

Women Revolutionaries & The Easter Rising Part 2

Easter Week 1916: A woman's perspective

The number of women who took part in the Easter Rising, in whatever manner, is difficult to confirm. Through the now more frequent research into women's role, more of an insight is realised into how many took part. However, as many of these women did not stay until the garrison they were with surrendered, as many of them altered their names upon marriage or offered their Irish names to British authorities, and as records from the time did not prioritise women, it makes for a difficult task. Nonetheless, it is known that 77 women were held in Richmond Barracks in Inchicore, and estimated, based on a number of sources, that 150 members of Cumann na mBan were deployed in Dublin and a number of other locations throughout the country. It is also known that a number of women were members of the ICA, and took part in the Rising. These figures do not account for those women, who, unassociated with any of the nationalist organisations, decided to join in the fight during Easter Week.

Indeed, when people hear of women fighting in the Easter Rising, it is, arguably, the women of the ICA that is being referred to, as the female members of the ICA were treated equally to the men within the organisation and as such were also trained in the use of arms. It is likely, however, that where the need arose, women from Cumann na mBan did use arms against the British forces.

For the women who wanted to assist in the fight for Irish freedom, the counter order issued by Eoin Mac Neill also caused confusion. For the most part, women were left outside of the decision making process, and as a result, for some it was after the beginning of the Rising that they joined their respective garrisons.

Though the majority of the women may not have taken up arms, their roles were still vital to the cause, and required similar bravery and courage. Many of the women of Cumann na mBan were given the task of cooking for the men at the garrison. This was no easy task in a city that was in the midst of a rebellion; towards the end of the week, not only were the citizens of the city struggling to find food, but so too were the rebels. The women often had to make their way out onto the streets, amidst sniper fire, to search the locality for food. At Marrowbone Lane, where the largest numbers (approximately 23) of Cumann na mBan were based, the men and women ate considerably better than most; on the Wednesday of Easter Week, the garrison captured a number of chickens and on Thursday the women seized a cow and two calves, and made butter from the milk.

The women were also nurses and first aiders, often venturing onto the chaos of the streets to bring an injured man back into the garrison for him to be treated. Prior to the beginning of the week, the majority of the women from Cumann na mBan had prepared bandages and first aid packages, and first aid stations or areas were found at the majority of the rebel garrisons. Women members of the ICA had also prepared bombs, cartridges and bullets in the basement of Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the ICA.

Cumann na mBan members were also given the duty of carrying messages, and food, around to the various garrisons in the city, and indeed were tasked with delivering messages around the country also- often coming up with unorthodox methods of hiding the hand written messages

(for example, in their hair). Many of those who took part in the Rising, both men and women, claim that not once did any of the women refuse to carry a message- and the majority who did were rarely unsuccessful. These women made their way through the destruction of the city; through barricades, through broken and even burning buildings, through the midst of fire and always at the mercy of British sniper fire and the threat of arrest.

By the end of Easter Week, women were located at all of the rebel garrisons, apart from at Boland's Mill & Bakery, where, it is said, Eamonn De Valera would not allow women; a decision he later admitted he regretted. As the word of surrender spread, many of the women were advised to leave the garrisons prior to their surrender; of those women who fought in the GPO, Winifred Carney, Julia Grenan and Elizabeth O' Farrell all remained. For the women at Marrowbone Lane, they would not leave the men at the last hurdle- the majority of the Cumann na mBan members at this garrison marched in surrender with the men, singing as they marched through jeering crowds.

Women Revolutionaries: Forgotten no longer?

While the majority of the women who took part in the Easter Rising may not have taken up arms, they did provide vital support for the cause. Though it will never be known how Easter Week of 1916 would have played out without them, as many of the fighting men would instead have been cooking, caring for the wounded and carrying messages around the city, the role of women during the Rising cannot be down played. These women came from all walks of life, from titled women from the 'upper' classes to the lower 'working classes' from the inner city. They worked tirelessly alongside the men, and came together under the same cause- to gain Ireland's Independence. Many of the women who took part in the Easter Rising played prominent roles in the turbulent years after. Someday, perhaps soon, it will be possible to write an all-inclusive history of the Easter Rising of 1916; a narrative that includes both men and women. For now, however, these revolutionary women are finally finding the recognition they deserve- these women, who just like the men, were ready to lose everything- their friends, their families and their lives- in the fight for Irish freedom.