

E. L. Voynich

by Alannah Hopkin

Broadcast on **Sunday Miscellany, RTE Radio 1**, Dublin, 5 October, 2014

When the Chinese-born writer Yiyun Li, the inaugural winner of the Frank O'Connor Award, came to the Cork International Short Story Festival, the first thing she wanted to do was to visit the birthplace of the great Cork-born writer, E.L.Voynich, the author of *The Gadfly*.

The Gadfly, published in 1897, is a cracking yarn set in the stirring revolutionary times of the Italian Risorgimento, seen through the eyes of an idealistic young couple, a committed young Englishwoman, Gemma, and a brave, quick-witted outcast, the Gadfly of the title. It is rip-roaring stuff, with a strong anti-clerical and pro-revolutionary stance. Its appeal to youthful readers keen to reject the establishment and all its ills is very clear.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell called it "The most exciting novel I have ever read in the English language." D.H. Lawrence and Rebecca West were admirers, while George Bernard Shaw liked it so much that he adapted it for the West End stage. *The Gadfly* also had its detractors: Joseph Conrad loathed it, writing somewhat paradoxically, 'The Gadfly is a very bad book. I have read it four times.'

The book became popular among socialists in the years leading up to the Irish uprising in 1916 and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It was essential reading in Russia, and has sold several million copies in the 18 languages of the Soviet Union. It has been filmed three times, most memorably with music by Shostakovich. It is also much loved in China, where it was one of the few western novels to survive the Cultural Revolution.

E. L. Voynich was born Ethel Lilian Boole in 1864, the fifth daughter of the mathematician George Boole, 'the founder of pure mathematics, father of computer science and the discoverer of symbolic logic,' as his biographer, Desmond MacHale describes him, and his wife, Mary Everest, educator and pioneering feminist. George Boole died suddenly six months after Ethel's birth. Mary Everest moved her family to London, and her daughters were cared for by relatives while she sought ways of making a living.

Ethel was sent to live in Lancashire with an uncle, who bullied and tormented her, to the point of breakdown. Happier times were spent back in Cork, where her mother's uncle, John Ryall, was Professor of Greek. There she first read Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian revolutionary writer, who became her hero. She took to dressing

entirely in black, in mourning for the condition of the world, she explained, and preferred to be known by her second name, Lily. Friends describe a tall slim figure with “her extraordinary eyes and halo of gold hair”.

A small legacy allowed Lily to study music in Berlin, where she read Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and *Underground Russia* by Sergei Kravchinski, known as Stepniak. Back in London she sought him out, and became a fluent Russian speaker. Stepniak's descriptions of the suffering of the Russian people under Tzarist rule affected her so profoundly that she travelled there to see for herself.

So began her years of courageous activism, visiting prisoners, bringing medical aid to isolated peasants, and smuggling propaganda into Russia. She counted among her friends Eleanor Marx, Constance Garnett, Friedrich Engels, George Bernard Shaw, William Morris and Oscar Wilde. She married a Polish exile, Wilfrid Voynich, who became a rare book dealer, and she started writing *The Gadfly*.

She published four more novels, but never repeated its success. Wilfrid moved to New York in 1914, and she followed. She taught music and composed, and after Wilfrid's death she shared an apartment in Manhattan with his business partner, Ann Nill. Money was tight, and as she got older she worried that Ann would be unable to keep working and also care for her.

In 1955, through a Russian delegate to the United Nations, she learnt that she was a celebrity in the Soviet Union. Her many readers were astounded to discover the legendary author living in New York. There were rumours of foreign royalties owed, and inquiries were made to the Russian Ambassador to the U.N. Two weeks later a cheque for \$15,000 dollars arrived, a huge sum then, enough to buy a comfortable apartment and have money left over.

There is a short clip on You Tube of dancers from the Bolshoi Ballet presenting the 95-year-old writer with a bouquet. Even at that great age, her eyes shine with an extraordinary intensity.

The academic year 2014-15 has been designated the Year of George Boole at University College, Cork, and will be celebrated with full ceremony: already the George Boole T-shirt is selling briskly on campus.

The anniversary of his daughter E.L.Voynich was celebrated more quietly on May 11 this year in the drawing room of the house in Blackrock where she was born on that day 150 years ago. Desmond MacHale said a few words about the author and her most famous book, then we stood in silence listening to a recording of Shostakovich's beautiful Romance from the Gadfly suite. The silence had a very special quality, like prayer, only better, and the soaring, heart-rending music that filled the room seemed to evoke the very soul of Ethel Voynich.