

Mary O'Connell Bianconi (1896 – 1968)

Mary (Molly) was, as her double-barrelled surname suggests, a descendant of two of Ireland's most prominent public figures, Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, and Charles Bianconi, the founder of public transport in the country.

In 1915 she joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD). Having successfully completed a nursing programme at a hospital in Yorkshire, Molly completed a motor car maintenance course in 1916.

Armed with basic training in nursing and motor car maintenance, Molly was then accepted into the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANYs). In August 1917 Molly was sent, with a contingent of FANYs, to France where she earned a reputation for hard work, innovation, bravery, courage, endurance, and flair. Molly was awarded a Military Medal (MM) for her conduct. Her citation read, in part:

For conspicuous devotion to duty during an (sic.) hostile air raid. All these lady drivers were out with their cars during the raid, picking up and in every way assisting the wounded and injured. They showed great bravery and coolness, and were an example to all ranks.

Following the war, she pursued several careers, including spells as a model and a hotelier. However, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Molly, then aged forty-three, rejoined the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. She was subsequently offered a commission as a Junior Commander in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the women's branch of the British Army during World War Two.

When the war ended, Molly embarked on an entirely new career. She wrote a biography of her great grandfather, Charles Bianconi., which was published by Allen Figgis in 1962 with the title "Bianconi: King of the Irish Roads".

Before she had a chance to turn her sights to something else different and new, Molly died in 1968, aged seventy-two. Her obituary contained an impressive list of her numerous occupations that had, like her great grandfather's coaching business, spanned over half a century. It concluded with the following poignant tribute:

'[She was] a woman of splendid physical appearance, despite advancing years...a warm, friendly, jovial character, well liked by all who knew her'.

These characteristics can readily be seen in the photograph (taken by Lafayette of Dublin, 1962).

This note is based on a biography by Alice McDermott.