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**CUMANN NA MBAN 1913-26
Redressing the Balance**

by

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Cumann na mBan 1913-1926.
Redressing the balance.

Cumann na mBan was formally inaugurated in April 1914. Discussion on an informal level about starting such an organisation had been taking place from November 1913. The name Cumann na mBan was translated at this time in the English language as The Irishwomen's Council.

An investigation of the Primary sources available on Cumann na mBan indicates that the histories previously written do not present a balanced picture of this organisation between the years' 1913-1926. The word balance is used here in the sense that previous histories of the organisation tend to be of unbalanced consensus.

The sub title of this work is Redressing the Balance. This subtitle is the kernel of the findings of this thesis. The story of Cumann na mBan is complex. It required a comprehensive reading of available Primary source material and a study of the Secondary sources to read what has been previously written about the organisation..

Cumann na mBan like Sinn Fein, the Irish Volunteers and the IRA was an integral part of the Nationalist Republican movement from 1913 to 1926. The general history books tend to treat Cumann na mBan as a minor aspect of the activities during this period.

Feminist history has isolated the story of Cumann na mBan from the events of their time. It has contributed to marginalising the history of this Nationalist Republican organisation. This has created in historic writing a simplistic imbalance in the way Cumann na mBan is perceived. The women are viewed as either victims or icons. They were neither. The history of the rank and file of Cumann na mBan has not been written.

Somewhere between these two types of study there is a way of redressing this imbalance. A reassessment of Cumann na mBan can be undertaken. This involves a through study of the Primary and Secondary Source material. This thesis will show precisely the results of the aforementioned method of study on this issue.

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Chronology

1900-1913

Inginidhe na hEireann was founded in 1900 it is considered to be the first women's revolutionary movement in Ireland. Many of its members joined Cumann na mBan in 1915.

1913-1915

Cumann na mBan was founded in 1913 but officially organised in public in April 1914. It was run by an executive. It was founded as an ally to the Irish Volunteers. In 1915 there was a split in the organisation at the same time the Irish Volunteers split over the issue of joining the British Army in World War One. After the reorganisation in 1915 the constitution was changed to enable them have a president. Jennie Wyse Power was the first president of Cumann na mBan.

1916-1917

After the Rising of 1916 the membership of the organisation grew. The new members were more militant than the founding members of Cumann na mBan. Countess Markievicz becomes a member and is elected President in November 1917. A good number of the women were involved with Sinn Fein which was the political wing of the Republican Nationalist movement.

1918-1919

Cumann na mBan became involved in the anti conscription movement. They also took part in the work canvassing for Sinn Fein candidates in the 1918 general election. In 1919 the First Dail was created. Countess Markievicz was appointed Minister for Labour by Eamonn de Valera.

This government was an illegal assembly. All the ministers of this Dail were not strictly bona fida state representatives. Cumann na mBan became involved in the Republican court system.

1919-1921

Cumann na mBan become immersed in the War of Independence.

1921-1922

A split in Cumann na mBan took place after disagreement over the Articles of Treaty signed in London. Cumann na mBan take republican anti treaty side. Civil War begins in June 1922.

1922-1923

Cumann na mBan members are imprisoned. They became totally immersed in the Civil War.

1924-1926

Cumann na mBan was always a minority organisation regarding the female population of Ireland. The membership dropped dramatically in the post war period, and never recovered.

In 1925 the Countess resigned as President of Cumann na mBan and Eithne Coyle was elected President. Sigle Humphries was elected the Vice President.

These two women became involved in Cumann na mBan after 1916. They would be regarded as representative of the more militant Republican separatist aspects of nationalism. The organisation continued to exist after 1926 though always small numerically.

Roll Call

The purpose of this roll call is to show at a glance the names of all the women mentioned in this work. All of these women were not members of Cumann na mBan but the majority were. Except for Lady Aberdeen they were involved in the Nationalist movement. By accident of name and alphabet Lady Aberdeen who was not a Nationalist is mentioned at the beginning. Jennie Wyse Power who involved in the Land League from the 1880's and the Nationalist movement comes last. The rank and file members fit between these two. Another reason the roll call has been compiled is to show a project thoroughly researched will unearth the histories of quite a number of Nationalist women.

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The Staff of Military Archive gave access to excellent source material. They were also kind to give me the time to discuss the Captured papers. I would like to offer a special word of thanks to Commandant Peter Young, Commandant Victor Laing, Sergeant Joseph White and Brendan Mahony.

My thanks to Richard Mullen for the maps. I would like to thank Brendan Halligan for the loan of his computer to work on this project. Thanks also to Teresa Mullen for proof reading the drafts of this work

Dedication

For my parents, Jane Matthews, John Matthews, and my daughter
Alyson Fortune

Abbreviations

GHQ	General Headquarters.
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRPDF	Irish Republican Prisoners Dependants Fund.
IV	Irish Volunteers
IVDP	Irish Volunteers Dependants Fund
NAVDF	National Aid and Volunteers Dependants Fund
NDU	North Dublin Union
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force.

Sources

Introduction

The research for this thesis was conducted by studying various categories of primary source material, much of it under-utilised. This material is not yet incorporated into the canon of contemporary history. There is a substantial literature on how official records of the state exclude women, thus making for the continuing academic invisibility. There are a whole range of alternative sources available. This material requires a method of study that is a combination of both resourcefulness and patience. Working with a whole host of fragmented sources in the hope that out of such a mosaic, will come an interesting and convincing interpretation of the past has been my intention in this study of Cumann na mBan.

University College Dublin Archive (UCDA), National Library, and Military Archive Cathal Brugha Barracks Dublin, were the main archive for material on Cumann na mBan. Kilmainham Gaol Museum was a good source for material though the amount of papers available there is small. However the most under-utilised and rewarding depository has been the Military Archive, where through the generous interest of the staff, access has been given to material previously not used.

This source was the first one consulted for this project. This project was originally begun as a history of Cumann na mBan during the Civil War 1922- 1923 using the Captured Papers as the main source. The reason for this was that the Captured Papers are a huge source of information on Cumann na mBan and how they operated as an organisation during this time. The study of the Captured Documents indicated to me that the history of Cumann na mBan written up to this

point does not reflect the women of this organisation. These histories do not tell us who they were, what political beliefs they held, and finally what were their aspirations were for Ireland. A question that must also be asked is how the women of Cumann na mBan seemingly disappeared for a while from history, to reappear in the history books of the 1970's as early twentieth feminists.

This indicated to me that a wide reading of the Primary and Secondary source material was important. This was necessary to try and understand the issues that emerged. At this point it became necessary to expand my inquiry into Cumann na mBan. This expansion was to change the original idea from a history of the Civil War years' 1922-1923. This change involved expanding my inquiry to write a history of Cumann na mBan from its inception in 1913 to 1926. This became necessary because in my opinion the history of the rank and file of Cumann na mBan has not been written.

Primary Sources

The Captured Documents in Military Archives are a descriptive list of documents or papers captured by the Free State authorities between 1921 and 1925.. The papers were taken from the captive personnel of Cumann Na mBan, the IRA, and Sinn Fein. There are also documents found in search operations. These search operations were in any premises suspected of being used by the subversives. Most of the papers relate to the Civil War period and they comprise of information passed between IRA General headquarters and Cumann Na mBan. The collection also contains documents relating to current political issues. Cumann Na mBan carried out surveys of public opinion about issues of the war. They also

documented the reactions of the civilian population to the actions taken by the combatants in the war.

The collection also includes a few documents dating back to 1919, the prelude to the War of Independence. The papers taken in raids were placed in the custody of the Intelligence Branch of the Free State Army. They recorded the name of each individual arrested with subversive documents. They also recorded the date and place of the capture of the documents. There are almost three hundred batches of documents in the Captured Documents. The name and address of the person found in charge of the papers is recorded with the number. For example the papers found on the premises of Miss Fitzpatrick at 16 Wexford Street Dublin are documented with her name, address date of capture and given the Lot number 119. There are over one hundred papers in this file. Each file is also called a batch of papers.

A batch can vary from just few papers to over two hundred papers. The Captured Papers is a single large collection, within this collection there are two hundred separate collections of papers. Each of these smaller collections ranges in size from one or two documents up to approximately three documents. The total number of documents within the total collection (Captured Papers) would number a few thousand. It was necessary to trawl through the whole collection of papers to develop a clear picture of the republican movement. The Captured Papers contain information about the IRA, and Sinn Fein as well as Cumann na mBan. Reading through this whole collection was the catalyst that enabled me to realise that the story of Cumann na mBan has not been written.

In 1923 a news paper the Eire The Irish Nation was launched by Cumann Na mBan to publicise the republican view of the war. It was a monthly publication. It ceased publication in late 1925. Every copy of this paper is available on microfilm in the National Library in Dublin. The paper gives a comprehensive view of what was happening within the republican side during the civil war.

Convention documents and debates

The convention documents of Cumann na mBan from 1914 to 1936 are available. The documents for every year were not available. The years I have unearthed from different locations in the archive material are for the years 1914, 1917, 1921, 1924, 1925, 1933, 1935, 1936. The debates of the conventions are available for the years 1921, 1915 and 1935. These three documents are interesting because the debates do not appear in the final official convention document. These official documents of the organisation help to balance the private papers.

Private Papers

The private papers studied are those of Eithne Coyle O Donnell, Mary McSwiney, Elizabeth Bloxham, Maire Comerford and the prison correspondence of Lily O Brennan and her sister Aine Ceannt. The papers of Eithne Coyle O Donnell are fairly extensive and they contain numerous statements made by individual members of Cumann na mBan. In 1969 Eithne canvassed these former members for their memories because she was contemplating writing the history of Cumann na mBan. For reasons unknown she did not write this history. Her papers are a rich source of information on the activities of the rank and file of Cumann na mBan. Some of the personal statements of the rank and file members can also be

found in Kilmainham Gaol Museum. Over the years; families of former members of Cumann na mBan donated photographs and other memorabilia to the museum. The papers of Eithne Coyle O Donnell are in the University College Dublin Archive (UCDA.) Eithne was from Falcarragh in Co. Donegal. She joined Cumann Na mBan in 1917. She was very active during the War of Independence. She was imprisoned by the British in Mountjoy Jail in 1920. During the period of the Civil War she was very active around the border area of Sligo and Donegal. Eithne was arrested by the Free State Forces and was imprisoned in Mountjoy Jail and in the North Dublin Union until after the war ended.

Eithne Coyle O Donnell became president of the organisation in 1926 and retained this position until 1941 when she tendered her resignation. Eithne has stated at the end of her memoir that, Sigle Humphries Vice President of Cumann Na mBan informed her that,

The executive never accepted my resignation, and decided to give me leave of absence. So it seems that I am still president of an organisation that no longer exists.¹

Mary Mc Swiney papers are comprehensive on all issues pertaining to the nationalist movement. I concentrated on the papers in the collection relating to Cumann na mBan. Most of these are administrative letters. Mary Mc Swiney was apparently a hoarder of papers because the administrative documents in her papers are comprehensive. She was based in Cork during the years 1913 to 1919 so the papers reflect that Cumann na mBan was not Dublin based

Elizabeth Bloxham was a founder member of Cumann na mBan. Her papers contribute a statement she made about her involvement in the organisation from 1914 until 1921. Her account is a valuable source that gives an account about how

¹ Eithne Coyle O Donnell University College Dublin (UCDA) p61

Cumann na mBan was spread around the country. Cumann na mBan was organised on a countrywide basis. The Rising in 1916 was concentrated in Dublin so therefore the accounts of Cumann na mBan written to date tend to concentrate on the activities of members in the Dublin region. The evidence of countrywide activity is fragmentary but nonetheless it does exist. Further study of these sources would elicit a clearer picture. Restriction on the length of this project does not allow me to pursue this particular aspect of Cumann na mBan except to state that the evidence does exist but requires a further thorough investigation.

Maire Comerford was a member of Cumann na mBan. She was from Wexford and became involved in Cumann na mBan around 1918. In 1919 she was employed as a secretary by Alice Stopford Green the historian, so she arrived in Dublin in the autumn of 1919. She worked for Alice Stopford Green until late 1921. Maire became involved in the anti treaty side in the Civil War 1922-23. She wrote a draft for a book called *Dangerous Ground* that was never published. This draft is in UCDA.

Lily O Brennan was interned by the Free State during the Civil War, her sister Aine was not interned. Their correspondence is a combination of private events in the lives of the two women, plus how the events of the Civil War affected them. Lily O Brennan kept a diary while in prison this diary is also in the papers. These four groups of Private papers are in University College Dublin Archive (UCDA).

Autobiographies

These primary sources range from personal reminiscences, to attempts to write a history of exactly what the individual writer believed they saw happening. The

bibliography indicates the books read within this genre. They range from propaganda to a genuine effort by some to give a balanced view of events. Autobiographies are sometimes works of self glorification and in some cases all the more interesting because of this. It makes very interesting study to see the processes by which people see themselves, justify past mistakes and attempt to set the record straight. However it was necessary use the autobiographies in conjunction with documentary evidence as a source to pin down some of their more dubious statements. Many of which are too rich to be ignored.

The convention documents and the debates on the conventions plus the Captured Documents enabled me to freely distinguish between the two genres.

Secondary Sources.

Cumann na mBan was an organisation that was an integral part of the Nationalist Republican movement. The secondary sources consulted for this work tends not to reflect this fact. As far as I can ascertain the writing of Republican Nationalist history experienced something of a boom in the 1930's. There is one exception to this. In 1924 the *Voice Of Ireland* was published. This was a large volume containing essays written by some well known and some less well known people who took the Free State side after 1921. It is an attempt at propaganda portraying positive aspects of Irish life. It deals with issues of religion, politics, the role of women, education and health in the Free State.

In 1931 Brian O Higgins an ardent Separatist Republican nationalist published the first edition of the *Wolfe Tone Annual*. This annual was an exercise in anti English and anti Free State propaganda. It ceased publication in 1966. Brian O Higgins had fought in the GPO during the Rising. He remained with the IRA after

the split 1921 and again in 1926. He was a prolific Republican writer and propagandist. Over the thirty-four years of the publication of the annual he had close contact with Cumann na mBan. He wrote in various editions of the annual the stories of the contributions of Cumann na mBan to the Republican cause.

R. M. Fox produced history books in the 1930's which are histories of events and personalities from the Anti Treaty perspective. They are a useful source because they discuss the IRA, Sinn Fein and Cumann na mBan as part of the history of the period under discussion.

R M Fox appears to have had a keen interest in the history of the women during this period. He integrated Republican women into the history books from 1916 to 1924. His book *Green Banners* (1938) does not exclude the contribution of women. He wrote *The history of the Irish Citizen Army* (1944) and here again he integrated the contribution of the women. During these years the history of Cumann na mBan was written in an integrated way and not in isolation from political events. From the middle of the 1940's as far as I can ascertain the writing about the women went into a demise. I can not find any explanation for this or enough evidence to attempt speculation. Nonetheless the point I want to make is that there was an effort to write history including women at this time.

The feminist history writing that began in the early 1970's in Ireland tends to isolate Cumann na mBan by discussing the organisation in isolation from contemporary events. Isolating the organisation from mainstream Irish life does an injustice to the story of Cumann na mBan. This writing created a history that appears to produce female victim. This victim is a one dimensional woman who was constantly fighting the male hegemony. This is a distortion of the story of these women. Cumann na mBan was set to fight the power of the British Empire. The

women who made up the membership of Cumann na mBan were not victims. This type of writing has created in history a distorted view of Cumann na mBan. The history of the rank and file of Cumann na mBan has not been written in the same way that it has been written about the IRA. Feminist history writing has contributed to marginalising the history of a Nationalist Republican movement. Margaret Wards' book *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* (1983) is an example of this genre.

The other more damaging aspect of this type of writing is that a select number of the prominent women within the Nationalist movement are targeted, and turned into icons. Two good examples of this are Anne Haverty's biography *Constance Markievicz* (1988) and Margaret Ward's biography on *Maud Gonne Mc Bride* (1990). An interesting aspect of these two books is that each author in a slightly different manner suggests that these two women could lay claim to the title, the Joan of Arc of Ireland. Creating a system of sainted icons and a mass of downtrodden victims does serious injustice to the thousands' women who comprised the rank and file membership of Cumann na mBan.

The general history books simply tend to mention Cumann na mBan as a small aspect of the period. See for example F S. L. Lyons *Ireland since the Famine* (1982) and J J Lee *Ireland 1921-1985 politics and society*. Somewhere between these two types of study there is a way of redressing this imbalance. A reassessment of Cumann na mBan can be undertaken. This would involve thorough study of the Primary Source material, plus wide reading of the secondary material from the 1930's to the 1990's. This thesis will show precisely the results of the aforementioned method of study on this issue.

Introduction

There are very interesting and important questions that need investigation regarding Cumann na mBan. These are, who were Cumann na mBan? What section of Irish society did these women come from and how do we evaluate their contribution to Irish politics and society? What role did this organisation have in the turbulent years 1913 to 1926 in Ireland?. These are just some of the aspects of the complex history of Cumann na mBan that this thesis will unravel.

Cumann na mBan was an organisation affected by and involved in the turbulent years' 1913-26 in Irish politics. A reassessment of the history of this organisation will change the way people think about the history of this particular group of women. Individually the women involved came from diverse backgrounds, in areas of religion, politics education and class. The organisation helped influence and in turn was influenced by developments within Irish Nationalism during this time.

The military aspect of the organisation has not been discussed by historians before. In this work it will be examined to clarify the position of Cumann na mBan in relation to the Irish Volunteers, later to become The Irish Republican Army in 1919. The political position of Cumann na mBan will be assessed through its particular relationship with Sinn Fein, from 1906-1926. It should be noted that Sinn Fein was the first political organisation to admit women.

Background

The society these women came from must be taken into account when the history of Cumann na mBan is explored. This is of vital importance. They lived in a stratified society which held rigidly to barriers of class, religion and sex.

Nationalism allowed the women of Inghinidhe na hEireann² and Cumann na mBan transcend class barriers. Nationalism was deemed to be a classless ideology. There would be no class barriers in the new Ireland.

We like all city companies were mixed: professions unskilled labour, students, Government clerks, Skilled labour, business men, and out of works; mostly young mostly men and boys.....they found the Cause had united men of different, outlooks, creeds. . On my right a guttee, on my left an out of work: covering me in the ranks was a Master of Arts, next to him a final medical student.There were no class distinctions.³

This holds true for all the other Nationalist organisations. During the Civil War a prisoner in the North Dublin Internment Camp conducted a survey of the occupations of seventy-nine of the Cumann na mBan women in the prison. This number represents one third of the prisoners held at this time.

At Home	19
Packer in Jacob's	11
Printing	10
Shop assistant	8
Typist	7
Clerk	7
Dressmaker	4
Sewing	4
Boxmaker	2
Nurse	2
Capmaker	1
Housekeeper	1
Secretary	1
Ladies Tailor	1
Medical Student	1
Teacher	1

² Inghinidhe na hEireann was founded in 1900 as a cultural nationalist movement.

³ Ernie O Malley *On another man's wound.* (Dublin 1994) pp46-47

The expression 'At Home' requires some explanation. This term can be applied to a married or single woman. The term unemployed was not in common usage at this so 'At Home' means a woman who is not in paid employment. Louie Bennet who was secretary of the Women Workers Union of Ireland and a labour activist said in an article in 1924 that,

Cumann na mBan has drawn to itself most of the intelligent and high spirited working class women⁴

Religion was an important aspect of their lives. The majority of the women were products of spirituality rooted in the ethos of the Catholic Church. The remainder of the women were Protestant. The primary sources consulted for this thesis indicate that religion was a vital component of their spiritual selves which enabled them to keep their beliefs in the Nationalist cause to the forefront. In this thesis the issue of their religious spirituality will be intertwined with their political and military activities. Their spirituality can not be isolated from other aspects of their lives. This was an integral part of how they lived. They were a product of Irish society at the turn of the twentieth century. The most important thread in this work is to understand the this context regarding the religious and the military aspect of the organisation. These women were traditional in the practice of their religious beliefs yet by becoming involved in a military force they were breaking the social conditioning of women of their time. The influence on them as women within their society would be conservative and yet, they became soldiers and politicians in the "Army of Irish Nationalism" This was radical. Nowhere in Europe in the early years of this century did a group of women set up a women's army. The women of Cumann na mBan were simultaneously radical and conservative.

⁴ 'Louie Bennet. 'What the workers can do in the new day' With a special to out women. *Voice of Ireland, Glor ns hEireann*, 1924.

Nationalism

Between the 1880's and the first ten years of the twentieth century Cultural Nationalism was the dominant theme within Irish Nationalism. Cultural Nationalism embraced disparate groups whose interest in Irish Ireland spanned issues of language, sport, an Irish Literary revival and a resurgence in interest in Irish history. By 1908. Cultural Nationalism, was part of what is called New Nationalism. Cultural Nationalism was a movement that emerged in the 1880's. The phrase Irish Ireland movement is an apt description of this phenomenon. *Inginidhe na hEireann* was a movement founded in 1900 as an organisation under the umbrella of Cultural Nationalism. It was founded at Easter in 1900. Maud Gonne became its figurehead and it has always been associated with her name. After 1906 when she went to live in Paris she did not have any real influence in the organisation⁵. Helena Moloney effectively took charge of the organisation. For a brief period, *Inginidhe na hEireann* under her guidance developed a feminist as well as a more militant nationalist stance.⁶ By 1911 *Inginidhe na hEireann* had no political direction and was really in the political doldrums. Cultural Nationalism was overtaken by the growing movement towards Political and Social Nationalism. After 1908 due to the influence of Helena Moloney, *Inginidhe na hEireann* moved towards Political and Social Nationalism. By 1914 the remnant of the organisation was subsumed into *Cumann na mBan*.

⁵ Maud Gonne seperated from her husband John Mc Bride, she left Ireland in 1906 and remained in France until 1916. John Mc Bride was executed as a leader of the Rising. She returned to Ireland around September 1916 as the bereaved widow .

⁶ '*Bean na hEireann*' Helena Moloney expressed the feminist angle in the paper she founded in 1909. It ceased publication in 1911. In the fourteen years of its existence the issue of feminism in *Inginidhe na hEireann* appears to be confined to these two years.

The development of the issues of political and social Nationalism from around the 1890's was simultaneous with Cultural Nationalism. Issues of political and social development in Irish life came into the antecedent around 1908 and Cultural Nationalism appeared to become less important. By 1913 there was an inexorable movement within Nationalism towards militant Separatist Nationalism. In 1913 the public emergence of militant Nationalism was seen in the founding of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan

Cumann na mBan was founded in alliance with the Irish Volunteers. The issue of feminism did not arise when Inghinidhe na hEireann became part of this organisation. It is also worth noting that Helena Moloney remained a Republican but did not join Cumann na mBan

Between 1914 and 1926 Cumann na mBan experienced three splits, each one representing a change in the political climate in Ireland. Each break rendered the organisation more militant, because it was usually the moderate members who left the organisation, so that by 1926 it was on the margin of mainstream politics. By 1926 Cumann na mBan was an extreme militant nationalist organisation allied with Sinn Fein and the IRA.

The Rising in 1916 led to the War Of Independence of 1919. This war lasted until the Truce in 1921. The campaign was conducted by means of guerrilla tactics. This type of warfare was adopted because of the inequality in the numerical and material assets of both sides in the conflict. The Irish guerrilla Army that fought the War of Independence had a vital and necessary component within its ranks, the organisation Cumann Na mBan.

Cumann na mBan and the Irish Volunteers were founded as a military organisations. The Volunteers did not accept women as members. It was not

common practice anywhere in the world at this time to have women in an army. The Irish Volunteers were the all male army, and Cumann na mBan were the all female army of Irish Separatist Nationalism. Both these organisations were the Army of the Separatist Nationalist movement which is one reason why they were founded in 1913 and 1914 respectively. Cumann Na mBan was an integral part of military organisation of Irish Separatist Nationalism.. I will draw some parallels with some aspects of a conventional state army to illustrate how this is the case.

In every country struggling to be free the soldiers of freedom must be a hidden army. If a guerrilla army tried to take to the field in a manned or any formation the fight would be over before it began. A guerrilla army must always be based upon the homes of the people, it does not have a barracks.”⁷

The first issue for discussion must deal with the fighting man. To the public the fighting man {soldier} is the embodiment of any conflict. The perception is that he is a tangible representation of either side in a war. He becomes the object of envy and pride to civilians who are on his side, whereas his opponent is perceived with fear and derision. The fighting man becomes a visible symbol of hope to those who share his ideology. A conventional army is sustained in the field by *rear echelon* units. These units are responsible for the provision of food, clothing, transport, weapons, ammunition, intelligence, medical service, pay and other administrative functions without which the army could not conduct its campaign. In a conventional army these functions are the responsibility of other soldiers within the organisation. During the early years of the twentieth century all army personnel were male. Cumann Na mBan worked in all the aforementioned areas as part of the Irish Guerrilla Army. Cumann Na mBan worked within this

⁷ 'Evening Press' 8 April 1933. Obituary to Mary Agnes Burke, who used her home to hide men at one point she sheltered Cathal Brugha.

structure in the same way that *rear echelon* units worked in the British Army during the War of Independence. During the Civil War they functioned in the same manner as the *rear echelon* units of the Irish Free State Army. Their homes and work places became the *barracks* of the guerrilla army. The members of Cumann Na mBan were active soldiers of the Irish Guerrilla Army.

Civil War 1922 /1923

It is difficult to ascertain the full membership of Cumann Na mBan in 1921. Disagreement in the republican movement over the Anglo Irish Treaty led to a split in the ranks in 1922. This was the second split in the organisation, as before the more militant Nationalist remained. Those members who supported the treaty left the organisation. The treaty led to the setting up of the Irish Free state. Cumann Na mBan the Irish Republican Army and Sein Fein became the anti treaty side in the immediate conflict of the Civil War. Until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1922, Cumann Na mBan became involved in a programme of political propaganda against the Irish Free State Government. The Civil War began in June 1922, and the organisation became involved in the military activities ranged against the Irish Free State.

During the Civil War, the organisation Cumann Na mBan were perceived as a threat to the stability of the Irish Free State. The military activities of Cumann Na mBan in the Civil War were multi- operational. They operated in intelligence, courier or military despatch service, carried guns and munitions for the men, and found billets to be used as rest stations. They were soldiers in the Anti Free State, Irish Republican movement.

The welfare of the dependants of IRA men was an issue which had to be addressed so that the men could leave their families to fight during the war. Between 1916 and 1921 they were involved in raising funds for dependants of men away from home. They were also involved in the distribution of the money which came into Ireland through the White Cross. The White Cross was founded in February 1921 to assist in the distribution of the American based funds.¹ This welfare system was not available to them as an anti government force. Cumann na mBan had to start again and set up a new welfare fund.

During the Civil War Cumann Na mBan set up a welfare system named the Irish Republican Prisoners Defence Fund (IRPDF). An examination of this welfare system will endeavour to show that without this aid the dependants of IRA men would have faced severe hardship. Raising funds for the IRPDF was the sole responsibility of Cumann Na mBan. This type of work was essential, as without a welfare system an army cannot function. This applies as much to the regular /conventional state army as much as it did to Sinn Fein and the IRA. Welfare and the care of IRA dependants were a large part of the workload of Cumann Na mBan. Another aspect of responsibility for welfare is that gradually the IRPDF became a fund for supporting the IRA itself.

The Civil War broke out in June 1922. By September /October 1922 the Free State began to arrest and imprison members of Cumann Na mBan. Their activities were a threat to the stability of the state, and imprisonment was a deterrent to try and contain their activities. By late spring 1923 more than 800 women were captured and imprisoned. An examination of prison conditions and the treatment they received at the hands of the prison personnel suggest they received similar treatment to the male prisoners. There was little distinction in the

treatment of the sexes. The Free State did execute male republicans. When the Free State began to execute male internees the women began to believe that they could also be executed. As already stated there was no difference in the way the Free State treated the male or female prisoners. A number of the women were interned for offences which warranted the death sentence. The execution of the men heightened the awareness that they too could be executed. This added to the tensions within the female prisons. There were no women executed during the Civil War.

The aftermath of the Civil War was a period of tension and confusion for extreme republicans. They were outside mainstream politics. When Eamonn De Valera founded Fianna Fail he developed a way forward for his party to participate in the political life of the Free State. This development led to another split in Sinn Fein and Cumann na mBan as members left to join the new party Fianna Fail.

Summary.

As an all female army Cumann na mBan were an enigma of their time. They are still historically an enigma. These radical women were the product of a society which in retrospect is considered conservative in the spheres of social mores and religion. The upbringing of young woman was more constrained in the latter years of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. So what drove women like these to the point of taking up arms in support of a nationalist cause?. Were they as many latter day historians see them, women with strong feminist ideals, or simply women out of their time.? This thesis will set out to indicate they were women of their time with a strong political commitment. They were unusual, history cannot explain exactly what or who they were. The primary sources indicate that

the history written to date does not give them the justice they deserve as women. The writing also does not explain anything of the political and social context of early twentieth century Ireland.

Secondary sources indicate that history written to date has not given these women the proper political voice. There is little need to set them up as feminist icons, or as women victimised by men. They were a strong militant political force, and as such they should be presented.

Chapter one

1.0 Antecedents of Cumann na mBan 1900-1913.

Maire Comerford in her unpublished memoir describes *Inginidhe na hEireann* as the first Irishwomen's revolutionary movement. This is because it links the Ladies Land League of 1881¹ with Cumann na mBan in 1913 through women like Jennie Wyse Power. In 1915 *Inginidhe na hEireann* was subsumed into Cumann Na mBan. R.M. Fox, in his book *Green Banners* maintains that "Cumann Na mBan grew out of *Inginidhe na hEireann*". *Inginidhe na hEireann* was launched on Easter Sunday 1900 in the Celtic Literary Society rooms in Dublin. Maud Gonne was elected president. Jennie Wyse Power, a founder of *Inginidhe na hEireann* had been secretary of the Ladies land league. She later became a founder member of Cumann na mBan.

In 1900 Queen Victoria came on an official visit to Ireland, part of the celebrations was a party organised in the Phoenix Park for about 15,000 children.. Nationalist families objected to the party seeing it as a propaganda exercise which would make it look as though the Queen was popular in Ireland. Around this time a group of women formed a committee to make a counter treat for those children who missed out on the picnic. In July they successfully held a party in Drumcondra with over 20,000 children. Maud Gonne was the president of this committee. This outing was a success. The hospitals in Dublin said it was the quietest, accident free weekend they ever experienced where children were concerned. Maud Gonne made speeches at the picnic telling the children that she hoped Ireland would be free by

¹ The ladies Land League was founded in 1881 as a female support organisation for the Land League . It was suppressed in 1882 by Charles Stuart Parnell leader of the Land league.

the time they were adults, she also exhorted the boys not to join the British army.

The treat became known as the Patriot Children's treat.

1.1 Ingidhe na hEireann and Cultural Nationalism.

The women's committee who organised the children's treat felt that they should not disband, but should continue to work for national ideals and from this emerged Ingidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Eireann). It was to be a nationalist women's association. This meant an association devoted to the ideal of an Ireland, free from the Empire. Maud Gonne was elected President at the inaugural meeting of Ingidhe na hEireann.²

Ingidhe na hEireann drew its membership from the young girls of all classes in the city. Sidney Gifford a sister of Grace Gifford was an early member of Ingidhe na hEireann. Her background was comfortable Protestant middle-class.. She was eleven years old in 1900 so she was obviously young when she joined Ingidhe na hEireann. Sidney went on to become a journalist adopting the pen name John Brennan because she felt a mans name would carry more weight. Molly Allgood (the actress Maire O' Neill) was born in Dublin. Her father died while she was still a child and she grew up in an orphanage. She was fourteen years old when she joined Ingidhe na hEireann. Her occupation was apprentice dressmaker. Her sister Sara was seventeen years old when she joined. Her occupation was apprentice to an upholsterer. Elizabeth O Farrell and Julia Grennan were also members of Ingidhe na hEireann from at least 1902. The committee realised after the treat in Drumcondra that education in the culture and history of Ireland was not being

² The other members of the executive were {four vice presidents} Jennie Wyse Power, Annie Egan, Anna Johnson {the writer Ethna Carbery} and Alice Furlong.

taught to children in schools. The organisation hoped to redress this imbalance in the education system through the classes.

Inginidhe na hEireann was not a military revolutionary movement but rather a social revolutionary one. Its aims were wide ranging, foremost was complete independence for Ireland from Britain. Support of Irish manufacture and industry was part of their stated aims. Gaelic culture was encouraged. Irish dancing was propagated by organising classes for young boys and girls. They also developed a programme in Irish language, history, and music. Dances and ceilithe for adults were provided at evening soirees to which other nationalist groups were invited. The children's classes were popular and time would show the success of reaching out to the young.

1.2 The aims of Inginidhe na hEireann

The organisation was founded to teach young boys and girls about the history of Ireland and the Irish language. The national school system taught the history of the Empire. It was felt that an organisation was necessary to try and counteract this imperialist ideology and teach Irish children about the history and culture of Ireland. It was hoped that this would inculcate a sense of pride in the children about Irish Language and Irish history. Irish children would learn to develop a pride in their Irish identity. Drama classes were used to convey the stories and legends of Ireland with the members of Inginidhe na hEireann acting in pageants. The organisation launched itself into theatre. Theatre in Dublin was influenced by the Celtic revival movement that began with the Gaelic league in the 1890's. Inginidhe na hEireann planned to hold dramatic festival in the autumn (Samhain) and (Bealteann) Spring. These festivals were to celebrate the Irish pre

Christian new year on 1 May (Bealteann) and the end of the old year on 31 October (Samhain.) These events caught the imagination of the girls and writers. They went on to perform plays for P. Colum and W. B. Yeats. Maud Gonne played the lead role in Caitlin Ni Houlihan a play written by W.B. Yeats. The two sisters Molly and Sara Allgood received the opportunity to discover talent as actresses through their involvement with Ingidhe na hEireann. They both went on to become professional actresses

Ingidhe na hEireann fostered much talent. Marie O Neill in her book From Parnell to de Valera says that the

Initiative of Ingidhe na hEireann led to the founding of a professional group from which the Abbey Theatre evolved.

One other aspect of the work of the early years of Ingidhe na hEireann was its protests against recruitment of Irishmen into the British Army. This campaign was tied to the anti Boer War effort in Ireland. They handed out anti-recruiting leaflets in places where British soldiers congregated. They distributed leaflets in O Connell Street to dissuade young men from joining the British army. The leaflets carried extracts from army medical bulletins describing venereal diseases to which young men were exposed.³ This was part of the propaganda to stop men joining the British Army. The baiting of the soldiers led to many a fracas and the girls and women of Ingidhe na hEireann brought brothers and boyfriends with them for protection. It became a method of pleasure for some to go to O

³ The issue of the girls who went with the soldiers was not dealt with by Ingidhe na hEireann. Though this protest indicates that it was believed the disease was spread by the Irish girls who are it is implied prostitutes. The social issue of prostitution and poverty was not an issue ever tackled by Ingidhe na hEireann or later by Cumann na mBan.

Connell Street and fight with the soldiers. It was stopped after some time as it was not a productive protest.

The provision of school meals to poor children was another of their projects. This could be seen as an attempt to redress some of the problems of poor families in the city. These families were mostly inhabitants of the slum areas of Dublin. It is an aspect of their attempt to become involved in social issues. Nonetheless, They provided a school meal in two Dublin city centre schools for poor children.

1.3 Militant and Feminist activities in Ingidhe na hEireann.

The main movers in this area were Helena Moloney and Countess Markievicz. Helena was running Ingidhe na hEireann during the absence of Maud Gonne and was a militant nationalist. She began to publish and edit a newspaper *Bean na hEireann* (Woman of Ireland) in November 1908. She also introduced the Countess Markievicz to Ingidhe na hEireann that year and enabled her join the organisation. Helena Moloney and the Countess crossed paths as actresses with the Theatre of Ireland.⁴ The paper reflects the organisation at this point but does not refer to the early activity or aspirations of Ingidhe na hEireann. The more militant feminist tones of the paper reflect the ideals of the women running the organisation at this time. The previously cultural organisation that which Maud Gonne founded was passing into a new phase. It was moving towards the more Militant and socialist Nationalist..

In 1915 Ingidhe na hEireann decided to merge with *Cumann na mBan* as they thought it was best to co-ordinate all the nationalist groups. Within *Cumann*

⁴ The Theatre of Ireland was formed by a group of the original players of the National Theatre of Ireland

na mBan Ingidhe na hEireann did not lose its identity, but formed a branch and retained their old name Ingidhe na hEireann. During the Easter Rising this branch was attached to the Fourth Battalion of the Irish Volunteers.

Lily O Brennan said of Ingidhe na hEireann

I would like to record here that this Branch of the Cumann na mBan- the only branch of the organisation to take part in the surrender. We all have stories of the Extraordinary bravery and courage of the women in the burning G.P.O and various other outposts in the city, where dispersal's had compulsorily to take place. Yet it was left to this little group (Ingidhe na hEireann) to symbolise that down through the centuries Irish women have ever shown devotion and steadfastness in defeat.⁵

Summary

From 1900 to 1908 Ingidhe na hEireann was an organisation which was part of Cultural Nationalism. During this time they became involved in some social issues. The most prominent being a campaign to have poor schoolchildren fed at school.

There is one aspect of their anti-recruiting campaign against Irish men joining the British Army deserves some consideration. This is the handing out leaflets describing the effects of venereal disease. The equation appears to be that, if an Irishman joined the British Army he will end up in O Connell Street with a prostitute and get venereal disease. The point that appeared to be missed by the organisation and particularly by Maud Gonne herself is that the prostitutes were Irishwomen.

Ingidhe na hEireann did not become involved at a deep social level to try to develop a welfare campaign that might save these women from the streets. No

⁵ Lily O' Brennan 'We Surrender' 'an episode of the fourth battalion' in *An Cosantoir*, The Irish Defence Forces Journal. v, vii no 6 June 1947 pp303-308

connection was made between the possibility that the poor children who needed free meals, were perhaps the future women who later ended up as escorts to British soldiers in O Connell Street. The feminist writers I studied for this thesis have not made this connection either.

It seems that by 1908 Helena Moloney was effectively in charge of *Inginidhe na hEireann*. Through the *Inginidhe na hEireann* (*Bean na hEireann*) paper that she was responsible for inaugurating they propagated feminist views. Nonetheless most of this would appear to be rhetoric, just as the concern for social issues appeared to be. Neither *Inginidhe na hEireann* or any Nationalist organisation that came later became involved in the issues affecting the lives of women outside Nationalism.

Inginidhe na hEireann was founded as a Nationalist organisation and it can not be asserted that it was any kind of forerunner for future feminism. Nevertheless it was a serious stepping stone for the development of *Na Fianna* and *Cumann na mBan*. *Inginidhe na hEireann* educated many young girls and boys in the Irish classes they held, and so could be easily seen to be a kindergarten for nationalism. In 1909 the *Na Fianna* was founded in the house of Frank Moloney who was Helena Moloney's brother. It was founded by Bulmer Hobson. This organisation was to become a serious training ground for many members of The IRB and the Irish Volunteers. *Na Fianna* was also the platform which enabled Countess Markievicz to launch herself into public prominence as a Nationalist.

All things considered the contribution of *Inginidhe na hEireann* was that it broke ground for the education of poor young children to be educated for the later developments in 1914. Many of their protégés joined the Irish Volunteers and *Cumann na mBan*.

Chapter Two

2.0 Introduction

Cumann Na mBan has its origins in the events that succeeded the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in 1912. The 1912 bill was the third attempt to introduce a Home Rule Bill for Ireland. The first and second bills had been introduced and defeated. In April 1912 H.H. Asquith, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom introduced the Bill in the English House of Commons.

There was strong opposition to the bill from the Irish Ulster Unionists and Conservatives. The Bill was passed by the House of Commons but rejected by the house of Lords. In 1913 the same thing happened again. In 1914 the bill was passed by the House of Commons but this time it did not need the consent of the Lords, under the terms of Parliament Act of 1911. Home Rule had made it to the statute books. It was waiting Royal assent when World War One started. The bill was shelved for the duration of the war which most believed would only last until Christmas 1914.

There was disquiet and anger within Unionists circles in the North and South of Ireland. The Ulster Unionist Council⁶ founded the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The Volunteers were financed by Ulster businessmen and the landed gentry. In September 1913 they became the Army of Ulster, when the Ulster Unionist Council appointed a Provisional Government of Ulster. The UVF drilled openly. In

⁶ This council was formed in March 1905. The aim of the council was to act as a link between Ulster Unionists and their parliamentary representation, and generally to advance and defend the interests of Ulster Unionists.

April 1914 the UVF were armed after a gun running episode enabled the organisation amass 25,000 guns and 3,000,000 rounds of ammunition.

In the South of Ireland Eoin Mac Neill suggested that southern nationalists should form a volunteer movement to oppose the UVF, and support the Home Rule Bill. This led to the formation of the Irish Volunteers on 25 November 1913. This association attracted members from other nationalist and Irish cultural movements already in existence.

Funds came from London through the London Committee organised by Alice Stopford Green and Roger Casement. Alice Stopford Green was a historian with a particular interest in Irish History. She gave £750 to buy guns for the Irish Volunteers. According to Maire Comerford, Alice Stopford Green started the London branch of Cumann na mBan⁷ It was understood that she would get this money back when each Volunteer bought his gun. The other area for funds was the United States. John Devoy and Clan na Gael the Irish American republican organisation sent money. In 1914 they bought arms for the Irish Volunteers. The Guns and ammunition were brought into Ireland at Howth Co. Dublin. By July 1914 there were two armed volunteer armies in Ireland opposing each other.

2.1 Cumann na mBan. 1913-1914

The Preamble to the 1924 Cumann na mBan convention document says that it is an Organisation founded in 1914

To advance the cause of Irish liberty. Although working in co-operation with other associations having the same objects, it is independent of them.

⁷ Maire Comerford, *Dangerous Ground* unpublished script for a book. La 18 v, 1 UCDA

According to this document Cumann na mBan came into being in November 1913. There was it seems much discussion behind closed doors before the first public meeting was held in April 1914. The inaugural meeting was presided over by Agnes O Farrelly in April 1914. Agnes O Farrelly was a lecturer in Irish Literature in the University of Dublin.. Part of her address details the role of Cumann na mBan Essentially it was to put Ireland first by arming the men. It is estimated one hundred women attended the meeting. Part of the constitution and policy of 1914 states the women were pledged,

- 1 To advance the cause of Irish liberty.
- 2 To organise Irishwomen in furtherance of the object.
- 3 To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland.
- 4 To form a fund for these purposes to be called ⁸ "The Defence of Ireland Fund.

The executive was elected. Elizabeth Bloxham⁹ who was at this meeting describes the election of the Executive. She had never been present at the founding of any movement and enquired of Jennie Wyse Power how this would be done. Jenny said it was done by simply electing ourselves. Elizabeth Bloxham was appointed as a national organiser for Cumann na mBan. She was a teacher and spent her holidays travelling around Ireland starting branches. It states her appointment as organiser was due to her background as a public speaker at literary and suffragette meetings.¹⁰

Her contact was Jennie Wyse Power. A volunteer would contact Jennie and she in turn would notify Elizabeth. On receiving the notification she attended the

⁸ Cumann na mBan , Manifesto Document Published 1914.

⁹ Elizabeth Bloxham 'a Protestant involved with Sinn Fein Movement 1913-21' She came from a farming family.. She said in her statement to the Military History Bureau that she learned her Irish History through a friendship with two neighbours who subscribed to Arthur Griffiths publications. She was also involved in the suffrage movement. UCDA P31

¹⁰ *ibid*

specified meetings. These meetings were held all over Ireland. Elizabeth spent her holidays travelling around Ireland setting up branches of Cumann na mBan.

These meetings were a joint venture between the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. Each branch of Cumann na mBan was set up in association with the a branch of the Irish Volunteers. They were separate organisations but they always worked together. Both organisations co-operated in the campaign to get men and women involved in both organisations.

To set up a branch of Cumann na mBan required a minimum of ten women. When Elizabeth went to Maryborough (Portlaoise) she was accompanied by Mary Column Thomas Mc Donagh, Sean Mc Dermott and the two Mellows brothers. Both women were to organise Cumann Na mBan, and the men to organise the Volunteers. The Cumann na mBan meetings were always prearranged by local nationalists so Elizabeth simply appointed a president and a secretary from the women and girls present.

2.2 Issue of Cumann na mBan membership.

It must be remembered when discussing Cumann na mBan that the membership was a minority of the female population of Ireland. Because many of them were the wives and girlfriends of men involved in the movement it is often suggested that the relationship is why they joined. I would suggest that the women who set up Cumann na mBan in 1914 were already involved in the nationalist movement and as a result they met men of like mind. It is a question of people of similiar interest marrying.

The membership of Cumann na mBan in its early stage tended to be made up of women already involved in diverse elements of life in Ireland. They reflect the membership of the founding of the Volunteers in that the women came from the New Nationalist movement. There was also a number like Elizabeth Bloxham who were also involved in the suffrage movement in Ireland. Some of the executive were related to leading figures in the Irish Volunteers. There were women like Agnes McNeill, Nancy O Rahilly, Louise Gavan Duffy, Mrs Tuohy, Mary Colum nee Maguire, nurse Mc Coy and Margaret Dobbs. Louise Gavin Duffy was a teacher in St Ita's School. This School was a precursor to St Enda's. Mary Colum whose maiden name was Molly Maguire was involved in Inghinidhe na hEireann and cultural nationalist movements. She was also a teacher in St Enda's before her marriage to Padraic Colum in 1912.

Social class concerning women in nationalist organisations are viewed by feminist historians as primarily middle class. This was not the case for Cumann na mBan, Inghinidhe na hEireann, the Irish Volunteers, and Sinn Fein. During the years 1900 to 1926 all of these organisations were a mixture of all the social classes in Ireland then. It is anachronistic to discuss Cumann na mBan from the social strata of the late twentieth century.

When branches were set up around the country the members were to be taught First aid, drill, rifle practice, and signalling. These classes were taught usually by a member of the Irish Volunteers. The members of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan attended the classes together. Each member of Cumann na mBan paid one shilling to join the organisation. The aforementioned activities would enable these branches around the country to achieve a national cohesiveness

essential to military efficiency. Each branch was formed within a volunteer Brigade district, so that each organisation would work together in training.

From 1914 to 1916 Cumann na mBan prepared itself by training in matters useful in war. Dorothy Mac Ardle in her book The Irish Republic Says of the organisation,

The women were perfecting the organisation Cumann na mBan, preparing to take charge of ambulance work, food supply and the making of equipment. Their organisation was an independent one with its constitution and executive. They were allies, not subordinates of the Volunteers.

2.3 The split in 1914

At the outbreak of the First World War, John Redmond leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party offered the services of the Irish Volunteers to the British Government. He toured the country to enlist men for the British army. The original Volunteer committee repudiated Redmond and his nominees. An emergency convention was held on 25 October 1914 to reaffirm the Volunteer manifesto, and resist all attempts at conscription. The split that ensued left the IVF with eleven thousand members. One hundred and Seventy thousand members left and formed the National Volunteers. At first Cumann na mBan tried to remain neutral, but at the convention in November 1914 the Ard Patrick branch brought a resolution

¹¹pledging the organisation to neutrality between Redmond and Irish Volunteers.

The resolution got little support.

Cumann na mBan, like the Irish Volunteers, was composed of all shades of political and religious opinion, and all were working in the greatest harmony when the split in the Irish Volunteers occurred.¹²

¹¹ R.M.Fox R M, *Green Banners* (London 1938), pp287.

¹² Kathleen Clarke *Revolutionary Woman*, (Dublin 1991), pp49

A meeting of the Dublin branches was summoned by the provisional committee to decide what to do about the split in the Irish Volunteers. According to Kathleen Clarke this was a “stormy meeting”. The vote on the issue of Redmond resulted in a majority voting in favour of his policy.

So now Cumann na mBan was split too.¹³

The membership of the Central branch went from two hundred to about two dozen. This was reflected in the rest of the country as membership dropped. Like the Irish Volunteers, Cumann na mBan had to start rebuilding the organisation. Kathleen maintained that the split meant that at least every member of Cumann na mBan and the Irish Volunteers left in both organisations were of like mind.

They knew they would be called upon to make sacrifices to bring their work to a successful conclusion. Knowing it, they worked with a will and a cheerful confidence that was amazing.¹⁴

In less than a year, Central Branch had rebuilt its membership back to the numbers it had before the split. Cumann na mBan was now an organisation committed to the ideals of Separatist Nationalism. In November 1914 Cumann na mBan issued a public statement making clear where they stood on this issue,

We came to being to advance the cause of Irish liberty and to organise Irishwomen in furtherance of that object. We feel bound to make the pronouncement that to urge or encourage Irish Volunteers, to enlist in the British Army cannot under any circumstances be regarded as consistent with the work we set ourselves to do.¹⁵

Over the next year and a half the each branch was rebuilt so that Cumann na mBan increased steadily both in numbers and in effectiveness.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid* p50

¹⁵ ‘The history of Cumann na mBan’ *An Phoblacht* 8 April 1933

Cumann Na mBan membership in 1914-15 would have been about 430 minimum possibly less than 1000 countrywide. In the first two years of its existence the organisation did not attract women in large numbers. In 1915 Cumann Na mBan was the only separatist nationalist revolutionary women's movement in existence. Up to this time the organisation did not have a president. It was organised by an executive committee. On The 31 October 1915 they decided to change the system and create a president and vice-president. Jennie Wyse Power was unanimously elected President and retained this position until the 1917 convention.

2.4 Easter Monday 1916.

On Easter Monday 24 April 1916, under the leadership of Patrick H. Pearse, the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army, Cumann Na mBan and the Hibernian Rifles, marched out to challenge the might of the British Empire. The ensuing Rising lasted seven days.

The Rising planned to begin on Easter Sunday was code named by the term

route march by its leaders. The German ship The Aud carrying guns into Ireland for the Rising was scuttled off the coast at Co Kerry. Eoin Mc Neill, Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers, placed an advertisement in the Sunday Independent cancelling the route march for Easter Sunday. The confusion created by the cancellation of the route march meant that members of all the organisations involved failed to turn out on Sunday.

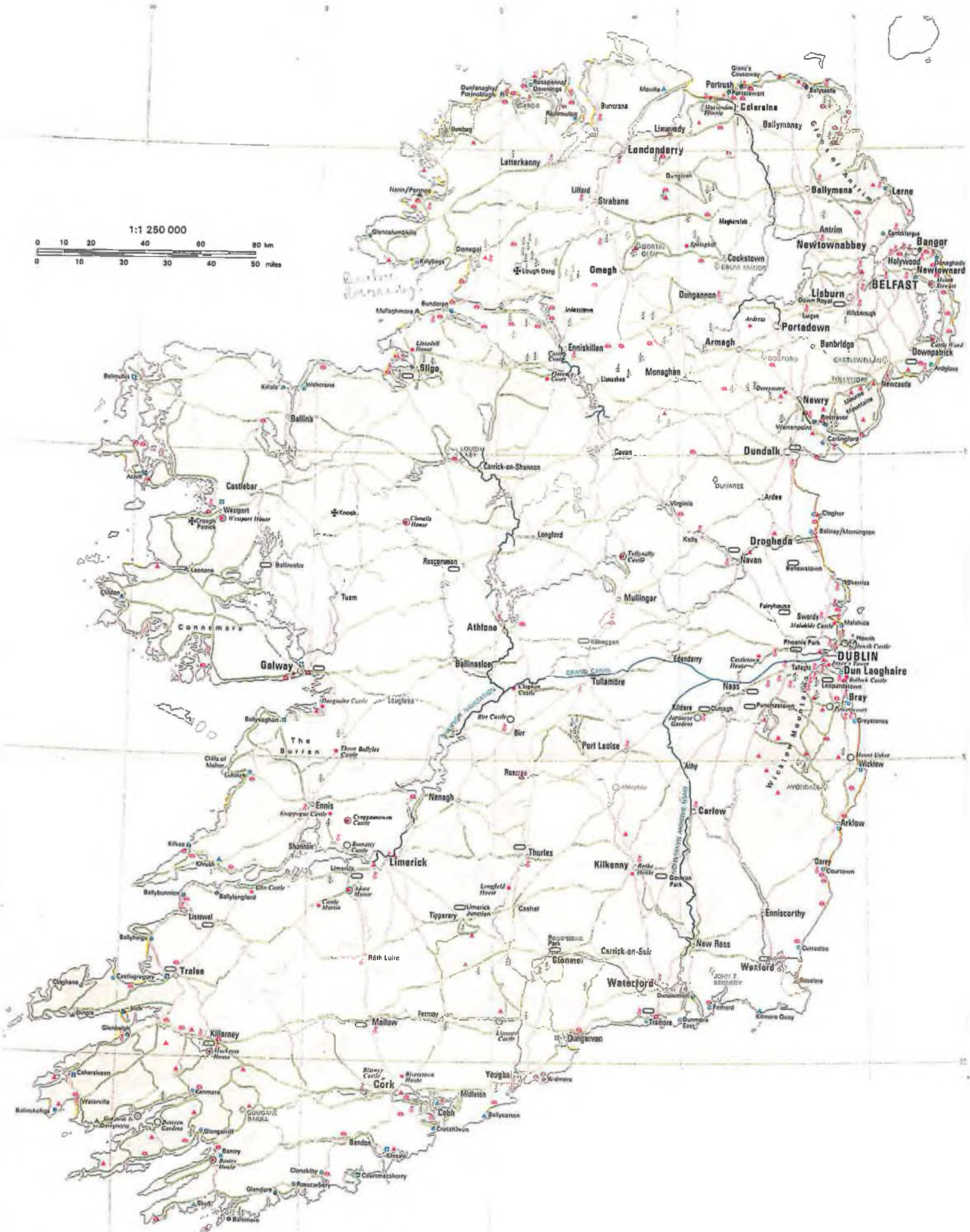
To protect the plans for the Rebellion from discovery, the rank and file members were trained over a period of months to be **on call** for the day of the

planned rising. The loyalty and preparedness of the Volunteers and Cumann Na mBan were tested by means of unscheduled *call out* under the pseudonym *route march*. This simply meant that at any time of night or day members were called upon to take part in a *route march*. One day it would be the real thing and not just a *route march*. This meant that only a small number of people knew about the plans for the rising on Easter Sunday. This protected the plans from British spies or Irish informers.

One of the points generally made about Cumann na mBan and the Easter Rising is that many of them did not turn out for the start of the Rising. It is also true that many of the Irish volunteers failed to turn out as well. They did not turn out because they were not kept fully informed of the current situation. The number of the Volunteers who turned out was numerically smaller than expected. The Irish Volunteers had 2,000 men trained and equipped for the Rising planned for Easter Sunday, but the confusion created by the newspaper advertisement resulted in only 800 men turning out on Monday. Many members of Cumann Na mBan failed to turn out for the same reason. This meant that many of the planned fighting outposts were severely understaffed.¹⁶ The members of Cumann Na mBan and the Volunteers, who did not initially turn up on Monday filtered into the city as news spread that the Rising had started.

2.5 The confusion of Easter Monday.

During the week before the Rising the women of Cumann na mBan and the Irish Citizen Army were rolling bandages, and preparing rations for the route march planned for Easter Sunday. That a Rising was imminent was not known to the rank



and file of the of Cumann na mBan but the executive knew about it. The need for secrecy created confusion. for Easter Sunday. This meant that when the leaders decided to go ahead on Easter Monday confusion reigned throughout the country. The decision to go ahead was taken by the leaders on Sunday night. The Proclamation was printed in Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday and finished that night. At two in the morning Elizabeth O Farrell, and Julia Grennan¹⁷ received instructions from James Connelly of the Irish Citizen Army to deliver the message of the Rising on Monday to the country. Julia travelled to Dundalk and Carrickmacross, while Elizabeth travelled to Galway City, Athenry, and Spiddal.

2.6 Irish Citizen Army and Cumann Na mBan

The Irish Citizen Army was founded as a worker's defence force in 1913. It had its origins in the trade dispute between the Dublin employers of casual labour and James Larkin's Workers Union. The workers formed the Irish Citizen Army to protect themselves from attack from the police and the hired henchmen of the employers. In 1914 it was reorganised by James Connelly and had a membership of about 200. The army had two aims, the ownership of the land of Ireland by the people, and the establishment of a Workers "Republic".

One other aspect of the Irish Citizen Army was that it had as part of its ideology the equality of the sexes. Women and men had equal status in the Irish Citizen Army. During the week of the rising the women of the Irish Citizen Army and Cumann Na mBan worked together.

All the volunteers, men and women reported to Liberty Hall, HQ of the Irish Citizen Army. This was the designated starting point to start the march to the

¹⁷ Elizabeth O Farrell and Julia Grennan became involved in the nationalist movement through Iniginidhe na hEireann in 1902. They joined Cumann na mBan in 1915.

G.P.O and the other posts to be taken around the city. Julia Grennan and Elizabeth O'Farrell delivered the dispatches from early Monday morning then returned to Dublin Monday night and made their way to the General Post Office the headquarters of the Rising. They spent that week acting as couriers around the city to the different posts held by the rebels. Using couriers was the only means the rebels had of knowing what was happening in the city or country. The rebels had broken up the communication system when they took over the post office. The consequences of this action were that the outposts around the city had no immediate contact with each other. Getting information from one place to another was difficult and slow. This created a further problem when men and women turned up, at different posts for duty. The following statement is an example of the confusion that reigned on Sunday 23 April and Monday 24.

A second mobilisation order was issued by Cumann Na mBan Headquarters and we all took up our position in various sections of the city held by the volunteers. A small group reported at Mount Street Bridge where the commander was Eamonn de Valera. He had been holding out against the British soldiers with only a handful of volunteers to keep the enemy at bay. He too sent the girls home (at least he thought he had) some or most of them remained in the area. In a very short time Commandant de Valera was calling for their help to carry dispatches, we worked during the whole week until P.H.Pearse and his comrades in arms eventually surrendered.¹⁸

The reference to someone else sending her home refers to Easter Sunday when she reported to Ned Daly of the Irish Volunteers at the Four Courts. Ned sent her home when the cancellation of the Rising became evident.

¹⁸ Josie Purfield nee Wall in the papers of, Eithe Coyle O'Donnell papers 1918-1976 UCDA p61/4 (44) (Hereafter called Papers of Eithne Coyle O'Donnell.)

2.7 The Week of the fighting.

The fighting went on from Easter Monday 24 April until to Saturday 29 April. The lack of solid information and the postponement of the route march planned for Sunday created confusion among Irish Volunteers the Irish Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan. This confusion is clear in the statement of Seamus Robinson. His garrison was composed of Volunteers from Scotland and London with a few local men as well. They were based at Larkfield House in Kimmage in Dublin and became known as the Kimmage Garrison of the Irish Volunteers. He says of Easter Sunday

There was a general impression in our garrison from the time we left Scotland that a fight was bound to come. We had no idea of what the plans were, if any, and we had no idea of the date it was to start.¹⁹

Patrick Pearse paid the garrison a visit during Holy week and gave them a lecture on street fighting, and defence of buildings. He also told them

There was no immediate certainty of a fight unless the enemy were mad enough to attempt to disarm or arrest the Volunteers. We were to hold ourselves in readiness to act at a moments notice.²⁰

One last piece of information Pearse imparted was there would be a Full Dress Parade held on Easter Sunday. He hinted at the possibility of interference by police or the military. Whatever the enemy did the parade would be held. On Sunday morning the parade was cancelled. The garrison spent Sunday in confusion because they were not informed of the reason for the cancellation. They were not aware of any alternate plans.

¹⁹ 'ibid' Seamus Robinson. correspondence. UCDA P61/13

²⁰ 'ibid'

On Easter Monday the garrison was assembled at 11.15 without any indication that this was to be the day of action. Sixty men left Larkfield House in Kimmage and reported to Liberty Hall. It was only when they arrived they discovered what was happening. Margaret Skinnider met them at Liberty Hall and told Seamus Robinson "Its ON". This was the first confirmation they had that the Rising was to begin that day.

Summary

The ignorance of events meant that every one of the rank and file of Cumann na mBan the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army were in the same position. Individual members of the three organisations had to find their way too specific fighting outposts to become involved in the Rebellion. The women were not specifically excluded from information.

Chapter three

3.0 The work of Cumann na mBan during the Rising.

When the G. P. O was commandeered the telecommunication system was broken. The only way the several outposts around the city could communicate with each other was by despatch. The responsibility for carrying and retaining some semblance of communication was part of the workload of Cumann na mBan. This work was carried out under dangerous and difficult circumstances. The work of carrying despatch messages was allied with moving arms from one outpost to another. Elizabeth O Farrell Julia Grennan and May Mc Loughan the latter a girl of fourteen were sent from the GPO to the St Stephens Green garrison with food and ammunition. The three women had 303 rounds of ammunition wrapped round their bodies under their clothes. They were also given money to buy food for the garrison. They reached Dame Street and found it lined with British soldiers. The younger girl got through but the other two had to plead with the soldiers. One eventually gave permission,

Not only that he put his arms around the two of them and shepherded them along Exchequer Street. His good nature was embarrassing, for, under their thin clothes, beneath his hands were wedges of ammunition. They got through safely....the two despatch carriers then went out to try and buy bread.²¹

The garrison at St Stephens green was short of food, using the money given to them at the GPO the three of them went in search of a shop to buy some bread. The men and women were suffering from hunger,

By Tuesday and Wednesday we were starved there seemed to be no bread in the town.²²

²¹ R.M.Fox, *Green Banners* pp293.

²² *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (reprint with intro, by Amanda Sebestyen 1987 of original ed 1934 London 1986), pp37-41

3.1 Easter week and feeding all Volunteers both men and women.

A criticism often made of the events of Easter week and the role of Cumann na mBan is that the women were used for cooking, and first aid at the various outposts. This is portrayed as an example of the women being placed in an inferior role by some historians. One of the threads most common in accounts of Irish Volunteers who fought that week is that there was a problem getting enough food to eat. They describe hunger and tiredness as being a major part of the difficulties of that week.

It is necessary to keep soldiers well fed so they have the energy to fight, without sufficient food the men and women would not be capable of keeping the energy levels at the optimum. Part of the planning for the rebellion was preparing hard rations for the men. After a few days the rations were not enough to sustain everyone's energy levels. The Volunteers took food from local shops. They commandeered food from Findlaters shop in O Connell Street and left a receipt signed on behalf of the Provisional Government.

Tuesday, 26 April 1916 Hopkins in O Connell Street.

We were under garrisoned and under provisioned...I returned to Hopkins and found the garrison had been doing some foraging and had obtained provisions, Principally from the D.B.C. shop²³

The post that had more than enough food was the GPO but the others around the city had problems obtaining food. Many of the volunteers had to make their way to the GPO when hunger became a problem. Shamus Robinson describes what happened to him when he went to the G. P. O for food

²³ Papers Eithne Coyle O'Donnell. Seamus Robinson correspondence UCDA P61/13.

Friday 28 April 1916 G. P. O.

My first task in the G.P.O was to obtain some food as it was many hours since we had eaten. A Cumann na mBan provided us with some. My next aim was to get some sleep as since Sunday night sleep had been out of the question except for an occasional hour.²⁴

3.2 Inside the GPO

By Monday evening 24 April a group of members Cumann na mBan and Irish Citizen Army arrived inside the G. P. O. Louise Gavan Duffy was put in charge of the women. Desmond Fitzgerald was in command of the kitchen and catering. He organised the fuel and stoking for the kitchen range by using a couple of British Army soldiers for the task of keeping the range working. It was a 6ft range with ovens all round it²⁵ The kitchen was at the top of the GPO building.

The food that was commandeered consisted of sides of meat, tea, bread, and cakes. Peg Downey from the London branch of Cumann na mBan was placed in complete charge of the cooking because she was the only one with experience of cooking for large numbers. They spent all Monday night and Tuesday morning organising the catering service.

Other women were involved in looking after the wounded by Monday evening the only casualties were caused by broken glass. By the end of the week the casualties became progressively worse.

The catering corps organised a dining room near the kitchen. The men and women while assembled here one day were addressed by a priest. He told them he had the power to give general absolution in danger of death and told them to kneel down and say an Act of Contrition while he gave absolution.

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ Gertie Colly Murphy, Kilmainham Museum.

This was an impressive scene, men of all walks in life most of them unshaven and yet so serious. I had a tray load of mugs that I had to balance on the corner of a table. Here I might mention we girls had our Rosary beads hanging around our necks all the time.²⁶

3.3 The other garrison outposts

At the Marrowbone Lane post everyone was reduced to eating dry bread and black tea. Lily O Brennan²⁷ does not have a problem declaring,

We relished all the more if milk and butter were spared for our glorious fighting men.²⁸

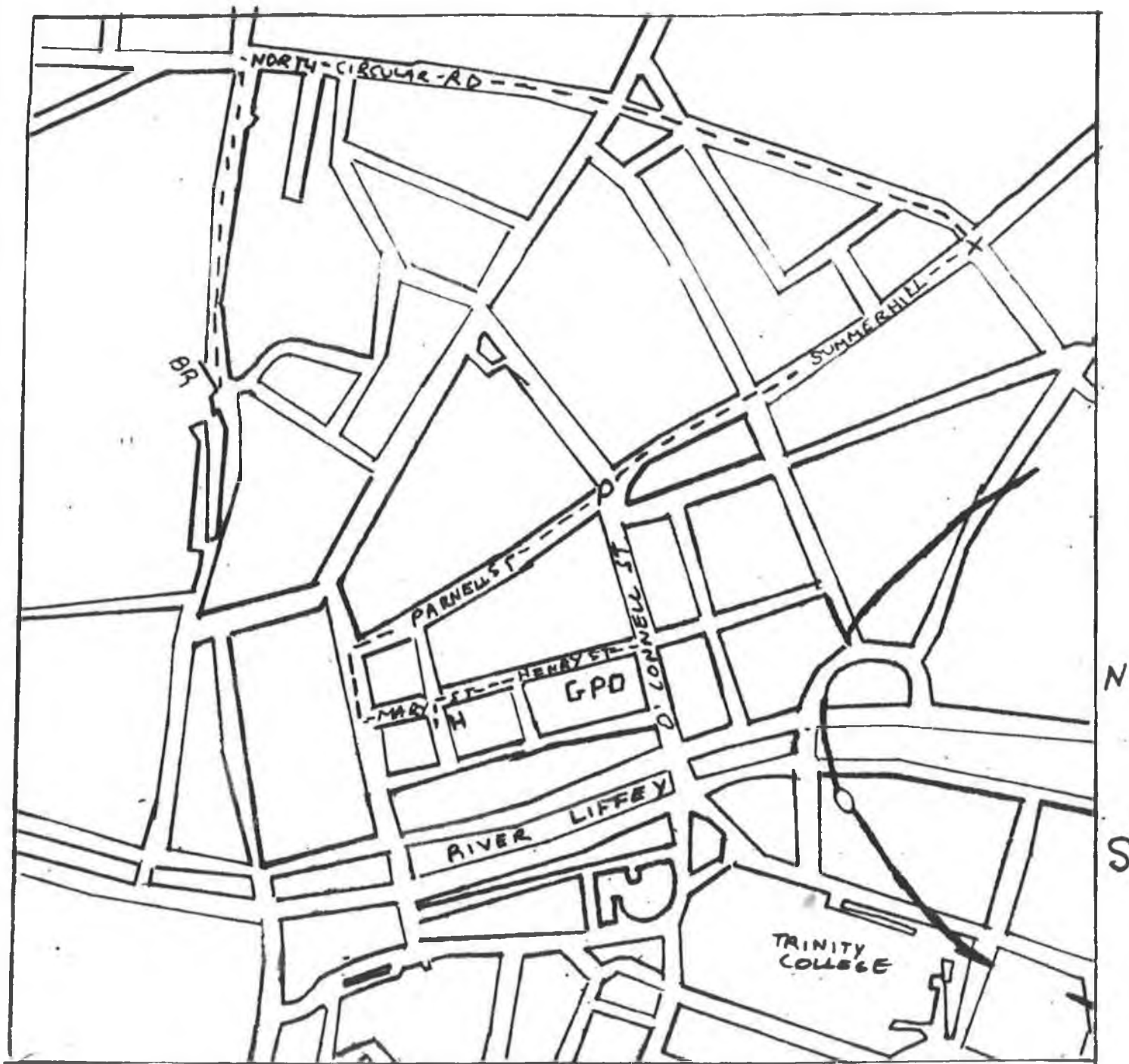
As part of the republican army Cumann na mBan performed the role of providing provisions for the men and for themselves. Placed in the social context of that time and understanding that the women during this week did not have a problem being in charge of feeding everyone would place a different perspective on this issue. As a small group, their involvement during this week indicates strength of character. They lived in a society that had stratified roles for women. Becoming involved in Cumann na mBan was a radical move for any woman then.

Cumann na mBan was responsible for rations during the Rising. Feeding everyone was not an issue large on their agenda of complaints about their lives as women in Ireland. As already indicated in Seamus Robinson's account, when food was a problem the men did not have a problem finding some to feed themselves. In the Distillery at the Marrowbone Lane post, the volunteers commandeered three calves passing by the garrison post.. The calves were butchered and hung ready to eat for Sunday. When the order for surrender arrived on Sunday the food was left

²⁶ 'ibid'

²⁷ Lily O Brennan a sister of Aine Ceannt. All the O Bannan women were individuals of strong character and would not have viewed themselves a inferior to anyone. O Brennan Papers UCDA

²⁸ Lily O'Brennan 'We Surrender' *An Casantoir* v, no recheck 1947. Lily O Brennan, pp 303-308.



4

The route taken by the group of women who left the GPO on Thursday 27 April

Distance 3 Miles

Key to text

- The route began at The GPO in Henry St and ended at the Broadstone Railway Station.
- H Jervis Street Hospital
- P Parnell Monument.
- X Surrender at the junction of Summerhill and North Circular Road
- BR Broadstone Railway station.

behind. In the chaos of the week's fighting everyone took some measure of responsibility for the food problem.

3.4 The Surrender.

When the fighting became fierce the Women were evacuated from the GPO at 8 PM on Friday 28 April. Patrick Pearse called the women together, he thanked them he praised them for their work and the help they gave. Desmond Fitzgerald called Gertie Colley Murphy aside and gave her a large Red Cross flag attached to a flag pole. He ordered the women to go down Henry Street to Jervis Street Hospital.

Suddenly at the door of the GPO Pearse called out, 'Girl with the flag march to the centre of the street'. It was only a matter of seconds before the others joined me, but my legs felt like jelly. We turned into Henry Street to be confronted with our first barricade. I scrambled up and held the flag on the top while the others got through at the sides or ends. Amy Wisely held the flag while I got around. We had I think three such barricades before reaching the turn into Jervis Street.²⁹

The group experienced an odyssey around the central streets of Dublin before they were allowed to surrender. They were refused admission at Jervis Street Hospital. They then went back to Mary Street into Capel Street along Britain Street (Parnell Street) Each street had a barricade and armed soldiers. From the Parnell monument they were directed to the junction of Summerhill and the North Circular Road. At this point they were placed under a military escort and marched to the Broadstone Railway station at Great Western Street.

They were given tea and biscuits. They were interviewed one by one about events in the GPO by a Colonel and other officers. The Colonel finally gave each woman a signed pass allowing them to go home.

²⁹ Gertie Colly Murphy , Kilmainham Museum..

Three women stayed behind in the GPO. These were Elizabeth O Farrell, Julia Grennan of Cumann na mBan and Winifred Carney of the Irish Citizen Army. Winifred had marched on Easter Monday with the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army contingent to the G.P.O from Liberty Hall. She carried her typewriter³⁰ and a Webly pistol with her. Her job was to type the dispatches sent to the outposts around the city from the general HQ set up in the GPO

Elizabeth O Farrell was chosen to carry the surrender because she was strong capable and fearless.³¹ The surrender was communicated to all the other posts by Elizabeth. She was made to deliver the surrender to each post one at a time. Unlike the earlier group of women her trip around the city to the other garrison outposts was more dangerous and required strong nerves. She had to walk through the firing line many times to deliver the order to surrender.

On Saturday morning 29 April the group that had retreated from the GPO were in a building in Moore Street. Sean McDermott ordered Elizabeth to provide a white flag. He hung it from out of the window to ensure that the women would not be fired upon. A British Army post was situated at the north end of Moore Street. She left the building at 12.45 PM carrying a white flag and made her way along Moore Street towards the British post. She was the bearer of a verbal message from Commandant Pearse for the Commander of the British forces to the effect

that he (Commandant Pearse) would like to treat³² with him.³³

She was brought to the Parnell Monument to discuss the message with another officer.

³⁰ She carried the typewriter on a cart.

³¹ Interview with Winifred Carney. R.M Fox *Green Banners*. pp 285-302

³² Treat is an old word meaning, to negotiate

³³ 'Miss O Farrell's story of the surrender' *Wolf Tone Annual* 1966

In Elizabeth's words this is what the exchange was.

I said: The Commandant of the Irish Republican Army wishes to treat with the Commandant of the British forces in Ireland.

Officer: The Irish republican Army-The Sinn Feiners you mean.

I Replied: The Irish Republican Army they call themselves and I think that is a very good name.

Officer Will Pearse be able to be moved on a stretcher

I said: Commandant Pearse does not need a stretcher

Officer: Pearse does need a stretcher madam.

I said: again Commandant Pearse does not need a stretcher.

To another officer: Remove that Red Cross from her and search her, she is a spy.³⁴

The Red Cross was cut off her arm and from the front of her apron. She was then searched. Two pairs of scissors, some sweet's bread and cake were taken from her. At this point she was deemed to be a prisoner. She was held for about an hour until Brigadier General Lowe came to see her. She gave him her message regarding the surrender. His response was that she would return to Pearse and tell him that

General Lowe would not treat at all until he (Pearse) would surrender unconditionally and that I must be back in a half hour or hostilities must continue. A note was given to her to this effect.³⁵

She gave the written and verbal message to Pearse. The situation was discussed and she was sent back up Moore Street with a reply to General Lowe. He was annoyed with her because he maintained she was she was a half minute late coming back. She told him that she was not late according to her watch.

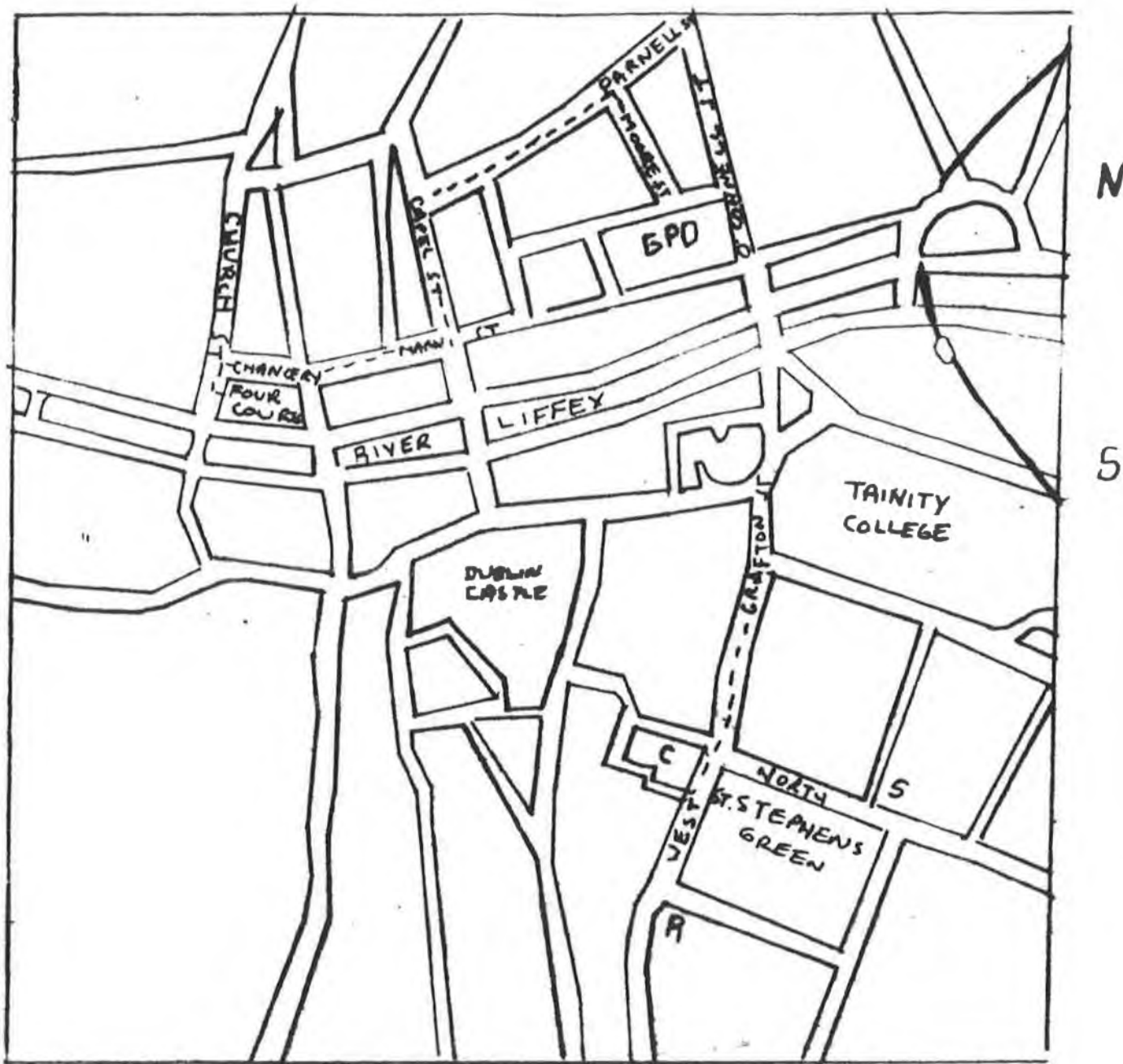
Then one of the officers set his watch by mine.³⁶

Elizabeth did not know what was in the note. General Lowe read it. He sent her back to Pearse with the verbal message, that if she did not come back with him

³⁴ 'Miss O Farrell's story of the surrender' 1966 *Wolf Tone Annual*

³⁵ 'ibid'

³⁶ 'ibid'



Route 1
Surrender of the Four Courts
Distance 1 mile
Key to text

----- Route takes starting at Moore St ending at Church St the side of the Four Courts.

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1 Moore Street | 6 Chancery Street. |
| 2 Parnell Street | 7 Charles Street |
| 3 Chapel Street. | 8 Church Street. |
| 4 Little Mary Street | 9 Four Courts |
| 5 East Arran Street | |

Route 2
Surrender of the garrison in the College of Surgeons at St Stephens Green West.

This group had retreated into the College of Surgeons earlier in the week from St Stephens Green park.

Distance 1/4 Mile

Key to text

- Route taken starting in Grafton Street.
- | | |
|---|--|
| C | College of Surgeons at St Stephens Green West. |
| S | Shelbourne Hotel. |
| R | Russell Hotel. |

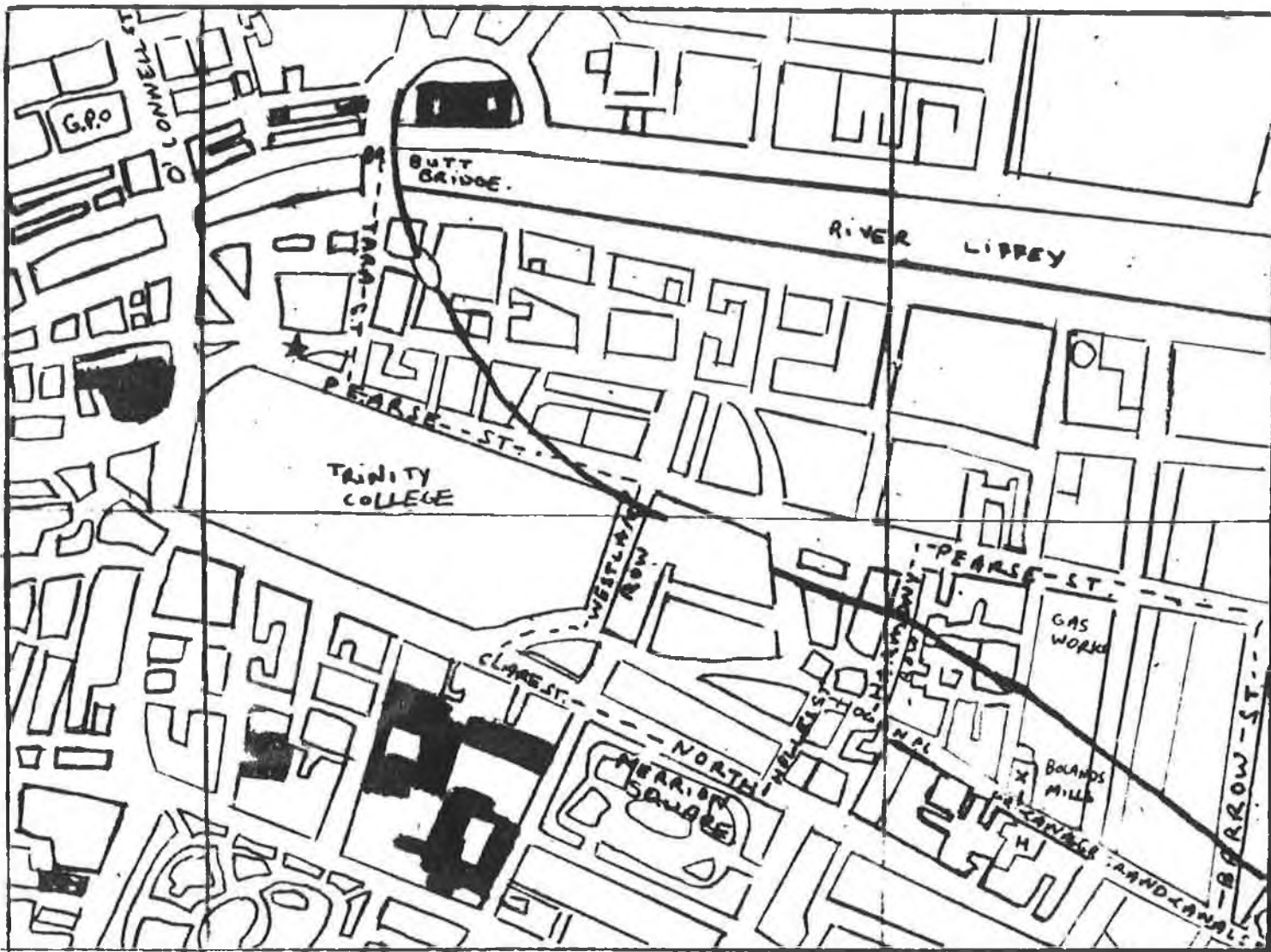
along with James Connelly on a stretcher, hostilities would begin again. On receiving this message Patrick Pearse accompanied Elizabeth O Farrell back to General Lowe. At

3.30 p.m. Patrick Pearse walked up Moore Street with Elizabeth to surrender to General Lowe. After the surrender Elizabeth was again sent down Moore Street to the GPO garrison with written instructions on how to surrender

3.5 Surrender of the Four Courts.

Elizabeth was given an order to take to the Four Courts garrison. She walked from Moore Street through Parnell Street and Capel Street. She was stopped several times by officers and returned by one who refused to allow her to pass. She returned to Moore Street and was given an escort back to Little Mary Street. From this point she continued alone until she reached a barricade at Chancery Street, where she met a Fr. Columbus of Church Street. He accompanied her to the Four Courts. Commandant Daly who was in charge accepted the order to surrender. Elizabeth then returned by the same route to O Connell Street, it was 7.15 p.m.

At this point the British brought Elizabeth to the National Bank building on the corner of O Connell St and Parnell Street to stay for the night. From her window she could see the 300 to 400 volunteers who had surrendered in the grounds of the Rotunda Hospital. Julia Grennan and Winifred Carney were with this group.



The route taken by Elizabeth O Farrell from Butt Bridge to Boland's Mill.
Distance 2.2miles

Key to text

- Route starting at Butt Bridge and ending at the Grand Canal Street dispensary.
- BR Butt Bridge
- GR Grand Canal Street Bridge.
- H Sir Patrick Dun's hospital
- X Grand Canal Street Dispensary.

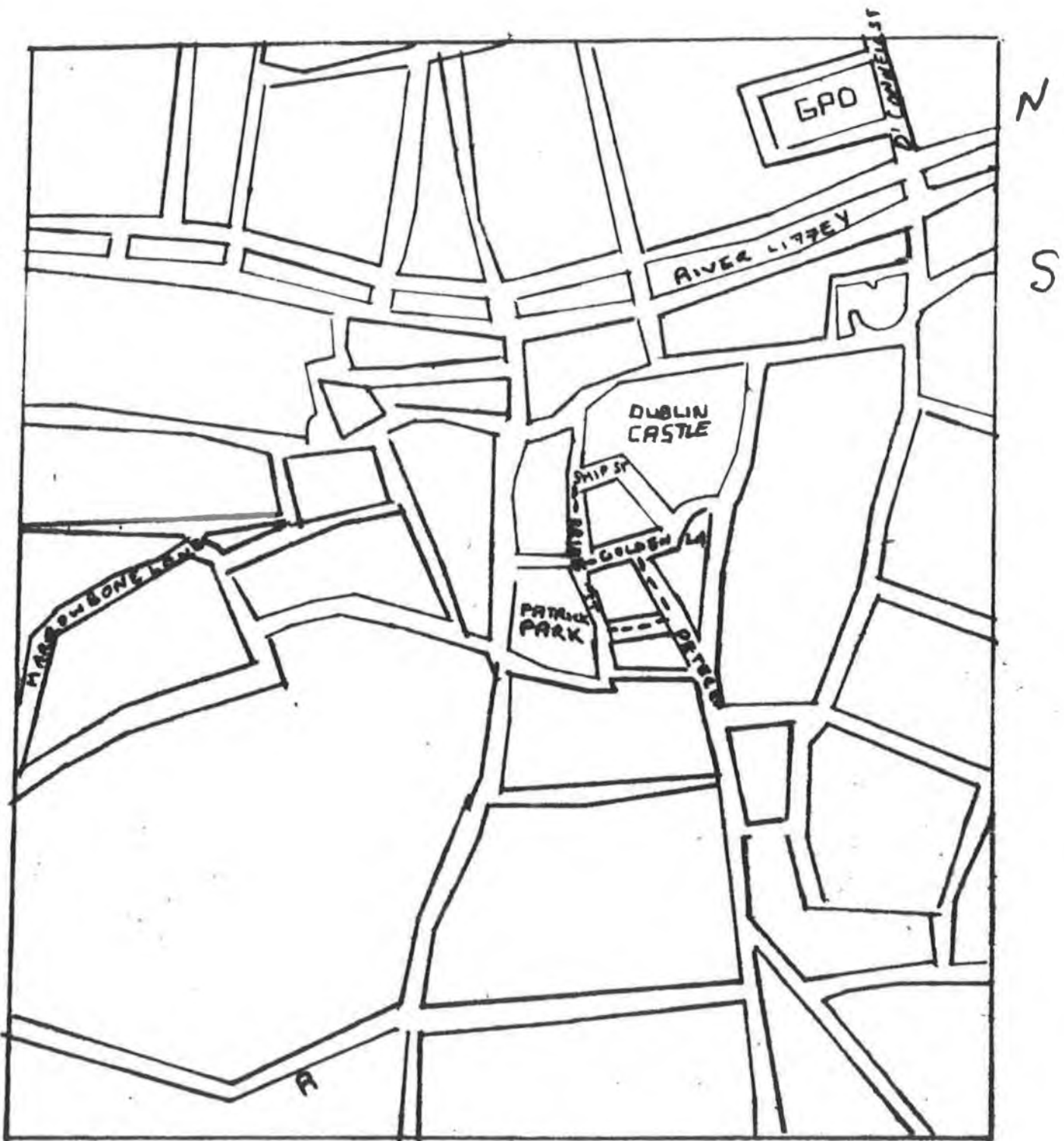
————— Railway line

3.6 St Stephens Green

At 8a.m on Saturday morning Captain Wheeler produced typewritten copies of the surrender and brought Elizabeth to the centre of Grafton Street. From there she walked carrying a white flag to St Stephens Green garrison at the College of Surgeons. She was told that Michael Mallin the commandant was sleeping and that Countess Markievicz was next in command. The Countess was surprised at the order and went to discuss it with Commandant Mallin. Elizabeth did not get to talk to him so she gave the paper with instructions on how to surrender to the Countess. Michael Mallin accepted the surrender as leader of the garrison. It is necessary to clear a misconception about the surrender at the College of Surgeons. The instructions for surrender were that the tricolour above the building would be taken down and a white flag hung in its place. This would be a signal to the British soldiers around the square to cease firing. Michael Mallin climbed to the roof and changed the flags which signalled the surrender of the post.. Countess Markievicz kissed her gun before she handed it to Captain Wheeler when she surrendered. This was a dramatic gesture that characterised most of her public appearances. She did not surrender the garrison. She was second in command to Michael Mallin. It is necessary to clarify this point because it is often assumed that she did it.

3.7 Boland's Mills

The journey to Boland's Mills was a difficult and dangerous mission. Captain Wheeler would not bring Elizabeth O Farrell beyond Butt Bridge because there were too many railway lines and they did not know exactly where the volunteers were. He left her at the bridge and she started the journey by



Surrender of the garrison Jacob's Biscuit Factory
 Distance 1/2 Mile

Key to the text.

----- Route starts at Dublin Castle and ends at Peter Street.

1 Ship Street
 2 Bride Street

3 Golden Street
 4 Peter Street

approaching the military at Westland Row to ask them to locate the volunteers for her.

When I came into Westland Row the military was lined across the top, and they were screaming to me to go back, but I kept on waving my white flag and the paper. When I got to the top a soldier was sent with me to Clare Street to find an officer. This being done, the officer sent another soldier with me to pass me through the military lines at Holles Street, and Merrion Square.

I asked a soldier where the Volunteers were firing from and he said the gasometer. I went down Holles Street around Wentworth Place and into Harmony Row on the left hand side. From here I proceeded down under the railway bridge in Brunswick Street and over the gas works, which I tried to enter it but did not succeed.I went along Barrow Street towards the railway bridge and here I saw some Volunteers who knew me. I enquired from them for Commandant de Valera and was told I would find him at the Grand Canal Dispensary. I went off to the Dispensary, back again towards town, and crossing the Grand Canal Street Bridge the firing was terrific. At this point a man crossing the bridge about a half yard behind me was shot. I called to some people in houses down the street and they ran up and carried him into Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital.

I crossed over to the dispensary and asked the volunteer on duty for de Valera, and he sent me round the back. When I got to the back the barricades had to be removed and I was lifted in through the window into a small room. Here de Valera came to me at first I think he thought the thing was a hoax, but by the time some of my Volunteer friends came in he realised I was to be trusted. He then said I will not take any orders except from my immediate superior officer Commandant Mac Donagh. So after all my trouble in finding him I had to go off again.³⁷

Elizabeth returned towards the city to report to Captain Wheeler who brought her to the garrison at Jacob's Biscuit factory.

3.8 Jacob's Biscuit Factory

This garrison was under the command of Thomas Mac Donagh. She was left at Bride Street and had to walk through the firing line to Jacob's factory at Peter Street. When she knocked to gain entry she was blindfolded for about five

³⁷ *ibid.*

minutes before she got to talk to Mac Donagh. He told her he would not take orders from a prisoner. The result was that a meeting was arranged between MacDonagh and General Lowe at St Patrick Park at 3 PM. After this meeting Mac Donagh consulted with Eamonn Ceannt who was in command at the Marrowbone Lane distillery. Both garrisons surrendered. They comprised Volunteers, members of Cumann na mBan and the Irish Citizen Army. In the meantime de Valera had surrendered, so Elizabeth did not have to repeat that particular journey. By this time it was 6pm and the surrender was complete.

By Sunday evening 75 women had been arrested and were lodged in Kilmainham Jail. Before they were brought to Kilmainham Gaol, some were brought to Ship St Barracks at Dublin Castle and a small number were brought to Richmond Barracks in Inchicore. They were strip searched by two female warders and then brought to Kilmainham. These 75 women comprised members of Cumann na mBan and the Irish Citizen Army.

Summary

During the chaos of Easter week Cumann na mBan provided support across all levels of need by the insurgents, from keeping the information channels open to moving guns around the outposts. They tried to keep everyone fed. The story of Gertie Colley Murphy is a good example of the way the women viewed their role that week. Feeding the men and women during this time is constantly alluded to by feminists as an example of the women being locked into the traditional role of nurturing. The women of Cumann na mBan did not have a problem with this. In the context of their time this was indeed traditional. It must also be remembered that it was also traditional for men to become soldiers and fight and die for their

country. All this has changed in the intervening eighty years. Roles have changed, it is essential not to lose sight of the fact that these events took place in a very different time when the roles of men and women were more rigid.

The surrender and how it all took place has never been explained in the history books I consulted. It was Brian O Higgins who printed the story of this event. It is worth noting at this point that the leaders in the GPO felt it was necessary to protect the women while they slept. Brian O Higgins had the responsibility of patrolling the corridor outside the women's room during Easter Week³⁸. It is not explained anywhere why Patrick Pearse sent a woman to the British forces with the surrender. It is speculation on my part to suggest that he believed the British would not shoot a woman carrying the white flag. This tendency to believe that a woman would not be shot at, meant that the women of Cumann na mBan were exposed to more danger than the forces inside the besieged buildings.

The strength in religious belief is indicated in the story of the priest giving general absolution. The understanding of the importance of religious symbolism is clarified by the realisation that all the women wore rosary beads around their necks that week for protection..

³⁸ Gertie Colley Murphy.

Chapter four

4.0 Aftermath of the Rising.

The court-martial which condemned to death the leaders of the Rising led to a week of executions. They began on the 3 May and stopped on the 12 of May. By this time 12 of the leaders of the Rising had been executed by firing squad. This episode horrified people. Elizabeth Bloxham sums up in one sentence the mood in Ireland. She was a founder member and organiser of Cumann na mBan and was in Strabane that week. She was teaching there. She was seeing the events unfold from this distance and said,

Then came the time when each day's paper brought news of the executions.....There was great agony of Spirit in Ireland at that time³⁹

These events left a vacuum in the leadership of the Nationalist movements. The problem now was how to regroup. This was a problem for Cumann na mBan. Immediately after Easter 1916 Cumann na mBan had about 43 affiliated Branches.⁴⁰ Kathleen Clarke the wife of Tom Clarke one of the Executed leaders became the focus of the revival of Cumann na mBan in the aftermath of the Rising.

This came about through the Irish Volunteers Dependants Fund which Kathleen started. Tom Clarke had left £3, 000 with his wife before the Rising. He told her before his execution to use this money to help the dependants of the volunteers executed or imprisoned. Kathleen said afterwards that he told her this the night before his execution not knowing hundreds would be imprisoned. The money she had was not nearly enough. Within a week of the Rising she decided to

³⁹ Elizabeth Bloxham.. UCDA p31.

⁴⁰ Cumann na mBan, Convention Document 1924.

set up the Irish Volunteers Dependants Fund (IVDF). In forming the committee Kathleen selected the female relatives of the executed men, because she believed John Redmond would not object to them. This opinion would appear to be based on the premise that with bereaved women on the committee he would not be so crass as to criticise the female relations of the executed men.

All the women I selected were Cumann na mBan except Mrs Pearse.”⁴¹

Problems rose when the censor refused to allow the publication of an appeal for money until they changed the name of the fund. The title was considered subversive. They had to comply with his wishes so it was eleven days before they had it to his liking. By this time another group had set also up a fund to collect money for aid.

Reading the names of those who started I could see it would be controlled by the Irish Parliamentary party and decided I would have to fight that.⁴²

Disagreement between both groups went on until June when a compromise was reached. Both funds came together to form the National Aid and Volunteers Dependants Fund (NAVDF).

Through the IVDF Cumann na mBan developed a cohesion from the shambles of the aftermath of the Rising. Cumann na mBan remained active the only way they could. They organised Mass to be said in the church of St Mary of the Angels, Church Street. After the mass they held a protest against the British for executing and imprisoning men. They made strong vigorous speeches outside the

⁴¹ Kathleen Clarke *Revolutionary woman* pp 137

⁴² 'ibid'

church. They repeated this every Sunday. The British authorities sent word to the priests that if the meetings after mass continued,

They would have machine-guns trained on the meeting, and shoot down those participating.⁴³

The meetings were abandoned because since there was no political point in provoking a situation that could lead to loss of life. This public unity in Cumann na mBan belied a problem that had to be surmounted to keep the organisation active.

The reforming of branches was a priority so Kathleen Clarke and Meave Mac Mahon called a meeting of the Central branch of Cumann na mBan to restart it. Kathleen says it was a very stormy meeting

Where were you? Were you out.? If not. Why not?

These were the questions bandied about by the women at the meeting. A motion was proposed that those who were not out in the Rising should be expelled. Some members showed intense bitterness towards members “who had not been out”⁴⁴ This conflict came about in the aftermath of the executions. At this point the development of a type of elitism was emerging among those who were involved and those who stayed at home. This elitism gave impetus to the ascendance of Eamonn de Valera and Countess Markievicz (This is discussed on page 37) Kathleen Clarke avoided a row over the issue by simply ignoring the motion. She pointed out that the failure in most cases was due to the action of Eoin McNeill of cancelling the Rising for Sunday 23 April. She also told the meeting that their duty to Ireland was

To close ranks, forget our failures and get to work.⁴⁵

⁴³ ‘ibid’

⁴⁴ ibid p132.

⁴⁵ ibid p132.

They heeded her word and went on to work together. Nevertheless the undercurrent of one-upmanship of who did take part in the Rising existed until after the Civil War.

This was the beginning of an undercurrent of a double sided movement within the republican movement of those who were out in the fight and those who were not. It is possible to speculate that the first manifestation of this was to come in 1917 at the Cumann na mBan convention. Jennie Wyse Power was President of Cumann na mBan since 1915 she was not out in the fight due to the confusion that reigned over orders and counter orders.

Kathleen Clarke believed that in the immediate aftermath of the Rising Cumann na mBan kept morale up among nationalists in Dublin and all over the country. They did this by becoming involved in the IVDF by taking care and maintaining the dependants of those dead and imprisoned. The latter became a major part of the workload of Cumann na mBan during 1916-17. It enabled the women work together for the common cause of nationalism.

4.1 Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan 1916 -1917

By June 1916 the British government had gradually released Republican prisoners. These men came back to Ireland to a tumultuous welcome. The Irish Volunteers, IRB, and Cumann na mBan had to face reorganising themselves after the prisoners came back. Men and women were joining these organisations who had no previous involvement with Nationalism. Sinn Fein experienced a growth in its branches throughout Ireland. This was to be significant when they held their convention in the Mansion House in Dublin in November 1917.

The Republican brotherhood co-opted with the other organisations in calling together a great assembly of Sinn Fein. The meeting was

held in the Mansion House in Dublin to agree on a new Constitution and elect a President.⁴⁶

Sinn Fein was now considered to be the civil aspect of militant nationalism.

The Irish Volunteers, Cumann na mBan and the IRB were the military side of the Irish Nationalist movement from this time. Worthy of note is that the executive of Sinn Fein after 1917 was composed of people from all three organisations and two members were from the Irish Citizen Army.⁴⁷ Cumann na mBan was part of the military side in the republican movement, but it had access to the political side through the Sinn Fein executive.

4.2 The Irish Volunteers convention 1917.

The Irish Volunteers held their convention on 19 November 1917 at Croke Park. It remained independent of Sinn Fein but Eamonn de Valera was elected President of the organisation. As president of both organisations Eamonn de Valera was leader of the civil and military side of the Nationalist movement.

4.3 New members

Countess Markievicz was not a member of Cumann na mBan before 1917. She was involved at this time with the Irish Citizen Army.⁴⁸ Her membership of Inghinidhe na hEireann ended when it was subsumed into Cumann na mBan. She does not appear in the ranks of Cumann na mBan until 1917 when she was elected President at the convention. Countess Markievicz held executive positions in the

⁴⁶ Dorothy Mac Ardle *The Irish Republic*. (Dublin 1968), pp 216

⁴⁷ Eoin Mac Neill, Cathal Brugha, Dr Richard Hayes, Fionan Lynch, Countess Markievicz, (Irish Citizen Army) Count Plunkett, Piaras Beaslai, Joseph Mc Guinness, Harry Boland DR Kath Ieen Lynn (Irish Citizen Army) J.J.walsh, Joseph Mc Donagh, Father Wall, Mrs Kathleen Clarke, Diarmuid Lynch, David Kent, Sean T.O Kelly. Dr T Dillon, Mrs Joseph Plunkett, (nee Grace Gifford,) Sean MacEntee.

⁴⁸ Dorothy Mac Ardle, *The Irish Republic*. pp101

Irish Citizen Army, Na Fianna, and the Irish Women Workers Union before 1916. Her elevation to the presidency of Cumann na mBan in 1917 deserves some considered observation at this point.

Eamonn de Valera and the Countess were court-martialled after the Rising along with the other leaders. They were all sentenced to death. After seven days, protests led a cessation of to the executions. Countess Markievicz and Eamonn de Valera were reprieved from death. It came too late for the other leaders, so they were the only two reprieved from death. Their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. After a general amnesty in late 1916 and early 1917 they were released from prison. On their return to Ireland they received a tumultuous welcome by large crowds.

They were two people reprieved at the last moment from death. In this ambience there developed a sense of spiritual triumphalism that centred on Countess Markievicz and Eamonn de Valera. In a sense they became symbols of a kind of resurrection. This was fuelled by Countess Markievicz who dressed in her Irish Citizen Army uniform travelled around Ireland and made public appearances and speeches.⁴⁹ Two weeks after her return to Ireland from prison she converted to Catholicism. She knew how to exploit ritual and symbolism. Her earlier experience as an actress was useful in knowing how to impress an audience. This activity brought her to public attention more so than any other woman in the Republican movement. It gave her the central role as the symbol of an Irishwoman upholding the fight against the Empire. This potent image would be difficult to fight. She was

⁴⁹ Countess Markievicz had a dramatic looking dress uniformshe had specially made before 1916 for public appearances, and had a portrait photograph taken wearing itjust prior to the Rising. She used a different outfit while in St Stephens Green.

elected President of Cumann na mBan even though she is not recorded as ever being a member before this election.

Countess Markievicz and Eamonn de Valera became icons of freedom and nationalism. They represented a return from death and were on the crest of a wave of public adulation. Both of them used the almost mystical aspects of Death, Resurrection and Redemption, to advance the nationalist cause, and advance themselves within the power structure of Nationalism in Ireland.

4.4 Regrouping 1917

Cumann na mBan spent 1917 reorganising the movement. Membership was growing. New branches were being started and former branches reformed.. The 1917 convention was held in the Autumn..

The executive of Cumann na mBan were Nancy O Rahilly and her daughter, Margaret Pearse, Aine Ceannt, Kathleen Clarke, Nancy Wyse Power, Fiona Plunkett, Madge Daly, Mary Mc Swiney. These women had all been bereaved as a result of the Rising. Other members of the executive were Lily O Brennan, Leslie Price, Mable Fitzgerald, Louise Gavin Duffy. These women had been involved in Cumann na mBan before the Rising. Winifred Carney was elected the Belfast delegate. Winifred Carney and Margaret Pearse had no previous membership of Cumann na mBan. Nancy Wyse Power was the daughter of Jennie Wyse Power.

4.5 Cumann na mBan, Sinn Fein and politics.

The name Sinn Fein is attributed to Mary Ellen Butler. Arthur Griffith while he was in Mountjoy Jail in 1921 wrote

Did you know it was she who christened this movement which has at last got Ireland out of the corner. It was she who suggested the

name Sinn Fein to me one day at the end of 1904. Her name will be ever linked with its history.⁵⁰

Sinn Fein membership was open to women since 1907 when Sinn Fein was known as the Sinn Fein League. This League was a result of an amalgamation of the Dungannon Clubs and Cumann na nGaelheal. The first object of the Sinn Fein League was “the regaining of Sovereign independence for Ireland”. From 1906 Jennie Wyse Power was a member of the executive of the League. In 1912 she was Vice- President of Sinn Fein. She was an executive member until 1917 when Sinn Fein became officially the political wing of the Republican Nationalist movement. She remained on the executive until 1922. Countess Markievicz became a member of Sinn Fein in 1909. This can be allied with her move into militant propaganda in late 1908 through the newspaper *Bean na hEireann*. Margaret Buckley was a member of Sinn Fein from about 1914 in one of the Dublin branches. She became president of Sinn Fein in the 1930’s.

Within Sinn Fein women had a political platform. Because their names have not previously been prominent within the history of Sinn Fein does not mean they did not have some influence or have their views listened to and acted upon.. During the discussion on the new Sinn Fein constitution Jennie Wyse Power spoke strongly on the rights of women in the organisation. She was supported by Dr Kathleen Lynn and Sean T. O Kelly. Women had equal access to membership of the organisation but it was not on any previous convention document. They obviously believed that the time had come to redress the situation. As a result a final clause was agreed:

That the equality of men and women in this organisation be emphasised in all speeches and pamphlets.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Part of a letter of Condolence to (Mere) Columba L Butler O.S.B on the sudden death of Mary Ellen while she was in Rome. The naming of the organisation took place in Arthur Griffith’s office in Fownes Street in Dublin.

The issue of political equality was now written into the constitution of the organisation. There could no longer be any ambiguity regarding the political position of women in the Republican movement.

The 1917 Sinn Fein convention was to try and pave the way forward politically for the nationalists. Before the convention meeting Countess Markievicz approached Kathleen Clarke for support of a motion at the convention attacking Eoin Mac Neill. The attack was on the basis that his countermanding of the order of the Rising on Easter Sunday was responsible for the failure of the Rising. Both women held this view of McNeill. Kathleen refused to support the Countess and told her so. The Countess went ahead and verbally attacked Mac Neill from the floor. Her attack received a hostile reception, it was so hostile that Kathleen Clarke got up and supported her,

“Her attack got such a bitterly hostile reception that despite my decision not to support her, I got up and did so..... The thing was hard to understand, and under the circumstances I felt bound to stand by her.”⁵²

Here again it is assumed that the Countess was right based solely on the fact that she was ‘out in Easter Week.’ There is also the underlying implication that because the Countess was ‘out’ that she is somehow automatically right. It indicates a tendency towards deification of the leaders of the Rising that soon came to rest on Eamonn de Valera and Countess Markievicz. Moreover the Countess was a woman being attacked by men. Kathleen Clarke went against her own political instinct to support Countess Markievicz. This political naiveté is partially what left the women on the margin. They were not yet educated in the political expediency of

⁵¹ The constitution of Sinn Fein 1917.

⁵² Kathleen Clarke *Revolutionary Woman* . p 148

political ruthlessness. Countess Markievicz was at the pinnacle of public admiration at this time. She may have overestimated her own political influence within Sinn Fein.

Summary

The Nationalist ambience developing more widely in Ireland after 1916 led to a dramatic increase of membership of Cumann na mBan. From 1917 the new rank and file members of Cumann na mBan were more radical nationalist than the early members of the organisation. The women who joined after the 1916 period were mostly effected by the wave of nationalist ideals spreading in the country. These new members came to Cumann na mBan with stronger militant nationalist leanings than the early members of the organisation. So Cumann na mBan was becoming more aggressive and adopting a more militant nationalist stance allied to Sinn Fein. Their single focus was to fight for a free Irish Republic. Cumann na mBan was becoming more militant and this is reflected in the new members attracted to the aspiration of an Irish Republic that grew after the 1916 Rising. They were different to the founding members of the organisation. The early members had come from diverse interests in Irish life.

After the Treaty and the split within the militant nationalist groups, this more militant group of women would later come to dominate within the leadership of Cumann na mBan. They gravitated towards the executive of the organisation.

Chapter five

5.0 Cumann na mBan 1918

The conscription Crisis in 1918 led Cumann na mBan into a new phase of militant activity. In April 1918 the British government passed a Military Service Act that empowered the government to extend conscription to Ireland. The Irish Party led by John Dillon withdrew from parliament in protest. The government advisors in Ireland were conscious of the difficulty. General Bryan Mahon Commander in Chief of the army in Ireland reported that conscription would be difficult to enforce. Edward Carson advised against conscription. He warned it would, 'cause too much bloodshed to be worth contemplating.'

The threat of conscription in spring 1918 led to a nation-wide anti-conscription campaign. A meeting was held in the mansion house in mid April to arrange united opposition to conscription. Cumann na mBan participated in this campaign by holding anti-conscription meetings, distributing leaflets, painting walls, and advising people to sign the anti-conscription sheets at the parish churches. A pledge had been proposed that

“Defying the right of the government to enforce compulsory service in this country, we pledge ourselves solemnly to one another to resist conscription by the most effective means at our disposal.

This was pledged at the mansion house meeting and was endorsed by the Catholic Church. They also promised that if conscription was introduced they would not take the jobs vacated by men. The women of Cumann na mBan throughout Ireland signed this pledge.

The Cumann na mBan executive organised a “La na mBan” (Day Of Women) on the 9 June 1918, this comprised a march to the City Hall in Dublin to

sign a protest against conscription.⁵³ They held flag days to raise funds for the anti conscription campaign and printed the slogan 'Women Won't Blackleg'⁵⁴ on the flags. The prospect of conscription served as a potent unifying force for the diverse shades of Irish nationalism.

There followed a series of laws during the following months aimed at suppressing the activities of the nationalists. In parts of the South and west of the country martial law was declared. In July Sinn Fein, the Irish Volunteers, and Cumann na mBan were suppressed. Ireland was viewed by an observer as

“In a state of barely manageable disorder”

In August, Lloyd George the Prime Minister announced a general election would be held in December 1918. At the same time the parliament passed the Representation of the people Act (1918) which gave the vote to all males over twenty-one and all women over thirty. This defused the situation and the republicans turned their attention to the general election.

5.1 Cumann na mBan, Sinn Fein and the 1918 election.

In its manifesto Sinn Fein was determined to proclaim its position on the issue of the sovereignty for an Irish republic.

Sinn Fein gives Ireland the opportunity of vindicating her honour and pursuing with renewed confidence the path of national salvation by rallying to the flag of the Irish Republic.⁵⁵

To lead the campaign Sinn Fein proposed Countess Markievicz and Winifred Carney. They set about printing Leaflets and distributing them through the branches of Cumann na mBan throughout the country. Individual branches of

⁵³ Papers Eithne Coyle O'Donnell Coyle's correspondence of Mary Byrne UCDA P61/4

⁵⁴ Maire Comerford Memoir Unpublished. UCDA LA18

⁵⁵ Dorothy Mac Ardle *The Irish Republic.* pp

Cumann na mBan became responsible for putting up posters and arranging for Sinn Fein speakers to address public election meetings. They also canvassed house to house in their own specific areas of operation. Jennie Wyse Power said that the women workers at the election were drawn from the ranks of Cumann na mBan.⁵⁶ In country areas Cumann na mBan helped the local volunteer company provide transport and refreshments for old people. On the day of the election members of Cumann na mBan worked at polling booths throughout the country. The election results gave Sinn Fein a total of seventy-three out of one hundred and thirty-five seats.

5.2 Cumann na mBan and the First Dail

On 19 January 1919 the First Dail Eireann met under the promise made in the manifesto. The Declaration of Independence made in 1916 was repeated in English and in Irish. It also issued a "message to the Free nations of the World calling on them to support The Irish Republic's appeal for recognition at the peace Conference in France.

Eamonn de Valera appointed Countess Markievicz Minister for Labour in this first Dail. This government was not a legal assembly. All the ministers of this assembly were not bona fide state representatives. A rhetorical question which is fair to ask is, would de Valera have given the countess an appointment if this government was a legal assembly?. It is possible he was keeping Cumann na mBan sweet because he needed their effort and work during this period.

Sinn Fein had now set up a structure for government and they set about organising all the necessary apparatus of a state. At this time the Irish Volunteers

⁵⁶ 'The political influence of women in modern Ireland' *Voice of Ireland 1924*. pp158-161

became the army of the Irish Republic, and called themselves the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

On 29 July 1920 courts of Justice and equities were decided. Nine hundred Parish courts and over seventy District Courts were in operation. The appointment of Judges and court clerks saw women of Cumann na mBan acting as judges for the Irish Republic. They also worked as court clerks and stenographers.

“The Justices in the parish courts were men and women selected without special legal qualifications, but in whose judgement and fairness they felt they could rely upon.”⁵⁷

Some of the women appointed as Judges were, Maud Gonne MacBride, Kathleen Clark, Lily Coventry, Mary Twamley and Aine Ceannt. The justices worked all day and sometimes in the evenings. Mary Twamley was from Dean Swift Square in Dublin and operated a court in a working men's club in York Street off St Stephen's Green. (She was a Captain in Cumann na mBan and she worked as a dressmaker.) Cumann na mBan members worked as secretary's and stenographer for the courts.

By July the criminal and civil courts were operating in 27 counties, and attempts to suppress the courts were made without success. Republican police enforced the decrees of the courts. Offenders were fined or removed to unknown destination for a specified period. The Republicans held miscreants as prisoners at unknown isolated places to serve out sentences. When women were tried an effort was made to have a woman judge on the bench.

⁵⁷ R.M Fox *Green Banners* pp314

In the rest of the country each IRA a Commandant controlled his area GHQ sent him guns and information and gave him advice and encouragement, but in the end only the local man knew how many weapons and men he had at his disposal and what the local possibilities were.

5.3 Dail Bonds.

Revenue was necessary to run a government. The British government was in control of Irish Revenue. The Republican Government set about raising a public loan to circumvent this problem and pay its way. This loan had a double function. It would raise necessary revenue and provide international recognition for the Provisional Republican government. On the 4 April the Dail issued Republican bonds valued at £250,000. These were broken into sums ranging from £1 to £1,000. It became important to try and sell some of the bonds in Ireland. This would raise money and enable people express support for the Republican Government. Cumann na mBan became involved in selling the bonds. They undertook to sell them on a house to house canvass. Many people did not have the money to buy them outright so Cumann na mBan devised a method of sale by instalment.

Later a weekly collection of small sums until the full amount of the Bond was paid. This system appears unusual these days but was made necessary by the scarcity of money among the very people who were most inclined to invest in the Dail at the time.⁵⁸

5.4 Cumann na mBan and the Anglo Irish War.

The irony of this war is that it is generally considered by the historian to have started on 21 January 1919 the same day the First Dail met. It could be said that historians are suggesting the constitutional and military declaration of the Irish Republic happened on the same day. So while the court system was being set up to

⁵⁸ Mary Byrne, in the papers Eithne Coyle O'Donnell UCDA P61/4

control the country, the violence of the Anglo Irish war was leading to a period of unprecedented mayhem in Ireland as war developed

The war operated at first on two fronts, the counter-intelligence work of Michael Collins that was mainly in Dublin.. Attack on police barracks and ambushes of police patrols around the country increased. The raids for arms and ammunition also increased Both these things happened together and interacted with each other. Michael Collins's intelligence network was made up of people from all occupations, from railwaymen, hotel porters, typists, civil servants working for the government, policemen and detectives. In many cases some of these workers were already members of the Irish Volunteers and Cumann na mBan. The intelligence war was mainly confined to Dublin.

Outside Dublin branches of Cumann na mBan were attached to the IRA commands in their areas. This is one of the reasons that information on a country basis about these women can be difficult to trace. They did not in most cases send reports to the Central executive in Dublin during this war, unlike the Civil war when reports were sent to Central HQ. The information available nevertheless is enough to see that Cumann na mBan were indeed very involved at the rank and file level throughout the country. Sigle Hartnett describes her work in Listowel in Kerry. She was fifteen years old and describes her work thus,

Carried Dispatches, and arms to the volunteers, and made black powder at the back of a chemist shop.⁵⁹

Annie Murphy of Carlow stored rifles, revolvers and ammunition in her house for the local volunteer Company. She also assisted the company captain in securing a box of bombs. Her house was used as a safe house for men on the run

⁵⁹ Sigle Hartnett , in the papers of Eithne Coyle O'Donnell, UCDA P61/4 (85)

even though she lived beside a policeman's wife. These activities were repeated by women all over Ireland as part of the war effort. Planning ambushes involved the co-operation of Cumann na mBan. They prepared the food rations and first aid outfits. They also carried quantities of arms to the sites of ambushes, then collected and stored them after the event.

As in the week of the Rising, keeping fighters fed was an important aspect of the war. The women conveyed food to training camps where men were living outdoors in most cases. They brought food to prisoners and smuggled letters in and out of prisons.

Annie Murphy from Carlow conveyed food to the IRA training camp at Ducketts Grove in Carlow in 1920-21. This camp had IRA and Cumann na mBan hiding from the authorities. Eithne Coyle, Linda Kearns and Mae Burke were there having escaped from Mountjoy by climbing over the wall. The social organisation of the sexes at this time meant it was easier for women to buy food and cook in their homes without it being obvious. At this time if a man did it he would have been noticed because it would have been unusual.

The IRA waged a campaign against the RIC and began systematic attacks on fortified barracks. During 1919 Cumann na mBan, Sinn Fein and the IRA were proscribed by the government. By September 1919 Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister was forced to look at the situation in Ireland. There were two reasons for this one of which was the growing level of violence in the country. The second was that the 1914 Home Rule Act, was due to come into force 'when the war ended.'

In March 1920 he ordered that RIC men must be recruited in Britain. They were in effect paid mercenaries and became known as the Black and Tans. They had later

reinforcements called the Auxiliaries. Between both groups they resorted to wholesale destruction of property and indiscriminate murder to terrorise the population.

The arrival of these forces on the 20 March 1920 led to a period of violence that ended with a Truce in July 1921. During this time the Guerrilla Warfare grew worse. It became a battle between both sides with the civilian population caught in the middle. People lost their homes and businesses which led to intense hardship.

5.5 The White Cross

Towards the end of 1920 a group of men and women came together to form the White Cross.

“The Irish White Cross was organised to cope with the distress and destitution resulting in Ireland caused by the war. This war was a developed from the determination of the Irish people to assert their right to nationhood.⁶⁰

It became necessary that a central organisation was set up to combine private efforts into one organisation. The Lord Mayor of Dublin became Chairman of this organisation. The men and women of the White Cross represented practically every section of the political and religious beliefs of Ireland,

except the Orange and Unionist parties of the North East corner.⁶¹

The White Cross was a humanitarian organisation with an interest in relieving human suffering in the North as well as in the South.

“As a result of the violence 100,000 people were reduced to destitution, with no alternative left to them but the support of charity or escape from their miseries by death from want and hunger.”⁶²

The White Cross allied with the American Committee for Relief in Ireland to raise and distribute funds. The White Cross was successful in its aims to help

⁶⁰ *The White Cross report* 1920 to 31 August 1922. (Dublin 1922)

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² *ibid*

alleviate suffering in Ireland. This thesis will just deal with the relief to families and the involvement of Cumann na mBan.

5.6 Cumann na mBan and the White Cross.

The standing committee of the White Cross was nominated by the trustees who included the Archbishop of Dublin, the Lord Mayor of Dublin and Arthur Griffith. Kathleen Clarke, Maud Gonne Mc Bride, Madame O' Rahilly and Mrs T.M.Kettle were among the women appointed to the standing executive committee. The members of the General Council were nominees from all organisations with an interest in the fund.

The White Cross committee allocated £10,000 to the Prisoners Dependants fund run by Cumann na mBan. This money was to help families suffering financially because the men were imprisoned. In 1921 the Republican prisoners were released from jails following the Treaty of Peace. Many of the released men were penniless.

When the prison doors opened they were themselves free men. Many of the were unable to travel to their homes for want of money to pay their fares. Many of them had to be provided with clothing, not merely for the sake of comfort but often for the sake of decency⁶³

The care did not end at the prison gates. Many of the men still had to be supported. There were two main reasons for this, some were unable to get work, and many others could not work because their health was broken due to their confinement in frequently insanitary prisons and internment camps. Some of the bad health was caused by the results of beatings or bullet wounds. On release some men had operations to remove bullets. The number who had broken teeth or broken noses

⁶³ *Irish White Report report pp60*

was legion. Some men had to be fitted with artificial limbs, and these men then had to be supported financially simply to live.

The greatest care was taken to ensure the money was dispersed properly. Parish committees were set up to take on the task of paying out the money where it was most needed.

It was at the Parish Committee level that Cumann na mBan became involved, with the White Cross, allocating funds to families in need. It was believed that these women knew the cases in their local areas where people were in need because of the war. This was necessary because many people in need did not come forward for help. The women of Cumann na mBan quietly helped people with money allocated for families. The sum of payment to families was set by the White Cross Committee. These were 10/- for each adult and 5/- for each child under sixteen years old. In certain cases a variation in the money paid out was allowed.

Where a person relieved was an adult living alone, an increase in the rate could be made. It was clear that what would suffice for the support of such a sufferer when living with his family would be inadequate when living alone.⁶⁴

Summary

From 1917 until 1922 the members of Cumann na mBan were simultaneously giving aid on a social level, and supporting the military campaign in Ireland against the British.

⁶⁴ Aine Ceannt *The story of the White Cross 1920-47*. (Dublin) no date.

Chapter six

6.0 The Treaty and the Civil War.

The War of Independence culminated in a Treaty with the British Government on 6 December 1921. This partitioned Ireland into two states, The Irish Free State with twenty-six counties and the State of Northern Ireland that comprised the other six counties. The other issue that became the most seriously divisive one was the Oath of Allegiance to the British monarch. The result was a serious rift within the republican movement. The republican nationalist split into two factions, those who were anti Treaty and those who decided to accept the treaty and form a government. The 'pro treaty side set up the Free State government. The anti treaty side kept the name Sinn Fein and they claimed to be the successors to the First Dail. They called themselves the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. The IRA split into two factions anti and pro treaty. The pro treaty side became in effect the Free State army. Some of them became members of the new Police Force (Garda Siochana). The anti side kept the name of IRA. They were the military side and Sinn Fein was the political arm of the Republican Provisional Government

Eamonn De Valera was the president of both organisations and President of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic. The consequence of this situation was a polarisation into two factions the Anti Treaty and Pro Treaty forces. The pro Treaty side claimed that acceptance of the Treaty would eventually lead to a united Ireland. The Anti Treaty side claimed to be the real inheritors of Patrick Pearse's 1916 proclamation. They were also the inheritors of the Irish Republic, and

the First Dail which in 1919 proclaimed an Irish Republic based on the 1916 Proclamation.

By June 1922, Civil War started in Ireland. The people on both sides were Republican Nationalists (or simply Republicans). After the split there emerged a move towards Militant Republican Nationalism (also called extreme Republicans). Sinn Fein the IRA and Cumann na mBan and some members of the Irish Citizen Army are regarded as the latter.

6.1 Cumann na mBan and the Treaty.

Cumann na mBan called an emergency convention on February 1922 to allow the overall membership of the organisation to vote on the issue of acceptance or non acceptance of the Treaty. The proposal, put forward by the President Countess Markievicz was,

“This executive of Cumann na mBan reaffirms their allegiance to the Republic. Therefore we cannot support the Articles of Treaty signed in London.”

The vote was 419, in favour to 63 against the motion. These votes represent the votes of the delegates from branches around the country. A branch of ten members had one delegate. A branch with more than twenty members had two delegates and a branch of over fifty members had three delegates. Each delegate had a vote. Therefore it is difficult to come to any firm conclusion about the numbers in Cumann na mBan at this time. Some of the delegates from the outlying areas of the country did not attend. This creates a further problem when trying to ascertain the numbers in the organisation at this time. This non attendance was due to a stoppage in the railway system. Nevertheless the deciding vote indicated strong support for Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army.

“The decision had the further effect of limiting Cumann na mBan to purely military work.”⁶⁵

The organisation was moving away from the prospect of having any political influence. So that as a strong women’s organisation their voice would be lost in the political arena of Irish Life because they were regressing into the purely military sphere. Cumann na mBan began as a military organisation. Their experience in the events from 1916 to 1921 had enabled them to develop the confidence to move towards the area of politics. The decision to go against the Treaty was a regressive step which seen in retrospect did leave them outside mainstream politics.

This is what upset Jennie Wyse Power. At this point she left Cumann na mBan. This is the third split within the organisation Cumann na mBan. Those who voted in support of the Treaty left the organisation. In 1924 Jennie Wyse Power said

I venture to prophesy that history will lay the blame for much of the present warfare on the shoulders of the women, who in December 1921 cried “Traitor” to those who believed that the Treaty afforded a surer path to freedom than the fanatical ‘Civil war that followed’⁶⁶

As the women who voted in favour of the Treaty left the meeting the women who voted anti treaty shouted after them ‘Traitor’. Jennie Wyse Power and Elizabeth Bloxham were two of the founder members of Cumann na mBan. They left the organisation at this time. Cumann na mBan had aligned itself with the militant republicans who claimed they were the inheritors of the Irish Republic. Cumann na mBan alongside Sinn Fein and the IRA did not recognise the Irish Free State.

⁶⁵ Senator Jennie Wyse Power “The political influence of Women in Ireland’. Voice of Ireland.” 1924 p161

⁶⁶ ibid p 160.

Cumann na mBan restructured their organisation, at their Convention in October 1921 before the split they had declared that they were a body of women ready,

- 1 To follow the policy of the republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the nation.
- 2 To Develop the suggested military activities in conjunction with the IRA.
- 3 To continue collecting for the "Defence of Ireland Fund" and any other fund to be devoted to the arming and equipping of the men and women of Ireland.⁶⁷

The split sees the movement into the executive of the organisation, those members who had joined the organisation after 1916. These members who had joined as Nationalist Republicans and their influence are discernible from 1917 onwards. At this split in 1922 some of the members who had joined in the early years left the organisation.

The Cumann na mBan executive restructured the organisation. They placed it on a strong military footing parallel with the IRA divisions. This was not a new idea it is similar to how the organisation operated since 1914. The difference at this point was that the organisation became in practice more centralised during the Civil War. Its branches throughout the country sent reports of activities to GHQ in Dublin. Reference to battalion, and a brigade is substituted for the name Branch.⁶⁸ The battalion worked closely with the IRA but took its direct orders from a Cumann na mBan officer. Brigade covered an area within a county and was the next link upwards in the chain of command. This comprised the entire group of battalions in a particular area. For example the Cumann na mBan branches of Deansgrange, Blackrock, Ballybrack Dundrum in Co Dublin and the branch from

⁶⁷ Cumann na mBan convention document October 1921.

⁶⁸ 'ibid'

Bray Co. Wicklow were brought together into a brigade area called the District Council of South Dublin. These District Councils were then divided into the Northern, Southern, Eastern, and Western of Cumann na mBan parallel to the structure of the IRA.

The Civil War followed a war of words which had been going on since the Treaty in 1921. In April 1922 the IRA occupied the Four Courts and other buildings in Dublin. This was a challenge to the Provisional government of the Free State. A siege situation ensued with the IRA and Cumann na mBan entrenching themselves into the occupied buildings.⁶⁹ Much wrangling went on between both sides until June. By then pressure on the government meant they had to make a decision. They bombarded the Four Courts to dislodge the extreme republicans. The IRA was accompanied by members of Cumann na mBan during the ensuing battles around Dublin. This event is considered to be the start of the Civil War.

6.2 The Civil War.

The workload for Cumann na mBan during the period of the war was huge. They carried on the type of work they were already involved from 1916. The difference with this war was they were fighting their people. The implications were enormous. Their enemy had access to information on arms dumps, safe houses, and the names of the women themselves. The organisation had to rebuild new contacts. They also had to start a new Dependents Fund. As opponents to the new state they lost access to the funds already in existence. Money became a problem for buying arms and food. They also had to rebuild the intelligence network and develop a propaganda programme on behalf of the anti Treaty side.

⁶⁹ The Free State came into existence on the 6 December 1922. Until then it was the Provisional government of the Irish Free State.

Propaganda was important so they could put their case to the general public. In January 1923 Cumann na mBan published a paper called "The Irish Nation." Its brief was to bring to public awareness the work of the republicans. It was also an attempt to circumvent the national press that was perceived as "pro British and anti-nationalist."⁷⁰ The paper was sold through selected agents and Cumann na mBan branches. An extract from an advertising handbill for the paper illustrates their purpose,

"The "Irish Nation" proposes to put the other side from week to week. Let the people read and judge for themselves. It is your duty on this national crisis to study both sides carefully. You are the judge and jury; you are the judges. You cannot exercise your judgement when you hear only one side of the argument"⁷¹

The paper was printed in Scotland and proof-read by members of the Ann Devlin branch in Glasgow. The paper was published until September 1925.

It was used in 1923 by the Women Prisoners Defence league (WPDL) to publish a list of names of women interned by the government. The WPDL was set up in 1922 in response to the government refusal to make public the names of prisoners in Irish jails. Official information was not forthcoming on prisoners so they compiled the list of 300 from their intelligence network.

Carrying dispatches and conveying arms and ammunition for the IRA was more difficult than before. It was also more dangerous, during the Anglo Irish War twenty-two women were imprisoned. Within four months of the hostilities of the Civil War over two hundred women were interned. The Civil War was also more bloody and vicious. More civilians were killed, maimed and imprisoned during the Civil War than during the Anglo Irish War.

⁷⁰ Mrs Cathal Brugha A Sales Flyer for the paper, Captured Documents, Lot 127

⁷¹ Mrs Corrigan. 21 May 1923 Captured documents Lot 12

The houses of members of Cumann na mBan were raided and ransacked for information. Aine Ceannt's sister Lily O Brennan was interned in Kilmainham, both women lived together. After a raid by Free State forces their house was left almost uninhabitable. Some women had their houses burned as reprisal for helping the irregulars.⁷²

Hiding information became difficult. Ingenuity was used to create places to store intelligence reports. One was the Mother and Baby Club in Werburgh Street in Dublin. This club was part of the health scheme founded by Lady Aberdeen. The scheme planned to educate mothers on how to keep their babies healthy and disease free. Infant mortality was high in Dublin at this time. Some of the nurses were in Cumann na mBan and used the Club as a front for hiding information. St Ultans Hospital was also used. Information was found in the files mixed with children's files. Miss Fitzpatrick a member of Cumann na mBan had a newsagent shop and a dressmaker's workroom at her premises in Wexford St. She kept files for Cumann na mBan, the IRA and Sinn Fein. She hid IRA men hiding from the government forces. Her house was raided and she was arrested because a large file of documents deemed to be treasonable were found on her premises

6.3 Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund.

Setting up a new welfare system was a daunting task. The scheme adopted was called the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund (IRPDF). The headquarters were always kept separate from Cumann na mBan. It moved its HQ address quite often to avoid detection. Four of the most used were number's 6 and 26 Harcourt Street in Dublin, a technical School in Blackrock Co. Dublin and the

⁷² The irregulars were the anti Treaty side. The regulars were the government side.

Baby Club in Werburgh Street. The new centralised system meant that quite a number of reports from around the country were sent to these places. All of these premises were raided at some point and the documents taken to army intelligence. These documents enable a reconstruction of how this welfare system worked.

Rules whereby the scheme would operate were devised. There is no exact date for its inauguration. The earliest reference to it in the archive material is July 1922 when an executive Committee meeting was held in Dunlaoghaire, Co. Dublin. The military style and format of the rules and regulations meant that in theory each area of the country was covered by this comprehensive structure. The theory was that each battalion would collect money in its area and send any surplus to Headquarters in Dublin. HQ would redistribute the money to areas short of support and funds.

6.4 Allocating Aid

In practice it was difficult in most areas to collect money, as each battalion did the best it could in its particular circumstances and very little money was sent to Dublin.

The scheme planned to pay 15s to a dependant wife, 2/6 for each child. The maximum paid would be £1 2's 6p for other dependants. A pattern that emerges in the source material is that dependants were not only wives and children. Many of the men away from home were often the main support to elderly parents, or parents and younger siblings.

For example two brothers from Carlow were the main financial support for their parents, four brothers and two sisters, ranging in age from 16 to 4 years old.

Paying money to dependant families became difficult because of the drain of also looking after the needs of the local IRA Active Service Units.

6.5 The IRPDF and the IRA

Cumann na mBan supplied the men with clothes, cigarettes, food, rest stations and first aid. In Callen a woman from the local Cumann na mBan explains when asking for money from the central fund,

“We have nine active members and these women always have the republicans to feed as well as looking after the needs of dependants⁷³”

Funerals of IRA killed in action became the responsibility of Cumann na mBan. The CID were constantly looking for IRA men, so they were buried quietly with women mostly as mourners.

The CID were nosing for men. Cumann na mBan women in uniform, some with eyes shut and faces screwed to one side, fired a volley over the graves with revolvers or automatics.⁷⁴

An illustration of this is the case of an IRA man killed in Carlow. Cumann na mBan paid the funeral expenses. Two members of Cumann na mBan gave him a wake for two nights. They then accompanied the remains to Mitchelstown Co Cork. This was paid for out of the IRPDF.

Legal aid was also paid out of this fund for volunteers who needed it. The IRPDF received many appeals from IRA commanding officers for money for their men.

The IRPDF HQ in Dublin sent money to the Southern Command in Cork to help the men.⁷⁵ They sent £900 to the First Southern Command in Cork, £400

⁷³ Mother and Baby Club Werburgh Street 7 February 1923 Captured Documents Lot 34

⁷⁴ Ernie O'Malley *The Singing Flame* (Dublin 1992), pp152

⁷⁵ Tom Derrig Captured Documents Lot 2

pounds to the Second Southern Command and £200 to the Third Southern Command, in December 1922. A further £200 was sent to the First Western Command during this time.

The IRPDF was inundated with requests for money from all quarters. Gradually the line between the needs of the dependants and those of the men disappeared. Consequently Cumann na mBan were trying to supply the needs of men, women, and children on the republican side of the war.

6.6 Raising money.

Raising money tested the ingenuity of the women.

Dependants are being looked after, the most urgent casesThese families are looked after by voluntary subscriptions from our members who give weekly subs. Women with Republican views send weekly supplies of milk... There are men and women who send groceries and bread to the poor. But it is always the same people who give.⁷⁶

This last sentence indicates the problems met with when raising funds. Only people with republican views would subscribe, with the same group constantly giving aid in whatever way they could. The sources were not infinite. Local effort at fund-raising was the holding of flag days, tea parties, and whist drives which on a local level helped also.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington went to the United States to raise money. At one point she sent £1,794 from New York.⁷⁷ A bank lodgement book belonging to Louise Nolan, a treasurer of the Fund showed a lodgement of £3464-2/- in the National Bank.⁷⁸ There is no explanation of how this money was raised. Individuals

⁷⁶ Mother Baby Club, Werburgh St Captured Documents lot 34.

⁷⁷ George Staunton. Captured Documents Lot 101

⁷⁸ Mother and Baby Club, Werburgh St Captured Documents Lot 34.

did send private subscriptions to the fund. The post Civil War editions of "The Irish Nation" published lists of subscriptions until the fund closed in 1925.

The overall impression from the sources is that the women simply begged for money from likely republican supporters. They had a world wide network of contacts. They sent appeals to Britain, Australia, the United States of America, South America, and South Africa to keep the IRPDF a viable proposition. In the papers of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington there are the names and addresses of individuals and newspapers in these countries with whom she had contact.

Summary

The military activities of Cumann na mBan was vital to the Republican side in the Civil War. Their involvement in the areas of intelligence, publicity, propaganda raising funds and creating the IRPDF was an important support to the IRA and Sinn Fein. They were in effect the administrative section of the Republican military and political system.

Military operations dominated the workload of Cumann na mBan during the Civil War. The Captured Papers indicate they had little or no impact on the political decisions during this time. Eamonn de Valera was the president of Sinn Fein and Chief of Staff of the IRA. Countess Markievicz was at this time still president of Cumann na mBan. She is notable for her absence in the Captured Documents. It is therefore difficult to pin down what she was doing during the Civil War.

Nevertheless the work of the members of rank and file continued until the war ended. It is documented in the many papers taken from women arrested and interned by the Free State authorities.

Chapter seven

7.0 Internment.

On the 22 October 1922 the Free State government announced that military courts would begin to function from 15 October 1922. From this date any person who committed an act of war (carrying guns or ammunition) faced imprisonment and a possible death sentence if captured. A person found carrying any documents relating to activities of the Free State authorities was deemed to be committing an act of treason. The penalty for treason was imprisonment. These laws applied to both sexes. Carrying dispatches, guns and ammunition was part of the work of Cumann na mBan, consequently many of its members when caught were imprisoned. They expected to be sent for trial. None of them were ever tried in court. They refer to themselves as internees not prisoners because of this.

Members of Cumann na mBan arrested around the country at the start of the war were interned in their local area. By February 1923 this became a problem for the government. There were women interned in jails around Ireland without female warders. Cumann na mBan objected to the male warders so the government moved all female internees to Dublin. They moved the women to Kilmainham Gaol and Mountjoy Jail in Dublin. The two prisons were overcrowded by May 1923 and the authorities opened the North Dublin Union (NDU). The NDU was formerly part of the North Dublin Union Workhouse. During the Anglo Irish War it was used as a barracks for the Black and Tans. The

NDU was handed over to the Department of Defence as part of the army barracks system in 1922. This meant the NDU was under military control at this time.

The women from Kilmainham Jail and Mountjoy Jail were moved into the North Dublin Union in May 1923 to centralise the interned women in one place. In July some prisoners were moved back to Kilmainham due to overcrowding in the NDU. The official papers on this issue are scarce. Personal memories of some of Cumann na mBan are available through written memoirs, diaries and letters. Between both sources it is possible to discover how they reacted to imprisonment.

One method of protest was the use of hunger strike. This was used for various forms of protest. Mary Mc Swiney used it on the two occasions she was arrested during the Civil War. On her first day in prison on both occasions she went on hunger strike as a protest at being interned. Her first strike lasted three weeks and she was released. Her second was at the end of March 1923 when she repeated her action and the strike lasted until the end of April. On each occasion Mary was released from prison after a short time when her health would become a cause for concern. This action meant she spent a short spell in prison compared with the women who did not resort to hunger strike. It is worth noting at this point that the President of Cumann na mBan Countess Markievicz did not agree with the use of hunger strikes as form of protest.

The other mode of protest was the breaking up of prison furniture. This form of protest was against the fact of their internment. It was a form of protest that did not have the not general agreement of all the female internees. The leaders of the protest in Mountjoy Jail in early January were Maire Comerford and Sigle Humphries. Sigle was in prison since November 1922 after a raid on her home. Ernie O'Malley was captured there after a shoot-out with the Free State

troops. Her mother was also arrested and imprisoned at the same time. Maire Comerford was arrested on the 6 January 1922 when she was found in possession of a 1.32 nickel plated revolver and seven rounds of ammunition. Maire Comerford was put into Sigle Humphries cell. On the 8 January she smashed up Sigle's cell, 'barehanded' breaking the locks and crockery. Lily O Brennan called Maire Comerford a troublemaker. Maire was locked into isolation for two days. On the 11 January a protest was held on the top landing. Banging and smashing could be heard from downstairs. At this point a brief explanation is required about the relationship between the female prisoners in Mountjoy Jail. Two factions grew in the prison as the number of prisoners grew. This developed from the belief by some that aggressive protest at internment should be pursued in the prison. Another group believed that it was best to serve out their time as best as they could. The former group were on the top landing and the latter on the bottom. Therefore the two factions became known by the names, the upstairs landing, and the downstairs landing. The women referred to themselves this way. They had elected a prison Council to prevent any one individual taking any action without the agreement of a majority but it never became effective. The upstairs group were apparently led by Maire and Sigle. They ignored this council as did their followers from the top landing.

On the 11 January when Maire was released from two days solitary confinement a riot was staged by the faction on the top landing. At lunch time about forty Free State soldiers arrived and removed all the furniture and left the women with mattresses and blankets. This punishment was meted out to all the women. That evening Free State soldiers came to the top landing and they arrested Maire

and Sigle. The two women were put into solitary confinement for three months. They immediately went on hunger strike but abandoned it on the 31 January.

Life became a little more peaceful for a while. Lily O'Brennan says the chief occupation at this point was scrounging cigarettes. In February the authorities began to move some of the women from Mountjoy to Kilmainham Jail. This reduced the overcrowding for a while.

In March 1923 Sigle and Maire were released from solitary confinement. They began a protest immediately. This included breaking doors, locks, and other fittings in the prison. This action led to a withdrawal of privileges for all prisoners, and the remaining furniture was removed including the beds. They were left with the mattresses and nothing else. They were told it would be restored if they promised to stop breaking the furniture. They refused to agree to this and privileges remained withdrawn.

The privileges were related to their status as political prisoners. As such they could wear their own clothes. They could also receive food parcels and letters. They could also send letters albeit written on just one page. They did not at any time have the right to receive visitors. All parcels and letters were posted or left personally at the front gate. The prison food was apparently vile and food was necessary to stay healthy. The withdrawal of these privileges led to a protest by all the internees. The form of protest they decided was to go on a hunger strike. The reasoning behind this strike was as Margaret Buckley declared,

“The hunger strike was the only weapon we could wield, and we felt justified in using it.we were being deprived of the common necessities which are accorded to the most depraved criminal. We felt we would be cowards if we did not put up a fight for the political status which in that very jail Tom Ashe⁷⁹ has suffered and died to obtain.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Thomas Ashe was a republican prisoner who went on Hunger Strike in 1917 in Mountjoy Jail. He died after an attempt at force feeding caused food to enter his lungs

⁸⁰ Margaret Buckley *The jangle of the keys* (Dublin 1938)

After seven days Margaret Buckley the spokeswoman for the prisoners developed a heart condition. Ensuing negotiations with the deputy governor restored the privileges of food parcels and their beds were also restored. The third way of coping with incarceration was by simply accepting it as a price paid for their commitment to cause of the Irish Republic. This was the at the heart of the disagreement between the prisoners. Some wanted a peaceful life to simply get through the ordeal of imprisonment. Other prisoners believed that they should go on fighting the Free State even in prison by creating havoc in any way they could. The rights of the individual prisoner was not a consideration for the more aggressive inmates. These events indicate the diversity of personalities within the movement.

The hunger strike was also used to pressurise for all kinds of demands. In Kilmainham Jail fifty-five women threatened a hunger strike to pressurise the governor into allowing one of the women who was ill be removed to hospital. The governor conceded on this one. In a period of one year they had five different lengthy hunger strikes.

7.1 The North Dublin Union and Kilmainham Gaol

Kilmainham Jail was cold and damp. Many of the women suffered from constant colds and flu like illnesses in this prison. The North Dublin Union (NDU) was an old building. It was the former hospital wing of the old workhouse. After this it was a barracks for some time. The women were crowded into this building from May 1923 until the gradual release began in August 1923. The building was in a bad state of disrepair when the women were transferred into it in May 1923. It

was vacant since the Black and Tans had left. It also had two extra years of dirt and neglect.

Dr Elessora L Fleury was an internee in the NDU. She was a member of Cumann na mBan. (Not all the republican women interned were members of Cumann na mBan)

She accepted responsibility for the health of the women. She worked with and was subordinate to the Government Medical Officer. She was released in July 1923 and wrote an article in "The Irish Nation"⁸¹ about the conditions in the North Dublin Union.

She said the condition they found it in was dreadful. It was filthy and had not been maintained in any way. Margaret Buckley's account ⁸²of the condition of the building is identical with Dr Fleury's description. The internees made the place as habitable as possible but it was a miserable existence to be there. Washing facilities were bad almost non-existent. Scabies and lice became a problem. Illness such as scarlet fever, chickenpox, and smallpox became a cause for concern. There were no deaths of female prisoners during this time. In many case's women suffered constant ill health that dogged them in later life. Nonetheless they survived the immediate difficulties of their situation.

During this difficult period the women resorted to an inner strength to help them through the experience. On the 24 September 1922 a Pastoral letter was read by the Rev Dr Cohalan in the Diocese of Cork. He warned the people that

According to the declaration of the bishops of Ireland,
The killing of National soldiers is Murder.....He affirmed that
priests were doing their duty when they refused absolution to those
who took part in the activities which the Bishops condemned.⁸³

⁸¹ 'Eire The Irish Nation' August 1923 pp5

⁸² Margaret Buckley *The Jangle of the Keys* pp?

⁸³ Dorothy Mac Ardle *The Irish Republic* pp 731



Most popular in Ireland

The original picture of the Mother of Perpetual Help is enthroned over the high altar of the Church of St. Alphonsus in Rome. It was placed there in 1866 at the wish of Pope Plus IX in fulfilment of the request made by our Lady herself some four hundred years earlier.

The first authentic copy of the picture came to Ireland within a few months of the solemn crowning ceremonies in Rome. It was brought to Limerick and was enshrined in the Redemptorist Church at Mount Saint Alphonsus. Two years later the Redemptoristines in Dublin obtained an authentic copy of the picture for their now famous Shrine in Drumcondra.

The old tin Church in Clonard, Belfast, prided itself in having its Shrine to the Mother of Perpetual Help, and it was there that the Archconfraternity of the Mother of Perpetual Help and St. Alphonsus was introduced in 1897.

1942 saw the beginning of the Perpetual Novena to the Mother of Perpetual Help at Clonard Church. The Catholic people of Belfast cherish a warm and sincere devotion to that loving Mother who strengthened their faith and renewed their courage during those dark and bitter days of World War II.

From Clonard the Perpetual Novena has spread throughout the length and breadth of Ireland making the picture of the Mother of Perpetual Help one of the best known and most loved of all representations of Mary.

Understanding the picture

WHAT type of Picture is this remarkable Image, and what is the secret of its appeal? The Picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help belongs to the class known as Icons. Icons are sacred Images, which have been venerated in Russia and the Middle East for over a thousand years. The artists who painted them had an enviable facility for compressing a rich treasure of spiritual ideas into a very small area. The Icon of Our Lady of

Perpetual Help is a happy example of this aptitude of the artist, for into a comparatively small space, he has packed a great wealth of mental images.

THE Picture of Our Mother of Perpetual Help is not a large one. It measures only 21 inches by 17 inches. It is painted on a hard type of wood, in colours mixed with wax. The background of the Picture is completely in gold,

Getting the message

WHAT is the story which the Icon maker evidently took such pains to tell? The Divine Child has had a terrible vision of His coming Passion and sufferings. The vision is shown by the two angels carrying the Instruments of His Passion: the Archangel Gabriel carries the Cross, and the Reed and Lance are borne by the Archangel Michael. Both angels watch the Divine Child intently, and His eyes naturally are on the Instruments. Instead of giving way to fear and dismay He instantly draws closer to His Mother. This movement is very swift and instinctive. How really sudden it is, the artist does not leave to our imagination. It is portrayed by the hanging sandal which has become loose, as He rapidly drew the left foot over the right one. This is one of the symbols suggested by the falling sandal—the immediate recourse to His Mother in time of distress and trouble.

THIS instant recourse is made without hesitation, almost, one may say, without thinking, and thereby we are given a most useful lesson on true devotion to the Mother of God. The Child's confidence is not in vain. Our Lady's head turns gently towards Him. Her strong right hand, the symbol of power, holds His two little hands, as if to support and sustain Him, showing how she rewards such trust and faith.

IS there any foundation in history for the scene depicted in this Icon? Nobody has ever claimed that there is. There is no reference to any such in Holy Scripture, nor is there mention of it in tradition. The preoccupation of the

artist with symbolism suggests that his purpose in the main was to teach a lesson, rather than to portray an historical event. If the incident were really true, we would expect to see Our Lady looking at the Child whom she is consoling. But she is not. These wonderful eyes gaze out on us who kneel at her feet. They remind each one of us of the great lessons of this Picture. They tell us that Mary is our Mother too, that she is our Mother of perpetual and ever ready help. They recall to us that we, too are her children, and that like the Divine Child we, also, in trouble and difficulties must turn at once to her for help and assistance. In spite of our sins Mary sees us as her children.

THOUGH we have crucified her Son, her compassionate eyes are full of forgiveness. Though we may detect in them a certain pain and disappointment because we have not been faithful to grace, it is scarcely discernible. Dominating everything else is the look of pity, of love and encouragement. Small wonder therefore, that a sinner finds it difficult to look into these eyes without acute feelings of shame and embarrassment. In his soul has been awakened the memory of better things, and a desire to amend. Who will count the number restored to grace in the hundred years since this image of Mary began to spread throughout the world? No wonder that our hearts are full of joy and gratitude as the centenary comes around. We thank our Heavenly Mother for what she has done for all those who invoke her and for all those for whom she has been invoked.

The prison chaplains in the male and female internment camps refused the sacrament to the Republican internees. In Mountjoy thirty-six women went to confession and were refused absolution. They returned often to the chaplain for the sacrament and he always refused it to them. This caused psychological hurt for quite a few some of the women. They devised ways of keeping their religious spirituality active by praying together as a group. They said the rosary three times a day and had half hour vigils before the altar of the Lady of Perpetual Succour. This usually amounted to three hours prayer a day. This statue of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour represented a focus for prayers and emotional sustenance for those women who believed they were on the right side in this war. It also enabled them through communal prayer to develop maintain a positive spirit.

In connection with our National novenacontains the Consecration of Ourselves and our Country to the Mother of Perpetual Succour whose well known picture appears as 'Our Battle Shield' (See Opposite page).....it should find its way into every Catholic home in the land.⁸⁴

Power and might of men and empires are as paper against the prayers of a people to whom God hearkens.⁸⁵

The women were not without a sense of humour. Margaret recounts a story about the altar and the Statute. The increase in the number of internees meant bed space became a problem. The prison authorities sought to place two into cells built for one. A protest ensued. Each time a new bed was put into a cell the women removed it. May Langan was brought in at midnight, and she got into a bed that earlier had been put out of the room and now occupied a place at the altar which Mrs Humphries (Who was Officer Commanding , prayers) had erected at the top of the flight of stairs.

⁸⁴ 'Catholic Bulletin' v, viii no 19 October 1918 pp 520

⁸⁵ ibid v, viii, no 6 June 1918. pp 257

It was our custom to kneel up along the steps of the stairs leading to the Altar, for morning and evening prayers. May Langan suddenly awoke to find a lot of women reciting the rosary around her bed. She thought she was dead and we were 'waking' her. She had a great sense of humour and always enjoyed the memory of that unique waking.⁸⁶

They also developed their armour against the institutional church by retreating into their own spiritual resources. The words of Margaret Buckley in the *The Jangle of the Keys* are a good example of their spiritual and psychological strength,

In the days that followed, our religion was our bulwark, our food our stay. We never confused the Creator with His creatures. Though denied the sacraments by human agency we were in close communion with God.

Nobody could deny us access to Him. Often during the dark nights in the lonely cells, when the black fingers of despair clutched at our hearts, we cried to Him.

Then the dawn would peep in through the prison bars, shyly at first and boldly, until the glory of the Resurrection enveloped us and we began another day with renewed courage and renewed hope.

A belief in God and the sense of who was right or wrong within the sphere of the Civil War is related to this issue of the Church and the sacraments. When Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins died within two weeks of each other, the former from natural causes and the latter killed in an ambush Ernie O Malley said that

The two men more than any others responsible for the treaty were dead. Religious ladies nodded heads in significance, 'Yes, it was a judgement of God' He was now on our side.⁸⁷

The women in prison were not all catholic. There were some who were Protestant but reference to their religion in the primary source material is scant

In Kilmainham the prisoners and the soldiers attended mass together. The reason for this was that only one mass was celebrated on Sunday's in the Gaol. The women went to mass one Sunday morning and sang hymn they had learned from

⁸⁶ Margaret Buckley *The jangle of the keys* pp26-27

⁸⁷ Ernie O'Malley *The Singing flame*, pp152.

their Protestant fellow prisoners. They hoped to shock the guards and soldiers by this behaviour.

There are two Hymns sung in Protestant churches for which I have a great liking. They are Abide with Me and Nearer my God to Thee. I taught the latter to my flock. Miss Browne who is a Protestant lent us her hymn book for the words, and we created a mild sensation the first time we sang it at mass.They (The soldiers) just stared at us I dare say they thought we were being perverted.⁸⁸

During the Civil War between June 1922 and July 1923 the female prisoners were constantly moved between Mountjoy jail Kilmainham Jail and the NDU. This was not part of any grand plan but more a reaction to controlling the numbers of female internees that kept growing.

7.2 Aftermath of the Civil War.

The Civil War ended in June 1923 and all prisoners were gradually released by November 1923. Again Cumann na mBan had to rebuild the organisation after the devastation of the war.

The first convention held after the war ended was in November 1924. Countess Markievicz was still President of Cumann na mBan. Her address to the convention was a rerun of the history of Cumann na mBan since its inception in 1913. She told the women of their great efforts for the Republic and though they did not win the battle was not finished.

Remember that even though a war of blood is not existing in our country just now. There is a more ignoble war being waged by the enemies of the Republic, the weapons of gold and trickery. Cumann na mBan however, will meet this with the same spirit of resistance that has always characterised its actions. By training and self sacrifice it will remain a powerful force in the life of the nation.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Margaret Buckley *The Jangle of the Keys*. pp

⁸⁹ Cumann na mBan Convention document 1924.

The membership of Cumann na mBan began to fall from this time. Many of the women involved in the years of turmoil had had enough. Some had to look for work to simply live. Some married and their families took up their time. Others emigrated because they had to seek employment outside Ireland. Many of them suffered bad health for many years after the civil war. The damp and miserable conditions of prison, and the hunger strikes took a toll on the health of a number of women. The 1924 convention was an effort to reorganise Cumann na mBan and try to look to the future. Their main policy was to work towards

The complete separation of Ireland from all foreign powers
The unity of Ireland
The Gaelicisation of Ireland.⁹⁰

This is just the one aspect of policy. There seven other statements seeking to perfect Nationalist aspirations, these encompass

becoming perfect citizens of a perfect Irish nation by Taking Honour, Truth, Courage, and Temperance as the watchwords of Cumann na mBan.⁹¹

In 1925 the women still in Cumann na mBan were the stalwarts of extreme republicanism. It was at this convention that Countess Markievicz resigned her position as President. The convention for this year was held on the 15 November. The opening address was made by Countess Markievicz who was still president. The debates were never published. It is worth noting from the document on the debates that at her final convention she opened her speech with expression the 'Comrades of Cumann na mBan'. It would appear she was influenced by socialism at this point. Perhaps she was, but in this instance this was not the case. The debates are not printed in the final convention document. She is less careful of her language because it would not be printed publicly. Later on in the debate

⁹⁰ Cumann na mBan Convention Document 1924.

⁹¹ *ibid*

document she is recorded as referring to de Valera as the 'Chief' She was moving in a different direction politically from the organisation.

A motion put forward at the meeting enabled her to make the break from Cumann na mBan. A motion was put forward for a general vote that

Under the present policy as practised by the Republican Government it is impossible to maintain the constitution of Cumann na mBan or live up to the principles of the Republican Proclamation of 1916.

Therefore to prevent the spiritual annihilation of the existing Republic, we demand that the Republican Government declare a working policy and recognise the Republican Organisation according to that policy,

We demand that under no circumstances should Republican T D's enter the Free State parliament.⁹²

Countess Markievicz is addressed as Madam in the document. She said that in view of this resolution and after 'careful consideration, and with great reluctance' she decided that the only course open to her was to resign her position as President. This she did on the 16 November 1925. She was a republican T D and she said she believed that the resolution just passed would tie her hands if the republicans entered the Dail.

In the event of certain circumstances arising, and while the occasion might never arise, and she believed the resolution would tie her hands. She took the action with deep regret. She had always put Cumann na mBan before everything and her services would always be at the disposal of the organisation.⁹³

The following year Eamonn de Valera founded Fianna Fail and entered the Dail.

Countess Markievicz was free to ally herself with the new party.

⁹² Debate at the Cumann na mBan convention 1925.

⁹³ *ibid*

7.3 Split in Sinn Fein and The IRA.

At a conference in 1925 the IRA repudiated Eamonn De Valera 's Presidency of the Irish Republic. This removed the IRA from the influence of the politicians of Sinn Fein. The IRA Army Council now controlled the IRA.. At the Sinn Fein convention inn March 1926 de Valera resigned his position as President and left the party. In April 1926 he founded Fianna Fail. He went into the 1927 general election on the issue of fighting the Oath of allegiance and pledged his party to establish a republic if it won. Countess Markievicz entered the general election as a Fianna Fail candidate. She won a seat in Dublin South.

7.4 Fianna Fail and Cumann na mBan

Eamonn De Valera founded Fianna Fail in 1926. This move saved him from the political wilderness. Sinn Fein was losing support all over the country. The founding of Fianna Fail splintered the republican movement for the second time in five years. Cumann na mBan did not escape the fallout. Countess Markievicz and Kathleen Clarke joined the new party. They both contested and won seats as Fianna Fail candidates in the 1927 General Election. Many other women left Cumann na mBan to join Fianna Fail in 1926.

Countess Markievicz resigned in November 1925. A new president of Cumann na mBan was elected. The new President was Eithne Coyle. Sigle Humphries was elected Vice President. Speaking of Cumann na mBan of this period in her autobiography Kathleen says

“I was not connected to the IRA at that time nor with Cumann na mBan. New Brooms who had come into the Cumann na mBan organisation after the Treaty (1921). They flung me out when the split occurred in Sinn Fein and I took De Valera’s side, or when I took my seat in the Dail with de Valera. I forget which of these crimes I was punished for, perhaps both.”⁹⁴

Summary

From 1925 Cumann na mBan under the influence of a new and more radical republican executive moved out of the limelight of mainstream politics. The membership dropped dramatically but it never went into total demise. The organisation continued with a propaganda campaign and is allied to the IRA and Sinn Fein to the present day.

⁹⁴ Kathleen Clarke *Revolutionary Woman* pp 222

Conclusion

This work is an attempt to redress the current writing of the history of an organisation called Cumann na mBan. The story of these women is complex. For this work a through reading of the available primary source material revealed a rich source of information about this a group of Irishwomen. They were women who became involved and indeed embroiled in the turbulent years of the first twenty-six years of the twentieth century.

This work is about all the women in Cumann na mBan, not just the favoured few of biographers. This rank and file were involved in the Nationalist movement as it moved through several phases between 1900 and 1926. These were Cultural Nationalism, New Nationalism, Militant Republican Nationalism and finally Extreme Militant Republican Nationalism.

The study of the primary sources as indicated in the introduction shows that Cumann na mBan was not a homogenous organisation. It had a stated aim that applied to all members but as the thesis has shown several women from the rank and file had distinct and powerful personalities. The purpose of Roll Call at the beginning of this work is to try and convey a sense of just how many were involved at all levels of the organisation. All of seventy-four women named in this Roll Call are mentioned in the text. It is a small number of the women I found in the primary sources.

These women were an enigma history cannot, and they still are up to the present time. This work is the start of a process of re- discovery. It is an attempt to formulate alternative questions about their experiences. Only a few are answered but perhaps questions rather than answers are more significant at this point.

General history does not exactly do them justice. Feminist history has distorted their story. It is necessary to go back to the beginning using the primary sources and try to construct an alternative view of Cumann na mBan. This thesis is a beginning.

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