

# CUMANN NA MBAN REGALIA

## Uniforms, Badges & Flags, 1914-1923

BY AILBHE ROGERS & PAUL GOSLING

**C**umann na mBan (henceforth CnamB) was founded in April 1914 as a women's auxiliary organisation whose activities included: first aid; the transportation and concealment of arms, ammunition and despatches; drilling; intelligence and propaganda work; providing for men on the run; prisoner network support and weapons care. The relationship between the CnamB and the Irish Volunteer leadership, has been explored in depth by historians, while the 2018 centenary commemorations drew considerable attention to questions of suffrage and female republicanism within the movement. However, there has been a distinct lack of research conducted on the militaristic aspects of CnamB as an organisation and the material culture surrounding CnamB, namely uniforms, badges and flags that survive in public and private possession (Figs. 1-4). This paper will attempt to rectify this and shed light on the merits of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of military regalia.

**UNIFORMS:** The first directive given by the CnamB Executive on the question of coordinated attire came in September 1914 when first-aid training sections were instructed to wear 'a washing frock, nurse's caps, aprons and cuffs. An armlet should be worn on the left arm with the words 'Cumann na mBan' printed, stencilled or embroidered above a green cross' (Fig. 1). Against the backdrop of the First World War in Ireland, this uniform was characteristic of several voluntary nursing groups. However, the green cross armlet in particular sought to disassociate CnamB from other nursing organisations such as the British Red Cross and emphasise the group's republican sympathies. During the Easter Rising, there are several accounts of CnamB members acting under the auspices of the Red Cross flag or wearing a Red Cross armlet. However, there are no reporting sightings of the green cross during the Rising. The wearing of such items in combat may have singled individuals out as collaborators and left them susceptible to arrest by British forces.

Cal McCarthy argues that the CnamB uniform was first worn in public at an aeridheacht in St. Enda's School, Rathfarnham in September 1915. Variants of the uniform were in fact modelled by Central Branch two months previously at the Wolfe Tone Annual Commemoration in Bodenstown and during the funeral of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa in Glasnevin Cemetery (Fig. 3). It was probably due to the hybrid quality and unkempt style of makeshift uniforms that the CnamB Executive sought to set a standard. At the



Fig. 1: Emily Elliot wearing a Cumann na mBan uniform, badge and first aid armlet. Photo courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Archives, 17PO-1A24-17.

CnamB Annual Convention in October 1915, the Executive recommended an optional uniform of 'a coat and skirt of Volunteer tweed and hat of same. Four pockets in coat, skirt at least seven inches off the ground, tweed or leather belt, haversack with first aid outfit' (Fig. 4). Members were pressed upon to purchase fabric of Irish manufacture and Mary F. Hegarty of Harcourt St, Dublin was one seamstress who specialised in the making of CnamB outfits.

The acquisition of a uniform depended upon one's economic means and personal skills. Eileen McGrane purchased her uniform from Harry Boland who operated a tailoring business on Middle Abbey St, Dublin while Annie O'Brien worked feverishly throughout Holy Week 1916 trying to finish her uniform coat in time for Easter Sunday. A CnamB uniform formerly on loan to the National Museum of Ireland, Collins Barracks, bore a label stating that it had been 'made in Dublin by Co-Op Workers'. This suggests an un-

documented level of co-operation between CnamB and the Irish Women Workers' Union who managed a co-operative at Liberty Hall.

According to Phyllis Morkan, CnamB members were ordered not to wear uniforms or badges for mobilisation on Easter Sunday 1916. In civilian clothes, female combatants could move through military cordons and intermingle with crowds more freely. During Easter Week, Margaret Skinner donned her uniform while sniping from the roof of the College of Surgeons but while on dispatch-carrying missions, wore her civilian clothes. During the War of Independence and Civil War, CnamB's regular appearance at public processions and republican funerals left members vulnerable to detection and ultimately led to the abandonment of the uniform for everyday activities in provincial regions.



Fig. 2: Subtypes A1 and B1 Cumann na mBan badges – approx. 5.4cm in length. Photo courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol Archives, KGM 2012.0248 and KGM 2011.0389.09.

**BADGES:** One of the most arresting of CnamB insignia are the small badges worn by its members (Fig. 2). Made initially of base metals, later of silver and gold, their design was not only radical but also aesthetic, cleverly intertwining the initials of the organisation with the motif of a rifle. As such, the badges announced that women were not only going to resist British rule but were prepared to bare arms in so doing. Given that the wearing of uniforms was neither compulsory nor practical, CnamB did not adopt a set of insignia. However, when worn with the uniform, the placement of the badges appears, at times, to have been an index of rank. Worn independently of the uniform, they were discrete and useful for identifying members up to and including the 1916 Rising. However, as the War of Independence unfolded, the wearing of the badges, like uniforms, was undoubtedly restricted and thus confined to official and ceremonial occasions.

The first mention of these badges dates from 5th September 1914 when the CnamB column in the *Irish Volunteer* reported that 'the badges of the organisation can be had from Tempest, Dundalk, price 6d'. These early examples (Fig. 2, A1) are clearly identifiable, in that they were all manufactured by the printing firm of William Tempest in Dundalk, Co. Louth (founded 1859). Tempests' had also begun trading as Dundalgan Press from 1907 and the latter moniker is neatly stamped on the reverse side of each of these badges.

By 1918, it is apparent that Tempests' were not the sole

purveyors of CnamB badges. Post 1916, a number of reputable jewellers and independent silversmiths in Dublin and Cork had begun manufacturing openwork varieties of the badge, albeit with the same design elements – Gaelic-style lettering, a rifle, and an interlaced shoulder strap. However, the type of rifle depicted began to vary (Fig. 2, compare A1 and B1). Using these variations, the present authors have developed a classification scheme for the badges. Four major types have been identified to date, and the preliminary typology is being published in the quarterly magazine *Archaeology Ireland* (Wordwell Books).

The rifle on the Dundalgan Press badges (Fig. 2, A1) has a bolt-action, a pistol grip on the stock and a long barrel. While some writers have suggested that it is a representation of a German Mauser, it is in fact a very realistic depiction

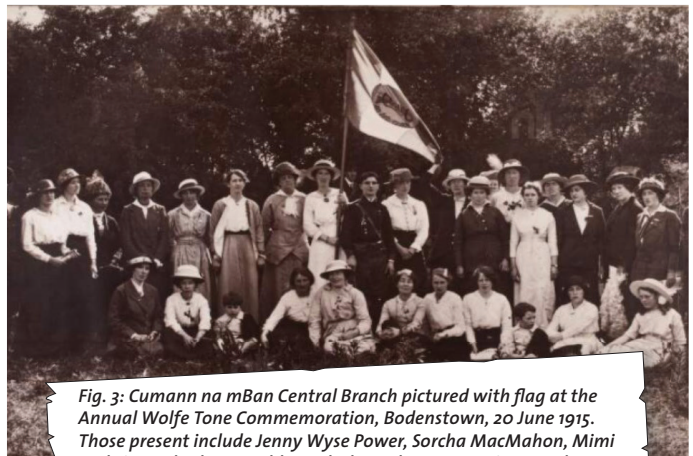


Fig. 3: Cumann na mBan Central Branch pictured with flag at the Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration, Bodenstown, 20 June 1915. Those present include Jenny Wyse Power, Sorcha MacMahon, Mimi and Fiona Plunkett, Kathleen Clarke and Rose McGuinness. Photo courtesy of National Library of Ireland, NPA CNB.

of the War Office Patent (WOP) Miniature Rifle. Up to 20,000 of these .22 calibre weapons were manufactured under licence by BSA, Birmingham and LSA, London, between 1906 and c.1916. They were designed specifically for training young civilians and cadets in the use of bolt-action service rifles. As the weapon gracing the earliest CnamB badges, the symbolism behind their choice is intriguing: a modern lightweight weapon indicating the intent of women to train in the use of firearms?

The second rifle of choice for the CnamB badges was the Lee Enfield, specifically the SMLE (short, magazine, Lee Enfield). Introduced in 1903, it became the standard service rifle of the British Army in WW1 and is depicted on many badges in loving detail (Fig. 2, B1). Its choice not only provides us with an index of badge date – possibly post 1916 – but originally must have signified something more: perhaps the coming of age of CnamB as a fully-fledged revolutionary organisation?

**FLAGS:** CnamB effectively wielded propaganda to their advantage throughout the Irish revolutionary period. The organisation produced and amassed a wide variety of ephemera, which grew to include badges, rosettes, ribbons, posters, banners, handbills and flags. The earliest newspaper evidence for the first public unfurling of a CnamB flag was during the Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration at Bodenstown on 20th June 1915 by CnamB Central Branch: 'The two Dublin Branches of Cumann na mBan were over



100 strong, and made a most creditable turn-out, the Central Branch contingent carrying for the first time their beautiful banner of gold, green and white, embroidered with the badge of the Association'. We are also very fortunate to have this occasion captured on camera as two group images from the event survive in public and private possession (Fig. 3). Both feature a group of CnamB Central Branch members posing with the flag. It has not been possible to identify all women present but the project is ongoing, and attempts are being made to retrieve names through other sources. Several of those present are wearing a CnamB badge and uniform hybrid, while the social status and age of others can be ascertained through the style of dress. The inclusion of an inaugural copy of Arthur Griffith's newspaper, *Nationality*, in both images is also significant.



Fig. 4: Group of women in Cumann na mBan uniform. The woman in the back row, far-right is Florence MacDermott aka Blathnaid Nic Diarmada. c1916. Photo courtesy of Kilmainham Gaol/wm\_2010.0016

There are no clues given as to the manufacturer of the CnamB flag, but it is reasonable to suggest that members embroidered the flag themselves. Central Branch members, Molly Gill and Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh were both employees of the Dun Emer Guild, a home industries establishment. Dun Emer manufactured the Starry Plough flag for the Irish Citizen Army, which was launched at a meeting in April 1914. Therefore, it would have been well within the guild's capabilities to produce a CnamB flag.

One key question that arises from this research is whether the CnamB emblem first appeared in flag or badge form. The CnamB badge was widely advertised in nationalist newspapers as early September 1914 and several individuals may also be observed wearing same in the 1915 Bodenstown commemoration images, thereby confirming that the CnamB badge was in circulation before the launch of the organisation's flag.

CnamB branches were encouraged to make their own individual flags to 'arouse curiosity and inquiry' and for use in ceremonial events such as republican processions, parades and funerals. An undated New Ross CnamB flag is currently on loan to Kilmainham Gaol Archives and the accompanying description notes that the flag was found in the house of Susie Browne at Bailey St, New Ross, Co. Wexford in the 1990s. It features a CnamB emblem set against a blue background. Above the image written in yellow Gaelic font is 'Ros Mhich Treóin' which demonstrates the branch's firm affiliation with the Irish language and the Gaelic League. Browne was a member of Wexford CnamB and held as an

anti-Treaty political prisoner in Kilmainham Gaol during the Irish Civil War.

In conclusion, the historical value of CnamB regalia can be ascertained through the combined application of archaeological techniques and documentary research to create a dialogue between an object and its historical context. Before the CnamB Executive set the standard, early CnamB uniforms were of a homemade composite style comprising varying articles, fabrics and shades leading Kitty O'Doherty to remark that some looked 'as if they were cut out with a knife and fork'. At the outset of the War of Independence, CnamB uniforms were abandoned in favour of plain civilian clothes for ease of movement through military and police cordons.



Fig. 5: Memorial Plaque commemorating the East Clare Brigade of IRA, and Cumann na mBan, in Tuamgraney, Co. Clare.

The predominant rifles to appear on CnamB badges during this period are the WOP Miniature (A1) and the Lee Enfield (B1) or stylised versions of same. It is also possible to trace a design evolution in the production of these badges with the Dundalغان Press prototype being followed closely by local jewellers' modifications of the design to satisfy customer commissions.

The unfurling of the CnamB Central Branch flag at Bodenstown in 1915 sought to firmly and openly entrench the organisation within the republican tradition and the survival of the New Ross CnamB flag suggests that many branches may have had their own flag for use in local parades and ceremonies.

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