

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

BY STEPHEN O'SULLIVAN



JENNY KING | Flower Seller

Between the wars Belfast was to many a dismal city, often scarred by conflict and political unrest. However, in one small place, at 'Gibson's Corner', in Donegall Place, and later in Donegall Square North, the flower sellers who daily plied their wares there lightened the gloom.

The 'Queen' of the flower sellers was Jenny King, who until she died on 12 May 1939 had for over 50 years sold her flowers in all weathers. Jenny, in her black shawl and with her Mediterranean good looks and luxurious black wavy hair, was the subject of many paintings by famous artists, including one by William Conor, which hangs in Armagh City Museum. In 1929 many portraits of her were shown at an art exhibition in the Belfast Municipal College of Technology.

Jenny was friend of Royalty that started when she sent a gift of shamrock to the young Princess Mary, soon to be Queen to George V; a tradition she continued throughout her life. She was presented to the Princess and met with other prominent figures such as Viscountess Pirrie and the Earl of Harewood.

She was also remembered for an act of bravery when she used her shawl to smother a fire that had engulfed a motor cycle belonging to one of a group a Dispatch Rider who were mustering nearby. For this she was presented with a brand new shawl 'the best that Ulster could produce' by the grateful Dispatch Riders.

Her philosophy so inspired a clergyman she told it to that he wrote a sermon based on it called 'The Philosophy of a Belfast Flower Seller' and preached it '..... from Belfast to Cork'. Her words were - 'I'll tell you three things - it's a far place where God can't send; it's a low bush that the sun never shines on; he's bad that can't mend'.