

## The Republican engagement of Irish women movements in the War of Independence (1919-1921): a Deleuzian perspective

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### Résumé

Le présent article est une analyse de l'engagement des femmes irlandaises dans l'organisation révolutionnaire féminine *Cumann na mBan* à la veille, pendant et après la guerre d'indépendance (1919-21). Hétérogénéité sociale, culturelle et religieuse sont les caractéristiques principales des membres d'un mouvement qui s'est fédéré autour de l'idéal républicain, au détriment d'autres revendications, féministes notamment. L'apport de la philosophie de Deleuze et Guattari à l'analyse politique de l'État et des mouvements d'opposition, notamment dans leur ouvrage *Mille Plateaux* (1980) permettra de définir les caractéristiques de cette diversité et de quelle manière elle se situe par rapport à une société dont le modèle dominant est à la fois colonial et masculin. La première partie dressera le tableau de cette hétérogénéité en se référant au concept de « rhizome », et, en particulier, à son caractère non-causal et non-linéaire. La seconde partie s'attachera à analyser les différentes manières dont *Cumann na mBan* a pu constituer, à sa manière, un « devenir-femme », c'est-à-dire un défi à la fois au pouvoir britannique en tant qu'Appareil d'État et à la masculinité comme modèle de « Visagéité ». Enfin, la troisième partie tentera d'expliquer les raisons pour lesquelles cet engagement unitaire des femmes fut de courte durée en se référant à ce que Deleuze et Guattari nomment le « devenir-minoritaire » des « machines de guerre » qui remettent en question, de l'extérieur, un Appareil d'État qui, dans le cas de l'Irlande, a simplement changé l'identité nationale du pouvoir, mais non sa forme.

### Mots-clés

Femmes – Révolution – Engagement – Minoritaire – Devenir – Visagéité – Appareil d'État – Rhizome – Machine de Guerre

### Abstract

The present contribution aims to analyse Irish women's engagement in the wake, during, and in the aftermath of the War of Independence against Britain (1919-21) through membership of the all-female revolutionary movement called *Cumann na mBan*. This organization was characterized by its social, cultural and religious diversity, which was federated under the Republican banner, to the detriment of more militant agendas, notably feminism. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's philosophical analysis of the structure of the State and of the nature of opposition movements as developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) will provide a theoretical explanation for *Cumann na mBan*'s diversity and how it was born out of a colonial, male-dominated social model. Part One will describe the key features of this diversity by reference to the Deleuzian concept of the "Rhizome" characterized by its non-causal, non-linear structure. Part Two will focus on the different manners in which *Cumann na mBan* can be considered as the expression of a "becoming-woman", especially in the way it challenged the British State Apparatus in Ireland and its masculine nature with reference to the concept of "Faciality". Finally, Part Three will stress the reasons why this common engagement of women was short-lived by analyzing it as a "becoming-minoritarian" War Machine, the aim of which is the question the legitimacy of a State Apparatus from the outside; in the case of Ireland, the State remained identical in nature and structure – only its national identity changed.

### Key-words

Women – Revolution – Engagement – Minoritarian – Becoming – Faciality – State Apparatus – Rhizome – War Machine

Feminism does not form a uniform, solid block in terms of theory and approaches; in that sense it would be preferable to speak of “feminisms”. Borrowings include Marxism or materialism (Vogel 2014), psychoanalysis (Irigaray 1974 & 1977), liberalism (Friedan 1963, Nussbaum 2000) Hegelianism (Butler), technosciences (Haraway 1991), and all the fields of knowledge and arts testify to the dynamism of that mode of conceptualizing and exemplifying feminine identity in the course of a history that was – and arguably still – is male-dominated. This does not mean that male thinkers did not contribute, directly or indirectly, to the shaping of feminist philosophy, and this was the case with Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). Although he was not a feminist philosopher, he elaborated on “women” in that they constitute what he called “becomings”. In the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* co-written with Félix Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus* 1972 & *A Thousand Plateaus* 1980), the notion of “becoming” opposes the existence of “woman” or “womanhood”, which refer to an assigned identity (Flieger 2000, 47). *A Thousand Plateaus* questions the existence of feminine identity in that it has existed not by default, but also as a result of a male-dominated structure. Indeed society, understood as a State Apparatus<sup>1</sup>, forms a block from which meaning emerges and is propagated by a discourse that contributes to the control of a specific “striated” institutional space<sup>2</sup>. What makes this form of control specific is its binarism: a society is typically organised around notional pairs like man/woman, old/young, work/leisure, law/outlaw, etc. These oppositions tend to create fixed modes of thought; this is also the characteristic of Western philosophy in that it follows immutable laws like causation, historical continuity and symmetry to form what Deleuze and Guattari name the “Tree”. To this they oppose movement, fluxes of life that are more singular, individual, and these form particular types of assemblages based on desire<sup>3</sup> and characterized by their intensity, speed and variation. Such assemblages are constantly departing from the striated, controlled space which they oppose. They form, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “War Machines”, “Rhizomes”, whose object and purpose is rarely war but a type of challenge to the established State Apparatus.

The latter is strictly organized by a language (in terms of meanings, content and expression) that gives it the visible features of a model (called “faciality”) dominated by the face of a white, western heterosexual male. Consequently, women, coloured people, homosexuals and animals are not minor social entities, but the challenge to faciality in that they are “becomings”, potential War Machines. In other words, a becoming-woman, or even a becoming-animal, a process that goes as far as

1 This expression refers to the State institutions as they form a territory characterised by fixity and sedentarity. But the State Apparatus is also ideological; it dominates individuals like a “superstructure”, to borrow from Marxism.

2 The space controlled by the State is “striated” in the sense that it attributes to individuals an identity based on binary relations and logical exclusions.

3 Desire, according to Deleuze, cannot be associated with “lack” or “want”, but is akin to a “life-force”. Spinoza used the Latin term “conatus” to describe this force.

“becoming-imperceptible” is, first and foremost, a key concern for men/males because it challenges accepted assumptions on individual and group identities. Of course Deleuze and Guattari do not speak in terms of biology but of social representation, while adding that a total departure from a State Apparatus and faciality is a never-ending process. Such a process works as a series of departures on “lines of flight” (also called “deterritorializations”) followed by “captures” (or “reterritorializations”) either by the State Apparatus, or, at least, by the “Abstract Machine” of faciality. This perspective can cast a new light on Irish women’s political engagement in the War of Independence (1919-1921) in the sense that they shared men’s nationalist ideals but they also managed to dissociate themselves from traditional views on the role of women within a new society. This also meant that they would remain minoritarian insofar as they were considered as mere auxiliaries to men’s struggle for freedom. Because Deleuze does not address the specificity of a feminine identity but rather seems to negate it, his works have been the subject of intense critique by feminist scholars and philosophers. Central to the dispute is the issue of identity (which is always associated by Deleuze with fixity and faciality), or, as we may call it now, “gender”. In more recent works, feminists have tried to re-examine and reassess the theory of “becoming” by analysing how it contributes (or not) to the destabilisation of established dichotomies, like the masculine and the feminine.

The purpose of this contribution is to show how Deleuzian concepts like “becomings”, “War Machine”, “Rhizome” and “Nomadism” can illuminate the understanding of particular “events”, namely the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) that saw women challenge “faciality” in the guise of a “becoming” that was politically Republican ; it did so in the form of a “War Machine” called *Cumann na mBan* (“The Council of Women”), precisely at a time when established colonial State structures effectively collapsed. The ephemeral existence of this organisation testifies to the emergence of a political feminine identity by, paradoxically, maintaining a kind of imperceptibility that can be attributed to the mutability of gender roles<sup>4</sup>, and the necessity to maintain seditious activities hidden behind the cloak of traditional gender stereotypes in order to create a space for women in the public sphere that had hitherto been denied to them.

The present contribution will examine how *Cumann na mBan* was an attempt to redefine the role of women in Irish politics in a way that would supersede other social and civil right struggles and form a united front among women of different social, educational and religious backgrounds in order to gain rights through physical

4 Women, for instance, used their feminine attributes (dress code, social role and received opinions about “womanhood”) to secretly contribute to the success of the insurrection. Men also used such a code to divert attention from policemen or soldiers when they dressed up as women to conceal their real identity and evade body searches.

involvement. Part one will discuss the heterogeneous nature of a “rhizomatic” political movement that used male codes of conduct in order to establish women as equal and valid actors in the creation of a new state. Part two will show how *Cumann na mBan* came across as subversive “war machine” in the eye of the British authorities and of some prominent Republicans alike in their challenging of gendered roles in the conduct of war and the mixed responses they prompted among male politicians. Part three will analyse how the aspirations of these “deterritorialized” women were then suppressed and reined in with the creation of the Irish Free State, which explains why the majority of *Cumann na mBan* members sided with the Anti-Treaty front during the Civil War that followed the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty of December 1921. It will then conclude with the description of the complete “capture” of this short-lived assemblage as embodied by the drafting and subsequent ratification of the 1937 Constitution and the incapacity of *Cumann na mBan* to distance themselves from the “moment of being” that encapsulated Irish Republicanism and the fight for Irish independence embodied by their association with *Sinn Féin* and its opposition to the Irish state that followed.

### The formation of an “all-female” rhizome

The War of Independence (1919-1922) was quickly followed by a bloody Civil War in Ireland that opposed those in favour of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of January 1922 as a momentary and necessary compromise, and those who staunchly denounced it as a renunciation to Republican ideals set forth by the First Dáil; interestingly, most members of *Cumann na mBan* were on the latter side. This may be explained by the plurality of interests and agendas that women aimed to promote; in other words, this all-female organisation constituted a “rhizome”, a complex notion that can be best explained by its formation and development<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, the existence of this rhizomatic structure is connected to specific events that define and encapsulate all its characteristics, but not in a strictly causal fashion. All of these events clearly show that those women challenged faciality (the social role model being the white, British, heterosexual, landed and upper-class male). This was the common ground for all the women that helped form *Cumann na mBan*, in spite of their otherwise different outlooks on the role of women in Irish society.

5 « À la différence des arbres ou de leurs racines, le rhizome connecte un point quelconque avec un autre point quelconque, et chacun de ses traits ne renvoie pas nécessairement à des traits de même nature, il met en jeu des régimes de signes très différents et même des états de non-signes. Le rhizome ne se laisse ramener ni à l'Un ni au multiple... Il n'est pas fait d'unités, mais de dimensions, ou plutôt de directions mouvantes. Il n'a pas de commencement ni de fin, mais toujours un milieu, par lequel il pousse et déborde. Il constitue des multiplicités » (Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, 1980, 31).

### *Cumann na mBan as a Deleuzian “Rhizome”*

The paradox of female involvement in Irish Republicanism is the result of women's awareness of the connection between politics and the promotion of their active role in a society that was fighting for social and political injustice. Some Irishwomen, through family connections, had been involved in the issues that divided Ireland regarding ownership of the land and the political status of the colony vis-à-vis the British Crown, as symbolized by the support or rejection of Home Rule. As such, they did not distinguish themselves from their male counterparts and mostly sided with them. What gave them the impetus to participate more openly in areas that were the safeguard of men was their more generalized access to education: in 1878 they were granted equal rights in that area based on academic merit; in 1904 Trinity College opened its doors to (Protestant) female students and the National University followed suit for Catholic women (McCarthy, 2014, 8). Better education also prompted women to repeatedly demand civil and voting rights in the United Kingdom and Ireland in general. In 1897 *The Suffragette Movement* was set up and English activist Millicent Fawcett helped create the *National Union of Women's Suffrage* in England. The movement was peaceful and meant to use all possible legal means to achieve the granting of the right to vote to women. Due to the reluctance of male members of what was to become the Labour Party, Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia set up the more “radical” *Women's Suffrage and Political Union* (WSPU) in 1903. Gradually, they took part in spectacular display of unrest and breaches of public order. But this movement split up precisely on the question of Irish nationalism. Sylvia sided with the Irish demands for Home Rule, then for independence. She was expelled from the WSPU in 1913 after she attended a meeting in Albert's Hall in support of the workers in the Dublin Lockout (Bell, 2016). In 1908 the *Irishwomen's Franchise League* was set up on a similar agenda. But they met with a lot of resistance among the political class and the Home Rule Bill of 1912 rejected the idea of women suffrage<sup>6</sup>. So far, it seemed that the commonality of interests between women of all socio-cultural hues and religious denominations was fragile across the wider British Empire. In Ireland, militant suffragettes like Margaret Connery, a Catholic, or Kathleen Emerson, a Protestant, were joined by republicans who added the struggle for Irish freedom to their agenda; it was the case for Maud Gonne or Constance Markiewicz, to name but a few (Watkins, 2014). Women were granted the right to vote in 1918 in Britain and Ireland, a time by which some had become more visible in intellectual

6 “Redmond, as the Manchester Guardian reported, found that ‘it is necessary for the Irish Party in the interests of Home Rule to save the Liberal ministry from the disruptive effects of women's suffrage’. This was no sacrifice for Redmond as he was totally opposed to women's suffrage anyway.[...] On the Unionist side, Carson was equally intransigent on the issue, and although Craig was a supporter of the women's cause he was not prepared to challenge the determined stand of his leader. The Unionists could only have one aim—the defeat of Home Rule and nothing could be allowed to distract from that?”. (Kelly, V. 1996, online)

and cultural spheres on both sides of the Irish Sea<sup>7</sup>. Another contributing factor to the formation of *Cumann na mBan* was the creation, in 1900 and 1910, of the *Labour Party* in Britain, based on the Trade Union movement. Key Irish figures involved in this movement include James Connolly, founder of the *Socialist Labour Party* in 1902. He later founded, with ex-British Army officer Jack White, the *Irish Citizen Army* in 1913 following the “Lockout” strike in Dublin to protect the workers and strikers against police brutality, the first in a series of events to be called “Bloody Sunday”<sup>8</sup>. Some early socialist ideals were instrumental in the formation of a female political consciousness because for Engels, gender equality was a prerequisite of the creation of a “perfect” socialist state, the starting point of which being women’s entry into the labour market (Engels 1884)<sup>9</sup>. Indeed women took part in the Dublin strike in a variety of ways: female workers at the Jacobs Biscuit factory protested against repressive methods aimed at controlling their “morality”<sup>10</sup>; many were wives and relatives of strikers and suffered from the consequences of misery imposed on their families, some others set up “kitchen soups” to feed the hungry, like Delia Larkin, Jim Larkin’s sister, at Liberty Hall<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, this movement that spread across geographical and cultural boundaries and de facto “deterritorialized” the whole issue of women’s status was somehow captured by other political, territorial considerations, namely the issue of Ireland’s political identity and quest for independence. Indeed women in Ireland were caught up in the rise of nationalist ideals; *better access to education* enabled them to get

7 Women emerged as political figures, but there was clearly a dividing line among them: Nationalists did not really support feminist causes, while those in favour of women’s struggle for equality with men did not necessarily embrace republican ideals (Kelly, 1996).

8 However, it is striking to note that the British Labour Party and the more radical Independent Labour Party strongly condemned the Easter Rising.

9 But socialists were not united on that front. In England, Ernest Belfort Bax (1854-1926) was a fierce anti-feminist. In 1896 he published *The Legal Subjection of Men* (London, The New Age Press), in which he drew on his experience as a barrister to maintain that the law was an instrument used in favour of women to the detriment of men. He later published *The Fraud of Feminism* in 1913, exposing what he believed to be the dangers of feminism for society.

10 James Connolly published an article in the *Irish Worker* on 14. March 1914 called “The Outrages at Jacob’s” vilipending the repressive measures taken against those female workers who asked for re-employment after the failure of the 1913 strike: “We have been told that when the girls apply for re-employment this manager, after brutally insulting them before the scabs whom he brings in, in order that he may parade the applicants before them, compels them to submit to his examination of their clothes, their hats, skirts and blouses, to submit while he pinches their arms, and examines their physical condition, and that all through this degrading examination he keeps up a running fire of insulting remarks [...]. In addition to this the girls have to strip to the waist, take off boots and stockings, and then in a semi-nude state go before a doctor to be examined. After submitting to all this they receive the final verdict from the manager. Usually that verdict is a refusal to re-employ – a refusal that was determined on before the ordeal, and was only delayed in order to give this vile brute of a manager an opportunity to gloat over the sufferings of the girls”. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/connolly/1914/03/jacobs.htm> (Accessed 20/01/16).

11 See Catriona Crowe’s video talk on women’s role during the Lockout.

involved in Irish cultural movements like *Conradh na Gaeilge* (the Gaelic League) founded in 1893 by Douglas Hyde<sup>12</sup> or the GAA, an organization promoting Gaelic sports, culture and language set up in 1884<sup>13</sup>. This exacerbated tensions in all areas of Irish life, be it in land wars, industrial action like the Lockout, and it polarized Irish society around the issue of political independence. What could have remained a classic class struggle<sup>14</sup> became indeed a radical rejection of colonial power. This meant that women were inevitably drawn into the nationalist debate due to their territorialized identity. But the major element in the formation of an all-female Republican movement was the creation, in 1858, of the *Irish Republican Brotherhood* by James Stevens. This secret organization was international, “deterritorialized” due to its connection with US branches of the Fenian Brotherhood, set up by Irish immigrants following political waves of repression in Ireland and mass immigration as a result of the Great Potato Famine (1845-50). The central tenet of this international network was to promote violent insurrection against British rule, the rejection of any political compromise like Home Rule, and the internationalisation of the Irish struggle by lobbying US politicians and secure some degree of “influence” *vis-à-vis* Britain. This seals the passage from Parliamentary struggle for emancipation (initiated in 1823 by Daniel O’Connell’s *Catholic Association*) to hardline republicanism modelled on Revolutionary France. *Cumann na mBan* was set up in 1914 as an ancillary organization of the Irish Volunteers, the armed branch of the IRB, and they never really departed from that original allegiance (McCarthy, 16-17; Matthews, 254).

The IRB functioned as a secret society, comparable in its structure to a game of Go, with pawns trying to infiltrate the State Apparatus in order to help dissolve it (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 436-437). Unlike the Volunteers, *Cumann na mBan* conducted public demonstrations and waged campaigns against conscription in 1916 or raised funds for the Irish prisoners in England following the Easter Rising. When they finally won the right to vote in 1918, Irishwomen played an important part in Sinn Féin’s electoral success during the 1918 General Elections. The publicity around the movement is part and parcel of a more general strategy: women’s involvement in public life could be felt as provocative and yet remain within acceptable limits. Indeed they were subversive in that they deterritorialized women from their home into the streets and public spaces, and yet they confined themselves to adjectival roles, such as assisting the Volunteers (McCarthy, 44).

What these events show is that close connections can be made between geographically distinct formations on the basis of rapid networking and travels,

12 See <https://cnag.ie/ga/eolas/conradh-na-gaeilge/stair-chonradh-na-gaeilge.html> (Visited 13/09/15).

13 See <http://www.gaa.ie/about-the-gaa/gaa-history/> (Visited 13/09/15).

14 See Pdraig Yeates’s talk on the nationalist interpretation of the Lockout at <http://www.nli.ie/lockout/> (Visited 13/09/15).



and cross-pollenization of ideas and ideals, something that is a key feature of rhizomes; moreover, all these movements are *minoritarian* and polymorphic<sup>15</sup>: they follow specific agendas but do not strive to change the world's order. They adapt to changing circumstances. All of them are relevant to the formation of Cumann na mBan itself, which adopted a very modest agenda when it was set up on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1914 in Dublin.

#### ***Cumann na mBan as a concatenation of diverging and concomitant agendas***

Since its creation in April 1914, members expressed diverging views on the exact role of women *vis-à-vis* their male counterparts and the more general issue of gender equality and the place of women in society. The more radical fringe of the movement (Constance Markiewicz, Jenny Wyse Power, Agnes O'Farrelly and a few others) supported women's engagement in armed conflict and resented the social pressure to bow to male authority. However, this issue was far from consensual among the members, and a more neutral approach was adopted. The official aim of the movement was to "advance the cause of Irish liberty, to organise Irishwomen in the furtherance of this object, to assist in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland, to form a fund for these purposes to be called the 'Defence of Ireland Fund' " (McCarthy, 17). This compromise's essential purpose was to secure a minimum of unity and attract more conservative women with nationalist feelings combined with a restricted vision of women's role in politics (18-22). The necessity to act efficiently established that priority was to be given to the support of political nationalism under male command, which may be seen as a paradox for an otherwise all-female organisation with its own structure and hierarchy. *Cumann na mBan* can be more aptly described as a rhizome, a multiplicity. The quest for women's civil and political identity was pushed aside, which also left the door open to increased responsibilities for women in a context that was not ready to accept them: bearing arms, wearing uniforms (the "hidden agenda" of some *Cumann na mBan* key figures like Constance Markiewicz) became more acceptable after the organisation achieved some success in fund-raising, nursing and offering safe houses to the Irish Volunteers. The group was finally morphing into a Deleuzian *War Machine* in its own rights. This concept is rather paradoxical and can be defined along the following lines. First of all, war is not its primary object (Deleuze & Parnet, 1990, 50) but it is connected with the exploration of a smooth, unchartered political space in a nomadic, non-causal fashion (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, 435): women form heterogeneous groups (in terms of social class and of religious persuasions) pursuing different agendas; the only common point was their opposition to the British State Apparatus. However, the novelty of their endeavor was such that it did not provide them with a clear idea of how to proceed, and it seems as though they were reacting to the political circumstances,

<sup>15</sup> "Minoritarian", according to Deleuze and Guattari, refers to a process of becoming, which suggests that it never ends.

rather than imposing their views to a reluctant society. Secondly, a War Machine is both unstable and temporary; it only leaves negative traces in history and tends to disappear once their stated aim has been reached: "becoming-revolutionary" is both unstable temporary. Either it fails as a revolution or it is captured by a State Apparatus, old or new, and then it turns into a different form of assemblage within a new social and political order. *Cumann na mBan* can be defined as such, since it explores hitherto unknown possibilities for women to occupy the public sphere in disguise, to help the IRA Volunteers and to deal with the least visible task of war-making. They remained external to the colonial State Apparatus because they fought it by resorting to unconventional means. This made their actions rather efficient, precisely because they used the gender stereotypes of the day to their advantage. This was particularly clear during the events that led to the insurrection fomented in April 1916 by the more radical sections of the nationalist movement. Republican women played the part of the proverbial "dark horse" in the process because they were never considered as potentially dangerous by the Crown authorities. As such, they effectively challenged the current gendered representations that pervaded the society of the day<sup>16</sup>.

#### **Challenge to faciality (Easter 1916)**

Women gained a lot from deterritorializing political ideals borrowed from republicanism by pushing its logic to its extreme possibilities: the Declaration of Independence and the First Dáil constitution were terse in the expression of their political goals, but the influence of socialism was to be felt in that they banned "domination of nation over nation, sex over sex and class over class". *Cumann na mBan* was set up as a shadow version of a male revolutionary army, which means they were given a role outside the home, parallel to access to education. This also entailed improving their political education through publications by women in nationalist papers (like *The Irish Volunteer*) and the production of political women's magazines like *Leabhar na mBan*. The latter was doubly minoritarian because it addressed women, a minoritarian group, in a minority language. In spite of all these obstacles put in the way of female political emancipation, women's engagement in republicanism may be seen as the alliance of two "minoritarian" becomings: the hitherto subjected Irish male republicans, their propaganda of a nation in chains,

<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, religious boundaries existed within families and they sometimes coincided with gender. The Gifford siblings were a good illustration of such a phenomenon: "All the boys remained staunch Protestant unionists despite their Catholic baptisms. All the girls declared for Irish republicanism; four of them became Catholic despite their Protestant baptisms, and two of them married signatories of the proclamation of the Irish freedom." (Clare, 2011, 11-12)

represented by a weeping maiden<sup>17</sup>, and, by way of association, Irish women, who had been doubly subjected as women and as Irish. That explains the twofold direction that their engagement took: on the one hand, they believed that they could make a real difference in the struggle for independence by acting like men and by using their femininity to deceive the authorities. This was done by blurring the gender dress codes and the accepted codes of behaviour.

### **Dress codes as a political statement**

First, the wearing of uniforms was tolerated but its value varied according to context. Since the First World War, women managed to be accepted as nurses on the battlefield, but there was a lot of reticence to accept them as a reserve force; the British Women's Legion, founded in 1915 by "Anglo-Irish, aristocratic feminist and pro-unionist, Edith, 7<sup>th</sup> Marchioness of Londonderry" (Urquhart, 2010, 1) had to fight an uphill battle for general recognition as worthy of military consideration; this was only achieved when gender differences were clearly stressed (1). Again, fluidity in their demands was a prerequisite, as opposed to the fixed assignment imposed on men as soldiers and protectors of the nation. During the Easter Rising, women disguised as men, and as such were targeted and shot at, like Margaret Skinnider (McCarthy, 60-61), while they would be spared by British soldiers when wearing female attire, thus conforming to the social norms of the day. When dealing with the Easter rebels, British troops considered that wearing a uniform entailed treating women as soldiers, but this only happened just before the surrender of the insurgents (68), where women were asked to leave before surrendering as this might upset the men; those who did not wear their uniforms were allowed to leave the "battlefield", but continued helping the Volunteers' Flying Columns during the War of Independence. Uniforms were not standardized, but were left to women's imagination; many of them either magnified warfare by sporting many guns, like Constance Markiewicz (Steele, 2010, 62), others wore features that were reminiscent of the past Irish struggles for freedom, especially the insurrection of 1798 (61): sporting the colour green, hats and feathers reminiscent of that past was part and parcel of the women's strategy to recapture a heroic period of republican ideals. In a way, this public attitude indicated that this "deterritorialization" of Irish history constituted a movement of deeper emancipation to come with the new Republic, and that women saw themselves as recipients of the rebel tradition. However, this public display of political defiance was mitigated by the necessity for women to conform to another, republican role model, the quiet, silent, loyal bride, daughter of the male nationalist hero.

<sup>17</sup> This refers to the poetic standard of the 18<sup>th</sup> century "aisling" (lit. "vision"), where a sleeping poet meets a beautiful, tearful maiden who tells him of her woes. She personifies Ireland under British rule. The image was still present in drama at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notably in WB Yeats' *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) or his *Countess Cathleen* (first performed in 1911).

### **Blurring gendered roles**

The very nature of guerrilla warfare conducted by the Volunteers offered women an opportunity to subvert, then to challenge their traditional role in society. Few parties promoted the disappearance of gendered roles, and James Connolly's *Citizens Army* was the exception. Interestingly, it was a woman, Helena Molony, an actress and political activist, who describes this unusual attitude to gender<sup>18</sup>. She stresses the interchangeability of men and women's roles in the following terms: "If a girl could handle a gun, she was given one. If a man could cook a meal, he was not made to feel in any way degraded by it"<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, the Volunteers' success was based on intelligence gathering, great mobility, and a tight control over a scarce supply in arms and ammunition. This entailed becoming invisible to the British troops and intelligence officers, the "G-men". Women proved an invaluable help in that they served as informers, couriers, eavesdropped on conversations, reported them to Volunteers HQ; they carried guns under their coats and outfits, dissimulated explosives (Steele, 53); this nevertheless entailed the risk of being arrested, or, worse, molested by the Auxiliaries (Ryan, 201, 38). In some other cases, they could face the hostility of their local communities who believed they were becoming too friendly to the British. In a guerrilla warfare, society went topsy-turvy and, paradoxically, women were constantly on the front line: while men hid away and organized attacks on the troops, women were often alone to protect their household; even if they conformed to their traditional role, they were particularly vulnerable to raids; besides, due to their family connections, they routinely offered shelter to IRA combatants and, as is still the case, they were easy targets for military reprisals; but this was done so as to humiliate the absent kinsmen. Only when they participated in covert operations could the women hope to gain some recognition for what they did as individuals. Otherwise they remained captive of family networks and conventional assumptions about the loyal wife and daughter, just like the personification of Ireland was waiting for her sons' sacrifice to deliver her from her chains. This emancipation came about when some emblematic women combatants were referred to as 'girls'.

### ***The 'Girl' and the unconventional war***

The Irish War of Independence was the first urban guerrilla warfare, which was invented by Michael Collins, in an even more unconventional manner. Women combatants were invisible, "imperceptible" in the public sphere, using diversion - like carrying ammunition in shopping baskets or under their coats. "Nomadism", a Deleuzian concept linked to the formation of the War Machine, helps define the nature of the women's contribution to the war. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the Nomads carry their tools and jewels with them and resort to secrecy to fulfil their

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.easter1916.ie/index.php/people/a-z/helena-molony/> (Last accessed 20/09/15).

<sup>19</sup> In Steele, 60.

aim, which is to oppose the State and the form of its thought and ideology; nomads are essentially minoritarian because they evade formal categorization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, 470-471). Republican women, by deterritorializing gender and gendered social roles, do not really create their own identity; instead of questioning stereotype, they use them to achieve their aims. The real challenge is to be found in the War Machine, which deterritorializes the attributes of womanhood, and this, oddly enough, is where the real challenge to gendered stereotype really was. One of the most sensational of these challenges is to be found in press reports, which described women activists as 'girls', a term reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's developments on the Girl<sup>20</sup>. For the authors, the Girl represents a pure "becoming", and not a stage in the growth and evolution of an individual woman (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, 340); in a way, the rebellious girl, who, like Antigone, relinquishes her role and her place in a social order she rejects, is no longer associated with an identity within a family or social structure; she is rather deprived of her body by the social discourse or reprimanded for not conforming to gendered stereotypes (339). Deleuze defines the "girl" as the expression of "becoming-woman": she is detached from corporeality and individuality; she is more "a way of being"; in that sense, every woman of every age group is, or "becomes- a girl"; however, the girl also expresses a relation based on power and confiscation- the girl is forever dispossessed of her identity and is devoid of subjectivity. She is minoritarian and, paradoxically, she escapes all attempts at reconfiguring a fixed female identity; she is pure movement, speed and intensity (339). She is also associated with what Deleuze calls a "Body without Organs" in which the organism (essentially shaped by psychoanalysis) disappears in favour of a line of flight that belong to no age, group, sex, order or kingdom (338): "it is a way of understanding transformative possibilities- the ways in which identity might escape from the codes which constitute the subject" (Driscoll, 200, 75). One such example is to be found in the 'Mary Bowles case'. She was arrested in Clogheen (Co. Cork) in January 1921 along with a group of nine men and accused of carrying weapons and seditious literature. One sensational element was that, after being searched, a steel body armour was found underneath her blouse. The story ran headlines and the reports contributed to the confusion since little was known of her personal history or even her age (which varied from 13 to 16). The body armour was shown on photographs in the press and it generated much speculation about her (Ryan, 38). Indeed her young age, her lack of fear, the presence of explosives and ammunition, and the absence of family members during her trial show that the 'girl' is in total contradiction with the image of the republican woman who supports her kin. She stands out as a social singularity, a pure 'becoming'. Even the sentence that was pronounced against her by the court martial contrasts with the fate of female combatants and IRA support groups; unlike her 'sisters in warfare', who were imprisoned, she was sent to a Catholic reformatory for a period of three years. This can be interpreted as a suitable punishment for a "deviant, wayward girl" (41),

20 "La jeune fille" in the original French.

who could be persuaded to become a normal woman again. In Deleuzian terms, Mary Bowles and her republican "tribe" circulated in an unchartered, smooth space of becomings in which the future Republic was forming its own political thought, in opposition with the striated, controlled space of the State Apparatus. Her masculine war equipment concealed under her feminine attire, along with her young age, literally 'unsexed' her and disturbed the gendered structure of society, in the same way that Joan of Arc must have challenged the Faciality of her period. Womanhood was challenged by the Girl. But what makes the engagement of women in the conduct of war (which took many forms) so specific is that it was instable, and it did not last long. As always, women's attempt at gaining some sort of recognition as equally capable as men remained, for the most part, limited to gendered preconceptions. Deterritorializing gender became theoretically possible because such a process, such a movement required two elements, two forces, two terms.

### ***Instability of the nomadic assemblage***

Deterritorialization is a complex term in Deleuzian philosophy and its meaning changed from *Anti-Oedipus* to *A Thousand Plateaus*, but one of its central tenets is that it is a process based on the relation between an individual (or a group) and a territory, which is not so much geographical than defined by a network of connections (feelings, affects, familiarity, safety, etc.) that can be transposed to another territory; it can thus be remodelled according to circumstances. During the War of Independence, *Cumann na mBan* members kept a close connection with their home, their families and their "domestic duties", except that they managed to change their finality. For instance, the home was a safe place, but because it gave shelter to Volunteers. Family was also a cover for other, illegal or seditious activities, which did not prevent activists from proclaiming their loyalty to Republicanism in public. Language filled with coded information, fame was used for propagandist purposes<sup>21</sup> while anonymity enabled the continuation of warfare. The comfortable dividing line between truth and lie, between trust and distrust was no longer evident, and this was due in part to a reversal of values in the definition of the term "civilian", which came to mean "faceless combatant". It also entailed a capacity to achieve a complete reversal of values and a series of actions that follow their own rhythm and their own intensity.

However, this type of assemblage is not meant to become a norm, and therefore it cannot maintain such a degree of intensity forever; instead, the historical events that led the Dáil to negotiate a truce, then a Treaty with Great Britain in January 1922 paved the way for the formation of an autonomous Irish Free State, and the capture of the War Machine by the newly-formed State Apparatus that became morally conservative. Irish Republican women had a lot to lose in the process,

21 Markiewicz was emblematic of that trend.

which explains that most members of *Cumann na mBan* fought on the losing side of the Civil War (June 1922-May 1923). They did so out of loyalty for the republican ideals and to preserve the memory of those who had died for those ideals. Most of all, they decided to give accurate accounts of the day-by-day developments of the conflict and of the role each and every leader played in it. This, of course, included the part played by women, both individually and as members of various movements, as we shall see. However, this attitude of constant remembrance did in fact isolate them from the evolution of party politics as time went by.

### Capturing the War Machine, or the end of the movement

In July, the parties to the conflict agreed on a truce in preparation for the drafting and the negotiation of a bilateral Treaty to end the hostilities. The matter was delicate, and the Irish clandestine government knew that the British would be reluctant to grant too many concessions and would threaten Ireland to wage a war of complete destruction if no agreement was reached. Éamonn de Valera, President of the Irish Republic, and his Dáil cabinet, sent a team of plenipotentiaries (among whom were Michel Collins and Arthur Griffith, founder of Sinn Féin) to negotiate the terms of the Treaty. It was finally signed in January 1922, and narrowly ratified by the Dáil on 7 January 1922 by a majority of 64 to 57. The division among Republicans hinged on the following aspects: the dominion status granted to Ireland (and not full independence), the necessity to take an oath of allegiance to the British Monarch, and the partition of Ireland. *Cumann na mBan* did not avoid the same divisive issues, but, in their case, most members decided to support the Anti-Treaty side led by De Valera. After a year of intense violence, the Pro-Treaties won the war and set about founding the Irish Free State. The question is why did Republican women so overwhelmingly support the “dissidents”? The answer is, as always, rather complex: first, the directing board of the organisation was led by women who had lost their husbands, sons and close relatives during a war that aimed to establish a Republic (Mary Colum, Kathleen Clarke, Margaret Pearse) for it is true that women’s political involvement was personal and based on family ties. Secondly, the Treaty signalled the end of all “native” initiatives in terms of justice (end of the *Dáil courts*, for example, on which *Cumann na mBan* members could sit<sup>22</sup>), the increased influence of the Catholic Church<sup>23</sup>— which supported the Irish Free state □ on national politics (and not all Irish rebels were Catholics), the disappearance of a socialist ethos from

22 Dáil courts, otherwise known as Sinn Féin courts, were set up in every part of the country controlled by the Volunteers. They settled civil disputes within the local communities by resorting to arbitration. Officials of these courts comprised local parish priests (as the smallest jurisdiction was indeed the parish), members of the Volunteers and/or of *Cumann na mBan*. They were shut down in 1924 by the Dáil as part of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

23 Most constitutional provisions concerning family law were directly inspired by the Catholic doctrine. While the 1937 Constitution was drafted, most Irish bishops negotiated with Éamon de Valera and the legal team that prepared the first draft.

the political discourse. That was a return to traditional gendered roles: women’s political identity was gradually disappearing, as opposed to Republican equality as they saw it. Thirdly, during the Civil War, women were massively imprisoned, even more so than during the War of Independence (Ryan, 2010, 49). In any case this fuelled a lot of bitterness among women and men alike; this division was a political landmark because it paved the way for the birth of *Fine Gael* (a Pro-treaty party) and *Fianna Fáil* (De Valera’ Anti-Treaty formation), which dominated Irish political life for decades. By contrast, most anti-Treaty women remained loyal to Sinn Féin; as the party’s influence waned, so did the “intransigent” women’s voice that still stood for it (Matthews, 2012, 227-256).

De Valera resumed party politics in 1926, and under the 1931 Statute of Westminster, Britain gave up its right to legislate for members of the Commonwealth, thus paving the way for Ireland’s full independence. In 1937, he became the architect of a Constitution that is still in force today. Many aspects pertaining to family, filiation and professional life confined women to a very traditional role shaped by Catholic values. For example, divorce was illegal<sup>24</sup>, nullity was left to judicial discretion. Legal separation was accepted but this remedy was mostly unfair to women. The newly-formed State emphasized the role of women as mothers and family stood as the most fundamental unit group in post-Independence Ireland. Pursuant to the 1925 *Civil Service Employment Act*, female civil servants had to resign upon marriage. In 1971 feminist organisations fought for equal pay and status for female employees and social justice for widows but the *Equal Status Act* was passed in 2000 only. In matters pertaining to sexuality and procreation, the Republic remained very conservative under the influence of the Catholic Church: contraception was unavailable, though not illegal; it was liberalized only in 1993. Abortion, though no longer strictly prohibited, is not available to most women<sup>25</sup>. As to interfaith adoption, it was legalized in 1974, but unmarried women have no access to it. The dearth in childcare facilities, along with short school days, meant that mothers could not have a professional career, with some notable exceptions like nurses.

All this shows that not only have women’s condition in Ireland regressed since the heydays of the First Dáil’s Republican ideals were proclaimed, but also that their bodies have been reterritorialized on a traditional State Apparatus. It looked as though women’s role in the struggle for Irish freedom had been but a parenthesis.

24 Until it was legalized through referendum in 1995.

25 Abortion was completely illegal in Ireland since the passing of the British *Offences Against the Person Act* of 1861 and the adoption of the 1937 Constitution. In 1983 the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment reaffirmed the right to life for the unborn. Tragic illustrations of the ban can be found at different moments in contemporary Irish history (1984: the Kerry babies case, the 1992 X case, the 2002-2010 *A, B and C v. Ireland* case before the ECHR, the death of Savita Halappanavar in October 2010, and the granting of a very limited right to abortion on Irish soil if the procedure is approved by a medical committee).



But what remains of *Cumann na mBan* and other Irish revolutionary rhizomes?

### **The “veiled rebels”<sup>26</sup> and their “tell-tale narratives”**

As the living memories of the War of Independence faded away, the leaders of *Cumann na mBan* had to deal with internal strife and their membership gradually decreased. The women who had fought for freedom alongside their male comrades went back to their family life and disappeared from public life. The Free State, then the Republic, granted them pensions as war veterans in 1934 (Matthews, 250). *Cumann na mBan*'s role in pushing women to the forefront of politics was invaluable; indeed these women played an important part in disseminating separatist propaganda among the general population, the more so as the movement had branches in virtually every county (McCarthy, 246-247). Part of the women's successful support to the Volunteers also laid in their utmost discretion and in the trust given to them by the IRA. This, of course, was justified by the guerrilla nature of their activities. As the new *régime* became stronger, a number of accounts of the individual heroic feats of prominent nationalists were published. The leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising became prominent figures in Irish history textbook, and some, like Pádraig Pearse, had paid their dues to the men who had influenced him<sup>27</sup>. Charles Stewart Parnell, James Connolly, Daniel O'Connell (the “Liberator”), Wolfe Tone, and many others, became household names and ranked high in the Irish republican pantheon. By contrast, only a handful of their female counterparts were widely known to the public; of course, Constance Markiewicz and Maud Gonne<sup>28</sup> were famous; but it was mostly due to their strong and excessive personality for the former, or to their association with literary luminaries like W.B. Yeats for the latter. Curiously, few of the most prominent female nationalists had come to the forefront. Kathleen Clarke, wife of the 1916 leader Thomas Clarke, had written a first-hand account of her involvement in Irish republicanism, but it was published only in 1991. This does not mean that such accounts are rare or non-existent. Margaret Skinnider published her book *Doing my Bit for Ireland* in 1917 in New York<sup>29</sup>; in the 1960s, TV broadcast of the surviving relatives of the 1916 “heroes” were made, notably of Nora Connolly, daughter of James Connolly<sup>30</sup>, but it was mainly to give an account of her father's life and character. In fact, many documents recording women's activities during the War of Independence can be found in the national archives, in the form of

26 This expression, coined by Karen Steele (2010) alludes to the quasi-invisibility of Irishwomen during the conflict. They took precautions so as to remain undetected while they performed their tasks. It also refers to their invisibility from publications after independence was gained. Women gave statements but they were rarely used and remained, for the most part, in the archives.

27 See <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/an-irishman-s-diary-on-nationalist-hero-thomas-davis-1.1951497> (Accessed 27/09/15)

28 <http://www.rte.ie/archives/2013/0426/385803-maud-gonne-macbride-speaking-in-1949/> (Accessed 27/09/15)

29 <https://archive.org/details/doingmybitforire00skiniiala> (Accessed 27/09/15)

30 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkBnUQoFcpq> (Accessed 27/09/15)

witness statements that were used to establish their entitlement to pensions. Some scholars estimate that most of these accounts are under-researched (Steele, 201, 53). However, when material is available, their author write detailed descriptions of their activities, their relation to IRA men; sometimes they debunk some myths by giving unflattering details on the men that had become national icons (54). Kathleen Clarke reveals how privy she was to the inner circle of nationalist leaders, those who plotted the Easter Rising (Clarke, 2010, 85-86); she even shows that she was entrusted with “passing on the work to those next in command” (86). Her narrative tells a very different tale from the unusual rendering of the nationalist saga during the struggle for independence. Women used traditional views on their virtues of patience, silence and trustworthiness, which enabled them to form a support network, a War Machine that maintained its ambiguity: they were both vocal in their political claims and discreet in their physical engagement. In fact, it was their steadfastness that set them apart from the post-conflict political agenda and precipitated their disappearance from the public sphere.

Even though the scope of Irish women's involvement in armed conflict between 1916 and 1923 is still somewhat underestimated, movements like *Cumann na mBan* paved the way for other initiatives that crossed social classes and religious denominations. Women in Ireland managed to earn a political voice for themselves, long after the end of the Anglo-Irish war. Beside political factions and parties that dominated the Northern-Irish political landscape, women played their part within their communities and in street politics. Republicanism and Unionism North and South of the Border have been confronted by peace movement presided by women who managed to cross the sectarian dividing line. This was the case with a non-denominational movement like “Women For Peace”, set up in 1972 by Margaret Dougherty. It was followed in 1976 by “The Peace People”, initiated by two other women, a Protestant Unionist (Betty Williams) and a Catholic Republican (Mairead Corrigan). But this blurring of entrenched affiliation accompany women's involvement in armed conflict and violence, and there is certainly some continuity between *Cumann na mBan* and female Volunteers in the ranks of the Provisional IRA; it seems that the women of *Cumann na mBan* and other political groups paved the way for a more visible involvement in politics and conflict (Betty Sinclair, a Northern Irish communist, was a member of the steering committee of the *Northern Irish Civil Rights Association* in 1967). They fought in the ranks of the IRA and supported Loyalist groups, but they are still minoritarian figures in conflict analysis and conflict resolution. Behind the veiled rebels of the Irish War of Independence, they keep questioning the way in which history is written.

To conclude, if Republican ideals are not officially associated with gender, the repetition, at different moments of Irish history, of the confrontation between the founding principles of the First Dáil and the hitherto conservative political agenda in the Republic and Northern Ireland shows that “becoming-woman”, “becoming-minoritarian”, “becoming-imperceptible” guarantee the constant evolution in the fate and status of women, and this Deleuzian perspective is not incompatible with the improvement of women’s right and the quest for an ever-changing feminine identity.

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