



Politics and Art

Mary Swanzy 1882–1978

Liz Cullinan

Liz Cullinane is a multi-disciplinary artist and designer for theatre. She has been researching Irish artist Mary Swanzy since 2007 and is currently working on an opera based on Swanzy's late paintings. Liz published her biography of Swanzy with IMMA for the Swanzy retrospective *Voyages* in 2018.

The Swanzy family name is synonymous in Cork and Lisburn with the Irish War of Independence and partition of Ireland. In Dublin the Swanzy name carries weight historically in medical circles and today largely within the art world.

The family member who has occupied my attention is Dublin born artist Mary Swanzy 1882–1978, daughter of eminent ophthalmic surgeon Sir Henry Rosborough Swanzy and Mary Knox Denham. My Masters study was an evaluation of Miss Swanzy's long and prolific career, it developed into more significant questions about colonialism, war, and the shifting place of modernist women artists in the newly found Irish nation state. Prior to my work the only publications on Swanzy's achievements were three catalogues by Pym's Gallery, London. Knowledge was limited mainly to Irish collectors and art historians; her paintings in Ireland's public collections are mainly landscapes.

The political role of the family was written large in Irish history in 1920 when Mary's cousin Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) Inspector Oswald Swanzy was killed by the IRA. It was a reprisal attack ordered by Michael Collins for the murder of Cork's first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor Tomás Mac Curtain. At the coroner's inquest into MacCurtain's death, D.I. Swanzy among others, including British Prime Minister, Lloyd George, was held responsible for 'the willful murder' of the Lord Mayor.¹ MacCurtain had been shot in front of his family at home in Cork's Blackpool area.

Swanzy's death as the Sunday congregation spilled out of the cathedral provoked a pogrom in Lisburn, changing the demographic in the town irreparably. Protestant loyalist crowds looted and burned almost all of the Catholic businesses and attacked Catholic homes. Large numbers of Catholics left. Despite assistance from British troops the violence spread to Belfast and twenty-two people lost their lives. There's evidence the Ulster Volunteers helped to organise the burnings.² The episode became known as the Swanzy Riots in extensive newspaper coverage in Belfast, Dublin and London.

¹ McCarthy, Kieran (22 August 2020). 'A Gun and its Story: The Assassination of Oswald Swanzy'. *Irish Examiner*
² Lawlor, Pearse (2009). *The Burnings 1920*. Mercier Press. p.153. ISBN 978-1-85635-612-1



Mary Swanzy's family was a Protestant professional family, not landed Anglo-Irish as has often been suggested; they lived in rented property in Dublin's Merrion Square. Sir Henry's honorary title was granted in 1907 for his services to medicine. The publication of his *Handbook of diseases of the eye and their treatment* in 1884 was an immediate and international success. He spearheaded the campaign for the Adelaide hospital in 1904. Dr Kathleen Lynn the first female doctor to work at the hospital went on to found Ireland's first children's hospital. Clearly Sir Henry Swanzy was a champion of women's education providing a route for Lynn's success.

Mary Swanzy, the middle of his three daughters, was highly educated, speaking both French and German before she reached eighteen. She had an 'over-riding hobby' as she put it in old age, tongue firmly in her cheek. Women of her era and class were permitted hobbies rather than careers. She also stated that had she been a Henry and not a Mary, her life would have been very different. Very true.

Her dedication to painting was life-long, her talent unquestionable, however, hers is not a recognised name in the way of her Irish peers Jack Yeats, Paul Henry or William Orpen. Nor even among the recovered younger generation of female artists such as modernists Mainie Jellet or Evie Hone known for their Cubist works.

Swanzy had fifteen solo exhibitions in her lifetime, a unique achievement in Irish art; she also exhibited at the RHA, Society of Dublin Painters and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. She had solo exhibitions in America, London and Paris, was a member of both the Beaux-Arts and the Paris Salon des Indépendants. In 1946 Swanzy exhibited with her European contemporaries Picasso, Braque and



Ebb tide, 1941

Chagall in London. Few, if any, Irish artists have ever achieved as much. So why is her reputation not greater? This maybe more about timing and politics than first appeared to be the case.

The Swanzy family was on the wrong side of Irish history during the shift from British rule to independence, the titled father, the Swanzy Riots and Mary's own belief that "in revolution the baby is often thrown out with the bath water." Mary Swanzy was not a supporter of nationalism, sending food to the Irish soldiers in German POW camps during the First World War. Her sister was chief recruiter in Ireland for Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps consistent with their Protestant origin and most likely unionist approach. A public demonstration of the family's politic or maybe suitable employment for a woman of her class, both sisters relied on their inheritance after their father's death in 1913.

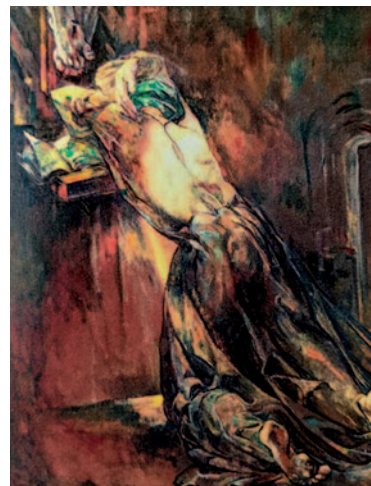
Like many of Ireland's now feted modernists Swanzy exiled herself, spending fifty years in London, believing life in her beloved native city would have been too narrow in the new state. As an exile to London in 1926 she would have been starting from scratch, being female, middle aged and proudly Irish would not have been helpful in making her way without gallery representation.

Today Irish collectors and art historians are primarily familiar with the Swanzy paintings that fit into the European Cubist story. Stylistically she is a chameleon, her shifts make sense in the broader canvas of social, political and artistic changes, but awkward for art historians to situate her in more recent discussions of Irish women painters.

Returning for three years to family in Dublin during the Second World War, she remained focused on the disturbing events of the world. Miss Swanzy was prolific in output and exhibiting at this time, her work was noted in reviews for its powerful evocation of war at the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art 1943.

In order to further understand Swanzy's limited public profile, I decided to follow the money. In 2007 Swanzy was achieving good prices at auction, this was not evident during her lifetime, she had always priced her work highly even in the Paris exhibitions. Swanzy had lived frugally on her limited inheritance while being documented as a wealthy Anglo-Irish artist. A big disconnect was going on between fact and received history, Swanzy always identified as an Irish woman despite her fifty years in London, her reputation was divided perhaps between the cognitive dissonance of the two islands. The gendered reaction against Protestant women artists in 1960's Ireland³ may also have worked against her reputation.

Mary Swanzy has a dedicated following, evidenced by the popularity of her retrospective exhibition *Voyages* at The Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) 2018 that toured to The Crawford Gallery, Cork and Limerick's City Gallery. The accompanying monograph was reprinted within the early weeks of the exhibition and continues to sell well today.



Fall of France

³ Kennedy, Róisín, *Art and the Nation State: The Reception of Modern Art in Ireland*, Oxford Academic <http://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781789622355.003.0006>

