Preface

On 1 August 2010 Leonard Cohen walked on to a stage on the grounds of a magnificent rural estate in County Sligo and recited these lines from one of Ireland's greatest poets: 'the light of evening Lissadell, great windows open to the south, two girls in silk kimonos, both beautiful, one a gazelle.'¹ The quotation was instantly recognisable and applauded by the thousands in the audience. It is of course the opening line from W.B. Yeats' much celebrated poem, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markiewicz [sic].' The venue for the concert was Lissadell Estate, once the ancestral home of Eva and her older sister Constance. Yeats wrote it on learning of the death of Constance in 1927, one year after Eva herself had died.²

More than eighty years after her death, the name of Eva Gore-Booth is still known. Some people recall her purely because of Yeats' poem, others as the younger sister of Constance, the Irish nationalist icon, Countess Markievicz. Gore-Booth's name may be familiar but details of her life and achievements have, until now, remained obscure. This book is the first dedicated biography of Eva Gore-Booth, a woman of considerable brilliance and outstanding fortitude. The following pages contain a chronological account of a politically and socially radical Irish woman who possessed vision and passion for her country and fellow citizens.

The story of her revolutionary life shows a person devoted to the ideal of a free and independent Ireland and a woman with a deep sense of how class and gender equality can transform lives and legislation. Her campaigns to achieve fundamental change in these areas were often at odds with the ideals of mainstream organisations and were almost always ahead of public opinion. In some cases her behaviour was deemed to be 'unlawful' by authorities but this only served to make her more determined.

Historian Maria Luddy suggests that 'biography always fascinates in its attempt to reveal individuals navigating the often turbulent waters of life.'³ This is certainly true of the life of Eva Gore-Booth as she attempted to change attitudes concerning such contentious issues as landlord-tenant relations, trade unions and gender equality, the Great War, the Easter Rising, military conscription, radical sexual reform and the new age religion of theosophy. Gore-Booth was unique, an Irish woman of Ascendancy class who rejected her privileged heritage to live, socialise and work amongst the industrial classes in Manchester. Throughout her many and varied political activities, Gore-Booth published volumes of poetry, philosophical prose and plays, becoming a respected and prolific author of her time.

This biography is based on a vast body of original documents belonging to Gore-Booth, much of which has been used here for the first time. Her papers are scattered throughout numerous archives, personal collections and university libraries across Ireland, England, Scotland and the United States. It has been a long and arduous task to discover the whereabouts of these manuscripts. However, it has been possible to construct a detailed life history of Eva Gore-Booth from these various sources, which include her personal and literary manuscripts, the papers of political and trade organisations, the archives of publishers and manuscript collections of her colleagues and friends. This material has been contextualised with readings of her literature and political writings, as well as newspaper reports tracing key events and activities in her life. This research has taken place over a number of years, across many miles and has been a delightful and worthwhile journey.

Sonja Tiernan
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Notes

- 1 W.B. Yeats, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz [sic],' in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan & Co, 1933), p. 197. The original version is held in the National Library of Ireland, Dublin, (hereafter NLI) Yeats Papers, MS 30,149.

- 2 Constance Markievicz died in August 1927 and Yeats began working on the poem in November 1927 when he was in Seville. Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), p. 268.
- 3 Maria Luddy, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington* (Dublin: Historical Association of Ireland, 1995), p. 6.