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Albinia Brodrick: Munster's Anglo-Irish Republican

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I

I don't suppose anyone, for example will write about old Albinia Brodrick . . . who conceived it her mission to atone for the sins of her ancestors, exacting landlords of the south-west; she dressed as an old Irish country-woman and ran a village shop, while behind her on a stony Dunkerron promontory rose the shell of a large hospital which she had built for the sick poor of Kerry, but which, because of its unsuitable though romantic site, had remained empty and unused. There is a labyrinthine story of idealism, obstinacy, perversity, social conscience, medicine, family, behind this empty structure. The man who could unravel it would be diagnosing the spiritual sickness of Ireland, and diagnosis is the first step to a cure.¹

– Hubert Butler

These words, written by the essayist Hubert Butler over fifty years ago strike a chord: among the most fascinating figures of the Revolutionary era, Albinia Brodrick has received little attention from writers and historians, and the general public has almost entirely forgotten her.

Born in London, scion of a prominent Cork landowning family, Albinia's career underwent a remarkable trajectory: youthful High-Tory intellectual; middle-aged nursing radical; then a move to Ireland and rebirth as a philanthropist, language activist, and Sinn Féiner. Her uncompromising personality made it almost inevitable that she would die an isolated and lonely death beside the ruins of her hospital in Sneem, Co. Kerry. What makes her career even stranger was the fact that she was the sister of St John Brodrick, Earl of Midleton and leader of the Southern Unionists.



Albinia Brodrick

In recent years Albinia has received some interest from scholars. In 1997 she was the focus of an Irish-language biography, *Gobnait Ní Bhruadair: The Hon. Albinia Lucy Brodrick*, by Pádraig Ó Loinsigh. It is useful on Albinia's life in Sneem but offers little psychological

insight into her motivation to reinvent herself in middle age as an Irish republican.² Ann Wickham's scholarly article *The Nursing Radicalism of the Honourable Albinia Brodrick, 1861–1955*³ offers an important revision of Albinia's career: while paying attention to her life in Kerry, Wickham's work focuses on her pioneering career as a nursing leader in the United Kingdom; however, in failing to offer much analysis on her life in Ireland, it does not take account of the truly multi-faceted nature of her career. This article will seek to survey Albinia's entire career, but will focus on the factors that made her among the most prominent Anglo-Irish republicans in Munster.

II

The Honourable Albinia Lucy Brodrick was born on 17 December 1861, in London, the fifth daughter of William Brodrick, 8th Viscount Midleton (1830–1907). The Brodrick family first settled in Ireland during the Cromwellian period, later acquiring a title and a large estate in County Cork around the town of Midleton.

Albinia's grandfather, George Alan Brodrick, 5th Viscount, had a profound effect on Albinia's personality. A landlord during the Famine, he was one of a few 'improving' landowners whose slum clearances and assisted migration caused public indignation. Despite offering his tenants generous abatements, his actions, such as the eviction of 350 people on his property in Cove, near Schull, in 1846 and the use of a 'crowbar brigade' to carry out evictions, tarnished his reputation.⁴ Years later, when asked why she had given up her privileged existence to live among the Irish peasantry, Albinia replied: 'I am doing penance for my grandfather. He was a tyrant in the days of the greatest of famines.'⁵

The family Albinia was born into held large estates in Ireland but retained normal residence at Peper Harow House in Surrey. In 1878 their Irish estates comprised 6,188 acres in County Cork, with a rateable valuation of £6,588.⁶

Their Irish seat was at Cahirmone, outside Midleton.

The later Brodricks were a family of noted intellectuals: Albinia was the niece of George Charles Brodrick, who served as Warden of Merton College, Oxford. His father, Rev. William Brodrick, 7th Viscount, was a devotee of Wilberforce who served as Dean of Exeter and chaplain to Queen Victoria. Albinia, although later to eschew much of the identity formed during her youth, would always retain the Protestant evangelism practised by her family, unlike other Anglo-Irish nationalists who converted to Catholicism.

The five Brodrick sisters were educated at home, by a succession of tutors and governesses. Much emphasis was placed on language learning: French, German, Italian and the Classics, as well as music.⁷ There can be little doubt but that this liberal education had a huge impact on Albinia: she would later gain a reputation for having a particularly open mind.

Albinia also accompanied her father, the 8th Viscount, who was partially blind and deaf, to the House of Lords, so as to ensure that his disability would cause him no embarrassment or difficulty.⁸ (She also read the newspaper to her father, but such was his hatred of Gladstone that she was forbidden to even read aloud his name, instead saying: 'he whose name shall not be mentioned';⁹ the viscount was a determined anti-Home Ruler).

In 1884 the Brodrick family undertook a tour of the continent. Albinia wrote an account of the trip. Demonstrating her aristocratic background, she is sharply critical about the ubiquitous 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité' slogan which is found 'even on the churches.' Her harsh assessment of French radicalism is worth quoting:

Much good their 'Liberté' has done them, when time after time, after a bloody revolution, they have defied the world and flaunted in the face of Europe their 'égalité' and their 'fraternité'. Is it liberty to receive the Prussians or the English within their walls as conquerors? Is it 'égalité' to be ruled with the despotism

of a Napoleon? Do they count it 'fraternité' to stir up the civil strife in which their passions have but a few years ago found vent? Vain words indeed for the French nation; most vain as applied to the Parisian world of slavery to fashion, hauteur of the aristocracy and strife of factions.¹⁰

This upper-class English abhorrence of revolutionary politics must be contrasted with the very different Albinia Brodrick who thirty years later would gain a reputation as the most unyielding of Irish republicans.

For about fifteen years during the period *c.* 1885–1900 Albinia lived in Oxford, as hostess for her uncle George Charles Brodrick.¹¹ G.C. Brodrick is an interesting, if somewhat forgotten figure: he was a political commentator who, besides writing polemics on issues such as land reform, wrote about 1,600 leading articles for the *Times*. Breaking with his family's traditional Toryism, Brodrick was a moderate Liberal, although he later opposed Home Rule.¹² Residing with the Warden in his lodgings at Merton doubtless proved an educational experience for Albinia. She had to preside over a dinner every Sunday of term-time to which her uncle, a famously sociable man, invited many of the most important people in the country. It is possibly here, under her uncle's influence she cast off much of the reactionary conservatism she exhibited in her diary. Although information on the exact relationship between the two remains obscure, it is possible, considering Albinia's education and lengthy period in the Warden's household, that she acted as a sort of unpaid and unacknowledged research assistant and amanuensis.

Although the Brodricks were absentee landlords, Ireland loomed large in the family's horizon. In his memoirs, St John Brodrick makes reference to regular visits to Ireland, where he got to know the estates at Middleton intimately.¹³ Albinia often accompanied her father on his trips to his Irish estates. On another occasion, on a trip to Connemara in 1877, the young Albinia was horrified by the poverty she

witnessed there.¹⁴ St John later became one of parliament's most noted experts on Irish affairs.¹⁵ In the coming decades both Albinia and her brother would find themselves more and more concerned with Ireland, but from markedly different viewpoints.

Earlier accounts of Albinia Brodrick's career have ventured that her life up to about 1900 was comparatively uneventful, and was defined or even dominated by familial duty towards her blind father and bachelor uncle.¹⁶ Analysis of the sources contradicts this judgement. In fact, far from being bound by the worst restraints of Victorian chauvinism, Albinia, above-averagely educated by the standards of her peers, carved out a successful literary and journalistic career during this period. During this time her work appeared in various other publications including the *Manchester Guardian* and the *St James Gazette*.

Albinia also wrote political pieces, of a Unionist bent. In an article in the *St James's Gazette* in March 1893, she castigated the Unionist interest for the loss of an English seat to the Radicals.¹⁷ In seeking to further the Unionist cause she also turned her hand to song-writing. Entitled *Irishmen Stand*, the song's politics is obvious:

Who dare loose the ties that bind us
Heart to Heart, in Friendship's band?
With the gallant hearts behind us,
Comrades of our English land?
Traitors thunder 'Separation'
Flows apace disunion's tide
Dark the gloom across our pathway-
Say, shall treason be our guide?¹⁸

Although her political opinions would later be utterly transformed, it is evident that already, in the 1890s, Albinia's romantic and passionate nature had settled on Ireland as the major theme of her life.

Albinia collaborated with Howard Talbot, the famous composer, on another, more ambitious piece, entitled *Musical Chess Tournament*. It was first performed in Oxford in

October 1892, before being revived in King's Lynn. The lyrics of *Musical Chess Tournament* provide a glimpse into the intellectual development of Albinia during the 1890s. At the conclusion of the cantata, with victory in the tournament claimed for the White pieces, the vanquished Reds sing:

Shades of our fathers, behold us dishonoured;
Hail to thee, Death! thine oblivion we claim!
Death alone left us, friend of the conquered ones,
Die then as heroes die, staunch to the last.¹⁹

Here one clearly sees in Albinia's writing a belief in the moral virtue of martyrdom, similar to the attitude later taken by the Irish nationalist Pádraic Pearse. Within *Musical Chess Tournament* can arguably be found the nucleus of her ideology. Martyrdom, and a faith in the virtuosity of political death would inform much of her later life.

With a comfortable lifestyle in Oxford, alongside an interesting literary career, one might be forgiven for thinking that Albinia Brodrick, by 1900, was a contented figure. However, this was far from the case. A volume of poems, *Verses of Adversity*, published in 1904, makes clear she suffered from depression. The preface to the short volume states that her poems relate to a period of 'mental and spiritual solitude' which lasted from 1900 to 1903.²⁰ One particular theme of the collection is feminism. *Verses of Adversity* includes such lines as:

We claim the right to strike
but one blow before we die,
And we claim the right of Heaven
to look upward and not down
Man is but as women make him
currish²¹ soul of purpose high
Though 'tis we who bear the crosses,
and 'tis they who claim the crown.

As for the Albinia's literary ability, it might be fair to say that Kerry, in gaining a nurse, did not lose a poet. It is clear from these lines that far from merely espousing the suffragist principles then gaining support, Albinia had been deeply

hurt by the actions of the men around her. This personal grief played a key role in her radical transformation in the early years of the 20th century.

The exact dispute which caused this rupture can be guessed at. In his *Kerryman* article on Albinia, Paud Gilday states that she 'fell deeply in love with a young man whom she knew in Surrey,' though she rarely spoke of it later in life. Years later, a former employee of Albinia's recalled that she had been disappointed in love – her father did not agree with her choice of partner.²² This patriarchal interference in her personal life was probably the cause of much animosity towards her family. It is easy to construe that Albinia, when writing, 'tis we who bear the crosses' was making reference to her treatment at the hands of her family.

Another turning-point was the Boer War. Controversial in British society, it was also deeply unpopular with Irish nationalists, many of whom sympathised with the Boer national struggle. The Irish Home Rule Party opposed the conflict and James Connolly, later a leader of the Easter Rising in 1916, took an explicitly pro-Boer position and organised an anti-war protest in Dublin. At first Albinia's sympathies were with her country of birth. She worked for a spell at the War Office, where her brother was now Secretary of State. By 1903 St John Brodrick had enjoyed a successful career in British politics, having entered Parliament as a Conservative in 1880. Over time Albinia came to have serious doubts about the morality of Britain's position, particularly following the deaths of friends of her family. The conflict left Albinia questioning Britain's Imperial policy.²³ It seems likely that she left the War Office some time in 1900, thus leading to her 'period of mental and spiritual solitude' which lasted from 1900 to 1903.

A writer of Unionist lyrics in 1893, ten years later she had become a political radical. The origin of this catharsis was twofold: patriarchal interference in her private life; and disillusionment

with the Boer conflict – Gilday states that ‘the death of love and the folly of an imperialist war caused Albinia to take stock of her life.’²⁴ The fact that her brother was Secretary of State for War may even have resulted in Albinia coming to associate her own family with British aggression. The clearest evidence we have dates her estrangement to 1903. In a letter to John St Loe Strachey (editor of *The Spectator*, 1887-1925), dated May 1916, St John Brodrick wrote: ‘She separated herself from my family thirteen years ago and I have not seen her since; she has always been very unbalanced in her views.’²⁵ They would remain unreconciled throughout his lifetime.

III

In 1903, aged forty-two, Albinia trained as a nurse. She began her career in the District Infirmary in Ashton-under-Lyne, Lancashire. As with her other activities, Albinia threw herself into nursing with great devotion. She later described her period in Ashton-under-Lyne as particularly trying: ‘For six weeks at a stretch I have been on duty eighteen hours daily, snatching my meals as best I could, and being called up at night as well.’²⁶

Albinia was following a common path for women who sought independence and some degree of status. Nursing offered a generation of women the opportunity to remove themselves from dependence on men, exercise philanthropy, and play a role in civil society. For a woman like Albinia, from an aristocratic background and with a measure of public recognition as a writer, her rise to the top of the profession was swift; she quickly became among the most prominent nursing leaders in Britain.

Until her work in Kerry forced her to take a back seat on issues relating to nursing politics, the period c. 1911–1918 saw Albinia involved in a number of important nursing controversies. Indeed, such is the volume of debate on nursing issues that Albinia was involved in during this time that a full discussion of her activities is

beyond the scope of this article.²⁷ This paper will concentrate briefly on two aspects of Albinia’s nursing career: her pioneering work on prevention of venereal disease; and her fundraising and educational trip to the United States of America.

A measure of Albinia’s radicalism as a nurse was her stance on sex education. On 23 July 1909, at the International Congress of Nurses, held in London, she presented a paper entitled ‘Morality in Relation to Health.’ Ann Wickham states that this was the first time in which a call was publicly made for greater instruction on the dangers of venereal diseases. Albinia’s paper involved a matter-of-fact description of the known science of sexually transmitted diseases, and described the best methods to treat the conditions.²⁸ She pointed out the limited instruction on venereal diseases given at British nursing schools and described the difficulty in obtaining statistics on the prevalence of the condition since doctors often omitted such information on death certificates, for reasons of propriety.

Such was the impact of Albinia’s paper that it was published in the *British Nursing Journal* as well as being offered on sale to the general public the following year.²⁹ She continued to write and lecture on the topic for a number of years. In 1914 she gave evidence to the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases; evidently, she was now regarded as an expert on the subject.

A measure of Albinia’s ambition and determination as a nurse is her decision in 1912 to visit the United States. Here she planned to study American nursing; and to raise money for her projects in Ireland.³⁰ Her schedule, organised by the British Embassy in Washington, included meetings with Lavinia Dock, the prominent nursing leader, as well as well-known Irish-American judges, politicians and businessmen. Ever ecumenical-minded, she addressed meetings of Episcopalians, and also Catholic, Irish nationalist-supporting societies such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians.³¹

While in America, Albinia also enrolled in a

course on nursing in the University of Columbia, where she believed the standard of health-care education was much higher than in the United Kingdom.³² Her intention, both in fundraising and education was to benefit the new hospital she was then building in Sneem, Co. Kerry. By 1912 Albinia had withdrawn from her career as a prominent nursing leader in England, to devote herself to Ireland.

IV

Although she would spend much of the following eight years in England, in 1904 Albinia took residence in Ireland for the first time. She undertook midwifery training in the Rotunda Hospital in Dublin the following year.³³ However, it is her decision, in June 1908, to purchase 13.5 acres of land in Sneem, Co. Kerry, and build a hospital that she is most remembered for; she would be closely associated with the area until her death. The area Albinia Brodrick moved to was one of the poorest in the entire country. Albinia herself described the poverty she saw there in the clearest terms:

In the Congested District Board south of Glenbeigh, Co. Kerry, there were one thousand and fifty three one-roomed cabins, occupied by five to eleven human beings each, not to speak of the four-footed inhabitants, where they cook, wash, eat, and sleep.³⁴

Moving to south Kerry, in middle age, to devote the remainder of her life to the welfare of some of the poorest people in the country was Albinia at her most romantic: she said she moved to Kerry as an act of contrition for her family's expropriation of land during the 17th and 18th centuries and for her grandfather's actions during the Famine.³⁵ She purchased the land from the Congested Districts Board, for £40. This purchase involved Albinia in one of the strangest episodes of her entire career. Despite her assertion that she came to Ireland in restitution for her ancestors' actions her purchase of the land necessitated the eviction of the farm's tenant, Con 'The Gun' O'Sullivan

and his family. Albinia arrived at the O'Sullivan farm and informed them that the land was required for a 'greater purpose' and that they were to be evicted. O'Sullivan never forgave Albinia for her actions.³⁶

This episode illustrates a certain unfeeling side to Albinia's character. Even if the eviction of a family of poor tenants was acceptable on the basis that 'the ends justifies the means,' the incident illustrates her often-described lack of understanding for the character of the Irish she lived among. It appears that despite Albinia's philanthropism, her upper-class manner did not endear her to locals.

She called her new hospital Ballincoona, or Baile an Chúnaimh, meaning the 'House of Help.' It was an ambitious project: four acres of bog were reclaimed, 5,000 trees were planted, a well dug, outhouses built, and road laid.³⁷ Also up-to-date was the hospital building itself. It included two wards, an operating theatre, surgery, dispensary, anaesthetic room, and a community hall. Albinia noted that: 'It was cheering to us to have the verdict of a matron from one of the greatest London hospitals that Ballincoona compares favourably in up-to-date arrangements with the newest metropolitan hospital.'³⁸ Ballincoona was clearly a most ambitious undertaking; its failure was a blow for the community.

By 1914 the building work had cost £11,723.³⁹ Of this, £1,732 came from donors; therefore it is probable that the vast bulk, about £10,000, came from Albinia's own diminishing resources. She decided to make the most of her upper-class connections in order to raise funds for her project. In an article in the *London Times* she stated:

I have done my utmost, living the simplest of simple lives in my tiny farm cottage upon about 5s per week. I have sold my beautiful old furniture, my china, knick knacks and jewellery, but still we cannot get sufficient money and I am obliged to beg.⁴⁰

A newspaper interview she gave upon embarking in New York in 1912 paints a similar picture.

When asked: 'You have sold your furniture and many family heirlooms to raise money for the peasantry?', she replied: 'Why should I not? It simply means forsaking a little pleasure by one person for the happiness of many. No one with a heart could see the poverty I have seen in Ireland and do otherwise.'⁴¹ Indeed, from this period until her death, Albinia would live in modest circumstances.

The hospital was not Albinia's sole venture in Ballincoona. Inspired by the example of her friend Horace Plunkett, she founded the Kilterahane Co-operative Society. Members could buy goods on credit, and at a much better price than was available in privately owned stores locally. This is said to have 'earned her the hatred of every gombeen man and commercial traveller from Cahirciveen to Parknasilla,'⁴² no doubt to her delight.

The co-op itself faded out during the 1920s, and the hospital was never fully functional. One must ask why the project, which had gained so much publicity, was a failure. One reason must be Albinia's business skills, which were lamentable. Acting as her own architect and surveyor,⁴³ she failed to take the advice of local tradesmen in building Ballincoona, which led to several costly errors. Although overruns depleted her funds Albinia's determination was undimmed: by 1913 she was to be seen, dressed in labourer's clothes, struggling to keep building the hospital alone.⁴⁴ Another reason for the collapse of the project was timing. Building began just prior to the Great War, which was followed by the War of Independence and Civil War. A capital project of the scope of Ballincoona could never have been completed in the midst of these events. It is also possible that Albinia's donors, most of whom were English or Anglo-Irish, withdrew their support once her republican views became evident after 1916.⁴⁵

A letter by Albinia to a friend offers a clearer explanation for the failure of the hospital and co-op. Due to her commitment to the republican cause Albinia was forced to spend long

periods of time in Tralee, treating IRA men. This necessitated the neglect of her project at Ballincoona. She wrote:

There is no possibility of getting cheques signed, or of paying wages, or of ordering things, so long as I am here. On the hand, committees and other things necessitate my being here. One feels very much torn in two, of course I was not reckoning on this complication, when I broke up my household, and now, my duty lies this end, on the principle that the whole is greater than the part. Our work at home, is after all, only a small one. This touches a very greater number of lives and in its way is National, as all work must be which is construction or re-construction.⁴⁶

It is likely that staying away from Ballincoona, and 'breaking up' her household, although freeing Albinia to work for Sinn Féin in Tralee, did great damage to the chances of her hospital and co-op being a success.

In 1915 Albinia entered into a public correspondence with Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, on the use of untrained nurses to treat wounded soldiers from the Great War. Describing the level of care as 'scandalous,' she called for the creation of a Board of Nursing experts to deal with the issue. The War Office resisted her proposal.⁴⁷ It appears that at least initially Albinia was a supporter of the war effort. She offered Ballincoona for injured members of the British Army. To her ever-lasting disgust, her offer was declined. The refusal of the British government to accept her offer has been presented as one of the incidents which led her towards Irish republicanism.⁴⁸ However, there is some consensus that the main cause of her embracing of the Sinn Féin cause was the 1916 Rebellion.

V

Albinia Brodrick, in common with many nationalists at the time, learned Irish and became an advocate for the language, often signing her name Gobnait Ní Bhruadair. She joined the Gaelic League in Dublin in the early 1900s. Founded by Douglas Hyde, the League

quickly became the leading society in the 'Gaelic Revival,' which sought to encourage interest in Irish language and culture. The League attracted many other Anglo-Irish members, including the artist Cesca Chenevix Trench and Constance Markievicz. Although originally non-political, the League eventually came to be infiltrated by the Irish Republican Brotherhood, who sought an Ireland free from English rule, by force if necessary. This, alongside the growing anti-Protestant sectarianism of the Gaelic League forced many Protestants to leave the movement – Albinia would not. She does not seem to have been in any way perplexed by these developments, although she remained a constitutional nationalist.

It is possible to detect the motivation for Albinia to join the Gaelic League and call herself *Gobnait Ní Bhruadair* once she moved to Ireland. The Anglo-Irish class, by the first decades of the 20th century, had become inextricably linked in peoples' minds with unionism, landlordism and reactionary politics. This eschewing of the tainted Ascendancy identity was an outward manifestation of change that had occurred within, i.e. the decision to become a nationalist. Events soon transpired to further radicalise her politics.

VI

As with so many Irish nationalists, the Easter Rising of 1916, and the executions that followed, changed Albinia's political outlook. Following the Rising, she eschewed constitutionalism and became convinced of the need for an independent republic.⁴⁹

A poem, *Dublin – May 1916*, written in the aftermath of the Rising fell foul of military censors, who prevented the *Catholic Bulletin* from publishing it. The final verse of the poem reads:

Silent we stand. The iron hand baptises
Éire, afresh, with blood and tears thy sod!
Martyrs! One holy place is ours, Unconquered,
Our souls are safe with God.⁵⁰

Once again Albinia's admiration for martyrs is apparent. The actions of the 'iron hand' in creating 'Martyrs' led to the conversion of Albinia to Sinn Féin; she was deeply impressed with the bravery of the rebels.

During this period Albinia joined both Sinn Féin and *Cumann na mBan*. From this period until her death Albinia would devote much of her considerable energy to nationalist politics. With the passion of the convert she became devoted to the Republic; she would brook no compromise. It would be mistaken, however, to view Albinia as a 'gun-slinger' in the romantic, Countess Markievicz mould. Age (Albinia was 55 in 1916) and temperament (she still viewed herself primarily as a nurse) prevented that. Rather, she saw her role in the War of Independence which began in 1919 as a continuation of her nursing activities of the previous years: devoting herself to supplying Volunteers with food, clothing and cigarettes.⁵¹

As a known supporter of the independence movement, Ballincoona became a frequent target for Black and Tan raids (as it would later be for Free State troops). Máire Comerford wrote that British forces would not 'consent to honour the Red Cross Flag when she raised it there to notify the presence of wounded and invoke its protection for them. Instead it was raided and its use for the purpose for which it was built was obstructed.'⁵²

One Volunteer later described the atmosphere in Albinia's house:

It was during the trouble in the mountains. I was in the Column. There was twenty-five of us altogether . . . she was helping us and looking after us and bringing us clothes . . . she had posters and that to join the IRA . . . and she'd be there at the head of the table and telling everything.⁵³

A combination of IRA activity and Black and Tan actions during this period created a very difficult situation for the people of Kerry. In a letter from May 1921 Albinia wrote:

If ten years ago anyone had told me that we could live through what we are living through now, I imagine that one would have thought him a sheer lunatic. [We] have neither trains nor posts. Everything in the way of provisioning must be done by train or common car. In occasional places lorries can run. But between want of permits, cut roads, broken bridges and felled trees, even that means of locomotion is more than difficult. [T]his last week an order is out forbidding the use of bicycles without a permit, which most people would be refused even if their principles allowed them to ask for one . . . Every soul in Tralee and for three miles outside must be indoors by nine o'clock and you may begin to form a faint conception of the general foundations of our life.⁵⁴

In the same letter, Albinia described the scene in Tralee when the bodies of three IRA volunteers, murdered by the Black and Tans, were brought back into the barracks in the town:

They must still have been, or one of them must have been alive for the *blood was still running from the lorry* when it came in. They were left for two hours in the barrack yard, by which time they were already dead. The face of one, a fine young fellow I knew personally, was all smashed in.

It was clear to Lloyd George by early 1921 that Sinn Féin was not going to be defeated militarily; any end to the violence in Ireland would require negotiating a settlement between the various parties to the struggle. In seeking to bring the conflict to a conclusion, Lloyd George relied on the support of Albinia's estranged brother St John Brodrick, now Earl of Midleton, who since 1910 had been leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance.

By 1921 Midleton had become concerned at the spate of Big House burnings and other violence, and was eager to salvage something for the beleaguered Protestant minority in any political settlement. Along with his cousin James Francis Bernard, 4th Earl of Bandon, a prominent Cork landowner, he began agitating to introduce 'Home Rule Dominion' status for Ireland.⁵⁵ This would have staved off partition

and perhaps allowed the Ascendancy retain some influence in a self-governing Ireland.

Besides being Albinia's cousin, Lord Bandon's family, the Bernards, had enjoyed close social and political links with the Brodricks for generations. At around 6.30 a.m. on 21 June 1921 Castle Bernard was burnt to the ground by a company of IRA men led by Commandant Sean Hales (1881–1922).⁵⁶ Lord Bandon, who was kidnapped during the attack, was targeted due to his involvement with Midleton in the Dominion scheme, and as a hostage against the execution of prisoners held by the British in Cork City Jail and Mountjoy Prison.⁵⁷ Bandon's Lord-Lieutenancy of Cork may have been a further factor that brought him to the attention of the IRA.

Having recovered from her ordeal, Lady Bandon had retired to the gardener's cottage; Castle Bernard was completely destroyed. Guarded by an officer and platoon from Bandon garrison, she was visited by her niece, Mary Gausson. On the Sunday after the attack Gausson and Lady Bandon were shocked to receive a visitor: Albinia. Albinia's politics were well known, thus making her decidedly *persona non grata* among her newly dispossessed relatives. At first Lady Bandon refused to see her cousin-in-law, though such was the latter's insistence that Mary records the Countess 'finally consented and that terrible woman came in.' It appears that Sinn Féin sent Albinia as a representative to give the family terms for his release; they would have known she was likely to get an audience. Albinia stated that she had no information on Lord Bandon (he was being held in various safe-houses in the area of Barryroe), having not seen 'our leaders.' She advised Lady Bandon to put pressure on the Government to release the prisoners.⁵⁸ Meda Ryan, quoting from the papers of Major Percival, the notorious counter-guerrilla warfare expert of the British army stationed in the area, writes:

A well-known lady [Albinia], who had become an ardent Sinn Féiner, came down to Castle Bernard

and said to Lady Bandon, 'I have been sent down to Castle Bernard to warn you that, unless the government conclude a Truce, Lord Bandon will be killed'. The reply was 'If that is all you have to say, you better go home'.⁵⁹

Gaussen, who was present at the meeting, also recorded her version of the meeting:

When Alba [*sic*] made this statement [that Lady Bandon should put pressure on the government] I remarked (with temper) that she ought to withdraw her connection from Sinn Féin, her reply being that she knew more about Sinn Féin than I did (a remark that went no way towards condoning murder). She laid stress upon 'our leaders' and I talked of blackmail.⁶⁰

Despite the upset Albinia had caused, Gaussen declined to have her detained, explaining, with a snobbery that is breathtaking, 'We had no officer up here at the moment and I'm afraid it wouldn't have done if I had asked the Corporal to arrest her.'⁶¹ Even with the family seat still smouldering behind them, it appears that certain aspects of the Anglo-Irish code were sacrosanct.

The meeting between Albinia and her cousin-in-law Lady Bandon could be perceived as showing a compassionless side to her character. However, the story may be somewhat more complicated. That well-informed observer, Eoin ('Pope') O'Mahony, who knew Albinia personally, has recorded that far from taking a hostile view of her landlord relatives, she 'went to infinite pains to intercede with the IRA on behalf of her cousin.' If this is true, the evidence of Gaussen and Percival must be read in a different light. It seems likely that Albinia exerted pressure on the Sinn Féin leadership to treat her cousin well or to release him.⁶²

Pressure for the release of Albinia's cousin was also applied by Lord Midleton; he made it a pre-condition of any talks with de Valera.⁶³ After King George V's appeal for peace in Ireland, Lloyd George invited de Valera to London for talks. Prior to this de Valera and

Arthur Griffith met Midleton in the Mansion House in Dublin, where they agreed to various safeguards for the Protestant community. They also agreed, as a pre-truce token of good faith, to release Lord Bandon; he had been well treated by his captors.⁶⁴

With Lord Bandon free, talks could proceed. Albinia had no faith in British honesty; she sought a meeting with Michael Collins to warn him of what she saw as their duplicity. She even warned the Sinn Féin leadership that her brother ought not to be trusted.⁶⁵ This was probably unfair – Midleton played the part of 'honest broker' in the negotiations leading to the Truce, despite scepticism about the process.⁶⁶ By now their estrangement was absolute; when asked by a member of the public if she was the sister of Lord Midleton, she replied, 'He used to be my brother.'⁶⁷

Collins declined to take Albinia's warnings about British untrustworthiness on board: on 6 December 1921 he led a delegation which signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Albinia, who was intransigently republican and anti-partitionist in her beliefs, was a vociferous opponent of the agreement. Midleton was also opposed the Treaty, but for markedly different reasons. With few of the undertakings promised him by Griffith and de Valera included in the text, he saw the agreement as containing little to safeguard the Ascendancy interest. He retired to England and played no further part in Irish affairs. Although equally disgusted, the last thing on Albinia's mind was exile. She intended to fight the Treaty.

VII

The election of Albinia Brodrick to Kerry County Council in 1920 illustrates the high regard in which she was held by the Sinn Féin movement. She was one of only five Sinn Féin women councillors to hold office from 1918–1925. She was elected uncontested for the Division of Killorglin, and became a reserve chairperson. At least initially, she was the sole woman on the council.⁶⁸

Among the many challenges facing the Dáil was its huge financial difficulties. To save money a policy of amalgamation of the various cottage hospitals, coupled with the closure of the infamous workhouse network throughout the country, was proposed. Led to a large extent by the county councils, local communities fought a virulent campaign against the policy.⁶⁹ In Kerry, Albinia came to dominate the opposition; she led an unofficial amalgamation committee which sought to reverse the government's decision.⁷⁰ Such was her anger at the policy that Albinia in fact resigned from the council. She later visited the workhouse in Killarney, where patients in Kerry had been sent. Máire Comerford described the scene:

She found the workhouse thronged with nuns and patients, who were even in the out-houses, in a terrible condition. Having known her so well I have no difficulty in understanding the conflict which existed between her instincts and training as a nurse and her devotion to the Republican cause to which she was all the more loyal when she questioned the orders she received on this occasion.⁷¹

A constant theme of Albinia's career is a refusal to compromise her principles. However, on this occasion, after fighting unsuccessfully to reach an accommodation, she relented and was convinced to return to local office.

These actions gained the ire of the Local Government department inspector Eamon Coogan. In a letter to Austin Stack dated February 1922, he criticised Albinia for having 'Irished her name' which meant she still 'ruled the roost' in Kerry local democracy, which, he claimed, she had under British rule.⁷² The animosity between central government and Kerry County Council culminated in the resignation of twelve councillors, including Albinia, in May 1923. In a letter they stated they would resign 'until guarantees will be given that no further executions will take place and that prisoners will receive Prisoners of War treatment.' The Council, which had not met since August 1922, and was a thorn in central government's side,

was at this meeting dissolved until 1926.⁷³ Albinia was not a candidate; by this stage her refusal to recognise Free State institutions would preclude that. However, during her three years in local office, she was a member of a very exclusive group: Sinn Féin women who actively participated in the democratic process.

VIII

Albinia was now an inveterate republican, utterly committed to a thirty-two county republic, and dismissive of any other solution – she would maintain this position for the rest of her life. The Treaty debates which were held from 19 December to 7 January provided Albinia with a public forum in which to express her views. The signing of the Treaty two weeks earlier had opened fissures in the Sinn Féin movement that would soon lead to civil war.

On 20 December 1921, the second day of the debates, Fionán Lynch (Sinn Féin TD for Kerry Limerick West) took the floor of the house, and stated, 'I can speak for the people of South Kerry.' The journalist Pádraig De Burca, recorded an unexpected reply that came from the public gallery:

'No!'

The House was thunderstruck. The dissenting voice was that of a sombre lady sitting in the body of the hall. All eyes were turned upon her, and Fionán Lynch, with biting emphasis, completed his sentence –

'With one exception – an Englishwoman.'

The interrupter was asked to leave the Chamber. Quietly closing her notebook, and still smiling, the Honourable Albinia Broderick [*sic*], Republican sister of a Southern Unionist Peer, left the hall.⁷⁴

Although the most public, this was only one occasion where Albinia's birth and religion was used as a rhetorical weapon against her.

During the Civil War, which lasted until May 1923, Albinia continued her nursing activities at Ballincoona, this time for the Irregular troops. Munster was the stronghold of the anti-Treaty side, with Kerry, as the actions of its

County Council suggests, representing a particular bastion of dissent – its IRA were predominantly on the Irregular side. Shortly after fighting began over the terms of the Treaty, she was arrested by Free State troops and held in custody in the Lansdowne Arms Hotel in Kenmare. Upon finding escape impossible, she demonstrated her displeasure by smashing every available object in the room and throwing them out the window, including the mattress which she had torn open.⁷⁵ The soldiers, exasperated by her actions, pronounced her an 'impossible woman.'⁷⁶ Indeed, such was the disquiet caused by her actions that the decision was shortly made to have her released; incarcerating Albinia Brodrick was judged more trouble than it was worth.

A more serious incident involved Albinia being shot by Free State troops. In April 1923, a column of Irregulars, whom Albinia had been aiding, were holding out in the Sneem area. Free State troops, on receiving this intelligence decided to attack them from the rear. A convoy of two or three Crossley Tenders set out from Waterville to engage the Irregulars. Albinia, on hearing of this, set off from Ballincoona to warn 'her boys.' She rode her bicycle into Sneem, where the Free State troops caught up with her. She refused repeated orders to halt, and continued, in the words of local historian T.E. Stoakley:

[K]eeping to the middle of the road and refusing to give way, so that she could not be passed without being run down. This strange procession went on until the stretch of road through Moneyflugh townland was reached, when Albinia, who was then just about sixty, was dead beat and turned into a boreen. Then, in the words of the narrator, 'Some silly b— — took a shot at her and drilled her clean through the buttocks'.⁷⁷

Albinia, true to form, would later laugh off the incident. Furthermore, she later stated she did not resent being shot at; the sound of the gun afforded the Irregulars the opportunity to flee.

The *British Journal of Nursing* offered its

sympathies to Albinia, 'one of the most altruistic of women, and one of the most charming and witty members of the Nursing Profession.' It stated that "Troops who deliberately fire on old ladies have yet to learn the meaning of the chivalry of war!" However, perhaps suppressing a smile at the incident, the journal conceded that Albinia was 'as game as a woman half her age, and worthy of the bow and spear of her enemies.'⁷⁸ In Albinia's own account of the shooting, she described how, having had her wound dressed by the soldiers, 'I informed the officer that I was on hunger strike.'⁷⁹

Following her arrest by the Free State troops, Albinia was taken from Kilmainham Jail, and then to the North Dublin Union internment camp, where her fellow inmates included her friend Máire Comerford. Hunger strike did not prevent Albinia from continuing her political activities in prison. Albinia's talent as a nurse was once again in demand. She stated: 'I found myself on my sixth or seventh day of hunger strike assuming the nursing charge of the ward, hopping around to the patients, doing my best to alleviate pain.'⁸⁰

Although she remained busy, Albinia's refusal of food caused her health to deteriorate. Margaret Buckley has recorded that after thirteen days on hunger strike, Albinia sent for her. Albinia told Buckley:

[T]hat she did not think she would last much longer, and I, looking at her, felt that she was right. She was quite cheerful and philosophic about dying. 'An old woman . . . is not much loss, but my death will be sure to make a noise, because of that wretched little prefix to my name, and in that way my death may do more good for Ireland than my life could do'. And her eyes sparkled.⁸¹

Due to her advanced age and injury, there is no doubt but Albinia intended to die in custody, thus showing her ultimate commitment to the republican cause. Of course, such an action would be hardly surprising; she on several occasions since 1893 had affirmed her belief in the moral justification of martyrdom; here she had

an opportunity to put her words into practice.

However, she never got this opportunity as on Friday, 15 May 1923 she was released after fifteen days hunger strike. Albinia would later write that she was unsure of the cause of her release. Interestingly, it was Lord Midleton who exerted influence on the Free State government to secure his sister's release; proof that despite a now twenty-year enmity he retained some familial affection for his younger sister. This was the last significant occasion in which their lives intersected.

Although Albinia's side, anti-Treaty Sinn Féin lost the Civil War, she had no intention of leaving politics. During the remaining thirty-two years of her life she never wavered from the staunch republican ideology she had formed during the period c.1900–1923. Living alone in Ballincoona, ideological inflexibility led to Albinia becoming increasingly politically isolated. Originally a supporter of Éamon de Valera, she broke with him in 1926 when he founded the Fianna Fáil party. Albinia remained a member of the now much-diminished Sinn Féin movement. She was involved in yet another split in 1933, at the Cumann na mBan convention. Feeling the organisation had become too concerned with social reform to the detriment of the 'National Question', i.e. declaring a republic and ending partition, Albinia resigned in protest, alongside such women as Mary MacSwiney, Eileen Tubbert and Noneen Brugha. They formed a splinter group, Mná na Poblachta (Women of the Republic), devoted to campaigning 'for the glory of God and the Glory of Ireland.' Her political convictions set in aspic, she turned her attentions once again to journalism, and edited a Sinn Féin-supporting newspaper, *Irish Freedom (Saoirse)* from 1926–1937.⁸²

Albinia had so little faith in the Free State government that in the late 1930s she had her hospital dismantled, so as to prevent the building from being used after her death 'for some purpose hostile to Ireland'. (She feared that after her death it might be used as a military

base). The hospital contents were donated to foreign missions in India; the slates from the roof were sold to a Cork builder, thus leaving the building open to the elements. It remains a ruin to this day. With her hospital dismantled and co-op dissolved, Albinia cut a somewhat marginal figure; her shop remained open in Sneem until 1945. She continued working locally as a nurse until her death on 6 January 1955 aged 93.⁸³ In his graveside eulogy the Rev. F.J. Roycroft, prophesied that: 'The grass of the churchyard would be worn thin by the feet of people coming to see the last resting-place of this great patriot.'⁸⁴ Fame, alas, is a fickle thing, and Roycroft's prophecy has yet to be borne out. Her reputation is in the hands of historians; she awaits a definitive biography.

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