the lives, lifestyles, houses and preoccupations of one sector of Ulster life over a remarkable period of time. They include accounts of great, and sometimes terrible, events. In writing of these, the Englishwoman Lillian's indignation and outrage at the actions of the 'enemies of Ulster', and therefore of Imperial England, are at times evident. But there is also clear distaste for Orange excesses and attitudes, and – above all – no rancour and no bitterness.

PRONI is indebted for the above description to Dr Dennis Kennedy of the Europe Resource Centre, Queen's University Belfast, who has been researching the diaries and gave a paper to the Belfast Literary Society on the subject at the end of 1996.

