

# Women in the Irish Revolution

Mary Smith

Anyone who knows anything about history knows also that great social upheavals are impossible without the feminine ferment. - Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

In the introduction to her book *Unmanageable Revolutionaries; women and Irish nationalism*, the historian Dr Margaret Ward states that: ‘...writing women into history does not mean simply tagging them onto what we already know; rather, it forces us to re-examine what is currently accepted, so that a whole people will eventually come into focus...’<sup>2</sup> This article is an attempt to sharpen the focus on events relating to the Rising in Dublin 1916, by recounting the role played by women. What it seeks to do specifically is:

- briefly outline the role played by women in the Easter Rising itself and the political events and movements leading up to it
- look at the relationship between the women’s suffrage movement and women involved in revolutionary nationalism.
- briefly discuss the attitude to women’s rights among the principal political organisations of the day
- consider the element of class in both the fight for national liberation and for women’s rights
- trace the ‘closing down’ of the path to women’s emancipation by the counter-revolutionary current embodied in the new ‘free state’.

## Background

At the turn of the century the British colony of Ireland was still recovering economically

and socially from the devastating effects of famine fifty years earlier. It was a predominantly rural and agricultural society with a poorly developed industrial infrastructure, apart from Belfast, where the success of the ship-building industry in particular underpinned loyalty to union with Britain. In the south, the emerging Catholic middle and upper classes were socially conservative, heavily influenced by, and reliant upon, the church<sup>3</sup>. They (correctly) perceived themselves as being ‘held back’ by the union with Britain and aspired to Home Rule. The Irish Parliamentary Party or Home Rule Party was the expression of their nationalist aspirations.

Life for working class men and women was harsh. Poverty and emigration were rife; Dublin city had reputedly the worst slums in Europe. The minimum working age was eight years old. Casual work and unemployment were high among men and worse among women. Accurate statistics are difficult to come by but it is estimated that a third of women with a job were employed as servants for the middle and upper classes. Single women emigrated in greater numbers than the men, usually alone. Married women could expect a life of unremitting drudgery with little access to health and educational services for their children. In 1911 over a third of married women had seven children or more.<sup>4</sup> Housing was characterised by over-crowded tenements in which diseases like TB were at epidemic proportions.

But change was in the air and Irish women were part of it. Improvements in education and other social changes began to offer new opportunities for women, and this in turn engendered expectation of, and demand for, more change.

<sup>1</sup>Letter to Kugelman, 12 Dec 1868

<sup>2</sup>*Unmanageable Revolutionaries; women and Irish Nationalism*, Margaret Ward. Brandon Press. 1983

<sup>3</sup>For an excellent account of this social process read Goretti Horgan’s ‘Changing women’s lives in Ireland’ <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/2001/isj2-091/horgan.htm>

<sup>4</sup>UCC [http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Ireland\\_society\\_\\_economy\\_1870-1914](http://multitext.ucc.ie/d/Ireland_society__economy_1870-1914)

## **Times that were a changin’**

### **...for the nationalists**

The closing years of the 19th century saw a rising confidence, fervour and agitation among Irish nationalists. The Land League had been suppressed, and with it women’s involvement in political life but the Gaelic League, committed to reviving Irish language and culture emerged as a vibrant force on the political scene and was open to women’s involvement in it. This was in stark contrast to what was to become the politically dominant Irish Parliamentary Party for whom vote less women were an irrelevance.

Democratic choice, restricted as it ever was (and is) under capitalism, was worse in Ireland than in Britain. No women had the right to vote (as in Britain) and only about 30 percent of the adult male population were eligible to do so; the property qualification excluded the majority of men (the figure was 60 percent among British males). It would take until 1918 for the vote to be extended to all men over 21 and to women over 30 (with a property restriction).

### **...for suffragists**

The demand for women’s rights was expressed in the demand for votes for women. The question of women’s suffrage in Ireland had been taken up as early as 1866, and by 1911 there were some 24 women’s suffragist groups agitating with varying degrees of militancy for the vote.

Early suffrage groups of women and men employed methods of campaigning that were relatively conservative - petitioning, lobbying etc. But improved educational opportunities for women and the rising militancy of the suffragist movement in Britain, saw numbers of young women, mostly from the middle and upper classes, becoming increasingly inspired and active in the demand for equality with men, focused on the demand for equal voting rights.

The best of the Irish suffragists, and suffragettes (a term coined by newspapers of the day for the women involved) fought with great courage and commitment to further their aims; they campaigned and demon-

strated, broke windows and attacked right-wing politicians, endured harassment and abuse, imprisonment, hunger-strikes and force-feeding. Between 1912 and 1914 there were 35 convictions of women for suffrage activities.

The question of Home Rule for Ireland became ever more pressing from 1912, when it was ‘aired’ in the British parliament. It also raised questions around the issue of votes for women in Ireland. Home Rule strained relations between the northern and southern suffragists. The northern suffragists were implacably opposed to Home Rule, as were some of the privileged suffragists in the south, seeing their economic interests best served by maintaining the union with Britain. Most southern suffragists, while frustrated with the anti-feminism of the Home Rule Party, were sympathetic to the principle of some sort of autonomy for Ireland, wherein they hoped the franchise would be extended to the women of Ireland.

By 1912 many suffragists’ meetings had become scenes of violence. This followed events surrounding the visit to Dublin in that year of Asquith, the British Prime Minister. There was an incident; Asquith and Redmond had a hatchet thrown at them by three militant suffragists from Britain, over in Dublin for the occasion of Asquith’s visit. No damage was done but the newspapers went ballistic. Then, as now, militancy was denounced and every opportunity was taken to denigrate the women’s cause, along with their actions. This helped inflame attacks on and harassment of suffragist meetings and events. It was James Connolly who organised for the Irish Transport & General Workers Union (ITGWU) to protect their meetings and continued to insist that women were entitled to fight for their demands in whatever way they chose, saying there was no action of theirs that he would not support. Husband and wife team Francis and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington (founders of the Irish Women’s Franchise League), were well known Dublin radicals - he was Ireland’s most famous pacifist and she was Ireland’s most famous suffragist. They also identified themselves as socialists (they were members of the tiny Socialist Party of Ireland) and

were delighted to have Connolly come down from Belfast to speak at suffrage meetings they helped organise.

### ...for the labour movement

Irish labour too was coming into its own in terms of trades union organisation. Organisers like Larkin and Connolly had hard-won but considerable success in getting Irish workers, particularly the hitherto unorganised unskilled workers, into the unions - the ITGWU and also the Irish Women Workers Union (IWWU). Among the ranks of the unskilled were young women workers in shops, factories, laundries and offices; some of these would gravitate to the Irish Citizens Army and socialist ideas.

## Convergence

There was a convergence of these influences in the struggle for progress in the Ireland of the early 1900s - a convergence of struggle for national freedom, for women's suffrage and for workers' rights to organise in unions. And although a minority in terms of numbers, those identifying as socialists, notably James Connolly, were hugely important in providing an ideological and organisational backbone for some of the most important elements involved in the insurrectionary movement, by the time it began.

## Organisations for change: Ireland's Daughters

The first women's organisation in Ireland, and one of the earliest and most influential organisations in the build-up to insurrectionary period was Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Ireland). Maud Gonne was part of an ad-hoc a group of women involved the 'reception' for the visit to Ireland in 1900, of Queen Victoria (dubbed 'The Famine Queen' by Gonne). The 'reception' was a stunt by the women's group that effectively launched Inghinidhe as a radical force for change, and ignited a new mood of militancy. The aging monarch's visit was

intended to rustle up support for conscription among the Irish to help the British fight the Boer war, and an official children's picnic was intended as a way of getting the population out to cheer for her. The Inghinidhe organised a 'Patriotic Children's Treat' instead, where they paraded 30,000 children around Dublin streets and then fed them goodies in a park. It was a treat for *not* cheering for the queen. For the next 14 years the Inghinidhe would continue to work among Dublin's poor (along with others) providing food, education and cultural opportunities, as well as political organisation, until they eventually morphed into Cumann na mBan (The Women's Council), a women's auxiliary group to Volunteers who would be the main force in the 1916 Rising.

Although many of the leading lights and founders of Inghinidhe were middle and upper class women their commitment was very much to the poor and working people of Dublin. They attracted and organised committed and militant young working women. Describing some of their early recruits Helen Maloney, editor of their paper *Bean na hEireann*, writes 'Now there were some young girls in Dublin, chiefly members of the Irish classes of Celtic Literary Society... They were (with one exception) all working girls. They had not much gold and silver to give to Ireland, only willing hearts, earnestness and determination'. Ella Young, in her memoirs, states that Inghinidhe was 'composed of girls who work hard all day in shops and offices owned for the most part by pro-British masters, who may at any moment discharge them for treasonable activities'; she admired the courage of the young women, for whom dismissal from their job would mean 'semi-starvation or long, continued unemployment'<sup>5</sup> Some of these girls and women would later become heroines of the Easter Rising, and senior figures in the subsequent Civil War and beyond. They were highly active in providing support to the strikers and dependants during the Lock-out in 1913 and many of them later came to hold dual membership in Inghinidhe and in the Irish Citizen Army.

Inghinidhe published a newspaper specif-

<sup>5</sup> Ella Young, *Flowering Dusk*, London, Dennis Dobson Ltd 1945, p70

ically aimed at women. *Bean na hÉireann* (meaning 'Woman of Ireland'), was the first women's newspaper in Ireland. It was launched in November 1908 with the expressed aim 'to be a women's paper, advocating militancy, Irish separatism and feminism'<sup>6</sup> 1908 also saw the launch of the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), set up by Hanna and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington to campaign for women's suffrage in Ireland. In 1912 it began publication of the weekly *Irish Citizen*. Until, and indeed after, the appearance of the *Irish Citizen*, suffragist women were regular contributors to the columns of *Bean na hÉireann*, which provided a forum for debate. Writers put forward arguments about priorities for Irish women: national independence or winning the vote? Suffragists queried the worth of an independent Ireland that did not recognise the right of women to vote in it; revolutionary nationalists argued that fighting for the right to vote in a parliament they wanted to bring down, was a distraction if not an irrelevance. Inghinidhe objected to the principle of the vote being granted by 'a hostile parliament' and Countess Markievicz asked women to pause before joining a franchise movement that did not have the freedom of the nation as part of its programme<sup>7</sup>. Criticism of Inghinidhe for failure to adequately champion the rights of women have been made, but Margaret Ward makes the point that 'Had Inghinidhe not existed, a whole generation of women would never have developed the self-confidence which eventually enabled them to hold their own in organisations composed of both sexes...(and that)..while they were fully aware of the realities of women's oppression... they saw their priority as the winning of political independence from Britain and the fight against women's oppression as secondary, to be tackled when the national revolution had been won'<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, B. *Changing Lives: Women in European History since 1700*, D C Heath, 1989, p383

<sup>7</sup> *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*. Dr Margaret Ward. Kerry. Brandon Book Publishers. 1983. P70-72

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 86-87

<sup>9</sup> See Senia Paseta [youtube.com/watch?v=NxKEd4ijApA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxKEd4ijApA)

<sup>10</sup> The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Volume 5. *Women and Politics 1860-1918* edited by Angela Bourke. NYU Press. New York. 2002 p104

## Cumann na mBan

Cumann na mBan was founded at a meeting of 100 women in Wynn's hotel in 1914. According to historian Senia Paseta<sup>9</sup> the meeting had the all debates and elements that were abroad in Irish politics at the time 'swirling round' in it; what would happen in the event of the Irish Volunteers splitting?; what would the relationship of Cumann na mBan be to constitutional nationalism or indeed to revolutionary nationalism? what was its priorities regarding votes for women? There was criticism about the conduct of the inaugural meeting itself, including the fact that because it was during the day it excluded many working class women. Certainly its founders and most prominent members were middle class (some were renegade upper class women) though by the time of the Rising came about, its ranks included many working class women, and its role in the movement was much more defined and militant than it had been at its inception. It is interesting that although their agenda was a nationalist one, all but one of members of their first executive were active suffragists. What it seems that these women did is not set aside their feminism for nationalism - they 'did' both.

The constitution of Cumann na mBan stated their aims:

To advance the cause of Irish liberty.

To organise Irish women in the furtherance of that objective.

To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irish men for the defence of Ireland.

To form a fund for these purposes to be called the 'Defence of Ireland Fund'<sup>10</sup>

Criticism of Cumann na mBan was voiced from within the ranks of the suffragist movement from the outset. In the pages of the suffrage newspaper the *Irish Citizen*, Cumann na mBan were referred to as 'slave women' and 'handmaidens' to the Irish Volunteers. Hannah Sheehy Skeffin-

gton at one stage dismissed them as being little more than ‘animated collecting boxes’. In their defence, Mary Colum, sister of the poet Padraig and member of the Ard Comhairle (executive), defended Cumann na mBan saying that they had ‘...decided to do any national work that came within the scope of our aims. ....we are not the auxiliaries or the handmaidens or the camp followers of the Volunteers—we are their allies.’<sup>11</sup>

By 1915, despite on-going criticism of the Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL), Cumann na mBan now ‘ran lectures, classes in first aid, signalling and rifle practice, lessons in cleaning and loading rifles and small arms.’<sup>12</sup>

We know quite a bit about the middle class women involved in Cumann na mBan, and why wouldn’t we? These were the women who had at least one maid to free them from housework and childcare so they could attend meetings, and accept the leading roles that required time and money to fulfil. They were the women for whom education and the confidence of their class meant that they would address meetings, act as spokespersons, write letters to the newspapers, network for the cause etc., and thereby become recognised and noted. Less is known of their working class sisters. Having someone to mind their children, the precarious nature of the job if they had one, money for transport, having the confidence to speak in public, all these presented challenges for working class women that their middle class sisters would never experience. But stories of their courage and commitment come to us through the course of the Rising itself. For many, the detail of their lives is not known to us; they remain the unsung heroines of the struggle. The role of women in the revolution remains under-researched but two relatively recent histories (by historians Sinead McCool<sup>13</sup> and Liz Gillis<sup>14</sup>) provide considerable biographical information for some of the women involved.

## The woman question - which side were they on?

**The Irish Parliamentary Party** (IPP) or Home Rule Party (either name is used) comprising those Irish members of the Westminster Parliament was anti-feminist. They did not admit women as members. In 1912 it happened that they held the balance of power in the British Parliament at a time when legislation which would have granted limited suffrage to women was proposed. They voted against it. Home rulers wanted all other questions set aside until Home Rule was granted. Women were barred not only from the Irish Parliamentary Party as members, but even from attending meetings, to stop them standing up and demanding attention to women’s suffrage.

**The Irish Volunteers** was a military organisation established in 1913 by a number of nationalist groups which included members of the Gaelic League the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Sinn Féin, and, secretly, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB). It was ostensibly formed in response to the formation of the Ulster Volunteers in 1912 who opposed Home Rule. As a military organisation it did not include women in its ranks and outfits like the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and to a lesser extent Sinn Féin, were deeply conservative on social issues, including rights for women. By mid-1914 the Irish Volunteers had a membership of 200,000 but split over party leader John Redmond’s commitment to the British War effort, with the smaller group retaining the name of ‘Volunteers’ - later to become the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Cumann na mBan was the women’s auxiliary group to the all-male Irish Volunteers.

**Sinn Féin** (SF) founded in 1908 by Arthur Griffith, did not oppose the demands of women in the way that the IPP did. SF was not actively anti-feminist and eventually admitted women as members and onto the executive but women’s suffrage was ‘was

<sup>11</sup>Haverty, Anne. 1993. *Constance Markievicz: Irish Revolutionary*. London: Pandora

<sup>12</sup>Clarke, K. *Revolutionary Woman*, O Brien Press . Dublin 1997. p50.

<sup>13</sup>McCool, S. *No Ordinary Women. Irish female activists in the revolutionary years 1900-1923*. O Brien Press. Dublin 2008

<sup>14</sup>Gillis, Liz. *Women of the Irish Revolution*. Mercier Press 2014.

never one of Sinn Féin's priorities'<sup>15</sup> Arthur Griffith himself had little time for the feminist cause (as well as showing great hostility to the labour movement. At the time of the Dublin Lockout in 1913, Griffith called for the strikers to be bayoneted, and SF denounced the boat which brought food aid from the British labour movement to the locked out Irish workers, because its cargo was made up of non-Irish goods).

**The socialists.** Connolly and Larkin gave the most commitment and support to women's demand for the vote, and more besides, through the unions, the ITGWU and IWWU, and through the Irish Citizen Army (ICA). In his analysis of capitalism, Connolly described women's position: 'The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave.'<sup>16</sup> He was widely recognised as a champion of women's rights. Francis and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, founders of the Irish Women's Franchise League, described Connolly as 'the soundest and most thoroughgoing feminist among all the Irish labour men'<sup>17</sup> Connolly argued forcefully in support of women's rights, and urged the labour movement to actively take up the demand for equality. He gave clear class reasons for supporting the call for votes for women. Writing in the suffragists' newspaper, *The Citizen*, he says 'It was because women workers had no vote they had not the safeguards even of the laws passed for their protection because they were ignored. They had women working for wages on which a man could not keep a dog. Men's conditions, bad as they were, had been improved because of the vote.'*Irish Citizen, 13 Nov 1912* Connolly brought in the key question of women as workers, and in so doing was both the champion of the oppressed - women - and of those suffering capitalist exploitation - the workers. His socialism could cut across false antagonisms. By 1913, Connolly had returned to Dublin and his efforts at building a Marxist organisation in Ireland

were now vested in the Irish Citizen Army (ICA), set up to defend strikers against the police during the Lockout.

In the preceding years, for activists in both the nationalist and suffragist movements, it was becoming ever clearer that there were other issues besides votes for women and freedom from British rule. In particular the appalling conditions of poverty were evident at every hands turn, and not all of which could be blamed on the Brits. A campaign to extend the 1906 Act in Britain to Ireland, whereby poor children could be fed in school, had been supported by both Inghinidhe and the suffragists, and they extended this work to actually feeding children themselves. Cooperation between the two camps was at its height by the time of the Lockout when soup-kitchens and supports for the strikers' families were an essential part of the struggle. Connolly's influence on the best radicals drew them to the Irish Citizen Army and they self-identified as socialists. The ICA involved both sexes at all levels - in the ranks and the leadership. As the time for armed insurrection approached Markievicz was appointed a member of the seven-person Army Council, Dr Kathleen Lynn held the rank of lieutenant and was in charge of the medical section, and Madeleine French-Mullen (her partner) was a sergeant. It is notable that none of these were working class women - whereas the men were entirely working class. Historian Phillip Ferguson makes the point that the fact '...that such women were welcomed in the ICA, and readily accepted as officers, is indicative of the lack of gender and class narrow-mindedness of Connolly and Mallin and the working class rank-and-file'<sup>18</sup>. These women had declared for the workers in the Lockout, the struggle which as Ferguson remarks 'had played the key role in bringing together the most militant sections of both women's groups and organised labour'. The ICA was the only organisation that drew together the strands of revolution-

<sup>15</sup>Haverty, Anne. 1993, As above. P52

<sup>16</sup>Connolly, *Selected Writings*, Monthly Review Press, 1973, p191

<sup>17</sup>Haverty, Anne. 1993, As above .p105

<sup>18</sup><https://theirevolution.wordpress.com/2011/08/31/women%E2%80%99s-rights-and-the-national-struggle-1916-1922/>

ary nationalism, anti-imperialism, women's emancipation and militant trades unionism and united them in struggle. The record of the ICA members in action bears testimony to their revolutionary courage, commitment and principles. The tragedy of the ICA is that although it punched way above its weight, it was too small to effectively build resistance to the reactionary forces that came to dominate in the aftermath of the rebellion.



**Mollie O Reilly**

**Mollie O Reilly** was from Gardiner St. When she was 9 years old she went to Liberty Hall to learn Irish dancing, where she first heard Connolly speak. She was enthralled. During the Lockout (she was then aged 11) she ran messages between Connolly and the strikers, collected money and helped run the soup kitchens for strikers dependants. She hid guns from the illicit Howth shipment in her house - unknown to her loyalist father! By the time she was 14 she was an ICA and IWWU member. Connolly sent for her the week before the Rising. He asked her to be the one to hoist the green and gold flag over Liberty Hall, which she did with great pride. When the Rising was called a week later, Mollie marched with the ICA to take the Castle then, falling back to City Hall, she operated as a dispatch-

carrier between the GPO and City Hall until City Hall was taken. After the surrender, she dodged arrest and re-emerged in the War of Independence, where she again acted as dispatch-carrier between various fighting units all round the country, sometimes transporting arms and explosives at great personal danger. She took the anti-Treaty side, was arrested for her anti-Treaty activities and went on hunger strike. After 16 days she was released.



**Maud Gonne**

**Maud Gonne**, founder of Inghinidhe na hÉireann was an extraordinary woman by any standards, and not least for her revolutionary zeal and her upper class background. She was the daughter of a British Army officer - privileged, educated, beautiful. Famously the muse of WB Yates, she told him his unrequited love for her would fuel his art as a poet and the world should thank her for rejecting him!

She first became involved in political activism by championing the cause of Irish political prisoners in Britain, and in the struggle for tenants' rights in the Land League in the 1880s, believing, not unreasonably, that 'the Irish masses would rally around the cause of national freedom only if they believed it would guarantee them permanent

possession of the farms they tilled'<sup>19</sup>. She became convinced of the importance of mobilising women into the struggle for Irish independence, since 'without the participation of her women, Mother Ireland was going into battle with one arm tied behind her back'<sup>20</sup>

The organisation she helped found, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* was committed to fostering Irish culture, nationalism and anti-British imperialism. They were deeply involved in social issues and have a proud record of support for the poor and for workers struggles. Although she was in France at the time of the Rising itself, Maud Gonne was one of the most formidable forces in revolutionary nationalism in the build-up to insurrection and in the resistance to the repression in its aftermath.



**Countess Constance Markievicz**

**Countess Constance Markievicz** (Con) was another brave and flamboyant rebel, a traitor to her upper class background and uncompromising revolutionary for most of her life. She attended her first meeting of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* in 1908 wearing a ball gown and diamond tiara - having just come from a function at Dublin Castle. The *Inghinidhe* were not impressed by a countess in full regalia, but she was, as much by their anti-British imperialism as by the fact that they weren't impressed! This debut was as far removed from her subsequent contribution to the struggle as can be imagined. She turned her back on her privileged background, threw herself wholeheartedly in building *Inghinidhe*, and later *Cumann na mBan*, joined Connolly's ICA, and played a heroic role in the rising and

subsequent events, a role that was to cost her health and hasten an early death. She famously offered pre-revolutionary fashion advice (to whom it might apply): 'Dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels in the bank and buy a revolver.'<sup>21</sup>

She and Maud Gonne both were actors on the stage of the newly founded Abbey Theatre - an important institution in the Irish cultural revival of those years. She campaigned with the suffragettes in Britain along with her sister Eva Gore Booth. Eva and her partner, a working class woman Esther Roper, were very prominent in the suffragist movement in Manchester. They worked to unionise female flower-sellers, circus performers, barmaids and coal pit-brow workers. Eva was later to come to Dublin to campaign for Markievicz's release when she was imprisoned for her part in the rising.

In 1909 she founded *Na Fianna Éireann*, a sort of paramilitary scouts group for boys and girls, who trained in the use of weapons and whose creation Pearse reckoned as being as important as the creation of the Irish Volunteers. She was jailed for the first time in 1911 for speaking at a 30,000 strong Irish Republican Brotherhood demonstration organised to protest against George V's visit to Ireland. During this protest Markievicz handed out leaflets, erected banners, participated in stone-throwing at pictures of the King and Queen and attempted to burn the giant British flag taken from Leinster House, eventually succeeding.

She worked tirelessly during the Dublin Lockout - organising food kitchens in Liberty Hall for the strikers and their dependents. Much of the funding for this came from the sale of her jewellery. During the rising she was appointed second in command to Mallin in Stephen's Green and then the College of Surgeons, shooting a policeman in the head and fatally wounding him. After the Rising she was sentenced to death but her sentence was commuted. She served the longest jail term of all the women arrested - it would not be for the last time. She was elected in 1918 for Sinn Féin. This made her

<sup>19</sup>Levenson, *Maud Gonne*, Cassell & Co., 1976, p44

<sup>20</sup>Quoted in Levenson, as above, pp169-170.

<sup>21</sup>Haverty, Anne. 1993. As above



the first woman elected to the British House of Commons. Later she became the second woman in the world, (after Alexandra Kollontai in Russia, following the Bolshevik Revolution) to hold cabinet rank in government - the Daíl of 1919. She opposed the Treaty in the Civil War, experienced more arrests and hunger strike, and though she joined Fianna Fail, it was in 1926 at its inauguration. She did not live to see what it would become. When she died in 1927, it was in a public ward 'among the poor - where she wanted to be'<sup>22</sup>. Her old comrade Dr Kathleen Lynn was in attendance.

## The Rising

The months leading up to the rising saw increasing debate and contact between the most revolutionary nationalists - the Volunteers (those who split from the majority Irish Volunteers over the question of support for the British War effort) - and the suffrage movement, and a discourse on gender equality began to become commonplace.<sup>23</sup> The insurrectionary movement drew in the best and most militant women fighters among nationalists and the best fighters for women's rights.

Estimates of the numbers participating in the Rising are put as about 90 women out of around 3000 overall. The evidence for the women's involvement is the records of the 77 female arrests after their surrender, applications to the Military Service Pension, statements with the Bureau of Military History collected in the 1950s, and other military archives. But these sources may miss out on women and men whose stories are not captured in this way. How many veterans of 1916 refused to have anything to do with a State that sold them out and murdered their comrades? How many refused to seek or accept a pension from 'Free-Staters' on principle? The author of this article knows of at least one - her grandfather, Barney Murphy who fought in the Four Courts in 1916. How many others might there be like Bar-

ney, including women of principle who refused State recognition or died before their story was eventually told?

The Rising itself began with great confusion due to the havoc caused by countermanding orders for its commencement. But there was the added complication that seemed, as Margaret Ward argues, to typify the attitude to women, particularly in the ranks of the Volunteers - they forgot to tell the Cumann na mBan!<sup>24</sup> Hurried dispatches were sent all over the country with new orders for the Volunteers, but nobody mobilised the women who were 'left in a state of total bewilderment'<sup>25</sup> '[I]t's an indication of the women's determination to fight, that so many did eventually take part. For them in particular, the first day was a day of chaos, of searching for outposts, asking to be allowed to join and, occasionally, of being turned away.'<sup>26</sup> About 60 of the women 'out' in 1916 were members of Cumann na mBan. None of these women took an active part in the fighting, their role being confined to nursing, cooking and dispatch carrying, all of which, especially the latter, was dangerous and courageous work, done as it was, under fire. Communications with the leaders in the GPO and other garrisons were maintained largely through the efforts of these women. Not only did they carry messages, but supplies of food and ammunition hidden in their clothing, and it was they on whom responsibility fell for sourcing the food - including holding up vans and commandeering the contents.

A handful of bemused citizens of Dublin would have heard Pearse read the Proclamation outside the GPO, shortly after the Rebels occupied. Few would have known its contents in advance, or that it was addressed to 'Irishmen *and* Irishwomen', or that it was then, and remains, a powerful reference point to refute the claim that the Rebels ignored women's rights; and while not explicitly a socialist document, it claimed 'the right of the people of Ireland to the own-

<sup>22</sup>Deputies, Nicola *Mna.Na HEireann: Women who Shaped Ireland*. 1999 Cork: Mercier Press Ltd. p. 171.

<sup>23</sup>Dr Margaret Ward <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMV4MrJ1s2M>

<sup>24</sup>Margaret Ward. 1983. As above, P107-108

<sup>25</sup>As above. p108

<sup>26</sup>As above. p109

ership of Ireland', and contained a guarantee of 'religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens'. Connolly had insisted on that pledge, and told Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington shortly before the Rising that the rest of the signatories had agreed to its inclusion<sup>27</sup>. Hannah had also been chosen to be one of the five person executive of a civil provisional government if the rebellion was to go on for any length, but she had not been told of this, at this stage. Hannah, as a pacifist, did not directly take part in the Rising but she and other women of the IWFL were seen carrying sacks of food and other supplies to the garrison in the College of Surgeons<sup>28</sup>.

The women of the Irish Citizen Army had a different experience to their sisters in Cumann na mBan. They were 30 in all, and assembled, along with the men, on Easter Monday and were told by Connolly they were all now members of the Irish Republican Army. Their roles were allotted in advance, and they were armed on the day. A group of nine women and ten men marched off to take Dublin Castle; they failed and resorted to taking City Hall instead. Dr Lynn later went to City Hall, to attend Sean Connolly, hit by a snipers bullet and badly wounded.

The diary of Douglas Hyde gives an insight into events; he mentions a priest telling him that at the Stephen's Green there had been 'a good many women' and that they 'shot as well as the men'. This may have been due to the efforts of **Margaret Skinnider**, a 23 year old Glasgow school teacher and friend of Markievicz through suffragist circles. She had joined Glasgow Cumann na mBan, and the ICA as well as the Glasgow rifle club, where she learned her marksmanship. She and Markievicz had regularly gotten together to smuggle arms and explosives, as well as to practice shooting. She arrived by bicycle and managed to join the garrison at the Royal College of Surgeons. She was shot and wounded seriously, later to be imprisoned and sentenced to death by the military authorities. She went on hunger strike and her sentence was commuted to life im-

prisonment. She was subsequently released and returned to Scotland to write a memoir of her activities entitled 'Doing My Bit For Ireland'.

Forty women, including **Winnie Carney**, entered the GPO with their male counterparts, though not all these women were to remain. Winnie did. She had been sent for by Connolly as his right-hand woman. They had met through trade union activities when Connolly was in Belfast; she was in charge of the women's section of the Irish Textile Workers' Union in Belfast. Winnie had remained North, working as a TGWU organiser till she received the call, and down she came with her typewriter and a Wbley pistol. She remained at Connolly's side till the end, typing up Connolly's dispatches and dictating his final orders. She had refused to leave him despite being ordered to evacuate the building with the injured.

By Easter Monday night, women insurgents were established in all of the major rebel strongholds throughout the city, bar one, Boland's Mill under the command of De Valera. He steadfastly refused, in defiance of orders from Pearse and Connolly to allow women fighters into the Boland's Mill garrison. One Cumann na mBan member who fought in the Rising, Sighle Bean Uí Donnachadha later remarked, 'De Valera refused absolutely to have Cumann na mBan girls in the posts... the result, I believe, was that the garrison there did not stand up to the siege as well as in other posts'.

**Constance Markievicz**, initially had the job of delivering medical supplies round the rebel-held posts. She reportedly cut quite a dash - at 48 years of age, dressed in full Cumann na mBan military uniform, a big hat bedecked with Ostrich feathers perched jauntily on her head and brandishing a revolver. She had had considerable success commandeering vehicles to be used as barricades. When she reached Stephen's Green Mallin appointed her his second in command, explaining that the countermanding orders fiasco had left him short of men. She relished the opportunity to fight by all accounts. She shot a police-

<sup>27</sup>R.M Fox, *Rebel Irishwomen*, Dublin and Cork, 1935. p140.

<sup>28</sup>Margaret Ward <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMV4MrJ1s2M>

man in the head, killing him. Along with other female fighters, including her friend Margaret Skinnider, she demanded that they be allowed to bomb the Shelbourne Hotel to dislodge snipers there. Mallin refused on the grounds that the risks were too great. According to contemporary accounts, they insisted that the proclamation gave them equal rights as the men, and that included risking their lives, as the men did. Mallin relented and a number of women were shot en route to the Shelbourne, with Skinnider badly injured.

As well as Margaret Skinnider's serious wounding, there was one fatality among the women, Cumann na mBan member Margaretta Keogh who was shot dead outside the South Dublin Union attempting to help a wounded Volunteer. It's surprising more women were not killed or seriously wounded, given the nature of their duties, the daring and the courage they showed during those five days. There were lucky escapes; one woman had the heel of her shoe shot off; another had her bicycle tyre punctured by a bullet - she was riding it at the time.

Not all the women's experiences were colourful or dramatic and some recount vivid recollections of fear and loneliness. One participant in Jacobs biscuit factory recalls: '...the sound of footsteps, an occasional clatter as a rifle fell, there was an eeriness about the place; a feeling of being cut off from the outside world...'<sup>29</sup>

The rebel garrison at City Hall was surrendered to British forces by Dr. Kathleen Lynn, the only officer present. At first, the British refused to take the surrender from a woman; they just didn't know what to do; nothing in handbook covered it! This happened at various garrisons throughout the city. Initially, the British military authorities simply asked the women to 'go home'. They refused and were arrested and taken to Kilmainham with the rest.

Similarly with **Rose McNamara**, the officer in command of the Cumann na mBan detachment at the Marrowbone Lane Distillery. Here there were five sets of sisters including the Cooneys, the Quigleys and the

Byrnes<sup>30</sup> and they seemed to have planned ceilis, even in the thick of a Rising! Rose presented the surrender of herself and twenty one other women to the British. A subsequent account of that surrender - held at Military Archives - comments, 'The women of the garrison could have evaded arrest but they marched down four deep in uniform along with the men. An attempt was made to get them to sign a statement recanting their stand but this failed. McNamara who led the contingent went to the British officer in charge and explained they were part of the rebel contingent and were surrendering along with the rest'.

As the Rising ground to a halt under a ferocious British onslaught, women all over the city surrendered with their male counterparts. Countess Markievicz surrendered in the manner in which she had fought, with great panache, shaking the hand of each of her comrades one by one, and kissing her revolver before handing it over. She and the other women held in Kilmainham were later to experience the horror of the sound of their male comrades being shot, one by one.

The women arrested were taken to Kilmainham Gaol; all but five were released after a relatively short period of time. The five were all members of the ICA. Some were sentenced to death. Those who were went on hunger strike and succeeded in having their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Eventually, they were released. Dr Kathleen Lynn, one of the five, subsequently went on to found St. Ultan's Hospital in Dublin's city centre where she initiated Ireland's first immunisation programme for children. Her life-long partner was fellow revolutionary and ICA member Madeleine French-Mullen.

Pearse selected nurse Elizabeth Farrell, one of the last three women remaining with the GPO rebels, to present the surrender to the British authorities. Accompanied by a priest and three soldiers she brought the order to surrender to the insurgent positions throughout the city. She stood next to Pearse as they made the declaration of surrender. Though partly obscured by Pearse,

<sup>29</sup>Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years*, Dublin. Duffy. 1955. p174-76

<sup>30</sup>Sinead McCoole. *No ordinary women*. P 31

she may be seen in a press photograph taken at the moment of the surrender. The apparent removal of her figure in subsequent versions of the photograph has given rise to speculation. The explanation we suggest is that reminders of the role played by women did not suit the agenda of those who came to 'inherit' the revolution - better that they should be airbrushed from history.

## After the Rising

The immediate aftermath of the Rising saw Dublin in ruins and the organisations that had made the Rising in disarray. 16 leaders were executed; 1,800 interned; 77 of them women. Although Sinn Féin as a party had not participated in the Rising, it was called the Sinn Féin Rising by the authorities and the press; with its dozen or so councillors and its newspaper, it would have been the only separatist organisation known to the administration in Dublin Castle.

It fell to the women of Cumann na mBan to deal with the immediate practical needs after Easter week - the tasks of re-establishing communications and looking after the dependents of those killed and imprisoned, and they did so with great commitment and efficiency.

**Kathleen Clarke**, widow of Tom, signatory to the Proclamation, had been left the remainder of the funds from the Republican rebels to disperse as needed, around £3000. This was supplemented by collections that became an on-going campaign over the next months and years. Kathleen herself had not only lost her husband but also her brother in the Rising, had three young children to look after, and, in the course of the Rising had miscarried the pregnancy that she had kept hidden from Tom, not wanting to worry him. She was very ill following the miscarriage but insisted on working to support the prisoners dependents to 'stop her from going mad', as she said herself. But it was not only fundraising; the women mounted a propaganda offensive, rallying people to meetings and demonstrations that lauded the aims of the rebellion, proclaimed the role of the participants and argued for the need for a Republic. Their

work, and the treatment meted out by the British authorities, helped galvanise the latent sympathy among the population for the rebel stand.

On the first anniversary of the Rising, commemorative masses were held all over the country. In Dublin women took on the job, outwitting the authorities, of hanging the flag on all the posts held by rebels during the Rising. Against the wishes of the ITGWU officials, Rosie Hackett and Helena Moloney hung a banner from Liberty Hall which read 'James Connolly - murdered 12th May'. Militancy, inspired by the events a year earlier was taking hold, despite those who wanted to keep a lid on it. The remnants of the various strands of nationalism regrouped under the banner of Sinn Féin to contest the election in 1918, and swept the board. Women had been granted the vote (in line with Britain), and their franchise was instrumental in the Sinn Féin victory. The fantastic period of workers' struggle that swept the country 1918-1921 (see C. Kostick article in this journal) saw women participating at levels hitherto unknown. For instance in Buttevant in Cork, a strike by farm labourers was joined by a sympathy strike among creamery workers, who were joined in turn by the majority of servant girls in Buttevant parish striking in sympathy with the men; whereupon the employers relented and conceded major wage demands. *Kostick, C. Revolution in Ireland: Popular militancy 1917-1923. Pluto Press. London. 1996 . p113* Women fought the Black and Tans and made it possible for the guerrilla army of the IRA to continue to function. They refused to be overlooked in terms of contesting elections, with varying degrees of success.

Tom Coonan summarises the gains women made:

In the years that followed, women played a high profile role in the fledgling Republic. Six women deputies were elected to the first Dáil of May 1921. Forty three women were also returned to borough and district councils. Kathleen Clarke, the first female Lord Mayor of Dublin was

elected in this period. Women also served as judges in the Sinn Féin courts between 1919 and 1921. All of these developments for women (were) revolutionary when compared with the lot of women elsewhere in Europe at the time.<sup>31</sup>

The vast majority of women activists opposed the Treaty, including Cumann na mBan and all the known ICA members. But the tide of counter-revolution was rolling in as the Civil War played out. The new 'Free State' gladly accepted the stabilising effect of the Catholic Church's endorsement, and with it the bishops' view of the appropriate position of women in society. Women were blamed for fomenting the Civil War, and anti-treaty revolutionary activities, already well outside the prescribed gender roles of the time, were now deemed not only 'un-seemly' by a deeply conservative Irish establishment but also a significant threat to the security of the state. Coonan summarises:

A London newspaper at the time, *The Sunday Graphic* published an article carrying the headline 'Irish Gun-women Menace' which described Irish women as 'trigger happy harpies'. In a pastoral letter issued in October 1922, the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland urged all women to desist from revolutionary activities. The Minister for Home Affairs described the female activists as 'hysterical young women who ought to be playing five fingered exercises or helping their mothers with the brasses'. Slowly but surely, the women were deterred from continuing in their dissident activities as greater numbers were arrested and interned. The government of the Free State banned Cumann na mBan

in January 1923 and opened up Kilmainham Jail as a detention prison for 'suspect' women<sup>32</sup>.

The counter-revolution was well and truly underway.

The mythology of 1916 that became central to the emerging identity of the state contained little or no reference to the activities of the Irish women who participated in the rising. The gains women had made were slowly rolled back with a series of Acts by the new government, restricting their access to work, removing them from civic roles (jury duty), targeting unmarried mothers and creating a framework for punishing those who were 'recidivists'. The Free State completely banned divorce by closing off all loopholes that might have made dissolution of unhappy unions possible, and introduced rigid censorship laws and restrictions on opportunities for men and women to socialise publicly. Finally the constitution of 1937 extinguished the last light of freedom for women when it copper-fastened their traditional role as homemakers and mothers. The State had in the bishops, agents for control, and they rewarded their loyalty with measures that enforced a Catholic fundamentalist ethos. The 'special position' of the Catholic Church in De Valera's new constitution was mirrored in the 'no position' for women. The rights they had won just 20 years earlier when they fought for both the Republic and their own rights, were wiped out.

## Comment on women's rights and the Rising

Hannna Sheehy Skeffington, feminist, socialist and by this time fervent nationalist said '...the Rising was the only instance in history that I know of where men fighting for freedom, voluntarily included women'<sup>33</sup> She compared the Rising to the Russian Revolution of 1917, and Kollontai with Constance Markievicz. Dr Margaret Ward remarks on how unique it was, not only the

---

<sup>31</sup>Conan, T., (2006): *The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in The 1916 Rising* available at <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1048&context=aaschedart>

<sup>32</sup>as above.

<sup>33</sup>D, Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* London, 2004, p. 217).

role played by women in the Rising itself, but also the commitment to equality in the Proclamation of 'religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities for all its citizens'. She suggests it would likely not have been that way were it not for the struggle of women in the years preceding the revolution when Irish feminists fought for the rights of women to be recognised and where radical nationalist women engaged in debate with their colleagues on these issues<sup>34</sup>. I would like to add that role of Connolly's rev-

olutionary Marxist perspective is difficult to overstate. He combined socialist theory and practice, bringing together in struggle, as circumstances permitted, the most progressive elements, male and female, in the fight for liberation, under the banner of the ICA. They were at most 10 percent of the fighting forces that Easter week; had they been more, their legacy would have been harder to suppress and ignore. One hundred years later - we have a duty to shout about it.

---

<sup>34</sup>Margaret Ward, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HMV4MrJ1s2M>