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## An Irishwoman's Diary

Kathleen ffrench stipulated in her will that her castle should become a home for 'indigent' people who had worked in teaching or the arts. Above, the mausoleum at Monivea, Co Galway, where she and her father were buried.

Photograph: Frank Miller

Lorna Siggins

AS WILLS GO, it was described by this newspaper as “one of the most eccentric in history”. When Kathleen Emily Sophy Alexandra ffrench died in Harbin, Manchuria, in 1938, she bequeathed her Co Galway estate to the nation, with the stipulation that no “parcel” of it at Monivea should ever be sold and no old trees cut down unless they fell to pieces.

There was a further clause. Her beloved castle should be turned into a “home” for “indigent persons of both sexes, not exceeding 10 in number”, who had “reached the age of 60 years”, and who had been “school-teachers or engaged in the profession of literature, painting, sculpture or music, so that they may find peace and comfort in their declining years”. The selection of the 10 men and women should be “left to the trustees appointed by the Irish Free State government to administer the estate of Monivea”, the will said.

How same government was to maintain the “artists” wasn't made clear, according to “our correspondent”, writing from London for this newspaper in November 1938.

The will, never fully acted upon, didn't acknowledge that ffrench's cousin was living at, and minding, Monivea “in her 70th year” and couldn't really be turfed out.

Kathleen ffrench's body was taken 4,000 miles in 1938 to be placed in a mausoleum at Monivea which she had built for her father at a cost of £10,000 many years before. The long journey to Co Galway the year before the outbreak of the second World War was the last of many. All her life, ffrench had moved between Russia, London and Ireland, settling finally in the Russian refuge and Manchurian railway town, Harbin – as traced in a new biography of her life by Jean Lombard.

It was all of half a century after her passing that Lombard discovered she was related to ffrench by marriage. Originally from Dublin, Lombard was moving to Moscow, where she had once worked as a nanny, with her husband, John. He had been assigned there by the

Australian Broadcasting Corporation. John's mother, Rosamond (née Blake), presented the couple with letters which had been written to Rosamond by her late Irish-Russian relative Kathleen French to family back home.

The letters, partly in French, English and Russian, gave a taste of the life a woman born into the privileged background provided by an Irish diplomat and a Russian heiress. Kathleen French's father Robert Percy French, bearing the surname and bloodline of one of Galway's 14 "tribes", was based temporarily in the British embassy in St Petersburg when he met Sophie Alexandrovna Kindiakova at a ball in Moscow.

He was just over 30, and almost rootless, for he had been just 10 years old when his mother died, and he was sent to boarding school in England. Sophie was just 18, and keen to escape an overbearing mother; within no time they were married, but the union didn't last.

Their daughter Kathleen was born in Simbirsk, in 1864, and reared by her grandparents when her parents separated, at a time of great social change. Situated on the Volga river almost 900km east of Moscow, the town was also birthplace of one of the architects of that change – Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, otherwise known as Lenin.

Their paths would never cross however, and Simbirsk had long been renamed as Ulyanovsk, after its famous resident, when Jean Lombard set to work.

With Russian journalist Masha Kiseleva, she discovered that there were at least 1,200 Kindiakov family letters and papers in Ulyanovsk's archive. She learned that French was managing all of seven estates at one time of her life; but was reduced to desperation in a Russian prison the year after revolution when vast properties owned by the landed classes were acquired by the new political order.

Lombard learned of her visits to Ireland with her father – "I could quite happily spend my whole life here," French wrote of Monivea, which had once been on the mail coach route and was bypassed when the Dublin-Galway railway line was built. She records her work with the Red Cross during the first World War and her struggles to keep Monivea maintained.

The mausoleum for her father, which *Irish Times* journalist Rosita Boland has also described in her book, *A Secret Map of Ireland*, took four years to construct. Large numbers of stone cutters, carvers and labourers were hired for the extravagant contract, and French also commissioned a bust of her father of Carrara marble in Naples and a set of stained glass windows. She wrote to Pope Pius X for permission to celebrate Mass there, and it wasn't until 1914, many years later, that the Vatican granted an "indult".

French built up a reputation for helping émigrés when she moved to the Russian haven of Harbin in Manchuria. Lombard also records how she never forgot the one man in her life, Peotr Bradke, who she nursed as an injured soldier at a Red Cross field hospital. He was by then a widower with children, she almost 40 years old, and they were smitten. They lost contact when he returned to military duty. In 1929, she made a heartbreaking trip to Mongolia to try to find him.

*An Irish Woman in Czarist Russia* by Jean Lombard (Ashfield Press) was launched in Monivea this week.