

Women Revolutionaries & The Easter Rising Part 1



Members of Cumann na mBan

Introduction

In the past twenty years, the role of women in the Irish fight for freedom has gradually come to the fore. For a significantly long time, women's role not only in the Easter Rising of 1916 but indeed in the turbulent years that followed, were ignored, went undiscussed and were largely written out of history. Apart from characters such as Countess Markievicz, the ordinary, everyday 'rank and file' Irish women who took part in the fight for Irish freedom were overlooked. In order to understand women's role in the Easter Rising, it is first important to examine where they came from.

Women in Ireland: The late 19th and early 20th centuries

Dublin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a tale of two cities. For most people, life was difficult. The city had the highest infant mortality rate in Europe, and indeed, one of the highest mortality rates. Many people lived in the city's overcrowded, dirty, dilapidated tenement buildings, often with a large family or even two, to one single room. A significant number of the population were unemployed. For the minority and the more fortunate, a new trend had begun in the 19th century; those who could afford it moved out from the city squalor and slums to the more spacious suburbs such as Rathmines. In Dublin 8, tenements existed on Francis Street and Bridgefoot Street, and for those families who were homeless, workhouses around the city provided shelter, though not relief. One such workhouse was that in the South Dublin Union, now St. James Street Hospital.

For women, their 'place' was seen as to marry, to have and raise children, and to care for their husbands. Upon marriage, a woman's right to own property was lost, and all assets they had were transferred by law to their husband. No woman, married or not, had the right to vote. For those women who didn't marry, they could work, in various capacities, if it could be found. Many of these jobs involved long hours, low pay and appalling conditions. However, some of the women who took part in the suffrage movement, the labour movement and indeed the nationalist movement were women who owned or ran businesses- these were a new type of 'working woman', i.e. women who were financially independent from their families, in spite of disapproval from some of those families. Women involved in political affairs were unusual and were not necessarily accepted by the all-male political parties of the time (with the exception of Sinn Féin and the Labour movement). Education for women was gradually increasing, though it was much further behind their male

counterparts, and not particularly accessible for the majority as it was costly. Gender segregation was accepted; women often had their own balcony or cordoned off area, away from the men. For the most part, a woman's place at this time was very much 'seen, not heard'.

The late 19th and early 20th century was an interesting time in Ireland; there was of course the nationalist question; there was the home rule movement; there was also the beginnings of the labour movement; and there was the suffrage movement, at its height in Ireland in the early 20th century.

While not all women in Ireland were actively involved in these movements, a large number were, and while many were involved in only one of these areas, there were those that were heavily involved in more than one. Just like the men, many women disagreed with each other on how to approach their various objectives, be it nationalist or suffragist, labour or home ruler. At this time, few organisations allowed women as members; The Gaelic League (set up in 1893 to promote all things Irish) and the Irish Citizen's Army (ICA; set up to protect their locked out workers in 1913) permitted women, and while the Irish Volunteers' manifesto stated that there was going to be work for the women, what this work entailed was ambiguous at best. In 1900, Inghinidhe na hÉireann was set up by Maud Gonne, who had become increasingly frustrated that no nationalist movement would accept women members. Inghinidhe na hÉireann eventually became a branch of Cumann na mBan, which was set up in 1914. Cumann na mBan's acceptance that the men would do the fighting to secure Ireland's freedom, can be seen in their constitution, as it states one of their objectives as "To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland". While the women were perhaps ready to fight if necessary, their organisation focused on advancing the cause of Irish Liberty, by organising the women, assisting in arming the men and through raising funds for the above. During the years, months and weeks leading up to Easter Week of 1916, the Cumann na mBan and ICA female members played vital roles; many of them assisted in smuggling arms, others were dispatch couriers, others prepared both first aid materials and ammunition materials.