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Hargreaves, Janet, Moorehouse, Paula and Hargreaves, David

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# RESEARCH ARTICLES

## Rebel Nurses of the Rising: Ireland, Easter 1916

**Janet Hargreaves, Paula Moorhouse and David, W. Hargreaves**

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### Abstract

The nursing of the 'rebels' and the role of nurses in the Easter Rising of 1916 have received little attention until recently, even within Ireland itself. There is now a growing analysis, in particular a reaffirmation of the significant role played by women in the Rising, culminating in publications commemorating the centenary of this event. This paper offers a critical review of what is known about nursing within rebel strongholds in Dublin during this time.

Findings suggest there is evidence of some qualified nurses involved in rebel (rather than civilian and military) positions, including accounts of the extent of their role and the injuries managed. However, the majority of the immediate nursing care available to the rebels was given by members of the Irish Citizen's Army and the women's organisation Cumman na mBan, both of whom were trained in first aid and were wearing Red Cross insignia. Accounts of the week suggest that the status and treatment of qualified nurses and first aid workers offering care was not consistent.

Although the Easter Rising was just one week of conflict confined to Ireland, its timing during WW1 and Ireland's contested status as a part of Great Britain in rebellion against the established order raise a number of issues for discussion. These include the use and status of the Red Cross emblem in such circumstances and the management of humanitarian aid in a heavily populated urban setting.

Through a focus on the humanitarian management of the conflict from a rebel perspective this paper offers an alternative perspective on the nursing response to this historical event. In doing so a parallel, alternative view may be seen which illustrates the need to explore multiple narratives.

### Background

On Easter Monday 1916 members of a number of Irish organisations hostile to British rule instigated a rising, declaring Ireland's independence from Britain. Although the Rising was contained within 6 days, it was a significant event in the history of conflict between Britain and Ireland, in which more than 400 people died and many more were injured. In addition, in the context of the First World War, it has been described as: '*arguably the most extensive and intensive example of urban warfare which had occurred in Europe up to that time*' (Kinsella 1997, p137). A short introduction to the reasons for the rising, and the nursing response, will be followed by an outline of the sources used, the findings and discussion.

### Conflict and rebellion in Ireland

This paper cannot do justice to the very complex history of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Rather, it offers a brief summary of some of the factors that led to 1916 being a year ripe for rebellion. The status of Ireland, as an autonomous nation or one subsumed into Britain had been contested for many centuries, but a starting point for this summary might be the Act of Union in 1800 which created the entity 'United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland'; the Irish Parliament in Dublin was shut down and rule transferred to London. For working class Irish people, the British were seen to be poor rulers. Repeated

famines appeared to be evidence of British indifference to their suffering, but were dismissed, blaming instead behaviour of Irish absentee landlords and the failure of Irish agriculture to diversify. The *Times* commented that '*we regard the potato blight as a blessing*' (Times 22.09.1846) because it provided an opportunity for the Irish to change their behaviour. Substantial assistance was withheld on the grounds that such help would reward the undeserving and was in defiance of the laws of God. As the famine got worse, Gray states that the campaign became one in which: '*identifying and eradicating 'abuse' acquired a higher priority than saving lives*' (Gray, 1999 p332).

During the famine corn, barley and dairy products were exported, predominantly to England leaving the local population to starve. Thus the history of Ireland in the nineteenth century became a story of emigration, increasing resistance anger and repression.

Two different strategies for resisting British rule emerged. Some believed in a political solution and thus initially the Home Rule League was formed in 1873, this was replaced in 1882 by the Irish Parliamentary Party which won an increased number of seats in the British Parliament. They introduced a Home Rule Bill in 1886, but this was defeated, as was the second Home Rule Bill, in 1893.

Others rejected political solutions and sought to establish an independent Republic through rebellion. The Fenian Rising of 1867 was an example of a comprehensive revolt but was poorly organised; division and unrest continued throughout the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A third Home Rule Bill was successful in 1912, and came into law in September 1914. Had it been enacted it might have addressed some of this issues, however, it

was suspended for the duration of the First World War. The sectarian divisions within Ireland, as well as those between republicans and the British, thus remained critical at this time.

James Connolly, one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising, saw the conflict firstly as one of class, not of religious or national identity and thus not in traditional Republican terms but '*a fight for mastery of the means of life, the sources of production in Ireland*' (Connolly, 1910, Chapter 16). He favoured working class action, arguing that the independence and socialism he believed was needed could not be achieved by expecting a broad nationalist approach to bring all the classes together. He argued that the ruling Irish class were and would continue to be just as oppressive as the British.

In 1913, Dublin became the centre of militant trade unionism based upon the use of widespread working class solidarity. Hundreds of workers were injured by the police on Blood Sunday (August 31<sup>st</sup>) and shortly after a Lock Out was organised by the employers. In October 1913 James Connolly said that he was going '*to organise and discipline a force to protect workers' meetings*' (Robbins, 1977 p 58), this became the Irish Citizens Army (ICA).

Further militant action was disrupted in August 1914 when the First World War began. Connolly opposed the war but also saw in it an opportunity for insurrection because Republicans had an armed body, the ICA, which was ready to fight, and Britain was distracted by the war effort. This was the context in which the Rising became possible.

In addition to the ICA there were a complex mix of groups with nationalist and republican sympathies ready to join a rebellion including the male Irish Volunteers and the female Cumann na mBan, (which translates as 'the League of women'). The

latter grew from a meeting in Dublin of over a hundred women in April 1914 to become an organisation with branches throughout Ireland, Scotland and England. The ICA, with its roots in union activism had a strong working class association; Cumann na mBan was more mixed, attracting large numbers of middle class women who tended to be the organisers and committee members. Cumann na mBan's purpose was to work in conjunction with the Irish Volunteers to advance the cause of Irish liberty. Both organisations would learn first aid, drill, and signaling and rifle practice in order to aid the cause of Irish freedom.

The outbreak of WW1 caused splits with some Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan members supporting the British war effort. In addition, some suffragists were very critical of what they saw as Cumann na mBan's subservience to the Volunteers. Despite these divisions a strong faction of Cumann na mBan was nationalistic and supported the Rising along with the ICA (Jones, 1998).

Thus by 1916 the will and means for rebellion were in place and despite confusion and miscommunication, around 1200 men and women took part on Easter Monday, 24<sup>th</sup> April. At midday the proclamation of an Irish Republic was announced from the steps of the General Post Office (GPO) on what is now known as O'Connell Street in Dublin. The Rebels attempted to take control of Ireland, commanded from their strategic headquarters at the GPO and stationed at critical points across Dublin and other cities. An urban battle ensued involving the British military, the rebels and ordinary citizens who had mixed sympathies. In addition to the 400 recorded deaths there were many casualties and buildings were destroyed by artillery and fire; the rebels surrendered 5 days later on the Friday. James Connolly, dying from a gangrenous gunshot wound, was imprisoned and sentenced to death

along with other leaders of the Rising. He was shot by firing squad 14 days later on May 12<sup>th</sup>. The contested nature of Irish identity and British involvement in Ireland continued to resonate throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to the present day.

### **The nursing response**

The response of established nursing services in Dublin to the rising has been researched in detail by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (Loughrey, 2016), as well as accounts by specific nursing orders [see for example the Sisters of Mercy n.d.]. In summary, both sources recount the fighting breaking out with little warning in a busy urban environment; thus rebels, British military and civilians all suffered injury and death. All general hospitals in Dublin took in casualties, as well as specialist areas such as the Maternity Hospital. In addition, staff went out into the streets and created temporary space in private homes to attend to casualties where it was too dangerous, or they were too ill, to reach the hospitals.

The situation at the South Dublin Union was particularly complicated as, due to its strategic geographical location, it was occupied early in the Rising by the rebels. This in turn led to counter attack by the British with open combat and gunfire. In this setting the nurse whose name is most associated with the Rising, Margaret Keogh, who was not a rebel, was shot and killed by a British soldier<sup>1</sup>. The British were understandably anxious to down play the incident, coming as it did soon after the execution of Edith Cavell, and thus carrying the strong potential for her to be seen as a rebel martyr. A question was raised at the Houses of Parliament by Mr. Ginnell MP of The Irish Parliamentary Party to Prime

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<sup>1</sup> For background see: <http://www.carlowassociation.co.uk/carlow-and-london-share-a-strong-connection-with-the-easter-rising-leading-to-parliamentary-questions-asked-in-the-houses-of-parliament-in-1916/>

Minister Asquith MP. Mr. Tennant MP, The Under Secretary of State for War made the statement: *'The circumstances connected with this case have been very carefully and exhaustively inquired into, the evidence of military and also civilian witnesses having been taken. It has been definitely ascertained that this most regrettable incident was a pure accident.'*(HC Deb. 22 June 1916 vol 83, c 304).

## Methods

The aim of this paper is to critically review what is known specifically about nursing in rebel strongholds in Dublin during the Easter Rising, drawing on primary and secondary sources. These include published research, autobiographical texts, and witness statements from the Bureau of Military History.

The role of nurses in the Easter Rising and the nursing of the rebel side have been under-researched until recently. There is now a growing body of research, in particular analysis of the role played by women in the Rising (McCoole, 2015), and publications commemorating the centenary of this event (Loughrey, 2016). There are also publications, for example Kinsella (1997), McGary (2016) that recount a broader history of these events and histories of the various women's organisations such as Cumann na mBan (McCallum, 2005) and the Irish Women Workers Union (Jones, 1998).

Two contemporary autobiographical accounts have informed this paper: Nurse Linda Kearns edited diary (Smithson, 1922) and Cumann na mBan activist Margaret Skinnider (1917). In addition the primary sources within the Bureau of Military History archive, in particular the extensive witness statements have been of relevance: (<http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/>).

The archive contains 1,773 witness statements from men and women involved in the conflicts in Ireland between 1913 - 1921. This collection does of course have

limitations: Firstly, the statements were collected in the 10 years from 1947, 30 years after the Rising. Secondly many of the key people whose testimony would have been valuable died or were executed during the period of conflict and not all who were involved were sympathetic with the Bureau's project and declined to give statements. For example, Madeline French-Mullen, who played a key role in leading the first aid support for the rebels in St Stephen's Green and is named in many witness statements is not recorded. Thirdly conflict in Ireland was not resolved in 1947 and witnesses may have self-edited their contribution to protect themselves and others. An example can be found in the slight differences between the witness statement and the autobiographical diary of Linda Kearns, which is explored later in this paper. However, the strength of the archive is in recording the experiences of ordinary people who were in Ireland at the time. In particular, women of ICA and Cumann na mBan who might otherwise be invisible.

Witness statements were searched for female authors using the phrases 'first aid' or 'Red Cross'. Their accounts were critically reviewed along with other literature to identify narratives related to nursing or first aid work undertaken within the rebel encampments.

Findings from this review include two particular areas for discussion: firstly, how the rebels planned for and managed first aid and battle injuries and secondly the status of the Red Cross.

## Nursing the rebels

Two trained nurses who proactively joined the Rising and offered their nursing services in support of the rebel cause appear in the witness statements: Aoife de Burka and Linda Kearns<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Farrell is also named in some documentation as a trained nurse, and was a significant presence in the GPO during the

In addition, many members of Cumann na mBan and the ICA, volunteered for first aid duties during the week. In this paper Rosie Hackett, Rose McNamara, Molly Reynolds and Claire Rooney are included.

Although the witness statements indicate first aid stations using Red Cross signage were set up in all rebel strongholds, the most detailed records relate to rebel positions in the O'Connell Street and General Post Office (GPO) area.

Aoife de Burka, Catherine Rooney and Molly Reynolds' witness statements place them at the GPO, on O'Connell Street.

Aoife de Burka was nursing in a private house on the outskirts of Dublin when the rising started. Although her witness statement was documented between 1947-57, much of it is taken from a personal account she wrote much earlier in July 1916. She was not a Cumann na mBan member, but sympathetic with the rebel cause. Hearing that the rising had commenced, she resigned her post and headed for Dublin on Tuesday. She was assigned to one of the command stations on O'Connell street near the GPO where eight Cumann na mBan volunteers were already stationed, and immediately attended to her first major casualty: *'a civilian was carried in, badly wounded in the abdomen. All that was possible was done for him, but he only survived one hour after admission'* (BMH WS 0359 p 7).

Wednesday morning a decision was made to set up a first aid station in a house next to the Hibernian bank, which was opposite the GPO and thought to be better situated for casualties: *' here we arranged everything necessary to render first aid. Having done so, we hoisted two large Red Cross flags through the windows*

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Rising but appears not to have trained until after this period and accounts, including her own witness statement, suggest that her chosen role was as a dispatch carrier, rather than nursing.

*overlooking O'Connell St.'* (BMH WS 0359 p6). They experienced heavy shelling by the British and she recalls: *'I proceeded at once to get everything in readiness for the wounded, for, judging by the tremendous firing I knew I was in for a busy time'* (BMH WS 0359 p8). She is proved right as almost immediately their Commander was mortally wounded and further casualties arrived: *'we did our best for him but he only survived about 15 minutes... I had just closed his eyes when another young fellow was carried up wounded in the foot. I dressed it and had him carried to the basement where we had beds laid out on the floor'* (BMH WS 0359 p8). The escalating bombardment of O'Connell Street necessitated a retreat to the first aid station in the GPO, carrying their wounded under the protection of Red Cross flags: *'The hospital portion, which was downstairs on the first floor, was well equipped, with everything necessary to enable us to do our work efficiently being at hand. At this time, we hadn't more than 5 wounded, and only one of these was serious'* (BMH WS 0359 p10).

Twenty-one year-old Catherine Rooney was a Cumann na mBan first aider already stationed in the GPO. Having rushed to be in the thick of things she arrived at the GPO at the start of the occupation at midday on Monday. Despite being told to go home she hung around and persuaded someone to lift her up on a windowsill *'I kicked in the glass of the window. I jumped in ...'* (BMH WS 648 p3). Almost immediately there was an explosion, caused by a volunteer, who was carrying a homemade grenade which exploded as he entered the post office: *'At this time he was lying on the ground and bleeding profusely from his head. Joe Gahan brought me a can of cold water and I washed Liam's head and I discovered he had a very nasty wound to the side of his head, which I dressed.'* (BMH WS 648 p3)

Having been awake since Tuesday morning Aoife de Burka left the GPO on Wednesday

evening to make the dangerous journey home to sleep. In a deteriorating situation and with some danger she managed to return to the GPO on Thursday morning, allowed through barricades because of her nurses' uniform. Very soon, she records helping with the injuries including James Connolly: '*... Connolly came in .... wounded in the lower part of the left leg; the bone was broken and the flesh very much lacerated. He seemed in great pain. I took off his boot and sock, and helped to dress his wound. We then got him to bed, where he was put under anaesthetic to have the bone set, which was ably performed by Lieutenant Mahony RAMC (a prisoner), assisted by two of our own young doctors. I watched him until he regained consciousness after the ether, and felt honoured by the duty*' (BMH WS 0359 p13-14). Molly Reynolds, a Red Cross trained Cumann na mBan volunteer was also present and recalls: '*His leg was dressed, set in splints and a waste paper basket was cut in two to make a cage for it*' (BMH WS 648 p6).

Lieutenant Mahoney is clearly kept busy in his captivity, and features again in Aoife de Burka's account when he extracts a bullet from another casualty's lumbar spine.

The last casualty she describes is later on Thursday: '*about midday another of our men was wounded. He had been on duty on the top of the post office, and was badly wounded the bullet passing through his lung, up his neck and out through his right cheek near his eye. He was carried in, his face covered in blood, and no one thought he would survive many minutes. But I am happy to say that he did ....*' (BMH WS 0359 p15).

Throughout Thursday shelling continued and many buildings were abandoned, although there was a lull overnight, by Friday the GPO was surrounded, with constant bombardment and risk of fire. The need to evacuate became inevitable. On

Friday evening Aoife de Burka reports that 12 people she describes as *Red Cross workers*, along with the wounded, accompanied by a priest and carrying the Red Cross flag, evacuated the building with the intention of trying to get everyone to Jervis Street hospital. Notably James Connolly, despite his worsening condition, remained. Aoife de Burka and Molly Reynolds are amongst many eye witness accounts within BMH of the dangerous journey which followed through buildings where holes in the walls have been created to seek safe passage. They were often under gunfire and carrying three stretcher cases as well as supervising walking wounded. Arriving at the hospital their way was blocked by fire and Aoife de Burka recalls they had to: '*rush the flames ...*' *he (the priest) dashed through holding aloft the white flag with its distinctive Red Cross*' (BMH WS 0359 p22).

Molly Reynolds recounts that as they reached their destination the army is waiting to round up possible rebels: '*British military arrested the Red Cross men and men with minor wounds*' (BMH WS 195 p7).

Linda Kearns is the second trained nurse associated with nursing on the rebel side. Although not present in the GPO she was in the O'Connell street area, as recorded in her witness statement and published diary (Smithson 1921). She was not a member of Cumann na mBan at the time of the Rising, but was appalled by the quality of care received by the Irish people under British rule and believed they should be '*expelled from the country*' (BMH WS 404 p1). Sometime in 1911 or 1912 she had started learning Irish and engaging in other activities about national identity. She was asked to lecture in first aid for Cumann na mBan in Dublin which she did. However, she identified herself as playing no active role in rebellion until 1916: '*My first direct association with the republican movement was on the first night of the rising -Monday -*

*when John O'Mahoney, who lived beside me, came in and asked me to open a hospital for the wounded volunteers' (BMH WS404 p2).*

At this point the witness statement and diary vary slightly. On the Tuesday or Wednesday, she opened a 'hospital' in an empty house, for which a chemist shop donated bandages and other supplies. She put a Red Cross in the window and six 'girls' plus two 'boys' as stretcher bearers assisted her. The hospital was within a mile of the GPO but in open territory, not a rebel stronghold. Thus, in line with Red Cross conventions, she was indiscriminate in treating anyone who asked for help. In her witness statement she says that only 2 casualties were treated that day, both British soldiers having their hands dressed, whereas in her diary she also alludes to treating republican soldiers and women.

Her personal allegiance to the rebels is clear, as she suggests the 'British Tommy' whose finger had been shot off: *'had no idea he was in the hands of the enemy!'* (Smithson 1921, p7).

Her hospital is short lived as the following morning a British officer ordered her to only treat British military or to close down. She refused and recalls that: *'when I protested he replied that the wounded could be treated in the Mater and Jervis St. Hospitals'* (BMH WS 404 p2).

Thus it seems the rebels had sophisticated preparation for, and management of front line trauma. This was offered by professionally qualified, or first aid trained people using the Red Cross symbol of neutrality and invoking the conventions of humanitarian aid during armed conflict.

### **The Red Cross**

These accounts show the Rebels deploying women as front line military and medical support and using Red Cross insignia in all of their first aid stations. Connolly was an advocate for women's equality, supporting a

Girls' Ambulance Corps within Cumann na mBan and from its inception the ICA recruited men and women. A doctor, Kathleen Lynn, who had been awarded degrees in medicine, surgery and obstetrics in 1899 and made a fellow of the royal College of Surgeons in 1909, ran advanced first aid classes and was appointed Chief Medical Officer with the rank of Captain and head of the ICA women's section (Jones 1996, McCool, 2015). This meant first aid training was routine: *'the Irish Citizens Army was unique amongst nationalist organisations in providing both military and medical training to all members, irrespective of gender'* (Kinsella 1997 P 137).

Aoife de Burka identifies the people stationed with her on O'Connell Street as: *'Red Cross workers for the Republican Army'* (BMH WS 0359 p5). She and Linda Kearns also refer to the use of Red Cross flags being used to mark first aid stations. A further example can be found on the opposite side of Dublin; a gated park, St Stephen's Green, was seized by the Rebels. Madeline French-Mullen, a Cumann na mBan leader, was in charge of setting up a first aid post in the park bandstand, with a team of Cumann na mBan volunteers (Skinnider 1917, McCool 2015). They wore white dresses with Red Cross insignia and raised Red Cross flags. Rosie Hackett, an ICA and Cumann na mBan member recalls: *'I was stationed at the first aid post in the park. It was very exciting there'* (BMH WS 546 P 6).

Whilst their preparedness and ability to cope with emergency care during urban warfare may seem remarkable, it needs to be viewed in the context of the World War. As in the rest Britain, all citizens were encouraged to prepare for the war effort and the Rebel training would have been the same or similar to that of the Red Cross and Voluntary Aid Detachment: *'as the western world moved closer to war the*



*British government encouraged women to attend subsidised first aid classes and fostered the establishment of Red Cross societies. Irish women, who had no intention of contributing to the British Empire's war effort, seized the opportunity to develop their skills. Their reasoning was that first aid workers would be indispensable to an insurrection and first aid work was thus an eminently practical way of participating in the fight for Ireland's independence'* (Taillon 1996, P10).

Cumann na mBan had sought recognition from the International Red Cross Society (IRCS) as a separate national organisation but were refused as they did not have a 'standing army' nor were they legally a separate nation. They were advised to affiliate with the British Red Cross (BRC) but this sat uncomfortably with Cumann na mBan members (Taillon 1996), as the 1906 IRCS conventions in place at the time state that national societies are under the command of the military (IRCS 1906 conventions nd). Thus during the Rising, they invoked the spirit of the Red Cross practices and used its insignia. They should, within the rules of the Convention, have been under the command and control of the British Military, but clearly this was impossible due to the Rebellion.

The IRCS had admitted no new countries for 16 years from 1898 to 1914, but it appears that the position of the Red Cross in an internal national conflict had already been raised. The IRCS International conference in Washington, May 1912, had an agenda item on civil war: *'in the event of civil war or rebellion ... proposed that the RC societies of countries not implicated in the civil war should be authorised to offer assistance to both the government in power and to the rebels as well as to non-combatants in rebel areas. . This was met with great opposition as 'assisting rebels*

*must be seen as act of violation of friendly relations''* (Boissier, 1985 p 19).

The item was debated but no vote taken. National Societies did continue to broker a role in such conflicts but a major resolution was not reached until the IRCS conference in 1921.

The situation in Dublin was slightly different, in that it involved divided Red Cross loyalties within the country, rather than assistance from a neutral country's Red Cross. Taillon (1996) reports that the rebels claim the right, as Red Cross trained persons, to use the Red Cross emblem in their first aid and hospital work, which is clearly borne out by the eye witness accounts during the Rising: Linda Kearns and Aoife de Burka wear the Red Cross on their dresses and use flags to indicate first aid stations as do the Cumann na mBan members in St Stephen's Green.

However, there are many accounts of incidents that show abuses of the Red Cross principles of 'Humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality' (IRCS Fundamental Principles nd). For example, Linda Kearns reports that the British military ordered her to only treat soldiers or shut down and McCool suggests that the lack of independent Red Cross recognition was an issue: *' to British soldiers therefore, these women were legitimate targets '* (McCool 1997 p 37).

First-hand accounts from St Stephen's Green elaborate upon this. Rosie Hackett remembers: *'We were under very heavy fire from late on Monday evening. Even when we marked out the first aid post with the red sign, they did not recognise it and kept firing on us'* (BMH WS 546 p6).

Skinnider also observed the soldiers shooting at the first aid station in the bandstand: *'Once that day I saw them shooting at our first-aid girls, who made excellent targets in their white dresses, with*

*large red crosses on them. It was a miracle that none of them was wounded. Bullets passed through one girl's skirt, and another girl had the heel of her shoe shot off. If I myself had not seen this happen, I could not have believed that the British soldiers would disobey the rules of war concerning the Red Cross'* (Skinnider 1917 P124).

As the situation deteriorated they evacuated to a safer venue, carrying the Red Cross flag, but still under gunfire, Rosie Hackett recalls: *'we were fired on - the pellets were hitting us'* (BMH WS 546 p7).

In other situations, Aoife de Burka and Molly Reynolds had seen rebel Red Cross workers and injured people being arrested, Taillon (1996) reports the British burning down a Rebel Red Cross unit and Linda Kearns witnesses a British Soldier refusing to allow an injured rebel to be treated. This last incident is recorded in more detail in the witness statement of Albert Mitchell. Attempting to get to work at the start of the rising he was refused permission to leave Dublin by the British military. As he could drive, he was co-opted by the army to act as a Red Cross ambulance driver. He recounts: *'When driving through Moore Street to Jervis street one afternoon towards the end of the week the sergeant drew my attention to the body of a man lying in the gutter in Moore lane. He was dressed in a green uniform. I took the Sergeant and two men with the stretcher and approached the body which appeared to be still alive. We were about to lift it up when a young English officer stepped out of a doorway and refused to allow us to touch it. I told him of my instructions from HQ but all to no avail'* (BMH WS 196 P2).

However, the Rebel position was also ambiguous as they invoked the spirit of the IRCS convention, but did not have formal recognition or authority. Also, many of the rebel witness statements show that Cumann na mBan members are trained to

take on all roles, from first aid worker to gun runner. Although many were wearing Red Cross uniforms they might also have secret dispatches hidden in their clothes. In some cases, this was incidental; Taillon (1996) refers to an unnamed woman in Red Cross uniform carrying dispatches whilst she goes to collect dressings and when Aoife de Burka leaves the GPO to get some sleep she carries messages with her. Catherine Rooney more overtly moves between different roles. When she is not offering first aid she is preparing food or ammunition and is on standby to carry dispatches, recalling crossing Dublin with a dispatch concealed under her hair.

The situation during this week was confusing and neither side were fully in control: *'During the Rising use was made of both artillery and armour in an urban setting, with areas of resistance being isolated and reduced by the concerted use of infantry, armour and artillery. Civilians who intermingled with the combatants suffered both by accident and deliberately at the hands of both sides. Because of the close proximity of civilians and combatants the medical and paramedical services of the city, in addition to the medical services of the combatants, were brought into action in a manner that had not been required of them before'* (Kinsella 1997 P 137).

## **Conclusion**

An exploration of the first aid and nursing available to the Irish nationalist rebels during the Easter Rising 1916 has led to greater understanding of the nursing that occurred, and the ambivalent position of the Red Cross in an armed national uprising.

The speed with which the Rising started, and the closed urban environment in Dublin meant that the rebels were involved with wound management, surgery and death in makeshift settings within minutes of injuries being sustained.

The rebels used the insignia of the Red Cross and invoked the Geneva Convention to seek humanitarian protection for their wounded. The infringement of aspects of Red Cross conventions illustrates the challenges faced when delivering humanitarian aid during a rebellion.

Although some of the incidents that occurred could be accidental rather than intended, it seems that some of the misuse of Red Cross principles was knowing and deliberate. Exploring the areas of ambivalence and conflict from the rebel perspective helps to understand the different perspectives of ruling and rebelling forces and the difficulties in discerning or accepting a single narrative.

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#### Bureau of Military History Archive Witness statements:

Aoife De Burka BMH WS 0359

Catherine Rooney BMH WS 648

Molly Reynolds BMH WS 648

Linda Kearns BMH WS 404

Rosie Hackett BMH WS 546

Albert Mitchell BHM WS 196