

Iris Cummins

Iris was one of five sisters who were eminently successful in their chosen fields.

Katherine Walshe, *The Engineers Journal*, September/October 1985.



Iris Cummins was born in Glanmire in Co. Cork in June 1894. Family lore recounts that from the day of her birth, Iris was destined to live an exhilarating life. Heavily pregnant, her mother was thrown from a carriage when a horse bolted and went into sudden labour. When both mother and child emerged unhurt, her father ordered that his new daughter be bathed in champagne in celebration. Iris had an idyllic childhood, developing an early interest in science and considerable prowess as a sportswoman. In 1909, aged just fifteen, she won a place on the Irish ladies' hockey team.



Ireland v Scotland 1922. Iris Cummins is front right.
Source: *The Irish Hockey Archive*.

Iris entered University College Cork in 1912. Although female access to university education was still limited, University College Cork was ahead of other universities, appointing the first female professor in Britain or Ireland in 1910. Of the 420 freshmen in 1912, 78 were women, an impressive proportion in the early twentieth century. Iris fully participated in college life, securing top class marks throughout her university career, editing the *Journal of the Engineering Society* and representing her university in hockey. She graduated with honours in 1915, becoming the first female engineer to qualify from University College Cork.

Her graduation coincided with technological advances in warfare, giving her the opportunity to use her engineering degree immediately. Working at the *Royal Arsenal's* munitions factory at Woolwich in London, the *Vickers* factory in Erith, a shipyard in Scotland and *Admiralty Department* in Haulbowline Dockyard in Cork, she gained professional experience previously unheard of for women.



Wartime propaganda poster 1916.



Iris Cummins's family home, Woodville in Glanmire, Co. Cork.
Source: *Cork Camera Club Historical Photos*.



Wartime propaganda poster 1917.

Unable to find employment in post-war Cork, Iris founded a private engineering practice in the city in 1924 but continued to struggle professionally as a long economic downturn and anti-female bias hampered her career. However, in 1927 she was appointed to the *Irish Land Commission*. Working as the first female land surveyor in Ireland, she produced detailed plans of land designated for division or redistribution. While her later career may not have had the excitement or urgency of her wartime work, her success at finding work in a predominantly male environment, and her appointment to the *Institution of Civil Engineers of Ireland*, were significant milestones.

Iris's international hockey career continued for much of her life, giving her opportunities for travel that few Irish women enjoyed. In 1925 she captained the Irish ladies' team tour of the USA, who were presented to President Calvin Coolidge at the White House.



Female munitions workers or 'munitionettes' of the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich c. 1917.

Iris Cummins died in Dublin in April 1968. We can assess the impact that her example had on subsequent generations of professional women by examining the

career of Katherine Walshe, another prominent Cork-born engineer. Writing in the *Engineers Journal* in 1985, she noted that of the 78 female freshmen that entered University College Cork with her in 1915, 40 were admitted to the *School of Engineering*. Katherine herself was inspired to become an engineer when she first heard about Iris as a child. Her determination to succeed in a field that continues to be largely male-dominated displays her exceptional talent, resilience and dedication.

The political and economic difficulties of the post-war years, as depicted in *Punch* magazine 1920.

