

Up the Republic! The 'Furies' in Action: The Role of Irish Feminists in War, 1913-23

Assignment 4

History 401

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Around the turn of the last century, feminists in Ireland were engaged in a struggle to be treated as full Irish citizens by attempting to obtain the right to vote.¹ This process was affected by four main conflicts which occurred during the same time period: World War I, the Easter Rising of 1916, the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. Irish nationalism and the movement to create an independent Irish state changed the suffragists' direction.² Thus, between 1913 and 1923 Irish feminists had a dualistic agenda: they expressed their desire to seek political equality with men while embracing the republican and nationalist causes resurrected in their country. These intertwining goals often caused conflicting loyalties in situations where "the rights of women and rights of the nation were constructed as incompatible."³ Feminists stepped out of traditional gender roles to become influential in Ireland's struggles for the creation of an Irish republic while pursuing their own agenda of becoming full citizens of Ireland.⁴ History neglected to mention these women, but they were actively involved in all of the conflicts and in the events which led up to and followed those conflicts.⁵

Nationalism affected the Irish feminist movement, but this was not unusual.⁶ Sociology lecturer and historian Louise Ryan states that nationalism has affected feminist movements all over the world; both movements have the commonality of experiencing the "struggle for liberation from oppression."⁷ The struggle for women's rights in Ireland had its beginnings in movements for social reform on issues

¹ Louise Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty: War, Nation, and Feminism in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland." *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20/1 (1997): 25. The suffragist movement was at its height between 1912 and 1914.

² Sarah Benton, "Women Disarmed: The Militarization of Politics in Ireland 1913-23: The Irish Issue The British Question." *Feminist Review*, 50 (Summer 1995): 50. This was not a new idea as separation from the domination of "Mother England," had been sought in the past with periods of open rebellion and conflict such as in 1798, 1803 and 1867. Tim Pat Coogan uses the phrase "Mother England."

³ Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty," 26.

⁴ Ann Matthew, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women, 1922-1941* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2010), 9.

⁵ Louise Ryan, "'Drunken Tans': Representation of Sex and Violence in the Anglo-Irish War." *Feminist Review*, 66, *Political Currents* (Autumn, 2000), 77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395833>.

⁶ Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty," 21.

⁷ *ibid.*, 23.

such as relief of poverty, disease, human justice, and peace, and it was the elite and middle-class women who led these endeavours.⁸ Activists needed the vote to give credence to their activities.

Feminism and the Rise of Irish Nationalism and Republicanism

To understand how early twentieth-century Irish feminists became involved in war and conflict it is necessary to outline events in Irish history which came just prior to the 1916 Easter Rising because as Ryan posits "feminism must be contextualized and understood within the specific cultural framework of a particular society."⁹

The movement for suffrage in Ireland began prior to WW I. During the same time there was a movement to secure a system of government which separated Ireland from its parent the British parliament.¹⁰ Strong feelings of Irish nationalism and patriotism had been building for years and women, particularly, had been involved in the revival of Irish culture that helped to foster this.¹¹ During 1913 and 1914, there were increasing movements to militarize Irish resistance to Britain's authority.¹² Historian Sarah Benton states, "The symbol of a nation's preparedness to take control of its own soul was the readiness to bear arms."¹³ Ireland was very practiced at the 'readiness' part having staged uprisings against "Mother England" in its past and women became drawn into the rising conflict.¹⁴ It was considered a "manly" virtue to arm voluntarily to reclaim Ireland by force.¹⁵ Prior to 1913, there were pods of organized men and women who committed themselves to creating an Irish republic, but not

⁸ Athabasca University, *History 401/Women and Gender Studies 400 Feminism in the Western Tradition 1790-1940s Study Guide*, (Athabasca: Athabasca University Press, 2011), Unit 3 Sec 3.3 p. 4 Unlike the Japanese women who had little to say about their position in society, the Irish feminists were extremely vocal.

⁹ Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty," 21.

¹⁰ Tim Pat Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* (London: Random House Group Limited, 2003), xii.

¹¹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 9. Some of the best-known suffragists of this period were highly involved in the arts, literature, and theatre. Some movements were cultural and some more political.

¹² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 148.

¹⁴ Ryan, "Drunken Tans," 13.

¹⁵ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 148.

everyone felt that women should be actively involved in war.¹⁶ Historian Jo Vellacott states that war assigns gender roles and bearing arms was not considered part of an Irish woman's proper role.¹⁷ The ingrained ideology that women belong in the home was supported by Ireland's strongly patriarchal society and the Catholic Church.¹⁸ Nevertheless, republican-minded women began to ally themselves with traditionally male volunteer organizations such as the Sinn Féin, a political organization which promoted Irish independence and the Irish Volunteers.¹⁹ The Irish Citizen Army also admitted women and expressed support for sexual equality and, as well, there were women's organizations such as Inghinidhe na Éireann²⁰ and the Cumann na mBan that were gaining support.²¹ Rising nationalism caused a see-saw effect with the suffragists who lowered their voices in order to take part in what was considered a more important movement: Irish nationalism and republicanism.

The Feminist Dilemma: Feminism, Suffrage, and Nationalism

Author, Claire Hackett states that feminists in Ireland had "a dilemma of where to place their formidable energies."²² Would it be for true equality in society or towards the republican struggle? At times, one agenda took precedence over the other. Middle-class suffragists experienced opposition from many sources.²³ Social-outreach-minded feminists determined that they needed the vote to address the many social problems plaguing Ireland at the turn of the century, and were powerless

¹⁶ Ibid., This took place primarily in the southern and western parts of Ireland.

¹⁷ Jo Vellacott, "Feminism as if all People Mattered: Working to Remove the Causes of War, 1919-1929," *Contemporary European History*, 10/3 (Nov. 2001), 393. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20081801>.

¹⁸ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 164. Women were viewed as morally superior and more virtuous than men.

¹⁹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 9.

²⁰ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 153.

²¹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 10.

²² Claire Hackett, "Self-Determination: The Republican Feminist Agenda," *Feminist Review*, 50, The Irish Issue: The British Question (Summer 1995), 112. <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>.

²³ Matthews, *Renegades*, 66.

Roger Sawyer, *We are but Women: Women in Ireland's History*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 73. There was not harmony within the ranks of the suffragists. Some wanted to be more militant than others. In addition, the church did not approve of suffrage.

without it.²⁴ They did not consider themselves to be “full citizens” without enfranchisement.²⁵ Before WW I, suffrage societies existed all over Ireland²⁶ and many suffragists allied themselves with the Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL) formed in 1909, but the onset of WW I negatively affected their progress.²⁷ Allbhe Smyth states that “the time is never ‘right’ for women’s challenge to the patriarchy and its operations: the affairs of the state, threatened or not, take automatic precedence.”²⁸ Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, a prominent Irish feminist, nationalist, and republican stated that “male politicians could no more be trusted with women’s rights than the leprechaun with the crock of gold. The minute you take your eye off him he will slip away.”²⁹

Understanding feminism and Irish politics is a daunting task: women do not think alike. Irish women had different political leanings: some were nationalists, liberals, socialists and unionists³⁰ Many wanted to be involved in movements which supported a free republic and some did not. In addition to the very political Sinn Féin League, specific women’s groups emerged, as well.³¹ In 1900, the Daughters of Ireland or Inghinidhe na Éireann (INE), a nationalist organization was formed; its interests were political, economic and, cultural.³² In 1913, the Cumann na mBan (Council of Women) emerged: it was the women’s branch of the Irish Volunteer movement and it became more focused on the “military sphere of republicanism.”³³ Throughout the forthcoming conflicts, this split between the political and

²⁴ Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, (Woodstock & New York: Overlook Press, 2007), 30, 31, 177.

Ferriter states social problems were rampant in Ireland during this time period.

²⁵ Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward, eds., *Irish Women and the Vote*, (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 75-79.

²⁶ Sawyer, *We are but Women*, 75.

²⁷ Matthews, *Renegades*, 10.

²⁸ Allbhe Smyth, “International Trends Paying our Disrespects to the Bloody States We’re in: Women, Violence, Culture and the State.” *Journal of Women’s History*, 6/4/ and 7/1 (Winter/Spring 1994): 197.

²⁹ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 176.

³⁰ Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 173.

³¹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 67. The Sinn Féin was organized in 1907.

³² Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 75. INE was founded by Maude Gonne.

³³ Matthews, *Renegades*, 9-11.

the military factions for women remained.³⁴ Feminists definitely had a dilemma. Sawyer states that some felt that if they supported the nationalist and republican causes they would receive the vote eventually and true equality of the sexes would occur. Others felt that if they did not have the vote, they could not vote for an Independent Ireland.³⁵ Soon nationalistic efforts drew interest away from suffrage issues for women.³⁶ Around 1914, there was a decrease in the membership and work of the Irish Women's Franchise League and their plans were put on hold because there was an increased interest in staging a revolution in Ireland: a revolution that would place the Irish in charge of their own affairs.³⁷

Feminism and Politics: Women Organize for Conflict, 1914-1916

Britain had drawn Ireland into WW I in 1914 and Irish women were affected. Suffragist Hannah Sheehy Skeffington stated that women had become "allens in their own land, powerless to stem the tide of barbarism."³⁸ Margaret Ward points out that the Great War found Irish feminists "sorted out into warrior mothers, servants of the state or radical pacifists."³⁹ Some pacifist feminists continued to seek the vote while speaking out against war at the same time, but as time progressed it was the issue of self-government, nationalism, and patriotism that drew women away from the suffrage movement.⁴⁰

There are acmes which describe founding moments of great change in a country's history: in Ireland it was the legendary 'Easter Rising' of April 1916. Irish feminists were not idle in the atmosphere of unrest and change in the South of Ireland and prior to the Easter Rising many allied themselves with several activist women's organizations. One of the most influential groups during this period was the Inghinidhe na hÉireann whose purpose was "to place women's rights in the context of nationalism by

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Sawyer, *We are but Women*, 72, 74.

³⁶ Matthews, *Renegades*, 87.

³⁷ Mathews, *Renegades*, 86.

³⁸ Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 136.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 178.

promoting Irish culture and working for Irish independence.⁴¹ Later, this group became "warriors" for the Irish Volunteers.⁴² One of their most prominent members was Maude Gonne, a rebellious crusader for women's rights, human justice, and nationalism.⁴³ Admired because of her beauty and outspoken in matters of public welfare, she often made dramatic appearances at public gatherings when she lectured about the Injustices of Mother England while raising issues of Irish national concern.⁴⁴

The other major feminist organization was the Cumann na mBan. It consisted of women who were "the most politically conscious" who wanted equality for women as well as independence for Ireland.⁴⁵ When it became apparent that an uprising would most certainly occur, these fiercely patriotic women were drawn to the more aggressive methods of resistance. Sawyer states that these rebel women were willing to take on duties and actions consistent with male rebels but were actually understood as being a "gunman's helpmeet" and always functioned in a "subordinate role" to the Irish Volunteers.⁴⁶ Sawyer states that Cumann na mBan was a "pathetic creation" from the feminist point of view because male members made sure that the Cumann na mBan members submitted to their orders and performed "secondary tasks."⁴⁷ A common view held by feminists was that if they just did as they were told, all would work out in the end and their goal of an independent Ireland would bring about the emancipation of women.⁴⁸ Countess Constance de Markievicz, the colourful president of Cumann na mBan, urged women to "demand equal status from the Irish Volunteers national movement. The female nationalists and suffragists were sometimes at loggerheads and some of the more militant suffrage

⁴¹ Nancy Cardozo, *Lucky Eyes and a High Heart: The Life of Maud Gonne*. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1978), 188.

⁴² Cardozo, *Lucky Eyes*, 290.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 188. Gonne possessed a strong hatred for the English (339).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 325. Gonne was arrested several times and deported to England and kept in solitary confinement for 5 ½ months. Throughout the forthcoming conflicts, she held an active role in politics, writing, working and being actively involved in her country's future.

⁴⁵ Sawyer, *We are But Women*, 80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 79, 81, 87, 88. They were allowed to fund raise, tend to the sick, work in the kitchens, courier messages, and trained to bear stretchers, administer first aid, be involved in signalling, and to fire rifles.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

leaders such as Hannah Sheehy Skeffington felt that it was a mistake for the Cumann na mBan to be involved in a situation with "unequal" relationships and there was a split within the organization.⁴⁹ There was condemnation of the "slave-like labour" practiced by the female volunteers.⁵⁰ Some members of Cumann na mBan defended their position by stating "there could be no talk of women's freedom while the nation itself was not free."⁵¹ The old attitudes of the proper role of women would influence the role of women in war. Sawyer states that during the actual conflict many women discovered that they were not treated equally and some of the male "comrades-in-arms" in the Irish Citizen Army were even objecting to their presence. Although the Cumann na mBan viewed themselves as soldiers, they always acted in a subordinate role to men.⁵² It appears that their roles as wives and mothers were seen as primary.

Feminism and the Easter Rising

In brief, the Easter Rising was a battle in which rebel Irish forces attempted to take control of Ireland by forming an army and declaring an Irish republic: It began on Easter Sunday 1916. The insurgents were a mixture of men and women led by the Irish Citizen Army and the Cumann na mBan. Suffragists who supported the idea of a republic had temporarily set aside their suffrage goals in order to take part in the more pressing issue of being involved in freeing Ireland. The secret plot was to overtake several key buildings and positions in Dublin and proclaim an independent Ireland. After seven days of fierce fighting the seventy-seven women who were actively participating and 1,000 men were forced to surrender: this mission failed and the severe repercussions which followed would have a

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84, 85.

⁵⁰ Ryan, "Question of Loyalty," 25.

Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 62. The IWFL stated that Cumann na mBan was really a ladies auxiliary who collected the money for the men to spend.

⁵¹ Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty," 25.

⁵² Sawyer, *We are But Women*, 88.

Ryan, "Drunken Tans," 90.

tremendous impact on the history of Ireland forever.⁵³ This historical conflict was just the beginning of many more years of open conflict which involved Irish men and women.

There were definite gender roles assigned to those involved in the military forces during this conflict. Despite being trained in the use of arms, the actual jobs that women were assigned during the Easter Rising conflict consisted of carrying dispatches and transporting food and ammunition to the various garrisons, operating the kitchens, and administering first aid to the wounded.⁵⁴ Some garrison commanders flatly refused to have women in their locale.⁵⁵ Sawyer, referring to the women, states that "their equality as combatants was short-lived."⁵⁶

There were many prominent feminists who took an active part in the Easter Rising, but the most famous was Countess Constance de Markievicz. The countess wore the uniform of a principal lieutenant of the Citizen Army.⁵⁷ She was the only woman to fire a gun and kill a man during this conflict.⁵⁸ The Countess accepted great responsibilities in the Cumann na mBan and she was very vocal in her views. She promoted the cause of Irish independence during her speaking tours and was jailed several times for her activities on behalf of republicanism.⁵⁹ This very courageous, high-profile feminist-activist loved attention and was involved in philanthropy, suffrage, and social and nationalistic causes; but as a result

⁵³ Sawyer, *We are But Women*, 90.

Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 141. Ferriter disagrees with the number of women taking part and states that 200 women took part. Fifteen male rebels were promptly executed by the British. These men became national heroes whose history remains prominent even today.

⁵⁴ Matthews, *Renegades*, 125-126.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁶ Sawyer, *We are But Women*, 90.

⁵⁷ Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 29.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 185-186

of some of her efforts she got to see the inside of many jails.⁶⁰ She was sentenced to death for her role in the 1916 uprising, but her punishment was deportation to England to serve her sentence.⁶¹

There were repercussions for other feminist-activists involved in the Easter Rising such as arrests and imprisonment for some.⁶² Six women with more serious charges were deported to England as punishment.⁶³ After the rising, republican thinking feminists became increasingly important in "spreading doctrine" and attacking newspapers that were hostile to the principles of republicanism.⁶⁴

Funding was needed to assist families of those who had been affected by taking part in the rebellion and it was the feminists who took the initiative in setting up aid agencies.⁶⁵ Widows, children, mothers, and sisters of rebels often had no income, and the rebels themselves were barred from obtaining employment. Obtaining foreign funding was not easy for these women as Mother England often refused to grant passports to them when attempting to leave the country to plead their cause.⁶⁶ Many involved in this conflict would, nevertheless, rise to positions of importance in the republican movement after 1916.⁶⁷

Cumann na mBan had critics. P.S. O'Hegarty, referring to women, and quoted in Sawyer states that: "Its worst effect was on the women...they...steadily eliminated from themselves every womanly feeling...INH....never forgot that it could not and should not do men's work and did useful work such as

⁶⁰ Ibid., 73

⁶¹ Ibid., 151, 182. She was released after a year of imprisonment. The British were reluctant to execute women.

⁶² Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 153. Seventy-nine women were arrested and most were released within a week.

⁶³ Matthews, *Renegades*, 151, 156.

⁶⁴ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 179-180.

⁶⁵ Matthews, *Renegades*, 160.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 165, 166.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 11.

child care...But Cumann na mBan knew better than that...Women's business in the world is with things of life; but these women busied themselves with nothing but the things of death."⁶⁸

The Easter proclamation statement read by the insurgents, states that it would have guaranteed equal rights and equal opportunities to all Irish Citizens, but this did not materialize. After the failed rising, "Mother Church" responded by "putting a speedy end to all those heretical aspirations."⁶⁹ Coogan states that the church was very critical of the role that women played in the rising and touted that women with their "natural virtues of obedience, servility and self-sacrifice" should remain in the home.⁷⁰

War and Its Consequences

The sequence of events that followed the Easter Rising is complicated; in the meantime, the Irish remained under British rule.⁷¹ While WW I dragged on, the Sinn Féin became more militant and insisted on a total separation from Great Britain and a stronger republican movement began. Irish citizens became alarmed when Great Britain suggested that conscription was going to occur in 1916. The Irish people and especially the Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan spoke against it and some leaders were arrested.⁷²

WW I gave an opportunity for Irish feminist-suffragist-pacifists to express their confusion about where their efforts should lie. They abhorred militarism and they wanted to pursue rights for women. In addition, they wanted national independence: they were not going to get all their wishes. In 1917 the

⁶⁸ Sawyer, *We are But Women*, 73. O'Hegarty was an Irish Civil Servant.

⁶⁹ Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 168.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 169. The church promoted patriarchy in the home even to the point of suggesting that lashing disobedient daughters would be in order.

⁷¹ Seamus Mac Annaidh, *Irish History*, (Bath: Parragon, 1999), 230, 231. Although not acted on, in 1914, the British parliament had endorsed Irish Home Rule which would have given the Irish some, but not total control of their affairs. WW I interrupted further progress on the matter.

⁷² Matthews, *Renegades*, 215-216.

suffragists began to raise their voices once again, although many felt it was too soon after the 1916 conflict and would have preferred putting off their arguments again.⁷³

By 1917, there was noticeable growth in the republican movement in southern Ireland and anti-British feelings were strong. Mother England banned public meetings, wearing military uniforms, and carrying weapons.⁷⁴ Those with republican leanings were often jailed and although they were political prisoners, they were not treated as such.⁷⁵ The Sinn Féin, Irish Volunteers and the Cumann na mBan became more active.⁷⁶ Interest in the Sinn Féin was on the rise and women sought increased representation in its ranks. They received four of the six positions they sought.⁷⁷

The spread of disease can be a consequence of war. In 1918, when soldiers began to return to Ireland, they passed along two major health problems to the Irish population: venereal disease and the Spanish 'Flu. The Sinn Féin organization took the lead in demanding medical testing of the soldiers but it was the social and political Irish feminist organizations who were more involved with attempting to eradicate these two problems.⁷⁸ The Irish Women's Suffrage League and local government associations such as the Irish Women's Reform League, The Infant Aid Society, Irish Women's Franchise League, Cumann, na mBan, the Irish Society for Combating the spread of Venereal Disease, the Dublin Watch Committee, United Irish Women and the women activists in the Cumann na dTeachtaire (League of Women Delegates) were all involved in attempting to ease the situation.⁷⁹ Dr. Kathleen Lynn, a feminist activist, had been arrested and jailed for her anti-British activities, but her medical expertise was needed

⁷³ *ibid.*, 180.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 189, 218. There were now over six hundred branches of Cumann na mBan and it was considered to be the main women's organization in Ireland.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 188. Matthews does not state why two more women were not permitted.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 205.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 222. They secured accommodations which were suitable for nursing sick soldiers and made sure the accommodations were in readiness for caring for them. Matthews states these groups also protested the lack of public bathrooms for women in Dublin 208, 210.

to manage these two epidemics. The British agreed to release her from jail if she signed an agreement to distance herself from political activity; she signed and then went promptly about her business as a doctor and continued her political activities anyway.⁸⁰

Following WW I, there was a mass movement for international peace and Ireland felt it should not only be admitted to this conference, but use the opportunity to garner support with the League of Nations to declare that Ireland was an independent state. The United Kingdom representatives made sure that this did not happen. Irish feminists wanted to be represented at the conference, too, but because Ireland was not considered an independent country, they were overlooked.⁸¹ A lobby group of women, the Women's Delegates to the all Ireland Conference (WDIC) was formed in 1917 to discuss obtaining more female representation among the Irish decision makers and the topic of suffrage was resurrected.⁸²

A Small Victory: Enfranchisement In 1918

Suffrage and nationalism were connected more closely when conscription threatened Ireland and the suffragist voices were heard again. In 1918, suffrage was granted to men over twenty-one and limited suffrage to women over thirty if they owned property.⁸³ The major reason this occurred was to increase the electorate numbers not because of realizing the enlightenment of gender equality.⁸⁴

Following the Easter rising until 1921, the Irish attempted to structure a form of government that would please the locals as well as Mother England but unanimity about which direction the country

⁸⁰ Matthews, *Renegades*, 221-222. Dr. Lynn was a specialist in the care and treatment of children with syphilis.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 180.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 234.

Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 231. This act was the Representation of the People's Act. Women had to fulfill certain property requirements, as well.

⁸⁴ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 167.

should take was non-existent.⁸⁵ In December of 1918, there was a democratic general election which the Cumann na mBan had helped to prepare for by promoting Sinn Féin platforms.⁸⁶ The Republicans with ideas of complete independence won the most seats and they formed the Dáil Éireann (House of Deputies) which was like the Irish House of Commons in January of 1919.⁸⁷ The Dáil devised a constitution and read out a Declaration of Independence declaring that Ireland was an independent country and, as such, should be allowed to send delegates to the peace conference in Versailles following WW I.⁸⁸ There was a small victory for the feminists when Countess de Marklevicz was elected to the Dáil as its only female member.⁸⁹ She was also elected as the first female MP to represent the Irish people in the British House of Commons.⁹⁰ Ferriter states that women were "deeply involved in the move toward independence" yet more female representation was desired at the government level and feminists lobbied the Dáil by submitting a list of suitable candidates.⁹¹ Lobbyists identified that their group lacked the ability to speak well in public and they hired Sheehy Skeffington to teach them how to improve their oration skills.⁹² Still, women did not enjoy equality with men and their presence in the Dáil did not increase at the beginning, but one step of progress was the 1919 directive from the Dáil that mentioned women and work stating that there should be equal pay for equal work.⁹³ The Dáil was not considered legitimate by the British and it needed money to operate, so the Cumann na mBan sold bonds to help in this effort.⁹⁴ Once again, feminists came to the rescue.

⁸⁵ Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 232.

⁸⁶ Matthews, *Renegades*, 234, 236.

⁸⁷ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 196.

Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 151.

⁸⁸ Matthews, *Renegades*, 238.

⁸⁹ Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 168. She was excluded from the cabinet which made decisions.

⁹⁰ Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, 231.

Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 168. She was given a position as a Minister in the British House of Commons and as such would have been the first female MP in Europe, but she declined her seat.

⁹¹ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 217.

⁹² Matthews, *Renegades*, 240.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

Feminists and the War of Independence, 1919-21

By 1919, Great Britain had outlawed the Sinn Féin, IRA, Cumann na mBan and Gaelic League organizations: war was beginning to escalate between the Irish and the British and violence was common.⁹⁵ The Icon Countess de Markievicz was jailed again.⁹⁶ A police constable referred to her as a "pestilential harridan...who was a grave danger as long as she is at large."⁹⁷ The Irish Volunteers became known as the Irish Republican Army and kept up a continuous campaign against the local police forces known as the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), so much so that the RIC had to import recruits from England. This force became known as the infamous "Black and Tans," so named because of the colour of their uniforms.⁹⁸ During the next nineteen months, the Black and Tans led a "reign of terror" which affected nearly everyone.⁹⁹ Thus, the IRA changed their tactics and organized "flying columns" which meant they conducted guerrilla-style warfare in small groups to antagonize the British troops.¹⁰⁰ The Cumann na mBan became instrumental in helping the IRA by organizing food supplies, smuggling messages and mail in and out of prisons, bringing food to prisoners, organizing first aid stations, collecting "comforts" for men "on the run" and, organizing safe houses: they did these activities at great personal risk.¹⁰¹ Their training included the use and care of guns and they became involved in riskier activities such as relaying dispatches, transporting and storing guns and ammunition, maintaining weapons, making black powder ammunition, protecting arms dumps and helping to plan ambushes.¹⁰² Some areas of Ireland were more militarized and active such as in the western division. Here, Cumann

⁹⁵ Ibid., 246.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 246. She was jailed for four months for attending a forbidden meeting.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 247.

⁹⁸ Matthews, *Renegades*, 248. Their uniforms were a mixture of dark coloured police uniforms and khaki army uniforms put together hastily because they were needed on the job before proper uniforms could be issued.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 266, 267.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 248. There were "no rules."

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 248.

¹⁰² Ibid., 249.

na mBan members did “highly dangerous” work in intelligence and scouting.¹⁰³ Because they were women, they were sometimes given the tasks of “relieving” soldiers of their arms by enticing them into quick romantic encounters during which the soldiers’ weapons would be stolen.¹⁰⁴ Women caught defying the British had particular punishments; and the practice of cutting a woman’s hair off or perhaps shaving her head was very common. In addition, threats of being shot and being assaulted in various ways, physically or sexually, was a common occurrence in spite of what some of the British reported officially.¹⁰⁵

Women suffer during war and Sheehy Skeffington addressed this when she issued a pamphlet entitled, “Statements of Atrocities against Women in Ireland.”¹⁰⁶ Women and children were victimized by night time raids, assaults, evictions, the burning of homes and humiliating body searches. Physical and sexual assaults were common and, then as now, women were often frightened to come forward with their experiences. So severe and frequent were these deeds that a commission was sent from Britain to Ireland to explore the violent occurrences.¹⁰⁷ The IRA was not entirely pure in their dealings with women because they, too, practiced some of these tactics against Irish women who were seen to or known to fraternize with the enemy.¹⁰⁸

Matthews states that there were 10,000 women active in the War of Independence: not all who assisted the IRA were Cumann na mBan.¹⁰⁹ Siobhán Lankford did intelligence work in County Cork, an area of extreme conflict.¹¹⁰ As a postal employee, she intercepted messages and relayed them to Michael Collins, the leader of an IRA flying column. She used the cover of organizing a Gaelic League for

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 249.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, 251, 266, 267.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 268. This was around 1920-21.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 268, 278, 279.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 276, 277.

¹⁰⁹ Ann Matthews, *Dissidents: Irish Republican Women 1923-1941* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2012), 9.

¹¹⁰ Mac Annaidh, *Irish History*, 274.

her IRA activity.¹¹¹ Mollie Cunningham, a young feminist activist involved as a Cumann na mBan member in the same area described the particular duties performed by the women of her group between 1916 and 1921. She states:

It was nothing unusual for me to take two or three revolvers at a time from one company area to another. In the transfer I had to pass by the sentry at the lower gate of Macroom Castle and was liable to be challenged at any moment. As my home was a 'receiving station' for dispatches coming by rail to Macroom, my sisters and I were regularly engaged in the delivery of these messages to the appropriate officers or units.¹¹²

Cunningham's home was raided and searched "two or three times a week by enemy military and police forces."¹¹³ She acted as an intelligence officer by reporting movements of enemy forces and often had to pass through enemy raiding parties. In addition, she aided in removing enemy military stores from the railway station and states her group assisted in "the removal and burial of the remains" of an IRA soldier.¹¹⁴

The Anglo-Irish war continued but the Sinn Féin election victory of 1920 led to a re-structuring of the government and several women gained places on various councils.¹¹⁵ Conflict escalated bringing more violence and a drop in the Irish economy; poverty and disease were rampant.¹¹⁶ An Irish White Cross was formed to raise funds for the many needs of the population and many Republican women worked to bring relief to their countrymen.

By 1921, forty-six Republican women had been arrested by the Black and Tans. Punishments ranged from fines to sentences of hard labour for ten years. They were accused of crimes like wearing

¹¹¹ Matthews, *Renegades*, 252. She used carbon paper in her scheme. Her escapades are recorded in the Cork City Archives. Gaelic Leagues promoted the Irish language and culture.

¹¹² Bureau of Military History, Statement by Witness Document No. W.S. 1681. 3. Statement by Miss Mollie Cunningham, Witness on Cumann na mBan Activities 1916-21.

www.bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1681.pdf. Her exploits are recorded in Cork City Archives.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 5. Additional duties of Cumann na mBan included body searching women who were suspected of collaborating with the enemy.

¹¹⁵ Matthews, *Renegades*, 253.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 254, 258.

armour, possessing guns or rebellious literature, being a courier, and distributing banned leaflets.¹¹⁷ Incarcerated Republican women developed some resistance strategies while in prison which included the pleasure of taunting the guards.¹¹⁸

Mother England and the Irish continued to disagree about their relationship. The Dáil of southern Ireland rejected the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 and demanded a completely independent state and more bargaining occurred.¹¹⁹ In 1921, Ireland was granted dominion status which meant that it was self-governing, yet still must swear allegiance to the crown. The Anglo-Irish treaty was signed in December 1921 and the southern part of Ireland became known as the Irish Free State.¹²⁰ The Dáil voted and acceptance of the act passed narrowly causing immediate conflict within the government ranks. The signing of this treaty was very controversial and was the genesis for the civil war which followed.

Civil War, 1922-23: More Action for the 'Furies'¹²¹

Opposition to the treaty led to a civil war. One group, led by Eamon de Valera, wanted complete independence from Great Britain and union with Northern Ireland, while the other group, led by Michael Collins, supported the 1921 treaty: this time, the Irish were at war with each other.¹²² The majority of the Dáil supported the treaty but the majority of the IRA and the Cumann na mBan members did not.¹²³ The Roman Catholic Church, neutral at first, later leaned towards acceptance of the treaty to

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 262, 264. Countess de Markievicz was sentenced to two years of hard labour for her continued association with Fianna Éireann, a banned group.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 264, 265.

¹¹⁹ Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 178. This act divided the island into two parts. It gave some powers of self-government to the Irish but stated both parts of Ireland were to remain loyal to Great Britain and that an oath of allegiance must be taken by the government.

¹²⁰ Matthews, *Dissidents* 44.

¹²¹ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 265. O'Hegarty used this term for women involved in the civil war, but I think it describes feminist activist women during all of the conflicts between 1913 and 1923.

¹²² Matthews, *Dissidents*, 22.

¹²³ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 246.

avoid bloodshed.¹²⁴ Pro-treaty Collins took leadership of the country and the British army vacated Ireland.¹²⁵ A planned election for June 16, 1922 put women's suffrage back on the political agenda: women wanted the same voting rights as men.¹²⁶ The pro-treaty supporters won the majority of seats and formed the provisional government of the Irish Free State and the Republican movement splintered.¹²⁷

The 1921 treaty split the ranks of the Cumann na mBan; most members were strongly against its terms and allied themselves with the anti-treaty IRA and a new political party, the Cumann na Poblachta (Republic of Ireland Party).¹²⁸ There was a dispute over who should use the Cumann na mBan name and, stubbornly, these women, regardless of their loyalties, operated under the same name.¹²⁹ Things got very heated when men of the anti-treaty faction in Dublin exerted military force against the authority of the Irish Free State government housed in Dublin's Four Courts building with a display of open conflict which lasted a week.¹³⁰ Allied with the "Rories" were the women of the third Cumann na mBan who became involved in carrying dispatches, arms and ammunition from place to place and organizing food services for the men and operating first aid stations because hostilities were escalating.¹³¹ The Countess de Markievicz, strongly anti-treaty and representing the Irish Citizen Army, used an ambulance to courier arms.¹³²

Hostilities broke out in other parts of Ireland and women were involved in war again. In Blessington, twenty-four women of the Cumann na mBan assisted the IRA and Irish Free Army; they

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 249. There was a symbolic act of handing over the keys to Dublin Castle, the seat of the British government to Collins.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹²⁷ Matthews, *Renegades*, 308.

¹²⁸ Matthews, *Dissidents*, 17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21. According to Matthews, (17), Jenny Wyse-Power and Louise Gavan Duffy formed a new party, the Irish Freedom Committee, a pro-treaty organization.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19. Rory O'Connor led the charge and his followers were called "the Rories."

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 23.

used the name "Red Cross" to signify that they should receive special immunity while carrying out their first aid duties.¹³³ By September 5, 1922, there was a full-scale civil war during which women became targets for prosecution if they were caught.¹³⁴ Cumann na mBan members were involved in IRA intelligence operations. Some of their work involved gathering and passing information requiring them to cycle long distances, sometimes at night and with no lights on their bicycles.¹³⁵ Often they were given the dangerous job of protecting arms dumps because, if caught, the Irish Free State military would not execute women.¹³⁶ Some women had impressive war records: Elizabeth Maguire took part in twenty-eight raids, attacks, and ambushes and was involved in handling and transporting arms.¹³⁷ Cumann na mBan was involved with spreading Republican propaganda and arranging funerals for deceased IRA members.¹³⁸ At funerals it became a common procedure for Cumann na mBan to act as pall bearers, fire weapons in graveside gun salutes, and even organize paying for funeral expenses.¹³⁹ Their members were very visible; they marched in Republican parades ahead of the military.¹⁴⁰ The social outreach of this benevolent group operated under a new title, the 'irregular' Irish Republican Prisoners' Dependents' Fund (IIRPDF), an outlawed organization that afforded the opportunity for imprisonment, if caught.¹⁴¹

¹³³ Mathews, *Dissidents*, 25. This organization should not be confused with the International Red Cross Organization. They used the name as a ruse on occasion deceiving the enemy about their activities.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26, 28. Countess de Marklevicz, a visible campaigner for the IRA and president of the Cumann na mBan, fled to Scotland.

Ryan, "Drunken Tans," 79. Male republicans were executed if caught, but women were treated differently.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34, 35.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35. During the civil war, they came to even more prominence in the life of Ireland especially after the funeral of hero Cathal Brugha (July 7, 1922) where his widow had the Cumann na mBan form an honour guard for his body.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 39, 40. The organization that supported the families of men on active service in the Irish forces by raising money during the earlier War of Independence now raised money in a variety of ways: whist drives, tea parties, food and clothing drives.

Quasi-Peace and Prisons: 1923

Despite cessation of hostilities on April 30, 1923, after nine months of war, the 'Furies' who still supported the IRA rebels continued to show resistance by disrespecting authority after their release from internment.¹⁴² The government enacted the Coercion Act to deal with this situation and more 'Furies' were imprisoned.¹⁴³ Prison conditions were harsh and protests such as hunger strikes were common.¹⁴⁴ Maude Gonne and Charlotte Desparde organized the Women's Prisoners' Defence League to protect imprisoned women of anti-treaty leanings. They held public meetings where they criticized the prison system while the prisoners, themselves, organized a prisoner's council in jail.¹⁴⁵ The church attempted to wield its power by withholding the sacraments from the incarcerated women, but the ever resourceful prisoners figured out their own system of prayers and rituals.¹⁴⁶ By early 1924, most of the 645 Republican women political prisoners whose sentences ranged from a few days to 1 ½ years were released.¹⁴⁷

After the Civil War, the Cumann na mBan membership was drastically reduced, yet members became instrumental in dealing with the unemployment issues that followed the war. They tried to help the single working girls who did not qualify for funding from relief organizations by starting a clothing factory and a poultry farm, but both ventures failed.¹⁴⁸ Cumann na mBan branches dwindled, "apathy was endemic" and many remaining members melded with the IRA and the new Fianna Fáil party

¹⁴² Matthews, *Dissidents*, 44. The Irish Free State army took charge of the country in June/July. Jail room was needed for the influx of male Republican prisoners and thus the women were released to make room.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45, 46. There were no female prison attendants.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 54, 57, 292, 293. Between November 1922 and November 1923 there were 70 hunger strikes; the longest recorded was 35 days. The women smashed up their jail cells, refused to keep the common areas of the jail clean, and were punished by having their few privileges removed.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 47, 56.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10, 86, 150. They were held in Kilmainham Jail, Mount Joy Prison, and the converted North Dublin Union Workhouse.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 157-158.

(Soldiers of Destiny).¹⁴⁹ Cumann na mBan, by 1923, had become strictly a military auxiliary and ceased to be part of a movement for women's interests.¹⁵⁰

Conclusion: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back.

Gaining the vote, albeit with some restrictions, in 1918, did not guarantee Irish women political equality with men. In 1922, after persistent lobbying all Irish women over twenty-one could vote, not just the ones owning property.¹⁵¹ The suffragists' activist background was useful in the struggles with Irish independence but it is obvious that militarism and war dominated all other movements.

Following the civil war, Mother Church reminded society that "women's place was in the home," and, as a result, gender affected how women were treated in Irish society from that time forward.¹⁵² In 1924, the government actually consulted the church before drafting its next constitution and because of that influence women's rights were "systematically eroded" by enacting many restrictions.¹⁵³ It is apparent that women backed away from their plans due to the influence of the church.

Recent scholarship in the field of women's involvement in armed conflict identifies that Irish Republican feminists had put up a strong position during the long struggle of war and conflict in Ireland. They showed their mettle, diverted their energies to fight for Irish independence, and suffered the consequences in order to do it. These brave, outspoken women, left out of the history books, were very much present in the making of history although it was the male "warriors" who received attention.¹⁵⁴ However, in spite of the fact that they had a brief presence in the new government of Ireland and on the

¹⁴⁹ Matthews, *Dissidents*, 11, 162, 189.

¹⁵⁰ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 168.

¹⁵¹ Ryan and Ward, *Irish Women and the Vote*, xxi.

¹⁵² Coogan, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*, 168. De Valera's Fianna Fáil party created a smaller-decision making cabinet that excluded Markievicz.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 171, 172. For example, one RC clergyman suggested that "the employment of wives or mothers in factories or outside their own household should be strictly limited by legislation."

Mary E. Daley, "Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-39: The Interaction between Economics and Ideology." *Journal of Women's History*, 6/ 4/ and 7/1 (Winter/Spring 1995), 22. The new government legislated restrictions on women's rights to divorce and access to contraception, for example.

¹⁵⁴ Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 142. See Appendix A. [Poem by Brian Moore]

international scene representing their country in the peace process, feminists lost their influence to be active participants in Irish politics when the Republican movement fell apart.¹⁵⁵ In the end, women were noticeably absent from leadership roles in the new Republican government: their political influence did not survive in that time period.¹⁵⁶ The old power structures of male authority exerted by the church and society placed women in their traditional gender roles again.

¹⁵⁵ Matthews, *Renegades*, 280-281. Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Daley, "Women In the Irish Free State," 99. Daley states that a few women got Dáil positions but not related to their abilities, but because of their relationship to dead war heroes.

¹⁵⁶ Benton, "Women Disarmed," 166.

Appendix A
Invisible Women
By Brian Moore

**For he sings of the bold Fenian men and
the boys of the old brigade
What about the women who stood there too?
when history was made?
Ireland, Mother Ireland with your freedom-loving sons,
did your daughters run and hide at the sound of guns?
Or did they have some part in the fight
and why does everybody try to keep them out of sight?**

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