

Robert Emmet & Sarah Curran

On September 8, 1803, Irish patriot Robert Emmet, age 25, wrote a letter from his cell in Kilmainham jail, Dublin. He addressed it to "Miss Sarah Curran, the Priory, Rathfarnham" and handed it to a prison warden, George Dunn, whom he trusted to deliver it. Dunn betrayed him and gave the letter to the government authorities, an action that nearly cost Sarah her life.

Emmet, the son of a Dublin doctor, joined the United Irishmen, a mainly Protestant militia opposed to British rule, while a student at Trinity College, Dublin. In 1798 the militia made plans with the post-revolutionary French government to expel the British forces and establish an independent Ireland. Poor organization defeated them, however, and for a while Emmet went into hiding in France, where he failed to secure Napoleon's support.

Returning to Ireland in October 1802, Emmet soon emerged as the leader of the United Irishmen in Dublin. Plans were made to stage a major uprising in the fall of 1803. Meanwhile, Emmet made a clear statement defining his political goals in the Proclamation of the Provisional Government:

"...we war not against property--we are against no religious sect--we war no against past opinions or prejudice--we war against English dominion."

How well he knew Sarah before this time is unclear. Sarah's brother, Richard, knew Robert well from Trinity College. Her father, John Curran, a distinguished lawyer, defended various members of the United Irishmen who came to trial after the failed 1798 rebellion. Emmet, in 1802 in a letter to a friend, the Marquise de Fontenay, referred to the "tender ties" he had at home. Once back in Ireland, Robert frequently visited Sarah's family at Rathfarnham, even though Sarah's father did not welcome him. Sarah and Robert became engaged, but kept it a secret because of her father's disapproval. Sarah was enthusiastic about all Robert's revolutionary plans. Her patriotism, youth, and great charm endeared her to all the members of the activist's circle. Emmet's housekeeper, Ann Devlin--whose father was imprisoned in 1798 for harboring rebels, and who was herself tortured and imprisoned after the unsuccessful uprising of 1803--said when questioned by Dr. R. R. Madden (author of *United Irishmen*) 40 years after the uprising:

"You could not see Miss Curran and not help liking her...her look was the mildest, and the softest, and the sweetest look you ever saw."

Following another coup attempt on July 23, 1803, Emmet again went into hiding. He sent Sarah a message asking her to elope with him to the United States. But the couple never left the country. He was arrested the following month, with unsigned love letters from Sarah in his possession.

The earliest letters were simply copies of poems. But the love letters, partly in coded language, were full of information that could identify her as the writer. Later letters expressed her fear of angering her father, and the latest letter focused completely on her anxiety about Robert's safety:

"I passed the house you are in twice this day, but did not see you. If I thought you were in safety, I would be comparatively happy, at least. I cannot help listening to every idle report...I cannot tell you how uneasy I shall be until I know that you have got this. Let me know immediately. I request you to burn it instantly...Goodbye my dear friend, but not forever."

Emmet kept all her letters inside his coat. On August 30, at the questioning after his arrest, he was asked point blank, *"By whom were these letters written that were found upon your person?"* He succeeded in keeping Sarah's name out of the proceedings, mentioning only *"a delicate and virtuous female."* He then protested, *"I would rather give up my own life than injure another person."*

Nine days later, Emmet wrote the letter extracted here, revealing her name, and on September 9 the Curran house was searched. With British soldiers downstairs, Sarah's sister Amelia only just succeeded in burning Emmet's letters. John Philpot Curran, furious that Sarah had threatened their lives and his career, ordered her out of the house. She took refuge with friends a few hundred miles away in Cork. The authorities made an example of Emmet, condemning him to be hanged, drawn, and quartered. His final speech in court, an inspiration to generations of Irish revolutionaries, is still widely quoted today:

"...Let no man write my epitaph...Let my memory be left in oblivion and my tomb remain un inscribed until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written. I have done."

He had not quite done. In a letter to Sarah's brother Richard, he wrote:

"I have injured the happiness of a sister that you love...Oh Richard! I have no excuse to offer, but that I meant the reverse; I intended as much happiness for Sarah as the most ardent lover could have given her. I never did tell you how much I idolised her..."

After Emmet's death, abandoned by her family and living with friends in Cork, at the southwestern tip of the country, she met a soldier named Robert Sturgeon who offered her marriage and a home. They moved to Sicily, but she never fully recovered from her grief. Her story inspired the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, to write a sentimental ballad that ensured her a place in popular Irish culture:

*"She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps,
And lovers around her are sighing,
But coldly she turns from their gaze, and weeps,
For her heart in his grave is lying."*