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The Forgotten Role of Women Insurgents in The 1916 Rising

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The Women of 1916

War is normally spoken of in the exclusively masculine sense – particularly by those with no experience of combat. Historical accounts of war tend to describe conflict almost solely in terms of male participation as combatants - thus reinforcing the myth of combat as an exclusively male preserve.

In a similar vein – despite the de facto role that women have always played in war and combat - the current debate around our commemoration of the Easter Rising consists of a highly gendered discussion on reclaiming a legitimate remembrance of this problematic event from certain 'men' of violence who would no doubt purport to trace a direct lineage to the 'men' of 1916 or even the 'men' of 1798.

The almost uniform references in this debate to the 'men' of 1916 masks the direct role – as combatants - that women played in the liberation of the state. In the current debate on the true meaning of the impending 1916 commemoration ceremonies, it is imperative - for our fullest understanding of the true significance of the Easter Rising - to acknowledge the role that women played in it.

Contemporary accounts suggest that up to ninety women participated in the city-wide rebellion of Easter 1916. Sixty or so were members of Cumann na mBan. Established in 1913 by a female committee, the constitution of Cumann na mBan – aside from a comprehensive commitment to an equality agenda – contained explicit references to the use of force by arms against crown forces in Ireland. Under its constitution, the primary aim of the organisation was to 'Advance the cause of Irish liberty' and 'To teach its members First Aid, Drill, Signalling and Rifle Practice in order to aid the men of Ireland'.

Weapons training became an integral part of Cumann na mBan's core activities. For example, in addition to the rifle training mentioned in their constitution, documents held at Military Archives in Dublin show Cumann na mBan members including a Ms. Lily O' Connor to have been 'highly proficient' in the use of a wide range of weapons including Webley, Colt and Smith and Wesson revolvers.

On the day of the rising, forty such women – including Winifred Carney who arrived armed with both a Webley revolver and a typewriter– entered the GPO with their male counterparts. By nightfall, women insurgents were established in all of the major rebel strongholds throughout the city – bar one. Eamon de Valera, located in Boland's Mill had no women under his command. According to some sources, de Valera steadfastly refused, in defiance of the orders of 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'.

The women in the rebel garrisons fought alongside the men and were not confined – as is commonly believed – to nursing duties or other 'feminine' pursuits such as making tea and sandwiches for the fighting men.

Constance Markiewicz for example, - armed with a pistol - during the opening phase of the hostilities shot a policeman in the head near St. Stephen's Green. Later, Markiewicz along with other female fighters - after a day of carrying out sniper attacks on British troops in the city centre - demanded that they be allowed to bomb the Shelbourne Hotel. Their superior officer, Michael Malinn refused on the grounds

that the risks to the women were 'too great'. According to contemporary accounts, Markiewicz's indignant reply was that the Republican Proclamation stated that women were now equal and that they had the same right to risk their lives as the men. Mallin relented and a number of women were shot en route to the Shelbourne. In a related incident, volunteer Margaretta Keogh was shot dead outside the South Dublin Union.

Margaret Skinnider, a Glasgow schoolteacher who had heard about the rising through suffragette contacts traveled to Ireland during her Easter holidays to join the armed struggle on the basis that it promised equal status for women under the Republican proclamation – a revolutionary idea at the time. She arrived – miraculously – by bicycle and managed to join the garrison at the Royal College of Surgeons. Later, on being shot and captured by British troops near Harcourt Street, she was imprisoned and sentenced to death by the military authorities. Later, whilst on hunger strike her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. She was subsequently released and returned to Scotland to write a memoir of her activities entitled 'Doing My Bit For Ireland'.

Another sizeable contingent of women, mostly members of the Irish Citizens Army also fought during the rising. The Irish Citizens Army expressly committed its female members to combat during the insurrection and women from this organisation played a vital role in a failed attack on Dublin Castle – from the rebel's point of view, the most potent symbol of British occupation and oppression.

Under the command of Sean Connolly, a contingent of ten men and nine women – armed with revolvers – launched an attack on the gates of Dublin Castle. Failing to gain entry, they fell back and occupied City Hall. Later, 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 and seemed at odds as to what to do with the women they encountered in the various garrisons throughout the city. Initially, the British military authorities simply asked the women to 'go home'. They refused. Many, like Kathleen Lynn were sentenced to death. Those sentenced to death went on hunger strike and succeeded in having their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. Eventually, they were released. Kathleen Lynn – the first female medical doctor to be elected a resident doctor to the Adelaide Hospital – subsequently went on to found St. Ultan's Hospital in Dublin's city centre where she initiated Ireland's first immunisation programme for children.

As the rising ground to a halt under a ferocious British onslaught, women all over the city surrendered with their male counterparts. In the GPO, Pearse selected Elizabeth Farrell to present the surrender to the British authorities. Rose Mc Namara, the officer in command of the female detachment at the Marrowbone Lane Distillery 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. Miss Mc Namara who led the contingent went to the British OC (Officer Commanding) and explained they were part of the rebel contingent and were surrendering with the rest'.

In the years that followed, women played a high profile role in the fledgling Republic. Six women deputies were elected to the first Dail 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 Fein courts between 1919 and 1921. All of these developments for women – revolutionary when compared with the lot of women elsewhere in Europe at the time – were consistent with the renewed and newly stated aims of Cumann na mBan. In 1921, Cumann na mBan reiterated at its annual convention that its primary aim was 'To follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the nation'.

However, as the country descended into civil war in the early 1920's, the newly founded Free State reverted to traditional Catholic values. The women of Cumann na mBan found that their ongoing anti-treaty revolutionary activities – already well outside the prescribed gender roles of the time – were now deemed not only 'unseemly' by a deeply conservative Irish establishment but also a significant threat to the security of the state.

A London newspaper at the time, 'The Sunday Graphic' published an article carrying the headline 'Irish Gunwoman 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 government of the Free State banned Cumann na mBan in January 1923 and opened up Kilmainham Jail as a detention prison for 'suspect' women. Minutes of the Executive Council of the Senate and Army Intelligence reports of the period – held at Military Archives – identify female dissidents at the time as a primary threat to the security of the state. The then Minister for Home Affairs described the female dissidents 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. Some remained defiant. In 1922, Maire Comerford found herself inside the Four Courts which was being shelled by the newly formed Free State Army. She later recounted the manner in which 'The building was shelled through and enveloped in flames. It was time for all of us to leave or surrender. I rode off through the smoke and the ruined buildings on my bicycle. I had stayed almost to the end and had cheated the enemy'.

Comerford was subsequently arrested for her part in a plot to kidnap the then Taoiseach, W T Cosgrave. She was shot whilst trying to escape. She resorted to hunger strike and was eventually released. A final handful of women continued the struggle single-handedly. Armed with a revolver a Ms Eithne Coyle held up the evening train at Creeslough and set fire to all of the newspapers on board. For a month she continued hijacking and burning trains.

In order to facilitate these ongoing revolutionary and political activities, Cumann na mBan operated city-wide crèches to release women for active duty. In documents held at Military Archives in Dublin, a Free State army officer describes raiding a 'baby club' at 21, Werburgh Street Dublin, where 'seditious' papers were seized. Other papers seized by the military authorities at the time reveal a great deal about the wider military activities of female volunteers. One letter from the Intelligence Department of the IRA – 1st Northern Division – to female 'Operative No. 23' states, 'Girls can get any amount of information from most men. Get them going. Don't think there is anything ignoble about army intelligence work. There is not – decidedly not. No army can move an inch or win the slightest victory without it. Help us move miles. Help us win victories. Realise your own importance – we

realize it and rely on you'.

However, as the 1920s wore on, the role that women played in the political life of the nation steadily waned. 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. Their contribution to the liberation of the state remains largely forgotten. There are no statues on O'Connell Street dedicated to the memory of any of these women and their collective contribution to the formation of this state. In 2006, the role that women played in the rising remains largely unrecognized in an ongoing debate on the legacy of the 'men of 1916'.

With women effectively airbrushed from historical accounts of the rising and their sacrifices for the state routinely omitted in discussions around Irish identity and citizenship, it is perhaps unsurprising – as has been highlighted in recent EU-wide research – that Irish women still remain underrepresented in all walks of Irish life from the houses of the Oireachtas to the judiciary, the public service and across many Irish industries. Given the vital role that Irish women played in the armed struggle of 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence and Civil War it is particularly vexing to see Irish women remain seriously underrepresented among the ranks of the Irish Defence Forces. By revisiting the role that Irish women played in the Easter Rising, we may gain some insights into the roles that women and other marginalized citizens play – or are discouraged from playing – in contemporary Irish society.