

Southern New Hampshire University

Women Rising

Embracing, Negotiating, and Reinterpreting Gender Roles in Revolutionary Ireland, 1913–1923

A Capstone Project Submitted to the College of Online and Continuing Education in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Master of Arts in History

By

Meredith Kate Murphy Schaefer

Glen Allen, Virginia

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the Irish revolutions (1913–1923) through the eyes of the revolutionary women who fought in them. The historiography on the period largely ignores and or downplays the contributions of women, often relying on a few exceptional examples of their participation to censure the work of all. The majority were nameless, faceless foot soldiers who took on traditionally male roles as spies, snipers, and dispatch carriers, but also traditionally female roles as mothers, wives, mourners, and caretakers. Revolutionary women did not reject their femininity so much as realize its possibilities.

Recognizing revolutionary women's experiences were unique and deeply personal, the thesis focuses on using the women's own words to tell their stories. The research uses Defense Forces Ireland Bureau of Military History witness statements, memoirs, diaries, correspondence, and speeches to draw much-needed attention to the ordinary women who did the extraordinary. It traces women's participation through four phases: their rise (1913-1916); reaction to their participation (1916-1919); their reinterpretation of the ways in which they would participate (1919-1921); and the ultimate reversal of their agency as Irish Free State political leaders decided women more important as symbols of the nation than active participants in it (1922-1923). Chapter five orients the Irish revolutionary woman's experience within the larger international context.

Women have always been involved in war and revolution; female participation in combat is neither new nor novel. Women *were* present and *did participate* in both socially-accepted and circumstantially-allowed roles during the Irish revolutionary period. Historians can no longer confuse women's exclusion from the Irish revolutionary narrative as non-participation.

## **Dedication**

For Travis, mo anam cara.

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To everyone I failed to mention, always remember everything will be alright in the end. If it's not alright, it's not the end.



## Timeline

- 1905 Arthur Griffith founds Irish nationalist/republican political organization Sinn Féin (“Ourselves Alone”)
- 1907 Inghindhe na hÉireann established by Maud Gonne and Helena Molony.
- 1912 Edward Carson and James Craig form the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), pledging to prevent Irish home rule by force if necessary.
- 1913 Irish nationalists, led by Eoin McNeill, form the Irish Volunteers in response to the formation of the UVF.
- 1914 *January*: First meeting of Cumann na mBan (“Association of Women”) in Dublin.  
*July*: Asgard gun-running expedition.
- 1916 *April 21*: British capture German cargo ship (the Aud) carrying weapons/ammunition for the Irish Volunteers.  
*April 22*: Eoin McNeill publishes stand-down order cancelling uprising intended for Monday, April 24; Joseph Connolly, Padraig Pearse, and others continue mobilization despite this order.  
*April 24*: Proclamation of the Irish Republic read from the steps of the General Post Office (GPO); the Irish Citizen Army, Irish Volunteers, Irish Republican Brotherhood take control of the GPO and other key areas of Dublin.  
*April 29*: Elizabeth O’Farrell/Padraig Pearse surrender to the British after the rebels hold out for five days.  
*May 3–12*: Rising leaders executed in Kilmainham Gaol.  
*May 8*: Most women released from prison following Rising arrests.
- 1916–1917 “Radicalism” of Sinn Féin; women lead memorial services and funeral masses for the dead; also form aid societies to help the widows/children left behind after the Rising.  
Irish Volunteers, etc. now referred to in collective as the Irish Republican Army (IRA).
- 1917–1918 “Electoral republicanism:” Sinn Féin attempts to bring Irish self-determination to the forefront of British and international politics; wins majority of Irish seats in British Parliament.
- 1918 *May*: The British arrest members of Sinn Féin on charges of collusion with German Empire to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The “German Plot” was used to justify the internment of Sinn Féin leaders who opposed British conscription for the war effort.  
*November 11*: Armistice (End of the World War).

## Timeline (Continued)

- 1919 *January:* Dáil Éireann sits for first time; later declared illegal by the British government.  
*September:* Anglo-Irish War begins: Irish Republican Army begins guerrilla war with intent to make Ireland ungovernable.
- 1920 *January:* Sinn Féin popularity confirmed as more representatives are elected to the Dáil.  
*July:* British police, military, and auxiliary forces (including the “Black and Tans”) deployed to restore order.  
*August:* Restoration of Order in Ireland Act grants the police and British army more leeway in apprehending, imprisoning, and punishing Irish men and women acting against the government; martial law and curfews imposed.  
*November 21:* Bloody Sunday: British police/auxiliaries fire into the crowd at a football game in Croke Park in reprisal for IRA assassinations earlier that day.
- 1921 *December:* Anglo-Irish War Treaty signed by Michael Collins. The treaty causes a rift in the revolutionary movement as they disagree on the Treaty’s terms (partition in particular).
- 1922 *April:* Animosity between pro- and anti-Treaty forces leads to outright civil war between the factions.  
*August:* Collins assassinated.  
*December:* Irish Free State established as members of the Dáil Éireann agree to ratify the treaty.
- 1923 *May:* Éamon de Valera gives official ceasefire order, ending the Irish Civil War.

## Key Players

Buckley, Margaret	Member of Inghinidhe na hÉireann, helped with reorganization of Sinn Fein after the Rising; fought in Cork during Anglo-Irish War, wrote and published a book about her time in prison, <i>The Jangling of the Keys</i> .
Clarke, Kathleen	Widow of executed 1916 Proclamation signatory and leader Thomas Clarke, helped direct republican movement after the executions of the leaders; aided Michael Collins in procuring funds to continue the fight against the British during the Anglo-Irish War.
Collins, Michael	Political leader; aide de camp for Joseph Plunkett during the Rising; head of intelligence for the Irish Republican Army; directed espionage and assassination campaigns during the Anglo-Irish War; represented Irish during Anglo-Irish Treaty negotiations, his signing of the treaty would lead to civil war. Assassinated in 1922, the identity of his assassin continues to be a subject of historical debate.
Comerford, Maire	Cumann na mBan member, planned to fight with Markiewicz during the Rising, ended up carrying dispatches for the GPO when she was not allowed to participate in combat. Supported the IRA during the Anglo-Irish War but broke with the group over the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Split with de Valera over his creation of the Fianna Fáil political party in 1927. Remained a staunch supporter of the original republican goal of achieving complete separation from England. Supported the Provisional IRA's activity and hunger strikes in Northern Ireland during the 1970s.
Creedon, Siobhán	Post official in Cork, part of espionage network during Irish War for Independence, 1919-?
Daly, Madge (855)	First president for Cumann na mBan Limerick branch.
de Valera, Éamon	Political leader; directed Boland's Mill garrison during Rising; broke with Collins over the Anglo-Irish Treaty terms, lead anti-Treaty factions. Finally accepted the treaty terms and affirmed establishment of the Irish Free State as president of the Dáil in 1922, ordered ceasefire in 1923. First president of the Republic of Ireland (founded 1949).
Nic Diarmada, Sorcha (945)	Secretary, Cumann na mBan London branch.

Duggan, Peg (1576)	Cumann na mBan Cork, Captain, Tomás Ceannt branch.
English, Ada	Medical doctor and Cumann na mBan member, served with the Irish Volunteers as a medical officer. Arrested for her activity during the Anglo-Irish War, later elected to the Dáil as a Sinn Féin candidate in 1921. Opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty.
Gonne, Maud	Founder of nationalist group, Inghindhe na hÉireann; actress at the Abbey Theatre; vocal supporter of Irish nationalism and republicanism.
Heron, Aine (293)	Captain, Cumann na mBan Dublin; Justice for Sinn Féin courts, co-treasurer Cumann na mBan Pembroke branch.
Hoey, Patricia	Secretary for Michael Collins.
Hyland-Lalor, Mrs. (295)	Organizer, Director of Training, member of Cumann na mBan Executive Council.
Keating, Pauline (432)	Member, Cumann na mBan, Dublin branch.
MacSwiney, Mary	Member of the Gaelic League and Inghinidhe na hÉireann; founding member of Cork Cumann na mBan, also served as national vice-president on its executive council. Elected to the Dáil in 1920; she also promoted the Irish cause abroad during speaking engagements in the United States. Though she also voiced strong opposition to the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, de Valera refused to allow her to attend the treaty negotiations because she was (according to contemporary Harry Boland) “too extreme.” <sup>1</sup> She remained a dedicated republican and nationalist, but also broke with de Valera over his creation of the Fianna Fáil political party in 1927.
Marchmount, Josephine	Part of Michael Collins’ espionage network during the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-?
McGrath, Bridget A. (1704)	Member, Clonmel Cumann na mBan.
Ui Mhairtin, Brighid Bean (398)	Member Cumann na mBan Dublin, courier to Cork during the Rising.
McGavock, Maureen (385) (Mrs. Sean Beaumont)	Member of Cumann na mBan executive council, 1918.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Boland quoted in Uinseann MacEoin, *The IRA in the Twilight Years, 1923-1948* (Dublin: Argenta Publications, 1997), 203.

McNeill, Josephine (303)	Cumann na mBan member.
Mernin, Lily	“Lt. G.,” clerk at Dublin Castle, part of espionage network during the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-?
Molony, Helena (391)	Honorary secretary of Inghindhe na hÉireann 1907-1914; outspoken nationalist and republican, extremely active in anti-Treaty debates following the Anglo-Irish War.
Morkan, Phyllis (210)	Member, Cumann na mBan, Dublin branch.
O’Brien, Elizabeth Anne (Lizanne) (122)	Member, Cumann na mBan, Tralee.
Ní Bhriain, Maire (Mary O’Brien) (363)	Traveled and distributed Irish republican propaganda 1918-?
O’Brien, Nancy	Hidden/procured weapons and ammunition for Michael Collins during the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-?
O’Brien, Nora Connolly	Sister of executed Rising leader, Joseph Connolly; nationalist/republican, outspoken on women’s rights in relation to revolutionary matters.
O’Farrell, Elizabeth	Nurse, participated in Rising, surrendered to British on behalf of Padraig Pearse, told to bring him in person to surrender as British would not accept surrender from a woman.
Ní Chealleagh, Mairead (925) (Mairead O’Kelly)	Cumann na mBan member, sister of Sean T. O’Kelly.
O’Mullane, Brighid (450)	Cumann na mBan organizer/recruiter, 1918; member of Executive council.
Markiewicz, Constance	Fervent nationalist and republican; feminist/suffragette and committed socialist. Served in the Irish Citizen Army under Joseph Connolly, arrested for her participation in the Easter Rising. Elected to British House of Commons in 1918, refused her seat in favor of serving in the first Dáil Éireann. Participated in Anglo-Irish War but refuted the Treaty, siding with de Valera over Collins and the rest of the treaty negotiators. Derided in the press (and later by the Irish government itself) for her flamboyant dress and personality.

Plunkett, Grace Gifford (257)	Widow of executed Rising leader Joseph Plunkett, became very involved in republican movement following her husband's death; imprisoned in Kilmainham Gaol several times for her activities, her mural, "Kilmainham Madonna," remains on the wall of her cell.
Rice, Mary Spring	Served aboard the Asgard during 1914 gun-running expedition.
Skinnider, Margaret	Teacher from Scotland, introduced to republicanism by Constance Markiewicz during a 1915 trip to Dublin, returned to participate in the Rising the following year. Published a memoir, <i>Doing my Bit for Ireland: A first-hand account of the Easter Rising</i> .
Thornton, Brigid Lyons (259)	Medical doctor, first woman doctor to complete all of her medical graduate work through Irish educational institutions; Connaught representative for Cumann na mBan executive council, Officer in Óglaigh na hÉireann.
Wallace, Nora	Part of espionage network during Anglo-Irish War, 1919-?
Walsh, Eileen (Mrs. Martin Murphy) (480)	Cumann na mBan commandant, Mullingar and Athlone.
Wisely, Catherine	Hid/procured weapons and ammunition for Michael Collins during the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-?

## Introduction: When Women Rise

Emergencies find their women as well as their men; if it were otherwise with either sex the flame of revolt would have died long before our time. The revolution threw up women along with men heroes; if things had been otherwise the war would not have achieved its limited success.

Maire Comerford<sup>1</sup>

When their families and homes are threatened, women rise. When their nations are under attack, women rise. They rise, they act, then they vanish. This disappearing act is not intentional. With very few exceptions, the women who participate in revolutionary movements are rendered invisible after the fact, their footprints dissolving into footnotes in the historical narrative. The women of the early twentieth-century Irish revolutions were no exception. Republican and nationalist women made important contributions to the movement for independence from Great Britain, but their efforts were often downplayed or disregarded because they were women. They even faced discrimination within the groups to which they pledged their allegiance and support. As a result, women learned to negotiate the shifting political landscape by embracing, negotiating, and reinterpreting their roles in response to the needs of the revolutionary movement.

The *Poblacht na hÉireann* (Proclamation of the Irish Republic) read from the steps of the Dublin General Post Office (GPO) on April 24, 1916 did not garner much attention from the passersby, but it meant everything to the women who pledged to fight for Irish independence. Believing Britain's preoccupation with world war was the opportunity they had been waiting for, a small group of men and women decided to force an end to British rule in Ireland. Anger over

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<sup>1</sup> Maire Comerford, *Memoir, Maire Comerford Papers, University College Dublin Archives*, LA18/41 (44).

what was considered British mishandling of famine relief in the 1840s and 1850s and Parliament's failure to pass home rule legislation created a political powder keg awaiting a spark. Taking control of several key areas of the city, the revolutionary Provisional Government, backed by the Irish Citizen Army, Irish Volunteers, and all-female nationalist group Cumann na mBan, declared Ireland a republic. Their rhetoric was as revolutionary as their actions. The *Poblacht* spoke to Irish men and women alike, pledging "religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens," and promising the establishment of a new society along with a new nation.<sup>2</sup> Women believed their leaders would make good on these promises once Ireland won its independence. The leaders soon realized it was much easier to pledge equality on paper than commit to it as a practice.

As the tone of Irish nationalism shifted from the social idealism of 1916 to the political pragmatism of the 1920s, national self-determination took precedence over all other goals. Colorful figures like Constance Markiewicz, Maud Gonne McBride, and Grace Gifford Plunkett came to symbolize the average Irish revolutionary woman, but their stories did not accurately represent the average Irish revolutionary woman's experience. The majority were nameless, faceless foot soldiers who worked behind the scenes to support the Rising, kept the movement together following the leaders' executions, and participated in the Anglo-Irish and Irish Civil War efforts.

They took on traditionally male roles as spies, snipers, and dispatch carriers, but were also mothers, wives, mourners, and caretakers. They did not reject their femininity so much as realize its possibilities. Being female had no bearing on their ability to form their own opinions

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<sup>2</sup> T. J. Clarke, S. MacDiarmada, P. Pearse, J. Connolly, T. MacDonagh, E. Ceannt, & J. M. Plunkett, "Typescript copy of the proclamation of the provisional government of the Irish Republic," *National Library of Ireland Catalogue*, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000652487>.



on politics and national affairs. Femininity did not preclude love of nation or willingness to fight for an ideal. Women could be both nurturing and aggressive; it was natural to exhibit more “male” characteristics in some situations and more “female” characteristics in others.

There was no room in Irish society for reinterpretation of the male/female binary, however. In 1923, the leaders of the newly-independent Irish Free State sought refuge in tradition, believing it the only way to prove its social stability to a skeptical international audience. The Catholic Church, government, and media seized on the most extreme examples of female participation in the revolution to condemn the participation of all. Most revolutionary women never held a weapon, but the press portrayed them all as bloodthirsty gunwomen. The women who had kept the movement going during the men’s absence were decried as too irrational and emotional to be trusted with expressing an opinion on the direction of their nation. They helped bring about an Irish state separate from Great Britain, but were disenfranchised in the effort to legitimize that state. The Free State government used the ways women negotiated gender roles during the revolution to justify barring them from further public service. The legitimization of the Irish Free State came at the cost of delegitimizing the revolution—and those who found themselves on the wrong side of revolutionary history.

When included in the narrative at all, women are reduced to caricature: the flamboyant/eccentric (Constance Markiewicz), the grieving widow (Grace Gifford Plunkett), or the well-placed star (Maud Gonne). An emphasis these stereotypes is detrimental to understanding the diverse ways women participated in and experienced the Irish revolutionary period. As Louise Ryan wrote in “Furies’ and ‘Die-hards’: Women and Irish Republicanism in

the Early Twentieth Century,” continued focus on the exceptional few allowed the press (and later, historians) to “underestimate and render invisible the various roles...women played.”<sup>3</sup>

Far less flamboyant were sisters Elizabeth and Nell Corr, who, upon hearing of Eoin McNeill’s Easter Sunday stand-down order, volunteered to carry messages to the remote Irish Volunteer brigades to assure them the Rising would occur the next day.<sup>4</sup> Linda Kearns McWhinney headed in a different direction, carrying dispatches from Dublin to Sligo.<sup>5</sup> Nurse Phyllis Morkan remained in Dublin, improvising medical triage and administering first aid to the Church Street garrison.<sup>6</sup> Sharing the revolutionary leaders’ appreciation for a well-armed revolutionary movement, Dr. Brigid Lyons Thornton and Bridget Anne Dooney acquired, concealed, and delivered weapons to Longford, Galway, and Tipperary during the Anglo-Irish War. These women, and hundreds of others, are not well-known. They did not always step far outside traditional gender roles in supporting the nationalist cause, but their work was extremely important to it.

The efforts and contributions of women acting in more traditional roles supported and sustained the Irish independence movement. They were a constant in an extremely fluid political and military situation. Hundreds chose invisibility through clandestine work as spies, informants, and couriers. Others chose to wear their gender, and its associated expectations, like a disguise, hiding guns and ammunition in their skirts and relying on their femininity to escape notice as active combatants. Sinead McCool described the women of the revolutionary period as “no ordinary women,” a misleading description that fails to do justice to the magnitude of their

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Ryan, “‘Furies’ and ‘Die-hards’: Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 256-275, accessed April 15, 2016, *EBSCOhost*, 261.

<sup>4</sup> W.S. 179, Elizabeth and Nell Corr.

<sup>5</sup> W.S. 404, Linda Kearns McWhinney.

<sup>6</sup> W.S. 210, Phyllis Morkan.

contributions in light of the constraints of their society. This research represents a break from that narrative. The Irish women who participated in the Easter Rising, Anglo-Irish War, and Irish Civil War were ordinary women who did extraordinary things. At that time, a woman who became involved in the revolutionary movement in *any* form or fashion rebelled against her society's behavioral norms and expectations. When directed to an acceptable cause or during a time of social crisis, a degree of female rebellion could be tolerated. When the crisis ended women were expected to willingly surrender their agency. They were also all but painted out of the history of the Irish revolutions. A more accurate understanding of female participation in the era can only be achieved through uncovering the individual brushstrokes left on the revolutionary canvas: the background contributions that allowed men to load their guns, hold the line in the garrisons, and escape capture. Women were never in the foreground, but their service made the action in the foreground possible.

Several questions guide this exploration of how Irish women revolutionaries found their place within a male-dominated revolution. Most historians remember women as supporting characters in the revolutionary drama, but to what degree did women accept and internalize that designation? How did they adapt (or fail to adapt) to the changing political situations post-Rising, including the Anglo-Irish and Irish Civil Wars? How were traditional symbols and stereotypes used to reinstate and reinforce gender norms during the 1920s? In what ways were women themselves complicit in the reinstatement of these norms?

Historians tend to treat women and revolution as mutually exclusive: one can write a history of the Irish revolutionary movement or a history of women in the Irish revolutionary movement. The pervasiveness of this either/or approach to Irish revolutionary history renders

synthesis impossible. The Irish revolutionary story is not an exclusively male story, but the extant literature on the topic records it as one.

In *The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations*, George Dangerfield described the Easter Rising as “the point of departure...for all subsequent Irish history.”<sup>7</sup> It was also a watershed for Irish historiography. History became more a platform for defending, validating, and justifying current politics than for value-free investigations into the Irish past, so the story shifted according to the writer’s ideology and the political climate at the time of his writing. Histories written immediately after the Rising immortalized the leaders who were executed by the British, a trend that continues to garner historians’ rapt attention. Although approximately 300 women participated during Easter week, only a few made it to the written page. The women who were included were glamorized to the point of caricature. For example, after over two hundred pages discussing revolutionary politics and British responses, Charles Newton Wheeler inserts a portrait of actress and activist Maud Gonne, referring to her as “one of Ireland’s most beautiful women who was deported and thrown into prison by the British government.”<sup>8</sup> He then returns to the narrative, leaving the reader with the impression that women were symbols, or at the very most, accessories adorning the nationalist cause. Louis George Redmond-Howard’s *Six Days of the Irish Republic* (1916) and George Russell’s *The National Being: Some Thoughts on an Irish Polity* (1920) approached the subject of female revolutionaries in similar fashions.

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<sup>7</sup> George Dangerfield quoted in “Review of *The Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations*,” *The New York Times*, accessed May 3, 2017, [http://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/25/archives/the-new-york-times-book-review.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/1976/07/25/archives/the-new-york-times-book-review.html?_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Newton Wheeler, *The Irish Republic, an analytical history of Ireland, 1914-1918, With particular reference to the Easter insurrection (1916) and the German “plots.”* (Chicago: Cahill-Igoe Company, 1919), 276.

The romance of revolution fell out of fashion after the nationalists and republicans splintered over partition in 1922. The men who led the nation after the Irish Civil War did not share the idealism of those who proclaimed nationhood in 1916. James Connolly and Padraig Pearse spearheaded the inclusion of universal civil rights and suffrage in the 1916 proclamation, but Irish Free State President (and former Easter Rising and Anglo-Irish War combatant) Éamon de Valera set aside that goal in return for the Catholic Church's support of his presidency and of Irish independence from Britain. Winning the Church's approval was only the beginning: the Irish Free State also had to prove its political and economic solvency on the international stage. Histories that praised the revolution were seen as detrimental to the national image. The suppression of revolutionary women's stories was part and parcel of the invalidation of revolutionary history as a whole. Historian and former Irish Republican Brotherhood member P.S. O'Hegarty denounced the revolutionary period as immoral and damaging to Ireland's credibility as a democratic nation, saying "we adopted political assassination as a principle; we devised the ambush; we encouraged women to forget their sex and play at gunmen."<sup>9</sup>

Revisionism became the order of the day as some historians feared highlighting Ireland's revolutionary past would give the Provisional Irish Republican Army (founded in the late 1960s) propagandistic ammunition in its fight for Northern Ireland's separation from the Empire. R. Dudley Edwards, T. Desmond Williams, and F.S.L. Lyons led the charge to write an Irish past devoid of the emotion invoked by previous historians. Lyons' protégé Roy F. Foster continued this trend in the 1980s. In *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, Foster argued the nation's continued fascination with anti-British sentiment and revolution was rooted more in its love of folklore and

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<sup>9</sup> P.S. O'Hegarty quoted in Roy F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 297.

legend than its understanding of historical fact. Accordingly, Foster gives the women who participated in the revolution no more than a passing mention.

The ceasefires and peace treaties of the 1990s made digging into Ireland's past more politically palatable, but most histories continued to be oriented within and defined by the male experience. Like those written one hundred years before, these interpretations continued to focus on the men of the revolution. One historian dared to introduce women into the revolutionary narrative: Margaret Ward.

Ward's work on the impact of female participation on the Irish nationalist/republican movement was some of the first to imagine women as important actors in Irish history. She published *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* in 1983, then updated and re-released the book with additional research in 1989 and 1995. In contrast with more static representations of the revolutionary period, Ward emphasized the necessity of revising historical interpretations as additional information became available to the historian. She focused on the main political groups founded for and by women: the Ladies Land League, the Daughters of Ireland (Inghinidhe na hÉireann), and Cumann na mBan, arguing each group experienced difficulties participating in the fight for Irish independence because of gender stereotypes and other social limitations. Her work encouraged a new generation of historians interested in Ireland, women's history, and gender to begin their own research.

In *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution*, Cal McCarthy highlighted the effects of popular opinion on the group's ability to act. Cumann na mBan's agency was tied closely to public acceptance. Nationalist and republican ideology guided the group's goals, but its actions were determined by the situation. McCarthy highlighted the consequences group members faced for becoming too vocal. Internal differences over support for the Anglo-Irish Treaty split the

group in three in 1922, but the Free State government targeted both pro- and anti-Treaty Cumann na mBan members as threats to national security.

Ruth Taillon also discussed the ways in which popular opinion and political expediency affected revolutionary women's agency. *When History was Made: The Women of 1916* concentrates on the roles women played during the active fighting, collecting information from the interviews, memoirs, diaries, and correspondence of nurses, snipers, couriers, and spies. Taillon argues that despite women's effectiveness in nontraditional gender roles, they could not tear down the gender barrier within the revolutionary movement. After the active fighting ended, the Irish government favored restoring traditional gender norms and expectations over recognizing and rewarding women's abilities and sacrifices.

Jason Knirck built on the works of Taillon and Ward by focusing on women in revolutionary-era politics. He argues revolutionary women enjoyed the most popular support when seen as "speaking for the dead:" representing male family members who died during the Rising or in the executions that followed.<sup>10</sup> Female participation was considered respectable because of its connection to male participation. After the Anglo-Irish and Irish Civil wars, the memorialization of those who died in the Rising held less weight and popular acceptance of women's participation waned accordingly. Knirck's work illustrates a disturbing trend running through the historiography of Irish revolutionary women. His focus on how social change and the actions of the government and Catholic Church stripped women of their ability to act in the public sphere also strips women of their historical agency. His line of reasoning perpetuates the myth that women are only acted upon, not viable historical actors in their own right.

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<sup>10</sup> Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dail* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 72.

Even as the 2001 opening of the Bureau of Military History introduced more documentary evidence of women's participation and contributions in the Irish revolutionary era, historians continued to struggle with how women should be included in the narrative. In *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World*, published in 2015, Maurice Walsh accurately characterizes Cumann na mBan as a "support organization," but describes their support as largely ornamental.<sup>11</sup> Writing the Cumann na mBan women "decorated the (IRA) dormitories and placed bunches of fresh flowers in empty tin cans on tables at mealtime," Walsh implies they were either unaware of, or oblivious to, the seriousness of the war raging around them.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the women in Michael Hopkinson's *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War* were far from oblivious to Irish politics. His republican women were "irate" and "hardline," contributing anger, not action.<sup>13</sup> In the hands of Walsh and Hopkinson, revolutionary women were either fanciful or rage-filled, but always ineffectual.

The women fared better in works by female historians, but their histories are not without their own problems. With *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900–1922* (published in 2010) and *Dissidents: Irish Republican Women 1923–1941* (published in 2012), Ann Matthews struggled to highlight the contributions of lesser known revolutionary women because she focused too often on trying to invalidate those of more well-known figures. Constance Markiewicz and Maud Gonne draw most of Matthews fire, and to some degree, deservedly so. Many historians argue to what degree self-promotion motivated their actions; neither shunned the spotlight or spurned the attention they received from trodding the boards of the international

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Hopkinson, *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, Limited; 2nd edition, 2004), 65; 66.



stage. Disputing their legacy does not affirm the legacies of the others, however. Whether positive or negative, attention paid exclusively to a few women ensured the mass of revolutionary women remained in the shadows.

Sinead McCoolle, a museum curator, archivist, and historian, used material evidence to orient women in the Irish revolution. She wrote *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923*, as a companion piece to a travelling exhibit intended to educate the public on women's active participation in Ireland's revolutionary past. In 2015, McCoolle partnered with mentor Margaret Ward to put together *No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923*. The book contains pictures of Cumann na mBan uniforms, badges, and buttons; reproductions of revolutionary propaganda; and images of correspondence, prison diaries, memoirs, and other documents authored by women during the time. As mentioned previously, describing revolutionary women as "no ordinary women" seems to contradict the message communicated by some of the material evidence she includes. The photographs show women dressed in lace *and* in tweed coats and pants; carrying guns *and* carrying their children. They were not women who set out to do the extraordinary; they set out to do what they felt was needed.

Historians struggled with how women should be re-introduced into Ireland's revolutionary past, or whether they should be included at all. Researchers in other disciplines became interested in why historians ignored and underestimated female revolutionaries, questioning why they were excluded from the historical narrative from the beginning. Sociologists Louise Ryan and Maryann Valiulis used the female experience in twentieth-century Ireland as a test case for exploring gender fluidity and the expansion and contraction of social structures during national crises. Embracing the tradition of sociologist and gender historian

Joan W. Scott, Ryan and Valiulis focused on gender as an expression of power within Irish society. Their explorations and conclusions are extremely useful in understanding how femininity can be an advantage or disadvantage, a tool or a weapon, but their investigations also confine female historical agency to structural terms. Individual women are lost amid the generalizations made about Irish women as a group.

Integrating theoretical definitions of gender structures with their application in real-life demonstrates women were both symbols and participants. They were both acted on and actors, both innocent of and complicit in the re-establishment of traditional gender norms following the Irish Civil War. They rejected their femininity in service to Irish republicanism, but also used it to their advantage, hiding guns in full skirts and messages in hats and valises, and “chaperoning” male revolutionaries to scout sites for future attacks. Purely structural analyses of the Irish revolutionary era overlook individuals and oversimplify or even distort its complexity. The fluidity of women’s social recognition by their leaders/government mirrored the fluidity with which the women negotiated their gender roles. It also reflected the fluidity of national politics. When women’s participation and contributions were useful to the cause of Irish independence, they were grudgingly accepted. When women were more useful as symbols, the Free State took the guns from their hands, removed them from public life, and placed them back on their pedestals.

Viewing the female revolutionary experience as a series of fluid, circumstance-based negotiations of gender roles involves reading and interpreting the primary documents in new ways. The autobiographies of Kathleen Clarke and Margaret Skinnider, *Cumann na mBan* handbooks and meeting minutes, period news articles (both Irish and British), correspondence, speeches, and memoirs describe the female revolutionary experience in the distinct voices of the

women who lived it. These sources allow a more nuanced understanding of their struggle to be both female and a revolutionary. Mary Spring Rice's diary of her time aboard the *Asgard*, a yacht that ran guns from Germany into Howth Harbor in 1914, is an excellent example. She lamented "crawling is not good for the clothes, or gun grease for the hands, or doing one's hair squatting...is rather a job," but also understood the safety and security of the cargo they were delivering to the Irish Volunteers was paramount.<sup>14</sup> "The worst was on a wet night when Molly (Childers) insisted on shutting the companion hatch," she wrote, but later explained it was "not so much for herself as to keep the guns dry."<sup>15</sup>

The Defense Forces Ireland (Óglaigh na nÉireann) Bureau of Military History Witness Statements (1913–1921) archive is also a critical resource. Though the interviews were conducted in the 1950s, the archive was not released into public domain until 2001. Decades elapsed between the events and the writing of the statements; therefore, a degree of recall bias is to be expected. The archive also harbors respondent bias because not every woman gave a statement, and some gave statements only on the activities of their husbands or male family members. Women's rationales for refusing to participate in the interviews also varied. Some had put away their revolutionary past as they married and raised families; some feared governmental reprisal or the judgment of their neighbors; and still others continued to nurse grudges against the government's failure to achieve the goals for which they fought. Pauline Keating recalled attending a Cumann na mBan reunion where the members argued about working with the Bureau. "(S)ome of them said they would rather burn anything they had than give it to the

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Spring Rice, "Tuesday, July 14, 1914" in "Diary of the *Asgard* (July 1914)," *National Museum of Ireland*, accessed May 1, 2017, [http://www.museum.ie/NationalMuseumIreland/media/Decorative-Arts-History/13\\_Asgard/PDFs/Diary-of-the-Asgard.pdf](http://www.museum.ie/NationalMuseumIreland/media/Decorative-Arts-History/13_Asgard/PDFs/Diary-of-the-Asgard.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Bureau...I suggested that the information might be of interest to future generations, but I did not succeed in convincing them.”<sup>16</sup>

The Defense Forces Ireland/Department of Defense (Óglaigh ha nÉireann/An Roinn Cosanta) Military Service Pension archive, made public in 2014, mitigates some bias by corroborating information in the witness statements. Cross-referencing the archived pension applications against the witness statements provides insight into the differences between the women’s and the government’s perception of their contributions during the revolutionary period. Rejections for pension claims largely centered on disputes over interpreting the language of the Military Service Pension Act, not questions regarding the veracity of the women’s service records.

War is a historical constant. Women in war is also a historical constant. Women have always been involved in war and revolution; female participation in combat is neither new nor novel. They are easy to overlook because their inclusion in the narrative is so rare. As a result, historical interpretations of women at war do not tell us about their contributions so much as reveal their society’s gender norms and expectations. Women *were* present and *did participate* in both traditionally-accepted and circumstantially-accepted roles during the Irish revolutionary period. They were acted on, but also acted. Non-inclusion can no longer be confused with non-participation. The Easter Rising brought about the Irish Free State, and women helped bring about the Rising. They still had to live in the imperfect society the Rising created.

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<sup>16</sup> “W.S. 432 Statement of Witness: Mrs. Pauline Keating, Member of Cumann na mBan, Dublin, 1915-,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 10, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0432.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0432.pdf).

## Chapter 1: Rise (1913–1916)

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Ireland's history of agitation against British rule was already centuries old. Women's involvement in this movement was also not a new phenomenon. The famines of the 1840s and 1850s brought politics out of upper-class drawing rooms and into the homes of ordinary men and women, drawing out anger, disillusionment, and determination for change. The Great Hunger re-awakened the revolutionary appetite crushed by the failure of the 1798 Rebellion and resulting 1801 Act of Union with the British Empire. As children died of malnourishment, whole families succumbed to disease, and the foundation of the nation's diet rotted beneath its feet, Irish men and women believed there must be a different way forward. Surely famine could be avoided in the future through land ownership and rent structure reform, or perhaps through a degree of British disengagement with Irish domestic affairs. The Ladies Land League, first established in the United States as a means of securing aid for Famine victims, came to Ireland in the early 1880s. While the idea of female participation in national affairs was disparaged by many, reformer Michael Davitt insisted "in certain emergencies, (women are) more dangerous to despotism than men."<sup>1</sup>

Discussions of land reform fell out of vogue in the late 1880s and 1890s as more politicians focused on home rule. British prime minister William Gladstone and Irish politician Charles Stewart Parnell dealt in hypotheticals, but Irish men and women interpreted very real consequences from their words. The famine, and Britain's slow and inadequate response to the crisis, devastated much of southern Ireland. Roughly one quarter of the Irish population was lost

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Davitt quoted in "Discovering Women in Irish History: The Ladies Land League," *Women in History*, accessed July 9, 2017, [http://womeninhistory.scoilnet.ie/content/unit3/ladies\\_land\\_league.html](http://womeninhistory.scoilnet.ie/content/unit3/ladies_land_league.html).

to death and emigration, leaving a large majority disgusted with British governance. Home rule would be a first step to independence.

The famine did not affect the northern counties to the same degree. The six northern counties that made up Ulster (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone) had a different relationship with Britain in part because their ancestors were loyal to the Crown and settled in Ireland as part of Queen Elizabeth's Ulster plantation. As such, they enjoyed a more privileged economic relationship that persisted through the centuries. The implied loss of this benefit made home rule seem tantamount to mob rule.

In 1912, Edward Carson and James Craig founded the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a volunteer militia dedicated to ensuring Ireland remained part of the British Empire. The following year, Irish nationalists formed their own militia, the Irish Volunteers, in response. Two other main Irish nationalist groups, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), shared the Irish Volunteers' goals, but favored using different methods to achieve them. The conflict was old, and so were the institutional challenges they faced. The revolutionary tradition bequeathed by Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmet marched into the new century undertrained, underarmed, and unorganized.

On August 4, 1914, another aspect of Ireland's revolutionary tradition fell into place. As nationalist and Rising participant Margaret Skinnider wrote, "an English war is always the signal for an Irish Rising."<sup>2</sup> As the British became embroiled in war with Germany, Irish nationalists seized the opportunity to exploit their preoccupation. Imperial mobilization for war, particularly conscription, energized nationalists and republicans to begin testing the limits of acceptable civil

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Skinnider, *Doing my Bit for Ireland: A first-hand account of the Easter Rising*, ed. Kirsty Lusk (London: Forgotten Books, 2016), 44.

disobedience. An Irishman's refusal to enlist in the British army demonstrated his dedication to Ireland. An Irish woman's patriotism, on the other hand, was not tied to her own actions (or refusal to act), but to the company she kept. Propaganda campaigns discouraged women from associating with anyone who wore a British uniform. "Irish girls who walk with Irishmen wearing England's uniform, remember you are walking with traitors," admonished one notice published in 1914. "You endanger your purity and honour by associating with such men, and you insult your Motherland."<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. Inghindne na hEireann

### World war

fundamentally changed the societies involved, but not all of the changes were permanent. Unpredictable political climates tend to favor reaction, not action. Decisions made in response to the unique circumstances of the current situation can result in outcomes

that most likely would not have been accepted during times of peace. The entrance and temporary acceptance of women into the public sphere is a striking example. Women had agitated for home rule in the Ladies' Land League, supported Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin (translated "ourselves alone"), and counted themselves as members of Helena Molony's and

<sup>3</sup> Cumann na mBan. (1914-1915). "[Inghindne na hEireann]: Irish girls! [S.I:S.n.]." *National Library of Ireland Digital Archive*, accessed October 13, 2015, catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000261392.

Maud Gonne's Inghindhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland).<sup>4</sup> Twentieth-century Irish nationalist women viewed their place in the republican/nationalist movement differently, arguing “ourselves” included women and women’s contributions. “We Irishwomen...felt that the time had come when the point of view of women on the many aspects of Social and National life, had to be expressed definitely,” wrote Helena Molony.<sup>5</sup>

Kathleen Lane-O’Kelly called the first meeting of Cumann na mBan (translated “Association of Women”) to order in the Wynn’s Hotel in Dublin in 1914. According to their newly adopted constitution, the group had four main aims:

1. To advance the cause of Irish liberty,
2. To organize Irishwomen in furtherance of this object,
3. To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland, and
4. To form a fund for these purposes to be called the ‘Defence of Ireland Fund.’<sup>6</sup>

These goals signified a significant break in what women were willing to do (and sacrifice) for the cause of Irish independence. Inghindhe na hÉireann’s outreach had focused on education and promoting Irish language and culture because they believed their chief responsibility and contribution was influencing the next generations. Cumann na mBan leaders argued teaching children to respect embrace the past in the hopes of their changing the Irish future was too passive. Women must be willing to work towards changing the Irish future themselves. Cumann na mBan did not pin their hopes on future generations; the “full-blooded militant organization”

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<sup>4</sup> Photograph from the Kilmainham Gaol archives, 13PO-1B54-14.

<sup>5</sup> “W.S. 391 Statement of Witness: Helena Molony, Honorary Secretary of Ighini ha nEireann 1907-1914,” *Roimn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed June 4, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistoryu.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0391.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistoryu.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0391.pdf), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1983), 93.



described by member M. Hyland-Lalor hung their hopes on their own abilities to influence the Irish present.<sup>7</sup>

Cumann na mBan members had different ideologies, educational backgrounds, and experiences. As a result, they disagreed on how the four goals would be met, and whether they were accurate to the role the women wanted to play in the revolutionary movement. The group's aim of organizing *all* Irishwomen also caused some alarm. At the turn of the century, any woman engaging in politics or openly expressing her own opinions in the public sphere was a rebel. Female life was primarily oriented around "respectability, manageability and passivity," explained Liz Gillis in *Richmond Barracks 1916: We Were There*.<sup>8</sup> Public action ran contrary to that traditional female ideal.

Cumann na mBan faced the same demons of disorganization and lack of clear communication experienced by the male groups, but its overriding issue was a near perpetual identity crisis. Cumann na mBan members were feminists, nationalists, and republicans, but to different degrees at different times. Simply by joining the group, women endorsed the feminist belief that women could and should play a public role in national affairs. They were nationalists in that they shared a love of Irish language, culture, and history. Like Inghindhe na hÉireann, many Cumann na mBan efforts went towards ensuring the new generations maintained a connection with their past. Some members also were republicans, believing Ireland should be completely independent from the British Empire. Nationalism and republicanism were not interchangeable terms. The question of whether national rights should take precedence over

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<sup>7</sup> "W.S. 295 Statement of Witness: Mrs. M. Hyland-Lalor," *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed June 4, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0295.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0295.pdf), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Mary McAuliffe and Liz Gillis, *Richmond Barracks 1916: We Were There: 77 Women of the Easter Rising* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016), 5.

women's civil rights made agreement on Cumann na mBan goals, and how to best meet those goals, increasingly difficult.

Writing in *Irish Citizen* in 1914, Cumann na mBan member Mary MacSwiney declared "The women of Ireland want the Vote, but they do not want it...at the expense of Home Rule."<sup>9</sup> She argued women's rights meant nothing in a society whose basic right to self-determination was denied. There would be "no free women in an enslaved nation."<sup>10</sup> The most "radicalized" women, already experienced in social activism and public expressions of civil disobedience through labor unions and socialist demonstrations, disagreed. They argued there could be no national freedom without first establishing freedom for women. Margaret Ward described Cumann na mBan's challenge as "a double bind:" on one hand it risked alienation if it refused to fight for Irish independence until women won equal rights; on the other, focusing on the fight for national rights over the fight for their own could "defeat any chance women stood of being accepted as partners...women's self-sacrifice would ensure that their needs remained unrecognized and therefore unsatisfied."<sup>11</sup> These conflicting views translated into differences in how women believed they could fulfill the group's constitutional aims.

Agnes O'Farrelly clearly positioned Cumann na mBan's work as a continuation of women's traditional roles. "Each rifle we put in their hand will represent to us a bolt fastened behind the door of some Irish home to keep out the hostile stranger," she said. "Each cartridge will be a watchdog to fight for the sanctity of the hearth."<sup>12</sup> Others believed accepting a role

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<sup>9</sup> Mary MacSwiney quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2015), 85.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Ward, "Marginality and Militancy: Cumann na mBan, 1914-36," in *The Irish Women's History Reader*, eds. Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (London: Routledge, 2001), 59.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Ward, "Marginality and Militancy...", 59.

<sup>12</sup> Agnes O'Farrelly quoted in *The Irish Women's History Reader*, Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 60.

subordinate to male groups like the Irish Volunteers undermined the effort entirely. Constance Markiewicz described Cumann na mBan as “chiefly there to collect funds for the men to spend.”<sup>13</sup> It is unclear what goals she believed an independent woman’s group *could* accomplish, but her decision to accept presidency of the group in 1914 meant she was willing to work with what she had at her disposal. Markiewicz personally elected to train and fight with the Irish Citizen Army, a republican group that took on both male and female recruits.

Along with the larger questions of identity and the challenge of allegiance to both national and women’s rights, individual Cumann na mBan groups struggled to escape the limitations of communication and distance. The Executive Council in Dublin found it difficult to coordinate the actions of the local groups. Maintaining consistent lines of communication was also a struggle. Lizanne (Elizabeth Anne) O’Brien, a member of the Tralee Cumann na mBan, explained her group was in contact with the general headquarters, but “got very little actual assistance after the start.”<sup>14</sup> In the absence of coordination from the top, the women “worked on [their] own initiative trying to do the best [they] could to help the Volunteers in every way possible.”<sup>15</sup>

Many women supported the revolutionary effort by taking on some of the same tasks they performed for their families at home. Sewing and other forms of needlework were especially important in outfitting an unofficial army. O’Brien wrote “(w)e made all the haversacks for the Tralee volunteers; also a number of canvas bandoliers and a number of sleeping bags.”<sup>16</sup> First aid training was also popular. Classes “were in constant operation” in Tralee, and one of the

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<sup>13</sup> Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 146.

<sup>14</sup> “W.S. 122 Statement of Witness: Miss Elizabeth Anne O’Brien, Member of the Tralee Branch Cumann na mBan,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed May 1, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0122.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0122.pdf), 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

Limerick groups found a way to make the British government pay for their training. Madge Daly explained they completed Department of Education first aid training classes, then donated the stipend they received to their local Volunteers. “In that way the British government was unwillingly subscribing to the funds of its enemies,” she wrote.<sup>17</sup> She later admitted it was a “practice which caused us much fun.”<sup>18</sup>

Men’s groups accepted women’s aid in forms like sewing and first aid training not only because they were needed, but because they did not challenge the traditional division of gender roles. Michael O’Hanrahan’s speech to Cumann na mBan members in late 1915 cautioned them against certain forms of revolutionary participation, saying “the rude shock of war is not for women. To man belongs that duty. To woman, gentle woman, belongs the privilege of binding up wounds, of living, of mourning.”<sup>19</sup> O’Hanrahan’s message fell on deaf ears. By 1916, many Cumann na mBan member’s ideas of female involvement went beyond rolling bandages and sewing bandoliers. Accounts of pre-Rising training and preparation indicate the depth of their commitment. “We drilled in the Fianna Hall in Camden Street...twice a week,” recalled Eileen Walsh. “We did route-marching and flag signaling...I do not remember any rifle practice, but we were shown how to load, unload, and clean a gun.”<sup>20</sup> Peg Duggan, a Cumann na mBan Captain in County Cork at the time of the Rising, said her group “learned the Morse code from a

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<sup>17</sup> “W.S. 855 Statement of Witness: Miss Madge Daly, First President of Limerick Branch of Cumann na mBan, Sister of Edward Daly,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed May 1, 2017 [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0855.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0855.pdf), 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Michael O’ Hanrahan, (1917). “Irish heroines: Being a lecture written for and delivered before An Árd Craobh Chumann na mBan, Dublin, during the winter proceeding Easter Week, 1916.” [Dublin]: Published by the O’ Hanrahans, 384, North Circular Road, Dublin, in *Trinity College Dublin Digital Archives: Samuels Box 2*, accessed October 20, 2015, [http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS\\_ID=SamuelsBox2pt3\\_169](http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/index.php?DRIS_ID=SamuelsBox2pt3_169).

<sup>20</sup> “W.S. 480 Statement of Witness: Mrs. Martin Murphy (Eileen Walsh), Commandant to Mullingar and Athlone, Holy Week 1916,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed October 21, 2015, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0480.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0480.pdf), 1.

Volunteer instructor and were drilled by a Volunteer officer. We also had rifle practice with a .22 rifle in the Volunteer Hall, Sheares St., Cork.”<sup>21</sup>

Duggan’s rifle training was not the norm. With fewer than 2,000 rifles for over 15,000 male Volunteers, arming the women was quite simply not a priority.<sup>22</sup> As a result, more women ran guns than fired them. Mary Ellen Spring Rice’s diary of her time aboard the *Asgard* vividly illustrates the ways women required the contradictions between their femininity and revolutionary activity. From July 1–26, 1914, Rice, Erskine Childers, and his wife, Molly, chartered a voyage to deliver a shipment of guns and ammunition to Howth harbor, and then to the Irish Volunteers. Rice’s narrative juxtaposes the traditionally masculine (guns, oilskins) with the traditionally feminine (hairpins, sewing) until the distinctions seem to fall away. On Saturday July 18, she writes “Molly spent the morning mending a great rent in the foresail, and I [tried] to make a blouse.”<sup>23</sup> Later that night, Erskine spilled his coffee “to Molly’s grief. ‘Gordon’ she said, ‘You’re ruining the guns with that coffee.’”<sup>24</sup> Aboard the *Asgard*, male and female meant nothing because the task meant everything.

Moving arms over land presented different challenges. Brigid Mhartin (Ni Fhoghludha) described “carrying guns and dispatches” for the Volunteers, noting “Ellie Taafe and myself on one occasion carried two rifles under our cloaks from Fleming’s to another house.”<sup>25</sup> Another

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<sup>21</sup> “W.S. 1576 Statement of Witness: Peg Duggan, Captain, Tómas Ceannt Branch, Cumann na mBan, Cork,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed October 21, 2015, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1576.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1576.pdf), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Pašeta, 160.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Spring Rice, “Saturday, July 18,” in “Diary of the *Asgard* (July 1914),” *National Museum of Ireland*, accessed May 1, 2017, [http://www.museum.ie/NationalMuseumIreland/media/Decorative-Arts-History/13\\_Asgard/PDFs/Diary-of-the-Asgard.pdf](http://www.museum.ie/NationalMuseumIreland/media/Decorative-Arts-History/13_Asgard/PDFs/Diary-of-the-Asgard.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “W.S. 398 Statement of Witness: Brigid, Bean Ui Mhairtin, Member of Cumann na mBan, Dublin; Courier to Cork, Holy Week, 1916,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed May 1, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0398.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0398.pdf), 2.

woman recalled Grace O’Sullivan smuggling “the accoutrements of a wireless apparatus” into Dublin underneath her clothes, the wires “wrapped around her body.”<sup>26</sup> Few expected women to act publicly, and fewer still even suspected they could be involved in such a subversive political movement. Female revolutionary activism was hidden in plain sight. This would be especially beneficial to female revolutionaries in years to come.

Unhappy with merely carrying guns, some women wanted the opportunity to use them. They got their chance in Joseph Connolly’s Irish Citizen Army (ICA). While training regimens differed among various branches of Cumann na mBan, women in the Irish Citizen Army were expected to train alongside the men. “[Women] took part in all marches, and even in the manoeuvres [sic] that lasted all night,” wrote revolutionary Constance Markiewicz. “Moreover, Connolly made it quite clear to us that unless we took our share in the drudgery of training and preparing, we should not be allowed to take any share at all in the fight.”<sup>27</sup> McAuliffe notes the ICA women “were more organized and disciplined” and had advance notice concerning the timing of the Rising. Assembled in Dublin a week before Easter, they “spent their time making bandages, bandoliers and bombs, putting together ration packs, learning first aid and generally preparing for the fight.”<sup>28</sup> As they assembled on Easter Monday, Connolly told the men and women “they were all members of the Irish Republican Army.”<sup>29</sup>

This level of enfranchisement would not have been possible without Connolly’s influence and leadership. An established labor rights leader and activist, Connolly possessed an aura of

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<sup>26</sup> “W.S. 945 Statement of Witness: Sorcha Nic Diarmada, Secretary, London Branch of Cumann na mBan, 1913-,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed May 1, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0945.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0945.pdf), 3.

<sup>27</sup> Constance Markiewicz, “Some Women in Easter Week (1926),” in *Ireland and Britain 1798-1922: An Anthology of Sources*, Dennis Dworkin, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012), 211.

<sup>28</sup> McAuliffe and Gillis, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1983), 111.

authority that helped justify ICA actions that ran counter to traditional gender norms and roles. By accepting women under his command, Connolly encouraged the association of women with men outside of their families, allowed men and women to live close to one another in the field, and encouraged women to leave their homes and families to drill, march, and train for the coming revolution. The driving force behind the inclusion of women's equality in the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic, Connolly hoped to establish a more equal Ireland beyond the immediate crisis of revolution.

Connolly and his Irish Citizen Army were a very small minority within the already small minority that was the Irish republican movement. Most male republicans struggled with how women could be used and how their participation would be interpreted. They knew they needed women's assistance, but were unsure how accepting female assistance would appear. Regardless of whether they belonged to Cumann na mBan, the Irish Citizen Army, or supported the Irish Republican Brotherhood directly, many of the women who would fight in the Easter Rising believed themselves to be "combatants, not mere auxiliaries, in the insurrection," wrote Ruth Taillon in *When History was Made: The Women of 1916*.<sup>30</sup>

Cumann na mBan's struggles with communication, lack of resources, uneven training and preparation, and its failure to come to a consensus on its identity and common goals also plagued the Easter Rising in general. Guided by a seven-member executive council, the Irish Volunteers, Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Irish Citizen Army planned to mobilize in Dublin on Monday, April 24. Hearing an arms shipment from Germany had been intercepted and fearing the lack of arms would result in a bloodbath at the hands of the British, Eoin McNeill called off the mobilization through advertisements in the Sunday newspaper. The Irish Republican

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<sup>30</sup> Ruth Taillon, *When History was Made: The Women of 1916*. (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1999), xvii.

Brotherhood and Irish Citizen Army countermanded McNeill and continued preparation for the rebellion the following day. According to Rising historian Charles Townshend, the confusion over conflicting orders meant “no more than twenty-five percent of ordinary Volunteers turned out to fight on Monday.”<sup>31</sup>

The confusion made it especially difficult for women to join the fight. Peg Duggan wrote her group knew “the boys were going on a route march to the country, but we got no instructions to accompany them.”<sup>32</sup> The women in Eileen Walsh’s Athlone/Mullingar branch faced a similar issue awaiting Éamon de Valera’s order to report to his garrison at Boland’s Mill. After assembling at 6 Harcourt Street twice, Walsh “told the girls to get into whatever outpost they could,” noting, “some of them succeeded...four or five of them...were in the GPO.”<sup>33</sup> Some women dismissed McNeill’s order to stand down completely. Aine Heron remembered preparing food for the Monday morning demonstration as her husband read McNeil’s advertisement in the *Sunday Independent*. He “told me I need not bother further as there would be no manoeuvres [sic]. But I said, ‘Who would mind the *Independent*?’”<sup>34</sup> Heron agreed with Connolly, Pearse, and the others. “[I]t would be impossible to put off the Rising, as never again would the people be brought to the pitch of enthusiasm that they were now at.”<sup>35</sup> Armed with enthusiasm, her “twenty-four hour rations, a waterproof coat [and her] first-aid outfit,” Heron marched out to join the fray.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Townshend, “‘Soldiers Are We:’ Women in the Irish Rising,” *History Today* 56, no. 4 (April 4, 2006), accessed July 14, 2017, <http://www.historytoday.com/charles-townshend/soldiers-are-we-women-irish-rising>, 29.

<sup>32</sup> W.S. 1576, Duggan, 4.

<sup>33</sup> W.S. 480, Walsh, 7.

<sup>34</sup> “W.S. 293 Statement of Witness: Mrs. Aine Heron, Captain Cumann na mBan; Justice Sinn Fein Courts, Co-Treasurer Pembroke Branch,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 27, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0293.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0293.pdf), 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



When allowed to join the men, a few women of the Irish Citizen Army succeeded in assuming combat roles. As one woman said, they had trained to “knit and darn, march and shoot,” and march, shoot, knit, and darn they would.<sup>37</sup> No Cumann na mBan members fought; their participation was largely oriented around carrying messages, nursing the wounded, and cooking for the men.

Casualties mounted and British soldiers greatly outnumbered and outgunned the rebels, but some men still refused to accept female volunteers. The Declaration of the Irish Republic read from the GPO steps on Monday morning had promised “equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens,” but the right and opportunity to participate in the rebellion was far from universal.<sup>38</sup> Individual garrison leaders decided who fought under their command and in what capacity. They justified the barring of women for several reasons. Referencing the women’s inconsistent training, some leaders balked at sparing male soldiers to train and watch over female soldiers. Others recognized female volunteers could provide much-needed assistance, but worried accepting them as combatants would cast aspersions on the movement’s legitimacy. After all, what modern nation depended on women to fight its battles?

De Valera’s direction of the Boland’s Mill outpost highlights the challenges women faced in joining the fight. Describing women as “at once the boldest and unmanageable revolutionaries;” his actions proved he did not mean this as a compliment.<sup>39</sup> He believed women were unmanageable because they refused to be managed according to his standards. He directed his men to turn Cumann na mBan volunteers away from Boland’s Mill even as the men “were

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<sup>37</sup> Anonymous quoted in Charles Townshend, “‘Soldiers Are We:’ Women in the Irish Rising,” 28.

<sup>38</sup> T. J. Clarke, S. MacDiarmada, P. Pearse, J. Connolly, T. MacDonagh, E. Ceannt, & J. M. Plunkett, “Typescript copy of the proclamation of the provisional government of the Irish Republic,” *National Library of Ireland Catalogue*, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000652487>.

<sup>39</sup> Sinead McCoole, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923* (London: Stationery Office Books, 1997), 18.

driven to the end of their ingenuity to compensate for their lack of numbers.”<sup>40</sup> De Valera later explained his decision by alluding to “anxieties of a certain kind” that he did not want to compound by “getting untrained women.”<sup>41</sup> Cumann na mBan members interpreted his decision differently. Sighle Bean Uí Donnachadh snidely remarked the result of refusing to let women fight was “the garrison there did not stand up to the siege as well as in other posts.”<sup>42</sup>

A few women experienced the Rising behind the barrel of a gun, but most performed the tasks they handled at home, including cooking, sewing, and caring for the wounded. There was still a degree of flexibility within carrying out tasks that were traditionally gendered female. Women learned to embrace take advantage of the assumptions associated with being female, remaking the most conventional of tasks into revolutionary actions. “Entirely conscious of men’s expectations of gendered behavior, the women played along with them,” explained historian Liz McDiarmid.

Carrying messages from outpost to outpost amid gunfire and bomb blasts, Margaret Skinnider boasted the police “paid no attention to me; I was only a girl on a bicycle.”<sup>43</sup> When British police or army officers stopped the women, they played the roles they were expected to play, adopting personas that cast doubt on their real motives for being out in the city. Couriers became mothers trying to get food for children or daughters seeking medicine for family members at home. Those responsible for putting down the rebellion were caught off-guard by these explanations as “there was always a possibility [a woman] really was innocent, young,

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<sup>40</sup> Taillon, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Éamon De Valera quoted in Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 110.

<sup>42</sup> Tom Clonan, “The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in the 1916 Rising.” *The Irish Times*, (January 1, 2006), accessed April 4, 2017, <http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschmedart>.

<sup>43</sup> Margaret Skinnider quoted in Karen Steele, “Constance Markiewicz and the politics of memory.” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 63.

helpless or seriously maternal.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, they could not reconcile the idea of women actively participating in revolution.

Clothing also played an important role in allowing women to operate invisibly. Just as a woman’s skirt could hide guns and ammunition, donning trousers could hide a woman. Articles of clothing, like traditional gender roles, were picked up or discarded based on the situation. Margaret Skinnider was especially adept at switching clothes to match the task she was given. “She needed only to switch costumes to switch roles; she could act as either sex,” explained Liz Gillis. “Ireland might not yet be liberated at this point, but Skinnider was.”<sup>45</sup> Cumann na mBan adopted an official uniform in 1915, but many members realized wearing it allowed them to be easily identified as enemy combatants. Anonymity was crucial to their work, so they gave up wearing uniforms. Phyllis Morkan recalled reporting for duty in Dublin “dressed in mufti- [because a] uniform would have attracted too much attention. We could not even wear a badge.”<sup>46</sup>

Interpretations of visible and invisible female participation in the Rising split according to gender lines. After the fighting ended, a Red Cross nurse confided the female revolutionaries she witnessed “could throw hand grenades [and] understood the use of bombs; in fact, they seemed to understand as much about the business of warfare as their men.”<sup>47</sup> Given the small number of women with access to grenades and bombs and the smaller number of women trained in their use, it is important not to take the nurse’s statements at face value. Exaggeration aside,

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<sup>44</sup> McDiarmid, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Liz Gillis, *Women of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Mercier Press Limited, 2014), 132.

<sup>46</sup> “W.S. 210 Statement of Witness: Phyllis Morkan, Member of Cumann na mBan, Dublin,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0210](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0210).

<sup>47</sup> Taillon, 70.

her views illustrate the dramatic difference between male and female interpretations of women's service.

Writing in the nationalist newspaper *An Phoblacht*, Mary Donnelly claimed “the Republic promised us equality without sex distinction, so we were all adjudged soldiers, women and men,” adding “those who showed ability were raised in rank.”<sup>48</sup> Most attempts to act on this promised equality were met with disdain. Some women insisted on surrendering with the men; the most popular story told was of Constance Markiewicz kissing her revolver before handing it over to a British officer. For their part, British soldiers were unsure whether they could even



accept terms of surrender from a woman.

When nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell delivered the notice of surrender to Major-General William Lowe on behalf of Padraig Pearse, she was told Pearse himself needed to deliver the terms. General Lowe did not view her as a combatant, therefore any terms she delivered meant nothing. In the original photograph of the surrender, O'Farrell's boots and a portion of her skirt can be seen behind Pearse.<sup>49</sup> A small scandal resulted from one newspaper editing O'Farrell out of the picture completely

before running it on the front page, prompting accusations that men were trying to remove all

**Figure 2. Pearse delivers notice of surrender April 29, 1916.**

<sup>48</sup> Steele, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Photograph from *The National Library of Ireland, Irish Political Figures Photographic Collection*. Note O'Farrell's boots and the edge of her skirt are visible behind Pearse.

traces of women from the Rising. By O'Farrell's own admission, however, the decision to stand hidden behind Pearse was her own. Describing the event to a newspaper in 1958, O'Farrell said she "stepped back beside Pearse so as not to give the enemy press any satisfaction" yet "ever after regretted doing so."<sup>50</sup>

Revolutionary women could not stay hidden for long. Flummoxed by disorganization and a lack of cohesion, Cumann na mBan was an ineffective fighting force. The next phase of the Revolution would not require the women to be soldiers, however. Following their release from prison, women took up the banner for the men who were still imprisoned or had been executed by the British following the Rising. From 1915, Kathleen Clarke, wife of Thomas Clarke, held a somewhat privileged position within the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a position that would allow her to keep the nationalist movement alive in the absence of men. The Supreme Council made Clarke the "custodian of their plans and decisions" so she "would be in a position to pass on the work to those next in command."<sup>51</sup> Part of her task included knowing "where to take hold and keep things going until the general release of the prisoners."<sup>52</sup>

Women were locked out of the first battle of the Irish Revolution, but they would both organize and lead the second. The Rising was about taking physical control of Ireland, but the second stage of revolution involved manipulating popular opinion. Highlighting British brutality and emphasizing the personal stories of the men lost during Easter week, women changed the revolutionary narrative. For them, the Rising was not a failure, the cause was not lost, and the battle was far from over.

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Barry, "Airbrushed out of history? Elizabeth O'Farrell and Patrick Pearse's surrender, 1916," *The Irish Story* (10 March 2016), accessed June 18, 2017, <http://www.theirishstory.com/2016/03/10/airbrushed-out-of-history-elizabeth-ofarrell-and-patrick-pearses-surrender-1916/#.WUwOqGem7cs>.

<sup>51</sup> Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman: My Fight for Ireland's Freedom*. ed. Helen Litton. (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1991), 60.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

## Chapter 2: Reaction (Late 1916–1919)

“As 1917 went on, I assumed that we had heard the last of the resistance movement in our generation and that we had no alternative to military defeat,” confided Cumann na mBan member Josephine McNeill.<sup>1</sup> McNeill’s feelings were understandable. The British crushed the rebellion, hoping also to crush the rebels’ spirits and erode any support for their cause. Acting Military Governor General John Grenfell Maxwell promised he would “ensure that there will be no treason whispered for 100 years.”<sup>2</sup> His actions, including ordering the executions of the leaders of the Rising, made clear his intent to make good on that promise.

The Cumann na mBan and Irish Citizen Army women who fought and surrendered with the men were separated from them in imprisonment and punishment. While the men were taken directly to Kilmainham Gaol, 77 women were first taken to Richmond Barracks before being moved to Kilmainham. The British commuted the women’s death sentences, rightly anticipating censure from the international community if they executed women. How women were treated behind the prison doors was another matter. Women could not die for their cause, but were certainly allowed to suffer for it. Dr. Brigid Lyons Thornton described draconian treatment by the prison guards, recalling “the sentries outside threw us a few dog biscuits through the fanlight. That was all the food we had that day.”<sup>3</sup> She later added there were “no beds, just the bare floor,

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<sup>1</sup> “W.S. 303 Statement of Witness: Josephine McNeill, Member of Cumann na mBan 1917-1921,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0303.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0303.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> John Grenfell Maxwell quoted in Anne Clare, *Unlikely Rebels: The Gifford Girls and the Fight for Irish Freedom* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2011), 171.

<sup>3</sup> “W.S. 259 Statement of Witness: Dr. B Thornton, Connaught Representative on Executive of Cumann na mBan; Officer in Oglai na hEireann,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0259.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0259.pdf), 7.

but we did sleep.”<sup>4</sup> Beyond hunger and exhaustion, the most psychologically trying part of their incarceration was hearing British justice carried out daily in the Kilmainham exercise yard. “We were there for all the executions,” wrote Thornton. “We used to hear the shots in the morning.”<sup>5</sup>

Most of the women were released by May 8 after being “solemnly warned against [sic] taking part in any subversive activities” and told repeat offenses “would be treated with the full rigour of the law.”<sup>6</sup> The warnings inspired defiance, not despondency. “During the past fifteen years we have been jeered at for our ambition, which always soared beyond the manipulation of the crochet needle,” wrote one contributor to the *Cork Examiner* in October 1916. “Men generally have been surprised...But women have not been surprised. We always knew we could accomplish the things for which we have been appraised, and do them well.”<sup>7</sup> With the male leadership gutted, the women of the 1916 revolution focused on keeping the movement going by turning the defeat into a means to win the battle for public opinion. Continuing to challenge traditional gender roles and expectations in service to revolutionary principles and goals, the women understood this battle would not have to be won through force of arms. They would amplify Maxwell’s whispers into a roar.

The Rising exploded the Irish revolutionaries’ naively romantic understanding of revolution. Women carried these lessons with them into the next phase. First aid training paled in comparison to the hands-on education accorded by bloodshed. Rolling bandages was very different than using them. Aine O’Rahilly (sister of Irish Volunteers founding member and noted revolutionary the O’Rahilly) recalled her only opportunity to use Cumann na mBan first-aid

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>7</sup> “War and the Emancipation of Women,” Anonymous editorial, assumed female author, *Cork Examiner* (October 28, 1916), in Kieran McCarthy and Suzanne Kirwan, *Cork 1916: A Year Examined* (Gloucestershire: The History Press Limited, 2016).

training prior to 1916 was to care for another woman who was injured playing camogie while they waited for drilling practice.<sup>8</sup> Rising nursing leaned more towards triage as the number of injuries soared and amount of supplies steadily dwindled. Though certainly overwhelmed and most likely out of their depth, the nurses more than proved their capacity and willingness to work in difficult circumstances. This proof of the nurses' abilities opened new opportunities. A December 9, 1916 editorial in the *Cork Examiner* reported plans to allow female medical students to become "resident pupils" instead of day students. With the number of female medical students steadily increasing, Bertram Windle of University College Cork argued "it will be enormously to their advantage to have an opportunity of seeing the practice of a great medical institution."<sup>9</sup>

Nursing was also a socially acceptable way for revolutionary women to maintain the skills they would need in future demonstrations. It also provided a platform to communicate Rising ideals to new converts. Maureen McGavock told Bureau of Military History interviewers that many Cumann na mBan members with first aid training volunteered as nurses during the Spanish Flu outbreaks in 1918. "Naturally there was no political distinction as regards the people we nursed," she wrote, but McGavock noted a group of Jewish families showed their appreciation for their help through "subscribing to our funds and voting for our candidates at the election."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Camogie is a traditional female team sport played with a stick and a ball (camogie sticks and sliotar). It is very similar to the male sport of hurling. Like American baseball and softball, many of the differences between the two sports (goal distances, ball size, etc.) are based on considerations of male and female physical characteristics.

<sup>9</sup> "The Education of Women," Editorial, *Cork Examiner*, December 9, 1916, in Kieran McCarthy and Suzanne Kirwan, *Cork 1916: A Year Examined* (Gloucestershire: The History Press Limited, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> "W.S. 385 Statement of Witness: Mrs. Sean Beaumont (Nee Maureen McGavock), Member of Executive of Cumann na mBan 1918," *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0385.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0385.pdf), 4.



The epidemic also had the unexpected benefit of returning some female revolutionaries to action. Dr. Kathleen Lynn was as passionate about Irish nationalism as she was her patients. In prison during the outbreak, a colleague in the Hospital Committee of Dublin Corporation campaigned for her release, arguing her medical expertise was necessary to deal with the mounting number of cases. As a condition of her release, the British made Lynn sign a statement saying she would not participate in politics. Her promise was ultimately not worth the paper on which it was written.

Women cared for the living, but also played an important role in remembering the dead and caring for the families they left behind. In her memoir *Revolutionary Woman: My Fight for Ireland's Freedom*, Kathleen Clarke described her work for the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund. “[We] spent most of [the] evening and night distributing help and sympathy to those who called to the house for it...I was so dreadfully sorry for those women who came; many did not know the fate of their men, whether they were dead or alive.”<sup>11</sup> Still, she remembered she “did not hear one complaint. They were proud of their men, and they were women to be proud of.”<sup>12</sup> Not knowing the fate of a family member could be worse than knowing.

Women of all backgrounds, ideologies, and social classes shared the battle against uncertainty, finding grief to be a universal language. Clarke battled her own grief after the execution of her husband, Thomas, a revolutionary leader and proclamation signatory. She found strength in sharing that grief with others in her community. Josephine McNeill suggested the social and political turmoil following Easter week unified people in ways unknown before the

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<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman: My Fight for Ireland's Freedom*. Edited by Helen Litton. (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1991), 121.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Rising. “[C]ontributions were generously given,” she wrote. “there were the pennies of the poor in the tenements; there were weekly collections in shops...we got regular support from the workers of all classes.”<sup>13</sup>

Food and monetary assistance were critical, but seeing to a loved one’s funeral and burial was also a pressing concern. Both Cumann na mBan members and unaffiliated sympathizers coordinated funeral masses and memorials on behalf of families who could not afford them. Nursing was apolitical and feeding and supporting families was humanitarian, but planning and carrying out funerals for men condemned for treason against the Crown was a very public expression of politics. “Cumann na mBan had had Mass said...for the men who had died for Ireland. After Mass, they held a meeting of protest against the British action in executing and imprisoning men, and vigorous speeches were made.”<sup>14</sup>

The funerals served both private and public functions. They eased the burden for families struggling to make ends meet and ensured their loved ones’ sacrifices were remembered. Religious services also allowed the republicans inroads into individual communities so they could encourage support for independence despite the devastation left behind from Easter week. Aine Heron remembered being initially turned away when going door-to-door for the Volunteer Dependant’s Fund, saying:

(S)ometimes the inhabitants denied all knowledge of the Volunteers in question, as they did not know us and...thought we might be setting traps for them. Gradually it became easier as the sympathy of the public had veered to the victims of the Rebellion...the masses for the men of Easter Week did a good deal to give courage to all these people. They gave them the only opportunity they had of coming together and exchanging news from various prisons.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> W.S. 330, McNeill, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Clarke, 127.

<sup>15</sup> W.S. 293, Heron, 12.

In remembering the dead, Cumann na mBan also ensured British brutality remained in the public eye. As Liz Gillis wrote, the women “show[ed] the men as people...as more than faceless names.”<sup>16</sup> Humanizing the rebels could help turn domestic and international popular opinion against Britain’s handling of the rebellion. According to Josephine McNeil, the funerals were very effective in that regard. “As we emerged behind the coffin there was a murmur of mingled indignation and grief from the crowds in the street,” she wrote. “The air seemed to vibrate with the surging sympathy of the people.”<sup>17</sup>

Women were the face of republican grief, but also the “visible face of republicanism” itself.<sup>18</sup> In 1918, the Cumann na mBan Executive Council approved significant changes to their constitution and goals. The new constitution vowed to “follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the Nation,” reaffirming their commitment to Joseph Connolly and Padraig Pearse’s plans for a society whose citizens’ contributions were not judged by gender or class.<sup>19</sup> This position recognized there were many ways to serve the nationalist cause; participation in armed combat was merely one. Changes to the constitution also clarified the group’s position in relation to the Irish Volunteers, vowing to “develop the suggested military activities in conjunction” with the group.<sup>20</sup> Conjunction implied equal partnership, a major change from the 1914 pledge to “assist” the men’s groups.

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<sup>16</sup> Liz Gillis, *Women of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Mercier Press Limited, 2014), 7.

<sup>17</sup> W.S. 330, McNeil, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Ryan, “‘In the line of fire’: representations of women and war (1919-1923) through the writings of republican men.” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 46.

<sup>19</sup> “Minutes of the Cumann na mBan convention, 1918 September 28-29,” in the Ceannt and O’Brennan Papers 1851-1953, *National Library of Ireland*, accessed June 27, 2017, <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000587423#page/1/mode/1up>.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Cumann na mBan membership increased as it established new branches around the country. Organized resistance to British rule spread beyond the cities and population centers. Brigid O'Mullane's witness statement provides a dramatic look at the efforts of and dangers faced by the women working in the field. She describes travelling from location to location on a push-bike, often going door-to-door to drum up support for establishing a local branch. One of her biggest challenges was convincing parents to allow their daughters to join. The parents "did not mind their boys taking part in a military movement, but...had never heard of, and were reluctant to accept, the idea of a body of gunwomen."<sup>21</sup>

O'Mullane emphasized the autonomy of each branch, describing a Cumann na mBan that relied on local efforts and promoted achieving local goals. Each group "preserved their separate identity" and "worked in close conjunction with the local I.R.A. companies, such as the carrying of arms and ammunition, dispatch carrying, intelligence work, getting safe houses for wanted men, [and] looking after the wounded."<sup>22</sup> Successful completion of these tasks required secrecy and discretion, and exposure would lead to their arrest and imprisonment. In 1919, O'Mullane was arrested for her efforts to drum up support for Irish independence. "I was brought under heavy escort to the Courthouse in Enniskillen, and charged with inviting the people to 'murder the police.' I refused to recognize the court and, accordingly, would have no defense," she explained. "I was convicted and sentenced to two months' hard labour and brought to Sligo jail. I spent the two months—which included Christmas of that year—in solitary confinement."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> W.S. 450 Statement of Witness: Miss Brigid O'Mullane, Organizer for Cumann na mBan 1917-; Member of Executive of G.H.Q., Cumann na mBan 1918-" *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 29, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0450.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0450.pdf), 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Cumann na mBan made progress mobilizing regions beyond the cities, but domestic propaganda was not enough. Some women reached out to the international community to condemn Britain's handling of the Rising and its governance of Ireland. Maire Ni Bhriain (Molly O'Brien) is not a household name by any stretch of the imagination, but the reach of her efforts extended across Europe. She begins her witness statement by connecting her own political activities to a family history of agitation against British rule. Her father emigrated to the United States and served in the Confederate army during the Civil War, but Ni Bhriain emphasizes he did not enlist out of sympathy for the Southern cause. "His purpose in joining...was to acquire such military experiences as would be useful to him later in a fight for Ireland."<sup>24</sup> Ni Bhriain's own motives for going abroad are less certain. The typewritten witness statement text reads "I went there ~~partly for health reasons,~~" and the handwritten correction is indistinct.<sup>25</sup> We do know her reception was less than warm. She was strip-searched twice and detained for questioning multiple times by Scotland Yard detectives convinced she was the author of pro-Irish nationalist propaganda published in German newspapers. No charges were filed and she was allowed to proceed to Spain.

Ni Bhriain was not a writer, but she was in the business of spreading nationalist propaganda. Officially unaffiliated with Cumann na mBan or any particular IRA battalion, she took advantage of her autonomy to "put the case of Ireland before the world."<sup>26</sup> She discovered many groups shared Irish republicans' dream of national self-determination. Her speeches in

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<sup>24</sup> "W.S. 363 Statement of Witness: Maire Ni Bhriain, Associated with Cumann na mBan 1915-," *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0363.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0363.pdf), 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Catalonia were especially well-received. “The Catalans always cherish the desire for separation from Spain and their aspiration is the bond of sympathy between us,” she wrote.<sup>27</sup>

Being a woman allowed Ni Bhriain to enter spaces denied to men. Trading on first aid training gained during the Rising, she and Daisy Cogley (Bannard) attended the world Congress of the Red Cross in Geneva “unofficially...that is to say we were not invited although we were sent.”<sup>28</sup> Though not officially part of the convention, the women wasted no time in talking to individual delegates and distributing flyers and pamphlets. “I think no one escaped without getting our propaganda leaflets,” she boasted.

International sympathy and domestic outrage could only go so far. Efforts to care for the living and dead helped ease local suffering, but could not affect national change. National change required participation on the national stage. As the war dragged on and casualties mounted, the British looked for ways to replenish its fighting forces, including mandatory conscription. Women took the lead in fighting this development. The revised Cumann na mBan constitution included “organis(ing) opposition to Conscription” as a critical goal, noting “the enforcement of Conscription on any peoples without their consent is tyranny.”<sup>29</sup> Anti-conscription efforts brought together women of all affiliations and ideologies, offering a degree of unity lacking in other endeavors. It also combined traditionally-female gender expectations (women as protectors of the family and their children) with actions that were traditionally gendered male (public demonstrations).

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> “1918-1919 Cumann na mBan Constitution” in “Documenting History: Cumann na mBan,” *RTE News*, accessed August 5, 2017, <https://www.rte.ie/news/galleries/2014/0328/605102-documenting-history-cumann-na-mban/>.

In addition to propaganda campaigns, women organized a general strike on April 23 and a Women's Day (La na mBan) on June 9. Thousands of women signed pledges to fight against conscription at their own communities' local celebrations. The Kilkenny Archaeology Society document archives include over 1,000 signatures from the Women's Day held in that county.<sup>30</sup> The archaeologists note the turnouts in the cities and more populous counties were even larger.<sup>31</sup>

Through participation in politics, women could directly influence change; propaganda and petitions distanced women from both the decision makers and the decisions being made. Women campaigned for Sinn Féin candidates in the 1918 general election, and a few were even elected themselves. Winifred Carney was defeated in Belfast, but Constance Markiewicz won the seat in Dublin, making her the first woman elected to the British House of Commons. She refused to take her seat in protest. Women aged of thirty and over won the right to vote the following year, allowing even more to realize their opinions could impact the direction of the country. Cumann na mBan argued voting was a woman's patriotic duty, not just a right. A 1918 pamphlet entitled "The Present Duty of Irish Women" declared "[g]enerations of Irishwomen have longed to possess the weapon which has now been put into your hands. Show that you value it properly, and do your part in publishing to the world our determination to be free."<sup>32</sup>

Ireland seemed to inch towards the gender equality promised in the Rising Proclamation, but women continued to experience difficulties in finding their place in the revolution. Traditional political symbols and language persisted, perpetuating views that prioritized the importance of the female image over female actors. Sinn Féin repeatedly used traditional

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<sup>30</sup> "Signatures of 1000 Kilkenny Women Who Opposed Conscription in 1918," *Kilkenny Archaeological Society*, accessed August 5, 2017, <http://kilkennyarchaeologicalsociety.ie/signatures-of-1000-kilkenny-women-who-opposed-conscription-in-1918/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Cumann na mBan (1918), "The present duty of Irish Women," *Irish Archives Resource*, accessed June 5, 2017, [www.iar.ie/Docs/The%20Present%20Duty%20of%20Irishwomen.pdf](http://www.iar.ie/Docs/The%20Present%20Duty%20of%20Irishwomen.pdf).

imagery to court female support for their candidates. “Not without reason did the old time poets in Eirinn call the country they loved by a woman’s name,” concluded one candidate.<sup>33</sup> A woman’s name was one thing, a woman quite another. “Women became the bearers of the symbols of nation, but their everyday experiences and agency [were] denied,” wrote historian Ailbhe Smyth.<sup>34</sup> The woman’s role was to mourn, not act. She sacrificed for the nation, but her political agency remained intimately tied to her pledge to work on behalf of and in service to the memory of the men that died during the Rising. The revolutionary legacy women constructed was not their own.

Women fought during Easter week, but as most of the work women performed leaned more towards tasks that were traditionally gendered female, men considered all forms of female participation to be an “extension of their domestic duties.”<sup>35</sup> This interpretation ignored the fact that some women repeatedly petitioned for permission to fight alongside the men. It also failed to recognize the women expected to face the same punishment as the men. Participation in Cumann na mBan and the Irish Citizen Army “may have radicalized the women involved,” wrote Maryann Valiulis, but “to their male colleagues it remained women’s work.”<sup>36</sup>

The media also helped define women’s inclusion in the Rising narrative. Exceptional examples of female participation overshadowed and often undermined the work done by hundreds of others. Countess Constance Markiewicz was a media favorite, her green uniform

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 87-88.

<sup>34</sup> Louise Ryan, “Reforming and Reframing: Newspaper Representations of Mary Bowles and the War of Independence, 1919-21,” in *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century*, Gillian McIntosh and Diane Urquhart, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010) 36.

<sup>35</sup> Maryann Valiulis, “The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937.” *Women’s History Review* 20, no. 4 (September 2011): 569-578, 572.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 573.



and flamboyant personality both mocked and admired.<sup>37</sup> Her wealth and social and political connections made it easy for the newspapers to portray her as “an upper-class eccentric out for kicks,” but, as Roy Foster wrote, Markiewicz “was a more serious person (and politician) than is often remembered.”<sup>38</sup>



Figure 3. Constance Markiewicz in Irish Citizen Army Uniform (*Weekend Telegraph*)

In her lengthy witness statement, Helena Molony defended Markiewicz as a victim of historians. “The only account written of her is by Seán Ó Faolaín- a very bad, inaccurate, misleading and unsympathetic account of her,” she wrote. “It completely misrepresents her character.”<sup>39</sup> Molony also debunked the rumors surrounding Markiewicz’s outlandish dress, saying fellow Irish Citizen Army soldier Michael Mallin only gave her the coat after he received a new one. Her only addition to her “plain tweed costume” was “a small bunch of cock’s feathers” she attached to the lapel.<sup>40</sup> Molony’s defense did not become part of the official record until the witness statement archives were released to

<sup>37</sup> See Figure 3. Photograph taken by Keogh Brothers, Ltd., photographers; published in the *Weekend Telegraph*. Taken from the *National Library of Ireland Irish Political Figures Photographic Collection*.

<sup>38</sup> Roy F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015), 167; 20.

<sup>39</sup> “W.S. 391 Statement of Witness: Helena Molony, Honorary Secretary of Ighini ha nEireann 1907-1914,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed June 4, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0391.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0391.pdf), 53.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

the public forty years later. That was more than enough time for historians to perpetuate and embellish Ó Faoláin's characterization.

Actress Maud Gonne McBride was another media favorite. Her beauty, stage presence, and dedication to Irish independence earned her the nickname "Ireland's Joan of Arc," but she was a stage-bound Joan, not a Joan of the battlefield.<sup>41</sup> The gossip surrounding her romantic entanglements benefitted her stage career, but damaged her reputation as a serious republican. Fellow rebels questioned her motives, wondering how many of her actions were motivated by self-promotion rather than selfless dedication to the revolution. Maire Comerford described Gonne as "a person more of reactions, resenting injustice, going where places were burnt... she followed them as a protestor."<sup>42</sup> Gonne followed fires, but did not work to put them out. Despite the funds she raised and publicity she provided, it was very easy for the media to portray her activism as nothing more than an act.

Grace Gifford Plunkett, the "tragic bride of 1916," also dominated media coverage of female participation in the Irish nationalist/republican movement.<sup>43</sup> Gifford married condemned Rising leader Joseph Plunkett a few hours before his execution. Her marriage and widowhood only hours apart, Plunkett became a lasting symbol of the romance of the Rising—and its futility. Louise Ryan writes Plunkett's mainstream popularity was assured because she could be "easily accommodated within traditional gender roles as young, beautiful, and lovelorn."<sup>44</sup> Neither Plunkett, Gonne, or Markiewicz represented every woman's revolutionary experience, but

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<sup>41</sup> Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne: A Life. Irish Political Women Series* (London and San Francisco: Pandora Press, 1990, reprint 1993), 54.

<sup>42</sup> Maire Comerford quoted in *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>43</sup> Taken from title; Marie O'Neill, *Grace Gifford Plunkett and Irish Freedom: Tragic Bride of 1916* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Louise Ryan, "'Furies' and 'Die-hards': Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century," *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 256-275, accessed April 15, 2016, *EBSCOhost*, 261.

presenting their experiences as the norm was easier than trying to accommodate the diverse ways experienced the early revolutionary period. Most women's contributions went unappreciated. They made personal strides despite the gender conventions that seemed to flout them at every turn. Through medical training, organizing funerals, fundraising, canvassing for political candidates, and spreading propaganda, individual women incorporated male elements into their "women's work."

The years directly following the Rising began as a time of mourning but ended in an atmosphere of anticipation. The proliferation of Cumann na mBan units and their coordination with local Irish Republican Army (IRA) groups enabled women were to prepare for the next conflict. They did not intend to ask for permission to join the next fight.

Women's adoption of leadership roles during the intermediary period did not mean they planned or even hoped to continue overseeing the revolutionary movement. They understood their service to be a stopgap, not a changing of the guard. Unlike the Ladies Land League members who resented men resuming control after their release from prison, the restoration of male leadership was a source of relief to many of the women who took on leadership roles during the male leaders' imprisonment. "As prisoners were now being released and taking over, things were easing for me," wrote Kathleen Clarke in 1918.<sup>45</sup> Women stepped back to let the new revolutionary leaders rise, but their invisibility would make them invaluable during the conflicts to come.

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<sup>45</sup> Clarke, 140.

### Chapter 3: Reinterpretation (1919–1921)

Aided in no small part by the women canvassing and lobbying on their behalf, Sinn Féin candidates won the majority in the 1918 election, taking 73 of the 105 seats earmarked for Irish representatives. The representatives broke away from the British Parliament and established their own legislature, the Dáil Éireann, the following year. “The people have voted for Sinn Féin,” wrote Father Michael O’Flanagan, a high-ranking member of the group. “What we have to do now is explain to them what Sinn Féin is.”<sup>1</sup> “This would have been easier if Sinn Féin itself had known more precisely,” noted historian Robert Kee.<sup>2</sup> In the years following the Rising, Sinn Féin wanted to represent everything and everyone. In its *Appeal to the Women of Ireland*, the group promised what Diarmaid Ferriter referred to as “the ultimate lie: ‘the womenfolk of the Gael shall have a huge place in the councils of a freed Gaelic nation.’”<sup>3</sup> It courted support from and made pledges to all sides, but had no real plans for how to follow through on its often contradictory promises. Supporters hoped Sinn Féin would take the lead in renewing the fight to achieve the republican and nationalist goals of the 1916 Rising. Sinn Féin leaders pinned their hopes on the international community’s influence in convincing the British to relinquish control of the island.

Sinn Féin overestimated the international community’s willingness to involve itself in another conflict. Great Britain emerged from the “war to end all wars” victorious and humbled. Defeating Germany came at a high cost, and rebuilding British infrastructure and shoring up its

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag Volume III: Ourselves Alone* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Appeal to the Women of Ireland” referenced in Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913–1923* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2015), 181.

own industries took priority. The war also exposed the hypocrisy in imperialism: the British Empire continued to profit from their holdings across the globe even as they fought against Germany's imperialist designs. This realization did not inspire a change in their stance on Ireland. Sinn Féin leaders hoped the post-war anti-imperialist spirit would lead the United States and other nations to urge Britain to grant Irish self-determination. The British staunchly refused to discuss the matter at the Paris Peace Conference, and American representatives did not want to risk their relationship with their wartime ally by broaching the subject. Their hopes of international support dashed, the revolutionaries understood they could not depend on outside support to win independence. It was one again up to themselves alone.

Sinn Féin's emphasis on international diplomacy and the "electoral republicanism" of 1918-1919 suited the war-weary Irish people. If independence could be won by ballot, it was preferable to trying to achieve it with bullets. Scars left by trench warfare returned with the Irishmen who had fought in the British army and the scars of loss remained with the families and friends of the men who never returned. The death and destruction left behind after the 1916 Rising were also powerful arguments against continuing the fight for independence by force of arms.

Revolutionary leaders (primarily Éamon de Valera, Cathal Brugha, and Michael Collins) took a different view. They prioritized independence over the people's concerns, illustrating they were, as Robert Kee noted, "elected on one understanding, and also members of a clandestinely-directed organization...operating on another understanding."<sup>4</sup> An important element of this "other understanding" was their realization that war had to be waged a different way. They could not overthrow Britain by force, but undermining its rule was possible.

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<sup>4</sup> Kee, 60.

The next war against the British began when two members of the Tipperary IRA (working on their own and not under the direction of IRA headquarters) ambushed and killed two Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) officers. Like a match to flame, Ireland again sparked into rebellion. The Anglo-Irish War (also referred to as the Black and Tan War and War for Irish Independence) traded traditional military strategies for guerilla tactics and ambushes. Prior to leaving for the GPO on April 24, James Connolly admitted “We’re going out to be slaughtered.”<sup>5</sup> His statement proved prophetic. Three years later, the Irish revolutionaries once again lacked the manpower and materiel to defeat the British through traditional military means. Independence could only be won through attrition.

Michael Collins understood this better than most. An aide-de-camp for Joseph Plunkett during the Rising, he was not significant enough to merit execution in 1916. Aided by the leadership vacuum created by the executions of the men who were considered significant enough to die for their cause, he rose to prominence within the Irish Republican movement, becoming president of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, then Minister of Intelligence and Director of Organization and Arms Procurement for the IRA. Collins also understood Ireland was no longer in rebellion, but outright war. “It was never possible for us to be militarily strong,” explained Collins, “but we could be strong enough to make England uncomfortable (and strong enough to make England too uncomfortable).”<sup>6</sup> This war would be fought in the shadows; there was no time for reading proclamations or raising flags.

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<sup>5</sup> James Connolly quoted in Craig Rosebraugh, *The Logic of Political Violence: Lessons in Reform and Revolution* (Portland, Arissa Media Group, 2004), 212.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Collins, “The Proof of Success 1916, Notes by General Michael Collins August, 1922” in *The Path to Freedom*, (New York: Greenbook Publications, LLC, 2010), 4.

Taking Collins' lead, the Irish Volunteers, IRA, and local Cumann na mBan groups mobilized with the intent of making Ireland impossible to govern. The adoption of guerrilla tactics helped turn the weaknesses exposed by the Rising into strengths. Successful completion of military objectives did not depend on recruiting, training, and coordinating an army. Local groups trained in small flying column units, learning to strike, disassemble, then reorganize later. Each flying column operated independently, allowing them the freedom to take the initiative when opportunities to strike arose.

Some efforts did not involve guns or military maneuvers at all. Intelligence gathering and espionage were essential to keeping the British off-balance as they tried to govern the island. Collins' military pragmatism in embracing irregular military tactics extended to his willingness to take advantage of a population of revolutionaries largely ignored by other leaders: women. Collins' dedication to gender-inclusivity and recognition of women in his speeches was rare for a political leader of the time, but his reliance on active female participation was unheard of. He recognized any man with an Irish accent would be suspected of collusion with the revolutionaries, but a woman could escape notice. Women were above suspicion because the idea that they could be combatants was considered ludicrous. Revolutionary activity was layered into the existing structure of a woman's everyday life. Feminine attributes allowed women to "transport arms, accompan[y] male Volunteers to pose as courting couples when selecting ambush sites, and lure unsuspecting soldiers to the dock to be disarmed by waiting volunteers," explained Eve Morrison.<sup>7</sup> The gender stereotypes and assumptions that blocked women from full participation in the Rising became their greatest weapons during the Anglo-Irish War.

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<sup>7</sup> Eve Morrison, "The Bureau of Military History and Female Republican Activism, 1913-1923," in *Gender and Power in Irish History*, Maryann Valiulis, ed. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), 62.

As British police and military officers were less suspicious of female revolutionaries, the women often found themselves in dangerous situations. Cumann na mBan member Catherine Wisely was “terrified” as she pushed her pram “carr(ying) twenty rounds of ammunition in her baby son’s clothes,” but completed her delivery.<sup>8</sup> She accepted fear and risk as the cost of her participation in the fight for Ireland. Other women were energized by the adrenaline induced by fear and their operation in plain sight. Bridget A. McGrath, part of the Cumann na mBan group attached to the Tipperary IRA/No. 2 Flying Column, was a photographer by trade and a conspirator by choice. Her home studio became a hub for dispatch work as she and her children carried information back and forth. “As a camouflage, I usually carried a camera, and if held up by police or military, I was supposed to be out photographing.”<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the best camouflage was simply being female. Describing a close call when moving arms from one part of the country to another, Dr. Brigid Lyons Thornton wrote the British received a tip that someone was smuggling arms on the train. Entering her cabin, one police officer explained “we are searching the train for arms and ammunition, but you don’t have to worry.”<sup>10</sup> He then told another officer, “Don’t disturb the lady’s luggage.”<sup>11</sup> Nancy O’Brien shared a similar story, saying one police officer noticed she was having trouble unloading a case from a tram. Not realizing the case was full of guns and ammunition, the officer delivered the case directly to her front door without questioning its contents.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sinead McCoolle, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923* (London: Stationery Office Books, 1997), 38.

<sup>9</sup> “W.S. 1704 Statement of Witness: Bridget A. McGrath, Member of Cumann na mBan, Clonmel Company,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1704.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1704.pdf), 6.

<sup>10</sup> “W.S. 259 Statement of Witness: Dr. B Thornton, Connaught Representative on Executive of Cumann na mBan; Officer in Oglaiigh na hEireann,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0259.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0259.pdf), 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Meda Ryan, *Michael Collins and the Women Who Spied for Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1996), 81.



The 1920 Restoration of Order in Ireland Act granted the British Army and police more extensive power in countering IRA ambushes, assassinations, and political unrest. Martial law and legalized internment created an atmosphere not unlike a police state, forcing male revolutionaries into hiding. The British also mobilized auxiliary forces to fill the gaps created by the IRA's targeting of police and military officials. Their auxiliaries' half-police, half-military "black and tan" uniforms were testament to the haste of their commission. "My own view is that to win a war of this sort you must be ruthless," wrote British intelligence officer Major Bernard Law Montgomery.<sup>13</sup> The Irish republicans wholeheartedly agreed and responded in kind. On November 21, 1920, local IRA units carried out the simultaneous assassinations of twelve British intelligence officers. A few hours later, British forces fired on the crowd at a football game at Croke Park, killing fourteen civilians in reprisal.

As the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act forced more men underground, women became the backbone of the IRA's intelligence and espionage efforts. "(Michael) Collins...(was) at the centre of intelligence regarding the fast changing political arena in Ireland," wrote Ann Matthews.<sup>14</sup> Female spies helped keep him there. Siobhán Creedon, a post official in Cork, intercepted telegraphs and sent the information to Collins for dissemination to area brigades and units. Josephine Marchmount and Nora Wallace also spied for Collins and the IRA, providing intelligence on "locations earmarked for raids, names of Sinn Féin and Volunteers on the military's wanted list, and...names of paid informers."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard Law Montgomery quoted in J.B.E. Hittle, *Michael Collins and the Anglo-Irish War: Britain's Counterinsurgency Failure* (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2011), 113.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2010), 174.

<sup>15</sup> Meda Ryan, 47-48.

Lily Mernin, or as she was referred to by Collins, “Lt. G.,” used her position as a clerk in Dublin Castle to gather intelligence. Mernin showed great ingenuity in collecting information, including turning a coworker’s predilection for gentleman callers, alcohol, and gossip into a well-spring of intelligence for the IRA. Mernin relayed the office gossip to Collins, paying special attention to one frequent visitor who “while under the influence of drink...(was) liable to talk a lot, and mainly, his conversation concerned raids and arrests of wanted IRA men.”<sup>16</sup> Any information had the potential to aid or impede IRA strategy. “Whatever tit-bits [sic] of information I could glean...I immediately passed on to the intelligence section.”<sup>17</sup> By never referring to her by name, T. Ryle Dwyer notes Collins allowed others to assume what they wanted about his spy’s identity. If they preferred to believe Lt. G was “an army officer rather than a woman typist at army headquarters,” it was none of his affair.<sup>18</sup> The informants’ gender did not matter to Collins in organizing the information into actionable data, therefore he determined it should not matter to anyone else.

Female intelligence agents were conduits of information, but also acted on the information they uncovered. Historian Joseph Connell Jnr. tells the story of Patricia Hoey’s close call with the British police in his recent book, *Michael Collins: Dublin 1916-22*.<sup>19</sup> Hoey worked as a secretary for Collins, but also allowed him to use her home as a safe house when he was on the run. When the British police entered the house one night and refused to leave, Hoey knew she had to warn Collins to go to another safe house that night. She had her mother fake a heart attack, then pleaded with the officers to let her call a doctor. The doctor on call was fellow

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<sup>16</sup> Lily Mernin quoted in T. Ryle Dwyer, *The Squad and the intelligence operations of Michael Collins* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2005), 167.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph E. A. Connell Jnr., *Michael Collins: Dublin 1916-22* (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd., 2017), 280.

revolutionary woman Dr. Kathleen Lynn, who left the house with a warning for Collins tucked in her medical bag. Cumann na mBan members Brigid O’Mullane, Maire Comerford, and Maire Duggan set their own traps. Hearing a rival spy was in the area, they ambushed, captured, disarmed, and blindfolded the woman. Discovering the woman wore a (presumably stolen) Cumann na mBan uniform, they stripped her, gave her a raincoat, and told her to be out of the country within 24 hours. “Her capture had its effect, as we never afterwards found any spy masquerading as Cumann na mBan,” concluded O’Mullane.<sup>20</sup>

Women were “indispensable to the [Irish Republican] Army,” wrote Tom Barry in his memoir, *Guerilla Days in Ireland*.<sup>21</sup> Other men on the front lines of the guerrilla fight agreed and urged women not to underestimate their importance. One letter to an anonymous female volunteer read:

Girls can get any amount of information from most men...Don’t think there is anything ignoble about army intelligence work...No army can move an inch or win the slightest victory without it. Help us move miles. Help us win victories. Realise your own importance- we realise it and rely on you.<sup>22</sup>

Women’s active participation was absolutely necessary to achieve revolutionary goals during the Anglo-Irish War, but the idea of accepting their participation in any situation other than a national crisis continued to cause concern. Female activity during the Easter Rising was easier to justify as an exceptional situation because it involved less than a hundred women. Participants in the Anglo-Irish War numbered thousands and its battles were fought on multiple

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<sup>20</sup> “W.S. 450 Statement of Witness: Miss Brigid O’Mullane, Organizer for Cumann na mBan 1917-; Member of Executive of G.H.Q., Cumann na mBan 1918-” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 29, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0450.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0450.pdf), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Tom Barry, *Guerilla Days in Ireland: A Personal Account of the Anglo-Irish War* (Boulder: Robins Rinehart, 1991 ed.), 209.

<sup>22</sup> Tom Clonan, “The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in the 1916 Rising,” *The Irish Times* (January 1, 2006), accessed April 4, 2017, <http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschmedart.>, 4.

fronts in towns and villages throughout the country. Women were pulled into the conflict by proximity as well as ideology. In 1916, women had to go to the revolution in Dublin; from 1919-1921, war brought the revolution to their doorsteps. The situation compounded the “sense of unease, confusion, and uncertainty” created by gender convention-bending women in 1916 explained Louise Ryan. “Being a victim was somewhat understandable, but being a willing accomplice seemed far less acceptable.”<sup>23</sup> The willing accomplices were flummoxed that male leaders continued to downplay their contributions. “It still shocks me...that I have two battles to fight- one against the Brits and secondly with the men of my own organisation.”<sup>24</sup>

The social and political confusion did not end with the Anglo-Irish War truce on July 21, 1921. The Anglo-Irish Treaty ended the hostilities between Britain and Ireland, but amplified hostilities between the Irish themselves. The treaty dissolved the Republic founded in 1918 and created the Irish Free State, granting it rights equivalent to a British commonwealth. The RIC and military police were demobilized and sent home, but Britain retained three naval bases on the western coast. The treaty’s plan for partition caused the most outrage, as Britain maintained full control over six northern counties. As a republican and nationalist, Michael Collins abhorred the terms of the treaty. As lead negotiator for the Irish delegation, he endorsed it, attempting to justify partition as “a stepping stone to greater freedom.”<sup>25</sup> The minister of intelligence did not need special informants to know his position was unpopular and would be used against him. After signing the treaty, he confided to a friend, “I tell you this, early this morning I signed my

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<sup>23</sup> Louise Ryan, “Reforming and Reframing: Newspaper Representations of Mary Bowles and the War of Independence, 1919-21,” in *Irish Women at War: The Twentieth Century*. eds. Gillian McIntosh and Diane Urquhart (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 49.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Steele, “Constance Markiewicz and the politics of memory,” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Bill Kissane, “The doctrine of self-determination and the Irish move to independence, 1916-1922,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8, no. 3 (2003): 327-346, accessed February 5, 2016, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, 338.

death warrant.”<sup>26</sup> The Dáil passed the treaty on January 7, 1922. Éamon de Valera, Cathal Brugha, and Austin Stack immediately resigned in protest. Irish political leaders, IRA soldiers, and Cumann na mBan members split into factions according to their positions on the treaty. By June, the situation had devolved into full civil war as men and women used the lessons they learned from the Rising and the tactics they honed during the Anglo-Irish War against each other.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Collins quoted in Anisseh Van Engeland and Rachael M. Rudolph, *From Terrorism to Politics* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1988), 51.

## Chapter 4: Reversal (1922–1923)

Civil war confirmed the factionalism within the republican/nationalist movement had not been healed by cooperation in the Rising and Anglo-Irish War. The Anti-Treaty faction, led by Cathal Brugha and Éamon de Valera, viewed the treaty as a betrayal and its supporters as traitors. Partition of the north was an outright repudiation of republican goals and nationalist ideals. Dominion status and swearing an oath of allegiance to the Crown was not independence. Collins' Pro-Treaty faction tried to requite republican ideology with political rationality. They also fought for independence, but argued the past five years of rebellion and war demonstrated it had to be negotiated. Hundreds of years of British occupation would not end with a few brushstrokes. Both sides realized they were no longer fighting for a free Ireland, but their unique interpretation of a free Ireland.

The Irish Civil War was bloodier and more brutal than the conflicts that came before. While the actual number of casualties is unknown, military historian and retired British army officer Peter Cottrell described its close-quarters fighting as “among the most complicated, manpower-intensive and bloody operations that any soldier can be called upon to perform.”<sup>1</sup> The proper execution of the tactics required “discipline, determination and training” that both sides lacked, adding to the war’s brutality.<sup>2</sup> Fighting against the men and women they once fought alongside, each side knew their opponents’ secrets, strengths, and weaknesses. The Irish Republican Army fractured into pro- and anti-treaty forces. Cumann na mBan splintered into three groups: women who supported the treaty formed Cumann na Saoirse and Cumann na

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Cottrell, *The War for Ireland 1913-1923* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009), 169.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

nGaedheal (established and operating in County Cork only), while those who rejected the treaty remained under the name Cumann na mBan.



**Figure 4. Cumann na mBan vigil at Mountjoy Gaol, April 1921. (National Library of Ireland)**

The Civil War did not change the basic tasks the women performed; they continued to handle funerals and memorials for the dead and spread propaganda at home and abroad.<sup>3</sup> Joseph E. A. Connell wrote the women's groups "played a more public

role" than in the 1916 and 1919-1921, but many continued to depend on the anonymity and invisibility so crucial to their efforts during the Anglo-Irish War.<sup>4</sup> Mairead Ni Cheallaigh found the skills she honed during previous conflicts continued to be useful. "We used to go out under fire to carry in the wounded on stretchers, also to procure supplies from local chemists' shops," she wrote.<sup>5</sup> The fight and fighters were the same, just arranged on different sides.

Though he was now at war with some of the men he had fought with for ten years, Michael Collins' advantage continued to be his spy network. Many of the women who worked for Collins during the war against the British continued to be loyal to him after the Anglo-Irish treaty. Collins depended on and "wouldn't have been able to operate without the aid of...[the]

<sup>3</sup> Figure 4 photograph taken by W.D. Hogan on April 24, 1921. Taken from the *National Library of Ireland Digital Archives/Photographs*.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph E. A. Connell Jnr., *Michael Collins: 1916-22* (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd., 2017), 104.

<sup>5</sup> "W.S. 925 Statement of Witness: Mairead Ni Chealleagh, Member of Cumann na mBan, 1913- ; Sister of Sean T. O Ceallaigh," *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0925.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0925.pdf), 10.

small army of women working for him as secretaries, typists and couriers,” wrote Connell.<sup>6</sup> These women were truly an “invisible army:” their identities and allegiances were not exposed during the Anglo-Irish War, therefore they remained concealed as the nation entered the next war. Collins urged the women not to participate in Cumann na Saoirse or Cumann na nGaedheal, fearing uniforms, public marches, and demonstrations would compromise their covert operations and possibly endanger their lives. Lily Mernin continued to be a key element of the Pro-Treaty forces’ strategy. Frank Thornton, writing in his own witness statement, said Mernin “(was) one to whom a large amount of the credit for the success of Intelligence must go.”<sup>7</sup> Mernin’s success depended on her own network of contacts, another invisible army whose identities were suspected, but not verified.

Collins worked hard to keep his spies safe, but arrests of female revolutionaries were much more common during the Civil War than during the Rising and Anglo-Irish War. One reason is the early underestimation of the extent of female participation in the independence movement. British police and military officials rejected the idea of women as active combatants because it simply did not correspond to their assumptions regarding women’s roles and abilities. While non-recognition was both maddening and demoralizing for the women who fought in Dublin in 1916, recognition could be life-threatening in 1922 and 1923. Irish men knew which women were combatants, their roles, and the locations in which they were active. They had worked together against the common British enemy. The British police were never quite sure whether a woman was a combatant or a wife/mother/daughter caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but soldiers in the pro- and anti-Treaty armies harbored no such doubts. Most men

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<sup>6</sup> Connell Jnr., 14.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Thornton quoted in *Ibid.*, 337-8.



only recognized women as legitimate combatants when they became a threat. It is ironic the revolutionary women made forgettable allies but formidable enemies.

Revolutionary women lost their most influential and outspoken supporter when Michael Collins was ambushed and assassinated outside *Béal na Bláth*, Cork on August 22, 1922. Credited with beginning the Civil War by ordering an attack on the anti-Treaty IRA-held Four Courts building in Dublin, he did not see the war to its end. Like that of Joseph Connelly and Padraig Pearse before him, Collins' vision of an Ireland that valued the contributions of both men and women died with him. The direction and definition of Irish freedom would largely be determined by the man who refused female support at his Boland's Mill garrison during Easter week.

The Civil War “drain[ed] away the idealism, the romanticism of the independence movement,” wrote Maryann Valiulis.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging women as legitimate adversaries in battle meant re-evaluating the traditional view of women as auxiliary to male military efforts. It also affected the public's views on female participation in national politics. The Fianna Fáil party (led by Éamon de Valera) officially recognized the Irish Free State by taking the oath of allegiance to Britain in 1927. Efforts to consolidate authority and establish international recognition and acceptance began as early as 1923, however. The nation born from revolution took a much more conservative stance on social and political affairs. Fearing continued revolutionary activity could jeopardize the security of the state, the Free State government outlawed Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan. Silencing current voices of dissent was only one part of the solution; the Free State also worked to silence the voices of the past.

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<sup>8</sup> Maryann Valiulis, “Power, Gender, and Identity in the Irish Free State,” *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 4 (Winter/Spring 1995): 117-136, 126.

Peter Cottrell wrote “all successful revolutionaries...rearrange the facts to create a ‘liberation myth’ that emphasizes the justness of their cause and vindicates their overthrow of what came before.”<sup>9</sup> The Free State government identified its enemies according to their potential to disrupt the state. Actions performed by and/or associated with women were doubly subversive because their continued participation in public roles disrupted social conventions and traditions. The funeral masses and memorial services so praised after the Rising became “convenient tool[s] for attacking and discrediting female TDs [Teachta Dála, Dáil Éireann assembly delegate] as being excessively emotional, hysterical, and even ‘mad,’” wrote Jason Knirck.<sup>10</sup> By characterizing women as irrational and overemotional, male politicians questioned their ability to form rational opinions independent of male guidance. Women like Dr. Ada English vehemently rejected the implication. “I have no dead men to throw in my teeth as a reason for holding the opinions I hold,” she stated.<sup>11</sup> Her argument was drowned out by the media, politicians, the Catholic Church, and historians.

Historian P.S. O’Hegarty disparaged the revolutionary period, and women’s active participation in it, as evidence of the breakdown of Irish society and civility in general. He was especially concerned by what he perceived as the war’s effect on women. “War, and the things war breeds- intolerance, swagger, unwomanliness- captured the women, turned them into unlovely, destructive-minded, avid begetters of violence.”<sup>12</sup> They “became practically unsexed,

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<sup>9</sup> Cottrell, *The War for Ireland 1913-1923*, 224.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dail* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ada English quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2015), 83.

<sup>12</sup> P.S. O’ Hegarty quoted in Connell Jnr., 104.

their mother's milk blackened to make gunpowder, their minds working on nothing save hate and blood."<sup>13</sup>

The media concurred. The London newspaper *The Sunday Graphic* published articles with headlines like "Irish Gunwoman Menace" that described Irish republican women as "trigger-happy harpies."<sup>14</sup> Continuing this imagery in a 1925 editorial for the *Cork Examiner*, Bishop Dooley wrote "women who go around taking dispatches and arms from one place to another are furies. Who would respect them or who would marry them?"<sup>15</sup> Counseling female readers to "never join a Cumann na mBan or Cumann na Saoirse or anything else," he exhorted them to instead "do your work as your grandmothers did before you."<sup>16</sup> His message was clear: fighting did not make women equal to men, and women who fought would no longer be considered women. The threat of gendered limbo was a harsh warning to the women who saw "the next stage as their life [as] that of wife [and] mother."<sup>17</sup>

A few ignored the threat hidden in Dooley's guidance. Maire Comerford, the Civil War dispatch carrier who escaped Mountjoy Prison with a bullet wound and survived a hunger strike during another imprisonment, "remained an avid republican all her life," wrote Connell Jnr.<sup>18</sup> The picture on the following page, taken from the RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Irish national television) archives, shows a smiling Comerford marching in a 1921 demonstration. In 1976, the 83-year old was arrested for marching in an illegal demonstration commemorating the Rising.

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<sup>13</sup> P.S. O'Hegarty quoted in Louise Ryan, "Splendidly Silent: Representing Irish Republican Women, 1919-1923," in *Re-presenting the Past: women and history*. Gallagher, Lubeska, and Ryan, eds. (New York: Longman Publishers, 2001), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Tom Clonan, "The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in the 1916 Rising." *The Irish Times*, (January 1, 2006), accessed April 4, 2017, <http://arrow.dit.ie/aaschmedart>, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Bishop Dooley quoted in Louise Ryan, "'Furies' and 'Die-hards': Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century," *Gender and History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 256-275, 270.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Liz Gillis, *Women of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Mercier Press Limited, 2014), 219.

<sup>18</sup> Connell Jnr., 279.



Figure 5. Maire Comerford in 1921.

Comerford did not marry or have children, but one would be hard-pressed to argue she considered her life's work unfulfilled because of it.

Priests and politicians raged against the female "monsters" in their midst, but the women presented in

revolutionary men's memories came no closer to the truth. Former Cork IRA soldier Florence O'Donoghue described republican women as "splendidly silent."<sup>19</sup> Historian Louise Ryan noted this meant women's "loyalty [to Ireland] was demonstrated by their ability to keep their mouths shut."<sup>20</sup> If the ideal female revolutionary was "silent, calm, and dutiful," she was also imaginary.<sup>21</sup> Meekness did not help hold off the siege of the General Post Office. Indirectness did not sustain and encourage support for the movement even as its leaders were killed or imprisoned. Silence did not challenge an Empire's ability to control its colony. Remolding the revolutionary past into the Free State's liberation myth meant rewriting women's stories fit the approved historical narrative, or removing them from the historical narrative altogether.

Maureen McGovock highlighted the de-feminization of revolutionary history, saying a woman cared for injured IRA soldier Ernie O'Malley, yet "I notice she gets no credit for that in

<sup>19</sup> Florence Donoghue quoted in Louise Ryan, "'In the line of fire:' representations of women and war (1919-1923) through the writings of republican men." in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

his book *On Another Man's Wound*, nor for the part she played later...(when) she brought Ernie safely in her car to Croydon airport on his way to America.”<sup>22</sup> She ends her witness statement saying “these are a few incidents that occur to me as being characteristic of the type of work that fell to the lot of us members of Cumann na mBan.”<sup>23</sup> Her words implied disregard for women’s contributions was also customary and characteristic of their lot.

Margaret Buckley was even more frank in her appraisal of how women were removed from revolutionary history. Her 1938 memoir, *The Jangling of the Keys*, tells of her experiences as a political prisoner in 1923. Buckley called attention to revolutionary women’s dogged determination to be treated as equal combatants, saying she and others rejected any special treatment rendered in deference to their gender. They insisted on being regarded as political prisoners, not female prisoners. From Rising to Civil War, revolutionary women progressed from ideological understandings of revolutionary sacrifice to visceral experiences of revolutionary sacrifice. “Hunger strike was their only weapon,” wrote Buckley, and it proved quite effective in influencing public opinion.<sup>24</sup> Starving women were not the image the Irish Free State wanted to communicate to the world, and histories that contradicted the accepted Free State history were ignored. The witness statements that described the myriad other ways women experienced the fight for Irish independence remained under lock and key for decades, rendering women “splendidly silent” by default.

Irish Free State leaders knew women played important roles during the Rising, Anglo-Irish War, and Irish Civil War. They fought beside them, ate the food they cooked, and wore the

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<sup>22</sup> “W.S. 385 Statement of Witness: Mrs. Sean Beaumont (Nee Maureen McGavock), Member of Executive of Cumann na mBan 1918,” *Roinn Cosanta Bureau of Military History, 1913-1921 Digital Archives*, accessed April 30, 2017, [www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0385.pdf](http://www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS0385.pdf), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Buckley quoted in Louise Ryan, “Splendidly Silent...,” 18.

uniforms they repaired and bandages they made. Their families were supported by women during the lean times, and women helped elect them to political office. This meant little when it came to official recognition of and compensation for their service, however. Beginning in 1924, the government agreed to award pensions for military service through the Military Services Pension Act. Over 200 Cumann na mBan members applied for pensions for their service between 1916 and 1922. All were refused. Historian Marie Coleman notes “women were not specifically excluded” in the text, but they were excluded by the ways in which the text was interpreted.<sup>25</sup>

Rejecting Margaret Skinnider’s wound pension claim in February 1925, Army Finance Officer E. Fahy wrote:

The preamble to the Army Pensions Act, 1923, while mentioning allowances or gratuities to ‘widows, children and dependants’ presumably contemplates that the deceased members shall be of the male sex. It would be illogical, therefore, to include the female sex under the terms ‘wounded members’ and ‘the definition of ‘wound’ in Section 16 only contemplates the masculine gender.<sup>26</sup>

Treasury Solicitor P. Coll concurred with Fahy. In a 1925 letter included in with other documents in Skinnider’s pension file, (1P724 MARGARETSKINNIDER), Coll wrote “I am satisfied that the Army Pensions Act is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense.”<sup>27</sup>

The only female pension application approved under the 1924 Service Pensions Act belonged to Dr. Brighid Lyons Thornton. As she was drafted as a medical official during the

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<sup>25</sup> Marie Coleman, “Military Service Pensions for Veterans of the Irish Revolution, 1916-1923,” *War in History* 20, no. 2 (2013): 201-221, accessed June 30, 2017, [sagepub.co.uk/journals](http://sagepub.co.uk/journals), 207.

<sup>26</sup> “1P724 MARGARETSKINNIDER,” in *An Roinn Cosanta Military Service Pension Archives*, accessed August 5, 2017, [http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie/docs/files/PDF\\_Pensions/R1/1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER/W1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER.pdf](http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie/docs/files/PDF_Pensions/R1/1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER/W1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Letter written by P. Coll dated March 18, 1925, in “1P724 MARGARETSKINNIDER,” in *An Roinn Cosanta Military Service Pension Archives*, accessed August 5, 2017, [http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie/docs/files/PDF\\_Pensions/R1/1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER/W1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER.pdf](http://mspcsearch.militaryarchives.ie/docs/files/PDF_Pensions/R1/1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER/W1P724MARGARETSKINNIDER.pdf).

Anglo-Irish War, the Attorney General argued “her commission was valid ‘and lawfully granted’” and moreover, “the term ‘person’ in the Military Service Pensions Act included women.”<sup>28</sup> The language used made the government’s view of women’s service clear: a woman could be considered a “person,” but no amount of sacrifice made her a “soldier.”<sup>29</sup>

The 1923 Irish Free State Constitution institutionalized the “silent, calm, dutiful” woman as the Irish ideal, pointedly ignoring the more liberal and egalitarian language of the 1916 Proclamation. Nora Connelly O’Brien, Joseph Connelly’s daughter, summed up the fears of the women who fought, carried messages, ran, hid, and carried guns, and spied for Irish independence, warning complacency would result in the complete surrender of any gains achieved during the revolutionary years. “Women are today showing once more that ‘damnable patience’ and are content to be the drudges of the movement.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Coleman, 207.

<sup>29</sup> Many women, including Skinnider, appealed the rejection of their applications and were awarded pensions under the amended Military Service Pensions Act of 1934. This version included Cumann na mBan membership as approved military service, but limited the amount of pension awarded. Women could receive no more than €10 per year. Men could receive up to €25 per year based on rank at the time of service. The 1934 Act recognized women’s service, but emphasized it was not equal to that of men. The text of the 1934 act is available through the *Electronic Irish Statute Book* (eISB), <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1934/act/43/enacted/en/print.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Nora Connolly O’Brien, “Women in Ireland; their part in the Revolutionary Struggle,” *An Problacht* (June 25, 1932), in Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 173-175.

## Chapter 5: Rejection (The Irish Revolutions in International Context)

What Connolly O'Brien called "damnable patience" could also be termed fatigue. The total war birthed in the trenches and fields of mainland Europe sent ripples throughout the world. War brought death and destruction, but also opportunity and the possibility of change. As men went to war, women stepped into roles usually denied them because of their sex. Response to social crisis trumped maintaining traditional social norms. Neither Britain nor the United States could have met the demands of world war without the assistance of half of their populations. Likewise, women's contributions were crucial to support and sustain the Irish revolutionary movement. Aided by the recognition that the women who helped win the war should have a say in the government they served, the woman's suffrage movement gained ground. Women age thirty and over won the right to vote in the British Empire in 1918 (amendments to this age range would be ratified in 1928) and in the United States in 1920. Securing a political voice did not mean women would be heard. Historian Carl N. Degler wrote American "suffrage, once achieved, had almost no observable effect upon the position of women."<sup>1</sup>

War brought irrevocable change, but some men and women longed for a return to normal, or at least to what was considered normal before the war. Christine Bolt remarks most working women "were not feminists seeking long-sought opportunities...they were responding to the national emergency and expecting, like many men, that life would return to what it had been once the fighting ceased."<sup>2</sup> When possible, women returned to hearth and home; their "most

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<sup>1</sup> Carl N. Degler quoted in Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Bolt, *The Women's Movements in the United States and Great Britain from the 1970s to the 1920s* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 241.



important function” to produce the “fighting men of the future.”<sup>3</sup> Others faced a prospect nearly unheard of prior to the war: not rearing a family of their own at all. In *Singled Out: How Two Million British Women Survived Without Men after the First World War*, Virginia Nicolson described a generation of “surplus women” forced to find new ways to understand their place in society and purpose in life.<sup>4</sup> The war’s culling of the male population meant the number of available brides outnumbered the number of available grooms. Widows and orphans grieved for the husbands and fathers they knew, but the “surplus women” grieved for the husbands and children they would never know. They joined and remained in the workforce out of necessity, not choice. A return to pre-war normal was impossible.

Ireland shared many of the United States’ and Britain’s post-war experiences and anxieties, but the interpretation and impact of these experiences and anxieties were uniquely Irish. In her article discussing the politics of memory within the Irish revolutions, Karen Steele noted WWI-era Irish society was torn over “a caustic quarrel over competing ideas of Irishness.”<sup>5</sup> Different portions of the population fought in two different wars at the same time: some fighting with the British Army abroad, some fighting against the British Army at home. The overriding question became what determined Irish patriotism: fighting to protect Ireland from Germany, or fighting to free it from Britain?

Approximately 35,000 of the 200,000 Irishmen who served in the British army did not return to Ireland. The men that returned received less than hero’s welcomes. Irish nationalists and republicans regarded the war veterans as traitors. Even those who pledged to use the skills

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Nicolson, *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Steele, “Constance Markiewicz and the politics of memory.” in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 70.

they learned against the British in Ireland were initially regarded with suspicion and mistrust. World War widows provided counterpoint to Cumann na mBan demonstrations. They protested the revolutionary movement because a break with the British Empire threatened the continuance of their husbands' pensions, money their families relied on to survive. Nationalists and republicans dealt with the issue by publicly discrediting the widows' arguments through assassinating their characters. Describing a protest in Ennis, John Flanagan told of women inspired more by drink than dedication to their husbands' memories. "In their drunken condition they were a frenzied and ferocious crowd to deal with," he wrote.<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of the World War widows foreshadowed the ways female revolutionaries would be silenced following the Irish Civil War. Bringing the female revolutionaries to heel was a bit more complicated than simply impugning their characters, however. The Free State leaders called upon the nationalist ideals women fought for while simultaneously denouncing their continued participation in the public sphere as unpatriotic and detrimental to the state. The social and cultural changes of the 1920s provided an effective backdrop for discrediting revolutionary women. Irish Free State leaders strove to forge a national political identity separate from Britain, but could not distance it from outside social and cultural influences completely. Ireland could not escape "jazz, cinema, and the lure of America," wrote Maurice Walsh.<sup>7</sup> The Catholic Church's anger seemed to rise with the hems of women's dresses until "the conduct of women" became a "prime example of the Irish crisis."<sup>8</sup> One Irish bishop's 1924 Lenten pastoral featured a non-traditional litany that warned his parishioners against the sins of Irish society, including

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<sup>6</sup> John Flanagan quoted in Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2015), 172.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

“women’s fashions and immodest dress; drinks, strikes, and lockouts, evil literature, theatrical performances, cinema exhibitions and ‘indecent’ dancing.”<sup>9</sup>

Free State leaders argued this immoral behavior was a symptom of the revolution itself. The years of fighting “not only spawned rancorous political division,” wrote Walsh, “but disorder in every other sphere.”<sup>10</sup> Victory allowed the government leaders to ignore their own role in perpetuating the division. Women could not avoid being made the scapegoat for social and political instability. The old arguments against female participation in the revolution were repurposed to demonstrate women’s unfitness to serve the nation they helped create. Being considered “dangerous to tyrants” was a compliment when the tyrant was a shared enemy. For the Free State and Catholic Church leaders, revolutionary women’s willingness to publicly express dissent made them a liability. Knirck writes women “were most vigorously attacked for being in league with militant republicanism,” while the government leaders interpreted their own revolutionary past as “trying to suppress a military revolt.”<sup>11</sup>

It did not matter that both Éamon de Valera and W.T. Cosgrave, members of the Irish Free State Executive Council, were part of the initial revolt against establishing the Irish Free State. That they fought against the Irish Free State provisional government during the Irish Civil War was also a moot point. In the 1930s, responsibility for the leadership of Ireland “quietly and smoothly passed...to men who just a decade earlier had denied the state’s right to exist and sought to kill its representatives,” explained Declan Kiberd.<sup>12</sup> Cosgrave maintained Irish woes

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 416.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 417.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Knirck, *Women of the Dail* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 360.

were not the result of years of political division and war weariness, saying “the mainstay of the trouble we have had was with the activity of the women.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Sinead McCoolle, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923* (London: Stationery Office Books, 1997), 40.

### Conclusion: “The agony and the sunshines”

You men that talk need not talk to us about war...it is the women who suffer the most of the hardships that war brings...We have to sit at home and work in more humble ways, we have to endure the agony, the sunshines, the torture of misery...

Mary MacSwiney<sup>1</sup>

The national crisis that allowed Irish women to temporarily act in non-traditional roles was a stolen season, not evidence of a great reversal of traditional social structures and norms. The Irish revolutionary era (1913–1923) was no more about women’s rights than it was solely about nationalism, republicanism, or socialism. Every participant understood the revolution, and their place in it, differently. The re-entrenchment of traditional gender norms and expectations in the early 1920s was a way for the Irish Free State government to end the factionalism of the Civil War and set the nation on a common ideological base. Whether it was the best way remains a matter of opinion.

Traditional symbols also re-emerged. “Woman as a national symbol was the guardian of the continuity and immutability of the nation,” wrote historian and sociologist George L. Mosse.<sup>2</sup> Reaffirming woman as national symbol was an important element in the Free State “liberation myth” described by Cottrell. Upholding the “chaste and modest woman” symbolic of the nation’s legitimacy required tearing down actual women.<sup>3</sup> This dovetailed nicely with the Free State government’s concerns that continued female activism could undermine the security and legitimacy of the state.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary MacSwiney quoted in Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1983), 167.

<sup>2</sup> George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and sexuality* (London, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Davitt quoted in “Discovering Women in Irish History: The Ladies Land League,” accessed July 9, 2017, [http://womeninhistory.scoilnet.ie/content/unit3/ladies\\_land\\_league.html](http://womeninhistory.scoilnet.ie/content/unit3/ladies_land_league.html).

Banning Cumann na mBan in 1924 was only the first step. Pressure from the Catholic Church and unfavorable coverage by the media made connections to revolutionary activity hazardous to one's social and economic status. In several of the witness statements, women took great pains to distance themselves from the violence of the period, recognizing how negatively Cumann na Ban was being portrayed and fearing they would be painted with the same brush. Though she wrote she "had not much to do with the movement" after she was released from prison after the Rising, Pauline Keating had difficulty securing and maintaining employment because of her political past.<sup>5</sup> Josephine McNeill ends her statement trying to set the record straight, saying "At no time was I involved directly in any violent action, as has sometimes been asserted about me."<sup>6</sup>

Even association with revolutionary groups in name only could damage a woman's reputation. Maurice Walsh explained women were expected "to embody the qualities of purity, virtue and integrity by which the nation would distinguish itself."<sup>7</sup> From its very beginning, Cumann na mBan established itself as an auxiliary to the Irish Volunteers, meaning it acted in support of its goals and actions. According to historian Linda Grant DePauw, the term "women's auxiliaries" had a negative sexual connotation during World War I; their members "widely assumed to be another way of providing 'clean' girls to meet 'soldiers' needs."<sup>8</sup> There was a very short distance from slang to slander.

Women sacrificed to create the nation and were sacrificed to legitimize it, but even this statement oversimplifies the situation. Interpreting the contraction of gender roles and re-

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<sup>5</sup> W.S. 432, Pauline Keating, 7.

<sup>6</sup> W.S. 303, Josephine McNeill, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015), 418.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Grant DePauw, *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 221.

establishment of traditional gender norms following the Irish revolutionary period as a plot to relegate women to hearth and home is only accurate when viewing the mores of the early twentieth century through the sensibilities of the early twenty-first. The re-entrenchment of social conservatism and traditional gender roles in the 1920s and 1930s was not unique to Ireland; it also occurred in Great Britain and the United States as those nations attempted to return to normal after world war. The specific arguments for re-entrenchment, evidence identified to support those arguments, and extent of re-entrenchment, were unique to each nation.

It is also important to understand “radical” female political action took traditional forms. Whether she held a gun or a needle, a woman was radical and revolutionary simply because she dared to act publicly. Orientation within the ordinary and expected helped women accomplish the extraordinary and unexpected. For most female revolutionaries, revolution looked and felt a lot like hearth and home. Because public-facing revolutionary activity was largely orchestrated and directed by men, their roles were determined by whether men allowed to them to participate. Constance Markiewicz’s combat experiences in Connolly’s Irish Citizen Army were far from the norm. Most women able to join the fighting in Dublin did so as cooks, nurses, and couriers. Margaret Ward wrote this trend helped create “an image of the women’s role within the nationalist movement which resembled that of an ideal housekeeper.”<sup>9</sup> These roles were important, but not the type of service that would convince men that women were their equals. In the words of historian Lil Conlon, most women “did what they had to do when it had to be done.”<sup>10</sup> Their rejection and reinterpretation of gender roles was based more on the situation at hand than social progressiveness. Margaret Skinnider took great pleasure in wearing male dress

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret Ward, “Marginality and Militancy: Cumann na mBan, 1914-36” in *The Irish Women’s History Reader*, Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2001 reprint), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Lil Conlon quoted in Liz Gillis, *Women of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Mercier Press Limited, 2014), 10.

to outsmart the British police during Easter week, but she only borrowed “maleness” within the context of a specific situation. As gender historian Linda Grant DePauw explained, women “were independent and competent, even strong and daring, but...certainly not men. They were by no means denying their gender simply because they put on pants and went to war.”<sup>11</sup>

Preparation for the 1916 Rising exposed rifts that would develop into full-blown schisms in the next decade. Ireland won independence, but lost the North. It lost some connections to the British Empire, but kept a significant amount of British oversight as the nation transitioned towards commonwealth status. Women’s participation did not change the trajectory of the revolution. Their presence or absence would not have changed the outcome of the Easter Rising, Anglo-Irish War, or Irish Civil War. They won limited suffrage in 1918 and universal suffrage in 1923, but could not secure the gender equality promised by the Proclamation of the Republic. As they struggled to enter the revolution, most revolutionary women did not expect equal rights to be the ultimate outcome of their sacrifices. Failure to adopt these tenets should not come as a surprise because neither female nor male revolutionaries fought for them. Independence was prioritized above all other goals.

The post-Irish Civil War emphasis on social conservatism and extent of its return to traditional gender norms and expectations was extremely disappointing to the women who played an active role in securing national independence, however. They did not change mainstream opinions regarding what women could and could not do (and should and should not do), and national politics remained a “men’s club.”<sup>12</sup> Some women still considered their

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<sup>11</sup> DePauw, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 363.



participation as the “high point of their existence.”<sup>13</sup> For Brighid Lyons Thornton, it was a way to apply her skills as a medical doctor to what she saw as a sick nation. Maire Ni Bhriain combined her wanderlust with her republican politics. Kathleen Clarke and Grace Gifford Plunkett found the strength to go on after losing their husbands. Lily Mernin, Siobhan Creedon, Josephine Marchmount, and Nora Wallace proved good things could come from participating in office gossip.

Revolutionary women also helped lay the groundwork for women’s involvement in national politics in the future. They challenged their personal understandings of how “feminine” looked and acted molding traditional gender norms and expectations into tools. In a time when little was expected of them, society’s underestimation became the most effective weapon women could wield. Taking on “male” or “female” traits was a conscious choice. Different situations required different responses, with some landing squarely within traditional norms, and others outside them.

The Irish revolutions allowed women to change their personal narratives, but their stories must be told within the context of the male-dominated society in which they acted. From Inghindne na hEireann to Cumann na mBan, female participation was never separate from the predominant male-oriented power structure. In several of the Rising witness statements, women speak of being “allowed” to fight, a term that implied the need for male permission or approval before they could act. There are countless historical references to women rejecting their femininity, but little is said about men rejecting their masculinity. For example, female snipers at the General Post office were seen as acting “male,” but the men who cooked at Boland’s Mill or repaired torn uniforms at Jacob’s Biscuit Factory were not seen as acting “female.” In that time,

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<sup>13</sup> Ward, “Marginality and Militancy...”, 60.

male was not a trait that should be willingly surrendered, while female was not a trait that should be willingly embraced.

Women's active roles expanded when men were in prison or awaiting execution, but their efforts were still directed towards men. In ensuring men became martyrs for the cause, they raised male sacrifice to a higher plain; women could only be custodians of their legacy. An individual woman's agency often depended on her connection to a powerful man within the movement. Lily Mernin's name and contributions are remembered because of her connection to Michael Collins, and to some degree, Constance Markiewicz owed her position on the revolutionary stage to her association with Padraig Pearse and Joseph Connolly.

Helena Molony told a reporter, "when people question me about the part women played in Ireland's last fight for freedom, I feel they might as well ask me what the tall fair-haired do in the wars and what did the small dark men do."<sup>14</sup> Her view was the exception, not the rule. Gender equality is a noble goal, but not an accurate paradigm through which to understand an era where men and women were not equal. Women must be included in the revolutionary narrative, but their contributions should not be exaggerated in the attempt to make them equal to that of men. They were not. Returning revolutionary women to their rightful place in Irish history hinges on putting them in their proper place. The truth of the Irish past is women were second-class citizens who needed permission to join the men's revolution. Entrance did not guarantee their acceptance or promise permanence. Women helped defeat an Empire, but tearing down Irish social constructs was never part of their battle plan.

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<sup>14</sup> Helena Molony quoted in Karen Steele, "Constance Markiewicz and the politics of memory," in *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags*. Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds. (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), 55.

An Irish woman's military history must include the female voices of its past, but also the new interpretations contributed by female voices in the present. This will require collaboration between women's, gender, military, and feminist military historians. At this time, the feminist perspective is noticeably absent. In 1998, Linda Grant DePauw wrote "feminist historians find military history unattractive; women as nurturers and peacemakers, even as victims, are more appealing than women who go to war."<sup>15</sup> Writing nearly ten years later, author and feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie contradicted DePauw's generalization by arguing "feminism is always contextual."<sup>16</sup> Like male and female, feminism is a socially-constructed term that changes from society to society and whose definition flexes and contracts from social crisis to social crisis. Feminist historians must weigh in on how changing definitions of feminism impacted the interpretation, acceptance, and/or rejection of women's participation during and following the Irish revolutions. Including the feminist perspective could also provide needed much-needed insight into the debate over prioritizing the fight for national rights over the fight for individual civil rights.

Regardless of their field, historians must also understand the history they write today could change completely tomorrow. The opening of the Bureau of Military History Witness Statement and Military Service Pension archives forced historians to rethink their preconceptions about how women participated in the Irish revolutions. The upcoming centenary celebrations of the Anglo-Irish and Irish Civil Wars could unearth primary documents and/or additions to the material historical record that would require revisions to the revolutionary narrative.

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<sup>15</sup> DePauw, xiii.

<sup>16</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), 65.

Irish revolutionary women did not fundamentally change their world, but they did help change the world to come. Their refusal to keep “splendidly silent” was an example to their children, who spoke out against the injustice they saw in their own time. It is difficult not to hear the echo of Clarke, Molony, Markiewicz, and Comerford in the words of Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, elected to British Parliament in 1969 at the age of 21: “We were born into an unjust system; we are not prepared to grow old in it.”<sup>17</sup> Devlin reinterpreted the intersection of feminism and republicanism for a new era. Constance Markiewicz, Ireland’s first female MP, protested British rule by refusing to take her seat. Devlin broke with this republican protest tradition by refusing to surrender hers, vowing to fight against gerrymandering and other forms of social and political injustice in Northern Ireland.

In 1990, the Republic of Ireland elected its first female president, Mary Robinson. The lawyer and human rights activist was born well after the end of the revolutionary age, but her election heralded a new era of political enfranchisement for Irish women. Calling to them in her November 9 acceptance speech, Robinson applauded “the women of Ireland, mná na hÉireann, who instead of rocking the cradle rocked the system, and who came out massively to make their mark on the ballot paper and on a new Ireland.”<sup>18</sup> Irish women’s right to “make their mark on the ballot” came in part from their female forebears’ participation in the revolution. Their belief that women were capable of making decisions on the national and world stage was fostered by women who led demonstrations and rallies and served in the Daíl. The individual footsteps of women in Irish history may be indistinguishable, but the path they laid is unmistakable. Women

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<sup>17</sup> Bernadette Devlin, *The price of my soul* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1969), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Robinson, “President Robinson’s Acceptance Speech,” *President of Ireland Media Library*, accessed June 30, 2017, <http://www.president.ie/en/media-library/speeches/president-robinsons-acceptance-speech>.

symbolized the promises of an independent Ireland, but the ordinary women who accomplished extraordinary things in an extraordinary time embodied it and brought it into being.

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*Cork City and County Online Digital Archive*  
<http://www.corkarchives.ie/collections/onlinedigitalarchive/>

*Kilmainham Gaol Museum Resources*  
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*National Library of Ireland*  
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*University College Cork, Ireland Library*  
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*Trinity College Dublin Digital Collections*  
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