

'at once the boldest and most unmanageable revolutionaries'

Stephanie Mann remembers
the women of Ireland's
fight for independence

The story of Ireland's nationalist movement is awash with the names of men who are valorised as either heroes or villains. However you view them—and whatever your political sympathies—men such as Padraig Pearse, Michael Collins and Eamon de Valera are assured of their place in history. But what of the women who fought alongside? Women including Countess Constance Markievicz, Grace Gifford Plunkett, Maud Gonne and others all had roles within the movement and became important in their own right. Despite personal losses, imprisonment and danger, these women fought for their beliefs with courage and commitment.

As early as 1900, a group of Irish republican women formed *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) as an independent and autonomous organisation to campaign for a free

influential newspaper *Bean na hÉireann* (Woman of Ireland). *Bean na hÉireann*, edited by actor and activist Helena Molony, reported on feminist as well as republican issues and became 'the ladies' paper that all the young men read'.

By 1914, the call for independence and 'Home Rule' was gaining support and becoming louder. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (a small and secretive group ready to use force to achieve an independent Ireland) had been infiltrating nationalist organisations for years. In 1913 the Brotherhood had become involved in forming the Irish Volunteers, an organisation committed to fighting for independence and acting as a counter to the new Ulster Volunteer Force. Both groups quickly began to arm themselves.

Although at the first meeting of the Irish Volunteers its leader Eoin MacNeill stated that there would be 'work for

adopted military titles, wore uniform (which they often made themselves), undertook military drills and trained in first aid. By the end of 1915, there were *Cumann na mBan* branches across Ireland and *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* became part of the organisation.

Members of *Cumann na mBan* played a crucial role in events in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1916. On this day, in what was to be remembered as the Easter Rising, a large and co-ordinated contingent of Volunteers and others seized key buildings. A group of men, led by Padraig Pearse and union leader James Connolly, took over the General Post Office and from there proclaimed the Irish Republic. Both Pearse and Connolly supported the deployment of women. Speaking the previous year, Connolly had said that 'militant women...are re-establishing a sane and perfect balance that makes more possible a well-ordered Ireland'. What's more, the Easter Proclamation was revolutionary not just in its call for Irish independence, but also in its inclusion of women. The Proclamation made an appeal to Irishwomen as well as to Irishmen and promised 'equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens'.

Women were involved throughout the lead up to the Easter Rising and during its execution. They made munitions, communicated with the various outposts in Dublin and beyond, and nursed the sick and wounded. Some also took up arms themselves. Women were crucial in the carrying of

'The Easter Proclamation was also revolutionary in including women as citizens'

Irish state. It aimed to promote Irish independence and culture while at the same time denouncing British influence. One of its founders was Maud Gonne, a life-long political activist who is mostly remembered today as W.B. Yeats' muse and lover. The women of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* staged plays in Gaelic, hosted children's parties and, from 1908, published an

the women'; women were excluded from his organisation. In response they set up their own. In 1914 the *Cumann na mBan* (The Irishwomen's Council) was established as an auxiliary force to work alongside the Volunteers. The *Cumann na mBan* was militaristic in its approach and its members were fully prepared to take up arms and fight alongside the men. The women



Countess Constance Markievicz in uniform holding a gun, c1915. By permission of Multitext Project in Irish History, University College Cork, <http://multitext.ucc.ie>

messages and food between garrisons. One girl carried messages hidden in her plaits, another ate a dispatch after being caught by the British and searched. These women often faced huge risks; once they left the relative safety of their garrison it was always possible that they

darn, march and shoot, to obey orders with our brothers at arms'. Eamon de Valera disapproved of women being involved in the fighting however, and later remarked that women were 'at once the boldest and most unmanageable revolutionaries'.

When the Easter Rising came to an end

'One girl carried messages hidden in her plaits'

could be walking into hostile fire.

Women came to offer their support for the Rising from all over Dublin. Many were exposed on the frontline, for example during the bloody clash at St Stephen's Green. Here the flamboyant and uniformed Countess Constance Markievicz was appointed second in command and wielded a large pistol to encourage the men. A group of women cleared the Green of civilians and tended to the wounded. St Stephen's Green was one of the last areas to surrender to the British. Helena Molony, stationed at City Hall, reported simply that 'part of our military duty was to knit and

after five days of conflict it was a woman, Elizabeth O'Farrell, who was given the dangerous task of surrendering to the British. O'Farrell had been nursing the men, including the severely-wounded Connolly, in the General Post Office and had disobeyed the order to leave when the rebels' position became untenable. At first she was treated as a spy by the British and held for nearly two hours. Eventually she was released to make her way to rebel battalions around battle-torn Dublin with the surrender documents from Pearse. This was an incredibly difficult journey, as she had to cross several firing lines in

Countess Constance Markievicz (1868-1927)



Constance, born Constance Gore-Booth to a family of wealthy Sligo landowners, had achieved her title upon marriage to a Polish count who she had met while they were both art students in Paris. When the couple moved to Dublin, Constance quickly became involved in the nationalist movement. She joined *Sinn Féin* and *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) in 1908 and became a regular contributor to its newspaper, *Bean na hÉireann*, Ireland's first women's nationalist publication.

By 1911 Constance had been voted onto the executive committee of *Sinn Féin* and *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*. In the same year she was arrested for the first time for protesting against George V's visit to Dublin. She was also increasingly attracted to socialism and offered strong support to the Irish Women Workers' Union and other trades unions. However

her passion was for Irish independence and she did not shirk from advocating armed resistance against the British. During the Easter Rising of 1916 she was second-in-command of a battalion of rebel troops at St Stephen's Green where, after nearly a week of intense fighting, she and her fellow combatants eventually surrendered. Constance was sentenced to death for her part in the Rising, along with other rebel leaders, but this was commuted to penal servitude for life on account of her gender. She served just over a year of her sentence and was released in June 1917 – only to be rearrested the following year on suspicion of involvement in a *Sinn Féin* plot.

While in prison Constance stood as a *Sinn Féin* candidate in the general election of 1918 and was duly returned as MP for Dublin's St Patrick's division. In this way, Countess Constance Markievicz became the first woman elected to the British parliament. As was *Sinn Féin* policy however, she refused to take her seat. The following year, on her release from gaol, Constance was appointed secretary for labour in the *Dáil Éireann* (the first Irish parliament). However this institution was proscribed

by the British and she spent much of her time on the run. More periods of arrest and imprisonment followed as Constance continued to agitate for independence. She was fiercely against the Anglo-Irish treaty and worked to oppose it through *Cumann na mBan*, the republican women's organisation of which she became president. Constance lost her seat in the general *Dáil* election of 1922 but was elected to the Free State parliament the following year. However she refused to take the oath of allegiance to the King (as did other elected republicans) and so was disqualified from taking her seat.

Constance was noted for her flamboyant and larger-than-life personality and for her like of weaponry and military uniform (she wore her *Cumann na mBan* uniform in the *Dáil*). Her republican passion did not diminish with age. She joined *Fianna Fáil* in 1926, soon after its establishment, and stood successfully as its candidate in the general election of 1927, but died in Dublin the same year.

order to complete her mission: 'I had to take my life in my hands several times... a man crossing the bridge about half a yard behind me was shot.'

'I do wish your lot would have the decency to shoot me'

Pearse had asked the women to leave when the time for surrender was imminent. According to a lecture given by Eithne Ni Chumhaill, president of *Cumann na mBan* in 1933, he 'briefly thanked them for their great help during the week and said that when the history of that fight would be written, the foremost page in the annals should be given to the women of Dublin.'

Pearse, Connolly and other leaders of the Easter Rising were arrested (including Countess Markievicz) and, along with seventy-seven *Cumann na mBan* members, were sent to gaol in Dublin. Conditions in prison were not as bad as they might have been.

The women were allowed to exercise together, socialise in a communal room and have visitors. However some of the women (including Markievicz) were

soon transferred to gaols in England to serve their sentences. While the men were all executed within a few days of each other, no woman received the death penalty – much to the chagrin of the Countess who was furious to have been spared execution on account of her gender. When her sentence of death was commuted to penal servitude for life she responded 'I do wish your lot would have the decency to shoot me.' Markievicz served fourteen months of her sentence before being released in the general amnesty of June 1917.

The activities of *Cumann na mBan* continued after the Easter Rising. Their first job was to destroy any papers that

would incriminate people further. The women also continued to care for the sick and injured, and to collect money to support the families of men killed, executed or imprisoned as a result of the Rising. With the loss of their men many of these families had lost their only means of income. Several of the widows, mothers and sisters of executed leaders now transferred some of their energies to the collection and distribution of aid. In the autumn of 1917 these women were voted to the leadership of *Cumann na mBan* and became potent symbols of the struggle for freedom. They became a very visible part of the political process by campaigning for *Sinn Féin* in General Elections. *Cumann na mBan* also joined the protests against the conscription of forces in Ireland for World War One. Members refused to fill job vacancies created by men going to war and signed petitions against the motion. As the fight for independence continued into the 1920s, so the women sustained their political activities. One notable example

Maud Gonne (1866-1953)

Maud Gonne's father was a Captain in the British Army and she was born in Surrey. However the family moved to Dublin when her father was posted there for a while and Maud developed a deep love for the country and became an ardent Irish nationalist.

After her parents died, Maud inherited a trust fund and made use of her more than adequate financial resources to live as she pleased. She returned to Dublin (although also established homes in France) and quickly became a part of that city's nationalist circles. Maud joined the revolutionary Irish National Alliance and then the Irish Socialist Republican Party in 1897. Much of her efforts at this time were spent in promoting the cause of Irish nationalism abroad, particularly in America. In 1900 Maud was a co-founder of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) and helped to establish the women's nationalist newspaper *Bean na hÉireann* a few years later. During the First World War she served as a nurse in French military hospitals. Her estranged husband, John MacBride, was executed after the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and this prompted Maud to renew her

passion for Irish nationalism and hatred of British policy. Although she accepted hesitantly the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, she soon changed her mind after the civil war began. She led demonstrations on behalf of political prisoners and supported the IRA.

Maud created a mythic Ireland for herself and romanticised the Irish and their struggle. In his autobiography, Yeats describes her grasp of the situation as 'melodrama with Ireland for blameless hero'. Yeats was enamored with Maud since he first met her in the late 1880s and was smitten with her 'luminous' beauty and tall, graceful looks. She refused to marry him, although they remained close for many years. She joined the magical Order of the Golden Dawn alongside him, and later his Celtic Mystical Order. Yeats wrote more than eighty poems about Maud during their friendship and today, despite her political campaigning, she is mostly remembered for her role as his muse.



Portrait of Maud Gonne by Sarah Purser (1890). Image: Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, by permission of Dr Michael Purser.

Grace Gifford Plunkett (1888-1955)



Grace Gifford is remembered for her marriage to Joseph Plunkett on the eve of his execution by firing squad in May 1916. He had been one of the leaders of the Easter Rising and

had signed the rebels' Proclamation of the Republic. Although she is remembered as a 'tragic bride' in the popular Irish song *Grace*, she is far more than just that.

Grace enjoyed a comfortable Dublin upbringing, had trained as an artist and was forging a career as a cartoonist when she became involved in nationalist circles. She was elected to the *Sinn Féin* executive in 1917 and helped the campaign by producing political images. During the Irish civil war that followed the establishment of the Free State Grace was gaoled, as were other republicans who held out for complete separation from Britain. Grace was impoverished for much of her life (she never remarried) and scratched a living from her political and other illustrations. In 1932 Eamon de Valera's *Fianna Fáil* party awarded her a small pension. When she died in Dublin in 1955 she was buried with full military honours.

Elizabeth O'Farrell (1884-1957)



Elizabeth O'Farrell is best known for her contributions to the Easter rising of 1916, particularly

for delivering the rebels' surrender to the British.

Elizabeth had trained as a nurse and midwife and was a committed member of the women's republican auxiliary unit, *Cumann na mBan*, which worked alongside the Irish Volunteers. On the morning of Easter Monday 1916, Elizabeth was among the group who stormed Dublin's General Post Office building and proclaimed an Irish republic. This building came under sustained attack from the British for almost a week and was all but destroyed. The decision was made to surrender. The last group fled to a nearby shop and Elizabeth was given the dangerous task of communicating with the British (during a previous attempt the messenger had been gunned down on emerging from the building). Elizabeth walked out of the building

under the protection of a white flag. After being suspected initially of being a spy, she was eventually sent back to the rebels with a demand from the British for unconditional surrender. They agreed, but had to pass on the message to all the other rebel groups holed-up at different locations throughout the city. Elizabeth did this job too. She travelled the city, including to areas where sniping was still ongoing, persuading rebel commanders that the surrender was for real and that they were ordered to lay down their arms and gather in O'Connell Street to await their fate.

Elizabeth spent some time in prison after the Rising but, as Countess Markievicz, was spared the death penalty due to her sex and valour. She remained committed to the Republican cause throughout her life and died in County Wicklow in 1957.

was the artist Grace Gifford Plunkett who produced propaganda and posters for *Sinn Féin* election candidates. She was the widow of one of the executed leaders of the Easter Rising, Joseph Plunkett, and had married him in Kilmainham Gaol only hours before his death.

From around 1919 the Irish Volunteers had begun calling themselves The Irish Republican Army (IRA). In addition to political campaigning, the women of *Cumann na mBan* supported the IRA 'flying columns' in their attacks on British soldiers. The women provided safe houses for fighters and weapons, as well as food, clothing and extras such as whiskey and cigarettes. They also nursed injured and sick men. By helping the IRA, these women were risking their lives and their reputations. If the British, particularly the rogue Black and Tans (soldiers sent from England as a special unit to assist the overwhelmed Royal Ulster Constabulary) discovered their activities, the women could suffer harsh retribution. For example, one girl suspected by the Black and Tans of

helping IRA men had her hair hacked off roughly with a knife. The members of *Cumann na mBan* also acted as couriers between different units of rebels in various counties and as lookouts and arms smugglers. Some also acted as spies; one woman dated a member of the British Auxiliaries as a way of gaining information, and another worked for the British and passed information from the inside. As before, if caught women were often sent to prison for their activities.

With the signing in 1921 of the Anglo-Irish Treaty that would give shape to modern Ireland, *Cumann na mBan* was split in two. This Treaty would lead to civil war in 1922-23 and see men and women, who had previously fought together for independence, fighting each other over the issue of limited Home Rule (the Irish Free State). Some women who approved the Treaty broke off into a separate group, *Cumann na Saoirse* (Freedom Group), whilst *Cumann na mBan* remained anti-Treaty.

Countess Markievicz again signed up for action and became a sniper. Maude Gonne tried to broker a peace between the two opposing sides, but to no avail. The homes of *Cumann na mBan* members were raided on a regular basis and some women were imprisoned for their activities. They often went on hunger strike (with some dying as a result) while *Cumann na mBan* held vigils outside the prison gates. Civil war agitation began to subside by the middle of 1923 and the Irish Free State moved to ban *Cumann na mBan*. After this, membership declined and the group became an underground institution. This organisation continues to exist to this day and is classed as a terrorist group by the British government due to its traditional links to the IRA.

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