

***‘We have all got to go on living together’<sup>1</sup>:  
Evaluating Rosamond Stephen’s ‘Record’ of a turbulent Ireland,  
1912-23***

***Rosamond Stephen (1868-1951) - a life under God***

Rosamond Stephen was a grand-daughter of a British colonial under-secretary and academic, daughter of a High Court judge and a cousin to Virginia Woolf. She thus came from a rarified cultural and intellectual background. Rosamond was brought up as a theist, but this proved unsatisfactory for her spiritual needs and she eventually found an amenable and amiable home within the Church of Ireland, being confirmed in 1896. Holidaying in Louth in the late nineteenth century seems to have awakened a love for Ireland and she eventually moved to Belfast in the early twentieth century, describing herself simply as ‘a church worker’.<sup>2</sup>

In historical terms she saw the Church of Ireland as a truly ‘national’ church. Her attempts at what we would now call ‘ecumenism’ and political balance and understanding were looked upon with suspicion in a highly polarised and sectarian society.<sup>3</sup> But the ‘Record’ shows how albeit with difficulties (some external, some self-imposed) she was able to cross barriers. In 1901 she formed the Guild of Witness the purpose of which was a prayerful encouragement of ‘patriotism and [to] discover fresh ways by which the Church could fulfil her mission to the nation’. This became the Irish Guild of Witness in 1918 with an emphasis on Irishness, including the language. Rosamond lived in Belfast until 1919 when she came to Dublin. Eschewing proselytism, Rosamond publicly encouraged warm relations between Catholics and Protestants and batted away objections and opposition from various critics with politeness and good humour. She had a small but eclectic lending library.<sup>4</sup> With 5,000 volumes, in 1931 it became the nucleus of the present-day RCB Library – in Archbishop Gregg’s words after Rosamond’s death ‘a most valuable possession’.<sup>5</sup>

Another ‘most valuable possession’ is also Stephen’s ‘Record’, a largely copy-typewritten set of letters returned to her by the recipients (her mother until her death in 1912, and then mainly her sisters, Dorothea in India and Kate in Cambridge) and her own journal entries that cover the years from 1902 to 1940. These letters and observations (some of which remain also in her original long and distinctively neat spidery handwriting) chronicle Ireland north and south. Stephen turned out to be an acute and perceptive observer of the Irish revolutionary period in its big things and little things. In June 2022 the RCB Library’s ‘Archive of the Month’ was ‘Rosamond Stephen’s Civil War’. This dealt with the year 1922. This piece takes a longer perspective, examining Rosamond’s ‘Record’ covering the Irish revolutionary period from 1912 to 1923. It largely lets Rosamond speak for herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of a Guild pamphlet aimed the Orange population, *Record*, July 1913, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Title page of typed extracts from her 1912-14 journal, ‘The passing of Home Rule’.

<sup>3</sup> See O. Walsh, *An Englishwoman in Belfast: Rosamond Stephen's Record of the Great War* (Cork, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> RS to DIS July 22; RS to KS, 18 Oct. 22.

<sup>5</sup> S. Hood, ‘Christmas 1921’, RCB Library Archive of the Month, at <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/11082/christmas-1921> (accessed 26 April 2022); G. Willis, ‘Rosamond Stephen: a constructive visionary’, *New Divinity*, winter 1972, pp 160-165.

Rosamond was an 'ordinary' observer. Given her family background and social class she had some access to the elite; but the journal in the main offers no startling or special additions to the high history of the period. Its value is captured precisely in Rosamond's title. It is a 'Record' not only of events but, perhaps more significantly, of reactions, tone, atmosphere in this turbulent period of the island's history. Her conversations with the citizenry bring larger political, social, economic and cultural disputations alive. This piece takes a thematic approach, aiming to interrogate and analyse the 'Record' and how it fits into the chronicling of an Ireland - like planetary birth - slowly solidifying into the two jurisdictions that were to determine the island's trajectory and development over the succeeding century. These themes are:

1. 'Every publican in Belfast is said to be Roman, and every pawnbroker, Protestant' - Rosamond's 'insider-outsider' views of Ireland, north and south.
2. 'Absolutely constitutional' - Rosamond's politics.
3. 'The Protestants were not all bad' - Rosamond as recorder of 'oral history'.
4. 'My visiting in this Roman street is most important' - Rosamond's religious devotion.
5. 'All reduced to writing' - how Rosamond evoked atmosphere and tone.
6. Evaluating the 'Record' and its contribution to Irish history.

**1. 'Every publican in Belfast is said to be Roman, and every pawnbroker, Protestant' - Rosamond's 'insider-outsider' views of Ireland, north and south**

One commentator has perceptively observed that Rosamond '...remained loyal not to individuals, but to an idealised vision of Britishness, which matched an equally idealised, and equally unrealistic vision of Irishness.'<sup>6</sup> She was 'a distanced, if opinionated, observer... a liberal, unionist Englishwoman..'.<sup>7</sup> In 1911 she exhibited a sort of irritation with both Catholics and Protestants – 'It is very hard here not to get drawn in amongst the Protestants. All day long and every day they come to you for something, and all day long and every day the RCs push you off. It really is hard to get it fair and even'.<sup>8</sup>

The Great War exhibited Rosamond's essential outsidership to both Irelands – north and south, Protestant and Catholic. While no fan of Carson and the wilder shores of unionism, she was – and in this like many Irish unionists – unable to really comprehend the transcendental nature of Irish nationalism. She could be patronising and condescending. In 1916 her characterisation of a rebel as 'a silly, naughty boy' mirrored William Wylie (who prosecuted the rebels at courts martial) as 'a lot of silly boys'. This infantilising of what was a deadly serious endeavour was not guaranteed to endear Rosamond to many Catholics. Similarly, during the Great War she was consistently obsessed with recruiting and in favour of conscription and could not understand why it was anathema to so many. For her, the

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<sup>6</sup> Walsh, *An Englishwoman in Belfast*, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Walsh, *An Englishwoman in Belfast*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> RS to DJS, 3 Oct. 1911.

successful prosecution of the War was all - indeed, she could be quite insensitive; 'Poor Mrs. ----- is nearly mad over Johnny being dead, and he was a horrid boy if ever there was one'.<sup>9</sup>

But if Rosamond's 'dedication to the country of her adoption was complete'<sup>10</sup> the establishment of the Irish Free State in essence removed what was the most important part of that Irishness to her – its Britishness. She was distinctly unenchanted with the new dispensation, exhibited in a sort of snobbishness about the often token 'Oirishness' that characterised the Free State - '...We think the pleasure of writing "Fogra" instead of "Notice" and "An Post" instead of "Post Office is enough to outweigh the solid advantages now lost' and that the Irish '...now depend for their very existence on the King's navy...'.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. 'Absolutely constitutional' - Rosamond's politics

Rosamond, no politician, took a lively interest in politics. She was unafraid to take on anybody and everybody and her political discussions give us some insight into her tenacious and well-informed character. She was not the sort to even take 'yes' for an answer. The Home Rule crisis of 1912-14 exercised her greatly. She set out her political philosophy in a long letter to both her sisters on 28 July 1913:

The practical question which arises is what am I to do?...I propose as follows. Having taken no step to stop Home Rule I am going to be absolutely constitutional. I shall take no share in any proceeding of the official Unionist party...If the bill becomes law I shall recognise the authority of the Dublin Parliament should occasion arise...I shall not recognise Sir Edward [Carson] in any official capacity unless the king should confer some office upon him in the regular way...<sup>12</sup>

In late 1914 Rosamond was so alienated by Carson's 'Ulsterism' that she felt his actions and attitudes might turn her into a Home Ruler. She saw him as a careerist and manipulator - in 1917 she wrote 'Oh how I hate that man...going to the admiralty over to the showy job in London, and leaving the people he has upset to scramble as they can out of the mess he organised'.<sup>13</sup>

Stephen was a unionist, but hers was a relatively 'soft' and pragmatic unionism. She had an instinctive empathy with attempts to bridge the unionist-nationalist divide. Presciently, in early 1917 she was '...most awfully afraid that there will be more fighting before all is done...it is a real wild revolutionary temper everywhere...'.<sup>14</sup>

Thus she approved of the Convention, the last all-Ireland representative assembly that attempted to find an agreed all-Ireland polity in 1917-18. The 'Record' tells us that 'Tomorrow is the convention. I wrote a line to Sir Horace [Plunkett, later chairman] last night, and I said I

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<sup>9</sup> RS to DJS, 21 Aug. 17.

<sup>10</sup> Willis, 'Rosamond Stephen', p. 160.

<sup>11</sup> RS to KS, 12 Dec. 22.

<sup>12</sup> RS to KS and DJS, 28 July 13.

<sup>13</sup> RS to KS, 23 Feb 17.

<sup>14</sup> RS to DIS, 27 Feb. 17.

was writing to send him good wishes for the great adventure ...' Rosamond hoped that if '...a very small flame of patriotism were glowing away under heaps, and mountains ... Sir Horace will be justified, and may say that the Convention has succeeded in leaving the country better than he found it.'<sup>15</sup> That was not to be; the Convention collapsed in 1918 with no visible achievements. A previous Archive of the Month has analysed the relationship between Stephen and Plunkett further here: <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/7306/good-wishes-for-the-great>

On 11 November 1921 she was noting on the date of the Armistice remembrance that she had been fearful of a republic, but that she thought de Valera had 'caved in' and '...now the fear has left me.'<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless when the end came in 1922 Rosamond was devastated. She saw the Treaty as 'so entirely visionary that I did not trouble to read it yet'.<sup>17</sup> On 10 January she wrote that 'I do not want the "Irish Free State" to be started'.<sup>18</sup> Loitering outside Dublin Castle on 18 January as it was handed over to the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State her reaction was a mixture of loss, fatalism and alienation:<sup>19</sup>

...I stood in Dame Street and watched with the crowd for the giving over of the Castle to the Provisional Government. It has haunted me ever since...it was horrid beyond words...then some of them said that the sun was shining, and that it was a great day, and Ireland was coming into her own after centuries of oppression. And I said it was very amusing to watch a crowd, but I had to go unfortunately. So I left them.'

Later that month she reported that 'Miss B. said to me today "We, the loyalists, are beaten, and we had better submit with a good grace"'.<sup>20</sup>

### IMAGE 1

Rosamond was not inclined to submit 'with a good grace'. Later in the year came the disbandment of the indigenous Irish regiments of the British Army. The bureaucrats in the War Office had accomplished what Kaiser, Emperor and Sultan had not.<sup>21</sup> The obsequies were held at Windsor Castle as the regimental insignia were surrendered into the bosom of the King's protection.<sup>22</sup> Rosamond 'could not read' the report of the King's participation. 'I felt as if he were calling to all the world "come and see the King of England kill his mother and his son with his own hands'.<sup>23</sup>

Rosamond often compared the Rising with the Civil War. Both fell outside her definition of acceptability; as she later wrote in 1933 'I know that many people call the 1916 fighting "the

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<sup>15</sup> RS to DIS 24 Jul 17. Copy reply Plunkett to RS 24 Jul 17, in RS to DIS, 25 Jul 17.

<sup>16</sup> RS to KS, 11 Nov. 21.

<sup>17</sup> RS to KS, 10. Jan. 22.

<sup>18</sup> RS to KS, 10 Jan. 22.

<sup>19</sup> RS to KS, 18 Jan. 22.

<sup>20</sup> RS to KS, 26 Jan. 22

<sup>21</sup> The South Dublin Horse, the Leinsters and Munsters, the Royal Irish, the Connaughts and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.

<sup>22</sup> *Irish Times*, 13 June 1922.

<sup>23</sup> RS to DIS, 14 June 22.

rebellion” and the 1922 fighting “the civil war”. I count them both as rebellions though carried on largely by means of organised murder’.<sup>24</sup>

## IMAGE 2

Her instinctive obeisance to duly constituted authority was best captured in her language about the combatants in the Civil War – ‘Irregulars’, ‘rebels’, ‘mutineers’ on one side and ‘Nationals’, ‘the troops’, ‘the army’ on the other. She thought that the Free State forces should be called the ‘National Guard’, or ‘Free State Force’. For the ‘Irregulars’, she wished that they be called ‘Four Courts men’. Nevertheless she did not approve of the summary execution of Erskine Childers, for the possession of a banned firearm. Rosamond felt that as in 1916 secret trials and unannounced executions were largely counterproductive.

Rosamond’s intellect was enquiring and forward-looking, and the fragility of 1922 engendered thoughts about where Ireland, north and south, was heading. During the dark days of early July she felt that Ireland would get ‘...more and more rustic, narrow, provincial and parochial’. However, when peace would come, more attention she felt might be given to social and economic problems ‘...and then another civilisation will grow up on a firmer foundation...’.<sup>25</sup> Exhibiting a largely utilitarian Protestant worldview, she hoped that ‘certain delusions about rebellion being romantic and amusing may be really eradicated from the Irish mind’.<sup>26</sup> That did not happen.

### 3. 'The Protestants were not all bad' - Rosamond as recorder of 'oral history'

One of the principal values in the ‘Record’ lies in how Rosamond brings to life the ordinary people amongst whom she lived. Even allowing for possibly some hyperbole and a not-always accurate representation, nevertheless the conversations she reports are contemporary and not filtered through the uncertain mesh of time and subsequent knowledge. This sort of contemporary witness is a significant and authentic addition to our store of knowledge about the revolutionary period – voices from the past speaking and being brought alive again as we read them.

She moved through both Protestant and Catholic camps. So, for example, just over a month after war broke out in 1914 she was reporting sentiment to her sister in Cambridge: ‘I was amongst the Papishes today and Home Rule was not named amongst them. It was Antwerp Antwerp [Antwerp] in every house’.<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes the Protestants *were* bad. This shocking cameo from the eve of ‘The Twelfth’ in 1912 captures the deep-rooted bigotry and sectarianism that was a feature of Belfast in those disturbed times:

...suddenly I saw something on the wall...I could hardly believe my eyes. It was a nun. The figure was made of a mask, a hooded cloak,

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<sup>24</sup> Handwritten note on ‘rebellion’, RCB Library Ms 253/4

<sup>25</sup> RS to KS, 7 July 22.

<sup>26</sup> RS to KS, 18 Nov.22.

<sup>27</sup> RS to KS, 9 Oct. 14.

a white band across the forehead, and a petticoat, and it had in its hand a cross, and what did duty for a rosary. Worst of all it had a paper pinned to it, 'Joe's [Devlin]...nun.' I did not know that (omitted) word, but I suppose it means that the nun is a woman of bad character. I stood and stared till I felt sure I was not dreaming, then when I knew it was real, something went on fire inside.

Rosamond rushed upon a crowd of women 'with a torrent of words that came out shaking with agitation'...such an outrage on decency I never saw in Belfast'.<sup>28</sup>

### IMAGE 3

She was much taken with what she called 'the living voice'.<sup>29</sup> This is significant in the way that she captured information with conversation featuring prominently in her 'Record' of this time. An example was a revealing exchange with Maggie Smyley [a Belfast Protestant] in July 1913:

I began asking her what was to happen if the [Home Rule] bill passed. M. 'Ulster will resist it'. RS 'But what will Ulster resist? You know you cannot fight the soldiers.' M. 'Oh no. But the soldiers will never fire upon us. They have promised not'. RS 'Well then who is it you will resist?' M. 'The present government I think'. RS 'That means resisting the King. Ulster will have to leave off talking about being loyal'. M. 'Yes. I suppose so but the Government is not loyal'. RS. 'Well I do hope there will be no disturbance....' M. (very seriously) 'Oh I do hope there will be no riot.'<sup>30</sup>

People are brought to life by Rosamond. In May 1917 she had an encounter at her [Guild of Witness] library in her house in Belfast:

On Monday last there came one Dr X to change a book...He is a man of about 50...We spoke of Irish history...I went on, and said how little real study there is of Irish questions, people go altogether by their prejudices. Well in one second he was transformed. He began to talk very fast with a good deal of action, and a sort of dramatic manner. It was like giving the cue and seeing an actor come on the stage. You felt he had nothing to say about anything real, he was going through a sort of performance, and a performance in which he took a leading part.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> RS to DJS, 16 July 12.

<sup>29</sup> Diary entry 2 Dec 14.

<sup>30</sup> RS to DJS, 18 July 13.

<sup>31</sup> RS to KS, 31 May 17.

The febrile, slightly hysterical atmosphere in Civil War Dublin in January 1922 is well captured when she meets a group of women:

I said 'Belfast is the most disturbed place now, we are quiet for the moment' and with elfish laughter they all cried out 'Oh yes we are very quiet for the moment. If it does not all begin again....'  
And we all began to laugh as if we had said something funny.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. 'My visiting in this Roman street is most important' - Rosamond's religious devotion

The stern religiosity of Ulster politics in the pre-War period is caught by this card inserted into Rosamond's 'Record' with a biblical quote underpinning the political message.

[IMAGE 4 NOTE: PLEASE GET FROM PAGE 19 OF THE FULL 1912-14 HANDWRITTEN VOLUME].

Stephen was serving as a lay missionary in Belfast until 1919. In 1901 she had established the Guild of Witness, a prayer union intended to promote the Irish dimension of the Church of Ireland.<sup>33</sup> In Belfast her principal occupation seems to have been the distribution of religious tracts promoting universal Christian faith, as well as operating the lending library of historical and theological books.

The tracts were anything but fire and brimstone, even though they were essentially aimed at the Protestant working class population in Belfast (in July 1913 she recorded the distribution of tracts in Protestant areas of Belfast, which were printed on orange paper).<sup>34</sup> But she was not afraid to dispense them across the divide. In 1913 on 12 July for instance she had been handing out tracts during the 'Twelfth'; it was, she wrote, 'the first time I have had help from a Papist in the distributing...'.<sup>35</sup> In February 1917 she was commended '...on how nice my intercourse with the RCs is...'.<sup>36</sup> The utopian vision of tolerance, kindness and goodwill in the tracts – given the temper of the times in Belfast particularly – are demonstrated in this extract from a 1912 tract:<sup>37</sup>

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She was less than impressed with 'Orange' sermons:<sup>38</sup>

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Where the Catholic Church chimed with her predilections, Rosamond was quite happy to speak approvingly, as in her remarks on the Catholic bishops' condemnation of the killing of

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<sup>32</sup> RS to KS, 18 Jan. 22.

<sup>33</sup> See The RCB Library and Rosamond Stephen, 18 Jan. 18, Archive of the Month, at <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/news/7730/the-rcb-library-and-rosamond>

<sup>34</sup> 'Record', typewritten version 1912-14, p. 32.

<sup>35</sup> RS to DJS, 18 July 13. 5,000 were distributed – RS to DJS, 16 July 13.

<sup>36</sup> RS to DJS, 27 Feb. 17.

<sup>37</sup> Copy tract from July 1912, in the full handwritten 1912-14 volume.

<sup>38</sup> RS to DJS, 7 Jul. 12.

Free State soldiers during the Civil War.<sup>39</sup> After her move to Dublin her perspective on the Church of Ireland altered. Even with her Guild of Witness as 'a small society in a microscopic church' she felt 'no anxiety', seeing in the Church of Ireland's catholicity a hope for 'reunion with Rome'.<sup>40</sup>

She predicted that 'a great change' would come over Rome in Ireland'. 'Some form of modernism must arise, and if Roman modernists can effect some alliance with the Church of Ireland I can think of nothing better. It would nearly make the revolution worthwhile.'<sup>41</sup> Perhaps in this she anticipated a later ecumenical movement; but that would have to navigate Catholic triumphalism in the new state, Protestant wariness and introspection and the Catholic archepiscopate of John Charles McQuaid. She was certainly ahead of her time in Christian unity aspiration.

##### 5. 'All reduced to writing' - how Rosamond evoked atmosphere and tone

Rosamond wrote in 1922 that 'My experience of life is all reduced to writing, and future generations will enjoy ferreting it out.' Rosamond had a spare style, able to evoke a particular event or place in a few words. Here she is on unionist Belfast in 1912 for example:<sup>42</sup>

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and on nationalist Belfast in January 1913:

'...then we came to the Falls Road, and it was all green flags and crownless harps and words in Irish...'<sup>43</sup>

In 1917 there's a lyrical piece:

On Easter we went to the world above, and saw Lough Neagh red and awful, and the Tyrone mountains so black in the sunset we thought they were clouds across a very red sunset. But it was earthly mountains, and an earthly lake reflecting a heavenly glow. Miss M stood staring, and has said more than once since how all her life she thought of Belfast as an uninteresting place. What a mistake.<sup>44</sup>

This is her description of Arthur Griffith's funeral on 16 August 1922:

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<sup>39</sup> RS to KS, 3 Nov. 22.

<sup>40</sup> July 22.

<sup>41</sup> July 22.

<sup>42</sup> RS to MRS, her mother, who died in Nov. 12 – 2 July 12.

<sup>43</sup> RS to DJS 17 Jan 13

<sup>44</sup> RS to KS, 9 Apr. 17 [Easter Monday].



There was ‘... no music, no drilled people of any sort, it was just a dismal party going trailing along at enormous length. Someone said there were some bands but ... they had not the wit to play by turns ... it was all quite second class and inferior as a show ... But that is Ireland now, no more shows, no more money to pay for any ...’<sup>45</sup> If it was a show, it was a ‘holy show ... quite out of the way shabby.’<sup>46</sup>

### **Evaluating the 'Record' and its contribution to Irish history**

It is arguable that an indigenous Irish ‘Protestant voice’ has been absent to date in the Decade of Centenaries with an overwhelming focus on the national, the Catholic and the British. This collaboration and the unveiling of the digitized version of this particular primary source of a female Protestant fills the gap, demonstrating the place that Protestants had in pre-independence Ireland, north and south. In 1916 for instance a plethora of Protestant eyewitness accounts are given which put a somewhat different slant on the Rebellion. Eugenio Biagini has suggested that the test of a nation’s civility and ease with itself is how it treats its minorities. Hearing them is equally important for the construction and comfort of a pluralistic society and we hear them in Rosamond Stephen’s ‘Record’.

What this source offers is close to a uniquely continuous voice over the entire revolutionary period from 1912 to 1923 – and moreover it is a voice that sees violence, hatred and love from many angles, acknowledges rights and wrongs on all sides and articulating it with insight, gentle humour and a command of descriptive and distinctive language.

Rosamond *is* Belfast and Dublin during the revolutionary period. She is the chronicler of the ordinary, a person of faith who nevertheless recognises and accepts the genuineness of a different faith in others. She has a firm politics which barely wavers over these turbulent years. It is a tolerant politics and with a recognition of reality. All this may stem from her essential “outsiderness” to Ireland; but in many respects she offers a wider vision of Protestant Irishness - north and south - that often eluded those whose noses were pressed too close to the glass to see the vistas beyond.

Ian d’Alton

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<sup>45</sup> RS to DIS, 16 Aug. 22.

<sup>46</sup> RS to KS, 18 Aug. 22.