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Authors	Johnson, Veronica
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Seeking Traces of Women in Early Irish Filmmaking: The O'Mara Sisters and the Archive

Veronica Johnson

Abstract: *Recent research by Díóg O'Connell and Donna Casella has brought to light the work of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan with the Film Company of Ireland (1916–20). These scholars trace the personal archive of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan's descendants and use this data to create a trajectory of her role within this first significant Irish film company. While the official record of the Film Company of Ireland is considered limited, there are traces of the company in trade papers, archives and newspapers. In comparison, information about the role of women in this company is difficult to discover as women often slip from the official archive in this period. In the case of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan, she is frequently hidden behind her husband's record as owner and director of the Film Company of Ireland, or behind her more famous father and brothers, well-connected Republicans, Mayors of Limerick, and successful businessmen. This paper will examine the role of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and her sister Mary Rynne in the development of the Film Company of Ireland by examining the archival records available and exploring how to find information about these women when they elude the official record. Working in particular on documents found in the Rynne family archive, Special Collections, NUIG, this paper will attempt to trace the financial contribution of Mary Rynne to this film company and to bring to light the role these two sisters played in the development of the early Irish film industry.*

Introduction

> With deep regret we announce the demise of Mrs Sullivan, wife of Mr J M Sullivan, Barrister at Law, Dublin and New York. The deceased, who was only 36 years of age, passed away on Saturday at Strand House, Limerick, the residence of her highly respected father, Mr Stephen O'Mara. She was sister of Mr James O'Mara, M P, and of Mr A M O'Mara, the present Mayor of Limerick, and was of a very kindly and gentle disposition, being a great favourite with all who knew her ("Limerick" 3).

This excerpt from the funeral announcement of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan, from the *Limerick Leader* newspaper in May 1919, is one of the few official records of her existence and is indicative of the problems that arise when trying to find information about the contribution of women to the early film industry in Ireland. The announcement here describes a woman in terms of her relationship to her husband, father and brothers, and the brief description of her life, while no doubt genuine, is at the same time generic. This announcement of her death, and the report on her funeral in the same newspaper a few days later ("Late Mrs. E. Sullivan" 3), report only on the public role of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan as wife, mother and member of an important business and political family; there is no mention of her work with the Film Company of Ireland. Looking for information then in relation to her film work means a search for alternative archival records and it also requires an ability to piece together the significance of her work within the early Irish film industry from brief mentions in reports and archives about other people. The process of writing women back into the history of early filmmaking and its theoretical and historical implications has been examined in detail by Jane

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M. Gaines in her most recent book and in the Women Film Pioneers Project established by Gaines and others. This article draws on this work. Research undertaken by Donna Casella, Díóg O'Connell, Maryanne Felter and Daniel Schultz including access to the private records of the O'Mara family show that Ellen O'Mara Sullivan was a key player in the development of the Film Company of Ireland, and recent research by Díóg O'Connell suggests that she might have been a screenwriter for the company also.

If the official record yields little in relation to Ellen O'Mara Sullivan, it is almost mute in relation to her sister Mary Rynne, and yet Rynne's financial contribution to the Film Company of Ireland in March 1917 allowed the company to continue to make films, including their first feature film *Knocknagow* (Fred O'Donovan, 1918), at a time when the company was in serious financial difficulty. The document showing Mary Rynne's purchase of shares in the Film Company of Ireland is part of the Rynne Family Papers archive at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway. This archive is a collection of papers relating to members of the Rynne Family donated by Professor Etienne Rynne, former Professor of Archaeology at NUI Galway. The bulk of the collection pertains to Professor Rynne's academic and personal records. Mary Rynne was his grandmother, and this collection also contains letters relating to the O'Mara family (her family of origin). These are mostly letters between her parents. I use these in this article to provide an insight into the family background of Ellen and Mary. There is also a box relating to the film *Knocknagow*, which contains a number of letters written by Michael Rynne (Mary Rynne's son) to newspapers, radio producers and researchers detailing memories of his and his mother's role as bit players in the film, and his memories of visiting Ellen and James Sullivan at their home in Dublin at this time. The share purchase document is one of the few documents extant relating to the finances of the Film Company of Ireland and its discovery sheds new light on the company and the economic difficulties it suffered.

The approach taken here is to bring together what has been discovered in the archival record in order to show that these two women had a significant role in the operation of the Film Company of Ireland. The most recent scholarship on Ellen O'Mara Sullivan from Díóg O'Connell states that while O'Mara Sullivan was "central to the production of *Knocknagow*" the exact role she played "needs further investigation" (30). O'Connell argues for the inclusion of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan in the history of early Irish cinema and brings the work of this pioneer of Irish cinema to light, "attempting to reassign focus where there was little focus beforehand" (30). O'Connell has successfully brought the work of O'Mara Sullivan to light and has shown how important a role she played in early Irish cinema.

Building on the work of O'Connell, this article evidences the role that Ellen O'Mara Sullivan played in sustaining the Film Company of Ireland during a difficult period of business in 1917. It also brings in Mary Rynne as a major contributor to the company. Writing the history of early Irish film and cinema poses challenges, not only due to the dearth of primary sources, but also due to the shortage of scholarly works on this topic. While general works of Irish film history offer an overview, only Denis Condon's monograph, *Early Irish Cinema: 1895-1921*, approaches the topic in depth. Finding women's stories within the history of early cinema is an even greater challenge. Jane M. Gaines' latest work addresses this difficulty, while the invisibility of women in the history of the film industry is also approached in work by Erin Hill. Gledhill and Knight's collection offers a methodological map to navigate this terrain, with a focus on the research methods that allow women to be written back into the historical record. The aim of this article is to contribute in a small way to that rewriting.

Background of the O'Mara Family

The O'Mara family from Limerick city ran a very successful pork business and were active politically. Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and Mary Rynne were daughters of Stephen and Ellen O'Mara who had nine children in total. Their father was a Parnellite M.P. and Mayor of Limerick. Some of his sons followed him into the family business and into political life. As a result, the family was well-known, not only in Limerick, but also nationally. Evidence of their importance can be seen in the attendance at Ellen's funeral in May 1919, where the mourners listed included important members of the new Dáil Éireann: Count Plunkett (Minister for Foreign Affairs), Arthur Griffith (Minister for Home Affairs), Cathal Brugha (Minister for Defence) and W. T. Cosgrave (Minister for Local Government). Neither Ellen O'Mara Sullivan nor her husband warranted such tributes; the attendance of these political figures at the funeral was a mark of respect for Ellen's father Stephen O'Mara. It is in part due to the political involvement of Ellen and Mary's father and brothers that there is a record of the family. Various descendants of the family have kept records and some have written books about the achievements of the family in the area of politics. Looking at the letters between Stephen and Ellen O'Mara held in the Rynne Family Papers at NUI Galway, it is clear that the family were affluent and cosmopolitan. The girls were educated in London, the boys in boarding school in Ireland. These letters give evidence of a strong and loving marriage and one in which Stephen O'Mara depended on his wife Ellen (often referred to as Nell) to oversee the business while he was attending parliament in London. This correspondence shows that Ellen senior was involved in the business decisions being made and that Stephen and Ellen relied on each other to promote and develop the business. They also give an insight into the upbringing of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and Mary Rynne. It is clear that they grew up in a household in which women were expected to have opinions and input into worldly and business matters. While these letters frequently show Ellen senior as the main care giver to her nine children and thus occupying a traditional feminine role, they also show that she advised her husband on all issues relating to the business and to politics and that he sought out this advice. Ellen junior and Mary thus had as a role model a woman who was knowledgeable about business affairs.

The family was also well travelled; there is evidence of trips to America, and the family had business interests in England and Europe. It is important to recognise this aspect of family's life and of the experience of Ellen and Mary, as it highlights an aspect of their lives that can be overshadowed by the nationalism of their family. Letters in this archive from January 1910 show Ellen O'Mara, her mother and father on a trip to America where they are met by James Sullivan; this is months prior to the wedding of James and Ellen and shows cordial relationships between the family and the groom-to-be ("Letter"). A later letter is addressed to Mary Rynne from her mother on a tour in America in 1919, showing again how well-travelled the family was. The letters between Ellen (senior) and her husband shed light on the international connections of the O'Mara family: there are frequent references to life in London and the expansion of the business abroad, trips within Ireland and abroad and meetings with international friends. These letters indicate that the household in which both Ellen and Mary grew up was a very loving one: it had a strong work ethic and a very strong sense of family; it was well connected to the wider world through business and politics; and women in the family were involved in all aspects of the business and politics. It is also clear from their financial investment in the Film Company of Ireland that these two sisters had substantial money at their disposal, and it seems likely that they also had the independence to invest it where they choose. On marrying James M. Sullivan in 1910, Ellen O'Mara brought her business knowledge and practice to the Film Company of Ireland, which he established with Henry Fitzgibbon in March 1916.

The Film Company of Ireland and the O'Mara Sisters

Following its establishment, the company immediately began to hire actors and directors from the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre. The company also began production at once, commencing with shorts initially. Its first offices in Henry Street, Dublin, were destroyed in the Easter Rising, and the company moved to new premises in Dame Street, Dublin. Despite these setbacks, the company had a productive summer. Their first film, *O'Neil of the Glen* (J. M. Kerrigan, 1916) was released in August of that year, and they had four comedy shorts of one and two reels produced by September of the same year. Between 1916 and 1920, the company released roughly thirty films, mostly one-reelers. Today, only two of these remain in existence, the feature length films *Knocknagow* and *Willy Reilly and His Colleen Bawn* (John MacDonagh, 1920). The Film Company of Ireland is the most significant Irish fiction film production company in Ireland in the early/silent film era. Only the Kalem Company of America comes close with over thirty films made in Kerry between 1910 and 1914. Other indigenous fiction filmmakers were few and far between in the 1910s.

Discovering Ellen O'Mara Sullivan's role in the Film Company of Ireland relies on piecing together evidence from a number of sources. As James was co-owner of the company, his involvement is recorded in all documents related to the company and his role in it is well established. Ellen's role has only recently come to light, and it is a role that must be argued for using slim and tangential evidence. Working on the archive and on research by other scholars, we can piece together her involvement in the company and argue for the significance of her role in it. There is a family archival record in relation to the O'Mara family. This includes the archives of Michael Rynne (nephew of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan) and of Mary Rose Callaghan (granddaughter of Ellen O'Mara Sullivan), though Callaghan's archives are held privately. There are also newspaper reports on Ellen's financial involvement with the film company. Scholarly research on Ellen comes in particular from Donna Casella, Díóg O'Connell, Maryanne Felter and Daniel Schultz. These scholars argue that Ellen had a significant role in the day-to-day running of the company, focusing in particular on her trip to America with James during 1918-19 where they attempted to find distributors for the Film Company of Ireland films. In the most recent scholarship, Díóg O'Connell builds on this work to suggest that the evidence also points to Ellen being possibly the screenwriter for the film *Knocknagow*, the first feature film made by the Film Company of Ireland. O'Connell's nuanced essay offers a biography of O'Mara Sullivan and details what is known about her role in the Film Company of Ireland. The essay builds on previous work on O'Mara Sullivan and while it cannot offer direct evidence that she was the screenwriter for *Knocknagow*, the cumulative effect of O'Connell's essay is to ensure that O'Mara Sullivan's importance in the Film Company of Ireland is established and that she is no longer in danger of being forgotten by history. There is enough evidence and argument at this stage to be able to state that Ellen was a major figure in the company.

Evidence from Michael Rynne and Mary Rose Callaghan's archives show that Ellen was an active business partner with James in the film company, although she did not seem to have an official role or title. Both the Rynne and Callaghan archives indicate that she was very involved in the management of the company, and, in particular, that she was involved in keeping the company afloat financially. In letters, Michael Rynne recorded his personal memories of his aunt and uncle (Ellen and James) and their film business in relation to the making of *Knocknagow* and the period surrounding its production ("Letter from Michael Rynne to Proinsias Ó Conluain"). Rynne's letters provide some evidence of Ellen's work in the company during this period. He states that he and his mother Mary had minor parts in the

film. As well as this, Michael Rynne states that he visited the offices of the Film Company of Ireland at least weekly in 1917 and 1918 and that he lived with Ellen and James in their Dublin home between 1919 and 1920. Rynne's most significant statement in relation to Ellen's involvement states that "apart from Mr. Sullivan and his wife, Ellen (a daughter of the late Senator O'Mara, ex-Mayor of Limerick and a former member of Parnell's Irish Party in Westminster) most of the Company's Directors took little active part in the actual production and distribution of the pictures". Other evidence supports this claim that Ellen was actively involved in the production and distribution of the films of the Film Company of Ireland. Research by Maryanne Felter and Daniel Schultz quotes extensively from letters which Ellen wrote to her niece during her 1918-19 trip to America with James. These letters show that she and James were working together to find distributors for their films and that her role at this time was an active one in pursuing the marketing of their films rather than merely providing financial or emotional support for her husband.

The letters show how well versed she was in the business of film, and how much she was personally invested in the success of the company. She often refers to the films as "our" films; in one letter, she states that "Pathé wants to see our stuff" indicating that she felt herself to be co-owner of the films with James. Felter and Schultz show that a letter from Ellen during this American visit indicates that their films arrived there in July 1918 ("Selling Memories"). Another letter states that they had the approval of Cardinal O'Connell, the influential Irish-American Cardinal and Archbishop of Boston, after a private screening at around the same time. This would have been an important endorsement for showing their films in Irish-American communities. At the start of 1919, they were hopeful that they were about to break into the American market. A letter from Ellen to her niece Hazel dated 4 January 1919 states that "Jim is making arrangements today with Schuberts for theatres all over the country for the showing of our pictures. The picture in Boston was really a success—and everything depended on that" ("Selling"). This letter seems to refer to a screening of their films that they had arranged in December 1918. These letters and Michael Rynne's reports show that Ellen O'Mara Sullivan was working on behalf of the Film Company of Ireland from 1917 at the latest and that her role was one which helped produce and promote the films of the company.

There is more to her role in the company than this. Ellen and Mary's business practices form a central part of the story of Irish cinema as they helped to keep the film company afloat during a financially turbulent period. Early Irish film history is difficult to uncover as few documents remain. However, those detailing the financial and labour investment of the sisters help to place women in this history and illuminate Irish film history more generally. Newspaper reports from 1917 give evidence of Ellen's central role and show that she was deeply involved in the financial management of the company. From its inception, the Film Company of Ireland ran into unexpected financial difficulty arising from the destruction of its offices and films during the 1916 Easter Rising. This was a huge setback for a company that started in business just one month before this occurred. However, despite this original setback, the company managed to produce a number of short films in 1916 and 1917, before running into difficulty in early 1917. In this year both sisters, Mary Rynne and Ellen O'Mara Sullivan, contributed to keeping the first important Irish fiction company afloat, and, arguably, their intervention ensured the production of the company's first full-length feature film *Knocknagow*.

Clearly, the company was in great difficulty in 1917, possibly as a result of losses incurred during the Rising. In March of that year, Mary Rynne bought £600 worth of shares in the company, a substantial investment. This share purchase document is found in the Rynne Family Papers at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Mary Rynne is described here as

a widow and her address is given as Strand House, Limerick, the family home of the O'Mara's, indicating perhaps that she had returned there after the death of her husband, and showing the strong links between members of the O'Mara family. The share purchase document reveals that despite her investment, Mary Rynne did not, at the time of purchase, receive her shares, as the co-owner of the Film Company of Ireland Henry Fitzgibbon was in America and the agreement could not proceed without his cooperation. However, James Sullivan promised her the shares from his portion of 1,000 shares, half of the allocated amount, if Fitzgibbon's approval could not be found. Sullivan held 1,000 shares at £1 each, Fitzgibbon had the same amount. Mary Rynne's investment gave her an important financial stake in the Film Company of Ireland and was key to sustaining the company at this time. James Sullivan giving over half of his own share allocation to Mary is indicative of the financial strain that the company was enduring at this time. With Henry Fitzgibbon uncontactable, it is likely that the company was hindered in moving forward as much as it wanted to. This share purchase document shows that James Sullivan was willing to forgo, even temporarily, half of his investment in order to get the working capital to allow the company to keep running and making films. However, it was James' wife Ellen who found a source of money to allow this to happen. Clearly, there was a close connection between the two sisters, Ellen and Mary, since the Film Company of Ireland was not a financially secure option at that time. Mary's purchase of shares in the company was an investment in her sister's financial future, and, perhaps also an investment in the artistic hopes of the Film Company of Ireland, as later in the year Mary went on to have a small part in *Knocknagow*, the film that her money had helped to finance.

Ellen's financial contribution to the company was of a different nature and much more long-standing than Mary's, at least as far as the archive shows at the time of writing. This involvement is recorded in two newspaper reports of court proceedings in relation to the liquidation of the Film Company of Ireland in June and September of 1917. In both cases, Ellen O'Mara Sullivan was the petitioner. These court reports show how much financial trouble the company was in at this time despite Mary Rynne's investment of £600 in March of that year. The first liquidation report from the *Irish Times* appears on 26 June 1917 and shows that the liquidation of the Film Company of Ireland was sought in order to allow for "the reconstruction of the company". It states that the company was operating at a loss of £1,526, despite Mary Rynne's investment of £600, and another £500 which this report says that Ellen had loaned to the company and had not been paid back. The share capital is shown to be £2,000 of which £1,635 was paid up. This figure and the loan of £500 from Ellen O'Mara Sullivan shows the extent to which the two sisters were keeping the company afloat in 1917. From the share purchase document, we know that £600 of this £1,635 was an investment from Mary Rynne, and that £1,000 is an investment from James Sullivan. Unaccounted for is the £1,000 of shares that should be showing up as allocated to Henry Fitzgibbon. It is likely that the £35 came from small investors. In his research into early Irish cinema, Denis Condon shows that the Abbey and Film Company of Ireland actor and film director J. M. Kerrigan had purchased shares in the company. This was likely to be a small amount and it is probable that there were other small investors also, although we do not know for certain. We do know that two of the largest investors in the company after the directors Sullivan and Fitzgibbon were the O'Mara sisters: Ellen and Mary.

This newspaper report of 26 June 1917 also shows how easy it is for women's contribution to the development of early cinema in Ireland to elude the record. In giving background to the case, the report states that "the object of the company was the manufacture and production of cinema films, and it practically consisted of two persons, Mr. James William Sullivan and Mr. Henry M. Fitzgibbon, who were also the two directors" ("Affairs of an Irish

Film Company"). Ellen appears in this report as a creditor and a petitioner only despite the evidence that shows that she provided the funds for the continuation of the company. In contrast, Henry Fitzgibbon, who had gone to America, as shown in the report, and seems to have withdrawn from the company, is recorded as being one of the two directors. Just three months later, in September of 1917, a second newspaper report shows that the Film Company of Ireland was back in the courts again. This time the company was liquidated so that it could be sold to Ellen for £1,000. Henry Fitzgibbon was still absent in America. Ellen's purchase of the company receives the backing of the other creditors, presumably including Mary Rynne. Therefore, in September 1917, Ellen O'Mara Sullivan became the owner of the Film Company of Ireland. This liquidation transferred the assets of the company to her. Given the perilous state of its finances at this point, it seems likely that she would have to go further into debt in order to finance any further filmmaking. While this was not an attractive option financially, it is probable that Ellen had access to the funds to keep the company going until other investors could be found. It also seems likely that the purchase of the company by Ellen was to ensure its continuance in the absence of Henry Fitzgibbon. Both reports of the two liquidations show Ellen's deep involvement in the Film Company of Ireland. From 7 September 1917, she was the legal owner of the Film Company of Ireland.

The Significance of the O'Mara Sisters' Contribution to the Film Company of Ireland

From the evidence to date, it is clear that Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and Mary Rynne's financial contribution to the Film Company of Ireland was significant. Their support of the company came at a critical time in its history and allowed it to continue operating and to continue to make films. To date, the archive has not yielded much about Mary Rynne's involvement with the company, apart from the share purchase document discussed above, and her acting role in *Knocknagow*. There is perhaps more to be discovered here. Was her support for the company out of loyalty to her sister, or was she independently interested in supporting an Irish film company? In contrast to her sister, Ellen O'Mara Sullivan's role in the film company is a significant one. At the very least, we can say that she was a producer, while from September 1917 she was the legal owner of the company. Together their impact on the company was great. It is arguable that the first feature length film from the company, *Knocknagow*, would not have been made without their financial support as the company would have likely collapsed under its own debts. Reports in the *Irish Limelight* show that the film was in production in June of 1917, months after Mary Rynne's investment and around the same time as the first liquidation of the company and the start of Ellen's greater financial involvement in it. The letters which Ellen wrote to her niece during 1918-19 while she was in America promoting the films of the Film Company of Ireland show that she was knowledgeable about all aspects of the company and that she was working hard to ensure that these films would get American distribution. Letters by Michael Rynne describe a woman who was involved in the day-to-day operations of the company and show that Ellen and James seemed to emulate Ellen's parents in having a marriage where both worked in business together. When Ellen returned to Ireland from America in early 1919, her son Donal was ill. Nursing him, she became sick also, and they both died shortly thereafter. In 1920, James Sullivan returned to America with their remaining two children and stayed there until his death. The Film Company of Ireland produced only one further feature length film after Ellen's death.

Conclusion

Finding traces of private women such as Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and Mary Rynne in the archival record is challenging. Bringing their role to light is the result of slow scholarship and often great good luck. In this case, a colleague in the Special Collections Department of NUI Galway, who knew of my interest in early Irish cinema, directed me to the Rynne Family Papers archive. Without that connection, it is unlikely that I would have searched in the papers of the former Head of Archaeology at NUI Galway for information on the Film Company of Ireland. Thanks to that lead, we can now acknowledge Mary Rynne's place in Irish film history. But Mary's story only makes sense if we know the story of her sister Ellen O'Mara Sullivan and her role in the Film Company of Ireland which can only be discovered by piecing together information from various sources both public and private. While the same approach is taken in relation to the contribution of men to early Irish film history, there is another layer which must be uncovered in relation to women, as their contribution is often hidden from the official record, as I hope to have shown here. The likelihood of there being more women involved in early Irish film history is strong, in particular in relation to the Film Company of Ireland. For example, at a press reception prior to the release of their first film *O'Neil of the Glen*, a reporter notes that "Mrs. H. M. Fitzgibbon, a vivacious French lady, will make her appearance." This woman, wife of Henry Fitzgibbon, co-owner at that time of the Film Company of Ireland, has yet to be traced in the records. Her role and that of her husband have much to reveal about the development and financial backing of the company, particularly as it was Henry Fitzgibbon's absence that may have led to Mary Rynne investing in the company when she did. Another potential approach would be to examine the screenwriters for the company. Some, such as M. T. Pender, the writer of *O'Neil of the Glen*, are somewhat known already, others less so. What is clear is that projects such as the Women's Film Pioneers Project at Columbia University, the Women and the Silent Screen Conference and the Women's Film & Television History Network are slowly building a picture of the contribution of women to early cinema. In doing so, these projects record a fuller version of film history than was heretofore the case.

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Veronica Johnson teaches film history and theory at the National University of Ireland, Galway. She is currently working on a project about the early days of the film industry in Ireland with a focus on the Film Company of Ireland (1916–20). Her most recent article on this topic "Dublin Cinemas in 1916: The Easter Rising, World War One Films and the Growth of the Middle-Class Audience" is published in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* (vol. 40, no. 2).