

Women of 1916

Cead mile failte

We are going to honor our Irish History by remembering the Women of 1916. Brian Moore wrote about the Invisible Women and I quote:

"The singer sings a rebel song and everyone sings along.

Just one thing I'll never understand:
Every damn rebel seems to be a man.

For he sings of the Bold Fenian Men and the Boys of the Old Brigade.

What about the women who stood there too
'When history was made....?

Ireland, Mother Ireland, with your freedom-loving sons.

Did your daughters run and hid at the sound of guns?

Or did they have some part in the fight and why does everybody try to keep them out of sight?

For they sing of the Men of the West and the Boys of Wexford too.

Were there no women living round those parts;

Tell me, what did they do...?

I am going to tell you what the Women did for our beloved Ireland. More than 200 Women participated in the Rising. 77 Women were imprisoned for their activities during Easter Week 1916. All have their own story worthy to be retold. Many of their stories can be found in the Bureau of Military History. I can only highlight a few.

Some of these women have been airbrushed out of history. The first woman who was airbrushed out of history was Margaret Keough. Paul Horan, Assistant

Professor of Nursing at Trinity College was studying his own family's participation in the Easter Rising when he stumbled on Margaret Keogh's story. He shares his research in an article in the Irish Mirror April 13, 2015. She was referred as the first martyr by Volunteer Commander Eamon Ceannt. She never made it to the history books. The British were in charge of the propaganda and wanted to hide the story of a uniformed nurse being shot by a British soldier. It is sad that the Irish did not tell the story but at the time they had their executed leaders stories to be told. Margaret Keough was a nurse working at the South Dublin Union who rushed to help the wounded at the time of her death on April 24, 1916. She was shot by a British soldier as she was attending to the patients. Paul Horan is quoted in the article: "She would have been wearing her uniform so I find it very distasteful. I understand that people might get shot in the crossfire but the notion that a

nurse in full uniform going to attend a casualty, was shot, that's cold-blooded murder." Another woman airbrushed out of history until now is Elizabeth O'Farrell. She also was a nurse by profession working as a midwife at Holles Street Hospital.

Elizabeth O'Farrell remembered in an article for An Phoblacht that ' she worked for Irish freedom from her sixteenth year." In 1906 she joined Inghinidhe na hEireann and in 1914 joined Cumann na mBan.

Constance Markiewicz introduced her to James Connolly informing him that she was very trustworthy. Following this introduction, Elizabeth was attached to the Irish Citizen Army. During the Rising she served in the GPO as a courier and attended to the wounded. On Thursday April 27, Pearse ordered the members of Cumann na mBan to leave the GPO except for 3: Elizabeth O'Farrell, Winifred Carney and Julia Grenan. When the GPO was evacuated completely on Friday April 28, there were

17 wounded men including James Connolly. Elizabeth spent the night nursing the wounded. On the morning of April 29, she was given the order and a white flag to present the message to the British:" The Commandant of the Irish Republican Army wishes to treat with the Commandant of the British Forces in Ireland." She was present at the time when the Formal Surrender was given by Pearse but in the photo only her feet are visible.

Women were involved in many activities leading up to the Historic moment of Easter Monday 1916

In the 1880s, small farmers and peasantry fought against the high rents which were being charged by the Irish landlords. The Land League was formed which was a political alliance of the Fenians and the Irish Parliamentary Party. To stop the agitations

of the Land War, the British government declared the Land League an illegal organization and start arresting members. On January 31, 1881, Irishmen asked Irishwomen to take control of the Land League. This was the first time in Irish History that women were given the opportunity to participate in a political movement. The Ladies Land League was formed at this time lead by Anna Parnell the sister of Charles Stewart Parnell. There was some resistance in the formation of a Ladies Land League but Michael Davitt spoke in their defense stating and I quote:

No better allies than women could be found for such a task. They are, in certain emergencies, more dangerous to despotism than men. They have more courage, through having less scruples, when and where their better instincts are appealed to be a militant and just cause in a fight against a mean foe." These women

took charge and directed the activities of the movement for 18 months until the men were released from prison. During this time Jenny Wyse Power, a strong campaigner for national independence claimed that this was the 'first time when Britain's power to 'proclaim' was not only questioned but defied." An observer to the activities of the Ladies Land League stated 'Five thousand ladies of Ireland were calling on the government to arrest them and were preaching Land League doctrine as they were never preached before.'" Some women were sentenced to prison: Miss McCormack, Margaret Daly, Mary Wall, Ellen Hannigan and Annie McAuliffe. These women suffered further humiliation of being arrested under statues to curb prostitution instead of being treated as political prisoners. The British government desired to get rid of these unruly women and negotiations began and the "Kilmainham Treaty was signed on May 2, 1882. The

Government released the prisoners and dealt with the question of fair rents. In remembering the Ladies Land League, let us listen to what Anna Parnell said: "When people do not govern their own country, then responsibility for crime rests on the conquerer, i.e. England." The other legacy from the Ladies Land League is that if women wanted to be politically active they needed to form their own organizations.

In 1893, the Gaelic League was formed to help reestablish Irish as the first language of Ireland. Padraic Pearse declared the League "the most revolutionary influence that ever came into Ireland." The Gaelic League was revolutionary in its attitude to women. The League accepted women and men equally.

In 1900, the Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Erin) were formed. 29 Women attended the first meeting. The goals of the organizations are:

The reestablishment of the complete independence of Ireland.

To encourage the study of Gaelic, of Irish Literature, History, Music and Art, especially among the young, by organizing the teaching of classes.

To support and popularise Irish manufacture.

To discourage the reading and circulation of low English literature, the singing of English songs, the attending of vulgar English entertainments at the theatres and music hall, and to combat in every way the English influence, which is doing so much injury to the artistic taste and refinements of the Irish people.

To form a fund called the National Purposes Fund, for the furtherance of the above objects.

I am proud of our own organization's contribution and I quote from in Their Own Voices from Maud Gonne: "Inghinidhe never lose sight that the objects of the

society were not merely cultural and educational, but to work for the complete independence of Ireland; so all children attending our classes were pledged never to enlist in the British Army or Navy. Before the end of the first year we had started a fund for organizing National Boys Brigades to prevent enlistment and received a generous subscription from the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in America Alliance, Suffolk County USA. The plan did not come to fruition until nine years later when Constance Markievicz of Inghinidhe organized Fianna Eireann."

As a Nationalistic Organization, members were required to be of Irish birth or descent and they also adopted the use of the Gaelic version of their names. The first women's paper ever produced was Bean na hEireann(Women of Ireland). Some of the women involved with the paper also would be very active in the Easter Rising: Sydney

Gifford, Helena Moloney, Constance
Markievicz, and Madeleine ffrench
Mullen

In 1909, Constance Markievicz delivered a lecture to the Students National Literary Society. Stating "Fix your mind on the ideal of Ireland Free with her women enjoying the full right of citizenship in their own nation" and concluding her address with "To sum up in a few words what I want the young Ireland Women to remember from me. Regard yourselves as Irish, believe in yourselves as Irish, as units of a nation distinct from England, your Conqueror, and as determined to maintain your distinctiveness and gain your deliverance. Arm yourselves with weapons to fight your nations cause. Arm your souls with noble and free ideas. Arm your minds with the histories and memories of your country and her martyrs, her language and a knowledge of her arts, and her industries. And if in your day the call should come for

your body to arm, do not shirk that either. May this aspiration towards life and freedom among the women of Ireland bring forth a Joan of Arc to free our nation."

An article in the Southwomen in November 1913 was one of the first to urge women to come forward to support the cause of Irish Freedom at the same time as the Irish Volunteers were being formed. " It is assumed by a great many people as a matter of course, that women cannot fight, but the merest glance backwards at history shows that there is not a country in the world, Ireland included, where women have not fought, and fought well, at one time or another." The article concludes "There is nothing unwomanly in active patriotism. Nobody calls Jeanne d'Arc unwomanly, nor Anne Devlin, nor to come to our own times, Madame Maud Gonne nor the members of the Ladies Land League; and whatever conservative minded people may say to you now about the unseemliness of

women actively and openly working for their country's cause: yet in the days when Ireland is free, no one will have anything but admiration for the women who contributed in however great or small a degree to the attainment of her freedom."

On April 2, 1914, the Cumann na mBan the most influential women's organization over the last century was founded and the goals of the organization are:

1. To advance the cause of Irish Liberty.
2. To organize Irishwomen in furtherance of this 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 the Defence of Ireland Fund. Other activities of this organization included first aid, drillings, signaling, and rifle practice.

In May 1915 Inghinidhe na hEireann became a Branch of Cumann na mBan.

Molly Spring Rice was a member of Cumann na mBan and was centrally involved in the planning of the Howth Gun Running of July 26, 1914. She had suggested using private yachts to smuggle weapons into Ireland and also provided financial assistance for the weapons. Erskine and Molly Childers made their yacht the Asgard available for this important task. The Asgard crew consisted of Erskine and Molly Childers, Mary Spring Rice, Gordon Shepard and 2 Donegal Fishing men. The cargo consisted of 900 guns and 29,000 rounds of ammunition. On arrival in the Harbor, Volunteers and some members of Na Fianna met the yacht to remove and store the guns and ammunition.

At this time, the Na Fianna and the Connally sisters were camping with Countess Markievicz. Nora and Ina, the daughters of James Connolly were

members of the only girls branch of the Na Fianna which was in Belfast. On Sunday morning the boys left camp to help with the Howth Gun Running. The Connolly sisters were very disappointed that they were not included to help. Nora told her sister Ina not to show her feelings to the boys. Ina was told by Nora: "A good soldier takes disappointment and defeat with his chin up. Perhaps they wanted to leave somebody at the cottage in case they were all arrested." The next day the Connolly sisters were told that they would take small arms to Belfast. Countess Markievicz told them "You are the first women to run guns to the North. Show what you are made of. Deliver them safely is all I ask. I have every confidence in you" (From In Their Own Voices)

Some of the female relatives of prominent Volunteers were essential to the movement of guns especially Aine O'Rahily, who was one of the first women to drive a car in Ireland. Aine was the sister of Michael O'Rahily. In Senia Pasetta's book IRISH NATIONAL WOMEN 1900-1918 pages 161-162, Aine O'Rahily is quoted:" I was to help Michael at the office to work in connection with the purchase and distributions of guns. We always worked in his house, some of the guns were kept at the house. They mostly came from Birmingham as did the ammunition. On one occasion when a lot of guns arrived we were to expect men from the country to purchase some of them. That evening a knock came to the door and I saw 4 men and thought that they were the men from

the country, so I welcomed them. But they were G men who searched the house and took away all the guns they found.

Fortunately as the house was very large they overlooked one room containing a big portion of the guns. This was very fortunate as the same room contained a list of the quartermasters from the country who were to collect them. Our problem then was how to remove the guns. We decided we would form an orchestra. Various people including the Plunketts came bringing their instrument cases into which we fitted the revolvers.

They were got away safely. That was the first raid we ever had, it was also the first occasion of which we had a quantity of arms delivered to the house. Michael Staines used to come to Michael's house regularly to arrange about getting guns. He

would bring the money for them. He seemed to be a very earnest worker. I used to sign some of the receipts in Michael's name if he was busy. One day he told me as I had been working so well that he would give me a treat. He took me one Sunday to Howth and when we were near our destination he said there were guns being brought in. The yacht was in the bay and it was a lovely sight. The Volunteers were all there before us. Michael filled the car with ammunition so I came back by bus."

Many other women were involved in obtaining guns for the Rising. These women placed their lives in jeopardy to prepare for the Rising. GO RAIBH MAITH AGAT to the women who help in arming the Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army.

The Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians have a Honor Our History Pin Remember the Women of the Rising. Molly O'Reilly is featured on this pin. Molly was a very brave young woman. She was chosen by James Connolly to raise the Green Harp Flag of Ireland over Liberty Hall on Palm Sunday 1916 Molly first went to Liberty Hall to learn Irish Dancing. She heard James Connolly speak and was inspired. During the Lock Out in 1913, she carried messages to the strikers for James Connolly, After the Howth Gunrunning she bravely hid under

her bed some of the smuggled weapons. During the Rising, Molly served with the City Hall Garrison. She was a courier sending messages between City Hall and the GPO. Her activities were unknown to her father who was a supporter of the Crown.

Kathleen Clarke is a remarkable woman and a I cannot due her proper justice in this talk since she is deserving of a talk all on her own. She was the wife of Tom Clarke one of the main leaders of the Easter Rising and a signer of the Proclamation. The Proclamation was unique in History because of the statement " Irishmen and Irish women" Tom came home from a meeting of the Supreme Council of the IRB and told me that it had been decided at the meeting to select some person whose

discretion, silence and capability they could rely upon, one who would be made fully actuated with all their decisions. In the event of the arrest of all the members of the Supreme Council, the custodian of their plans and decisions would be in a position to pass on the work to those next in command, thus preventing confusion and temporary stoppage...I was very interested in all he was telling me, it was unusual for him to mention that happened at their meeting, so I was very surprised when he informed me that the person selected was myself." What a task she was given.

Another woman who deserves a talk of her own is Constance Markievicz whom I have quoted in this talk earlier. Constance Markievicz was second in command at Stephen's Green and the College of

Surgeons. I would like to share her memories of Some Women in Easter Week

"You ask me to write you an account of my experiences and of the women of Easter Week. I am afraid that I can only give you a little account of those who were enrolled like me in the Irish Citizen Army, and those who were with me or whom I met during the week. Some were members of Cumann na mBan, and others, just women who were ready to die for Ireland.

My activities were confined to a very limited area. I was mobilized for Liberty Hall and was sent from there via City Hall to St. Stephen's Green, where I remained.

On Easter Monday morning there was a great hosting of disciplined and armed men at Liberty Hall.

Padraic Pearse and James Connolly addressed us and told us that from now the Volunteers and the ICA were not two

forces, but the wings of the Irish Republican Army.

There were a considerable number of ICA women. These were absolutely on the same footing as the men. They took part in all marches, and even in the maneuvers that lasted all night. Moreover, Connolly made it quite clear to us that unless we took our share in the drudgery of training and preparing, we should not be allowed to take any share at all in the fight. You may judge how fit we were when I tell you that sixteen miles was the length of our last route march.

Connolly had appointed two staff officers -Commandant Mallin and myself. I held a commission, giving me the rank of Staff Lieutenant. I was accepted by Tom Clarke and the members of the Provisional Government as the second of Connolly's ghosts. Ghosts was the name we gave to those who stood secretly behind the leaders and were entrusted with enough of

the plans of the Rising to enable them to carry on that Leader's work should anything happen to himself. Commandant Mallin was over me and next in line to Connolly. Dr. Kathleen Lynn was our medical officer, holding the rank of Captain.

We watched the little bodies of men and women march off, Pearse and Connolly to the GPO, Sean Connolly to the City Hall. I went off then with the Doctor in her car. We carried a large store of First Aid necessities and drove off through quiet dusty streets and across the river, reaching the City Hall just at the very moment that Commandant Sean Connolly and his little troop of men and women swung round the corner and he raised his gun and shot the policeman who barred the way. A wild excitement ensued, people running from every side to see what was up. The Doctor got out, and I remember Mrs. Barrett-sister of Sean Connolly and others helping to carry in the Doctor's bundles. I did not meet Dr. Lynn

again until my release, where she cared for me and fed me up and looked after me till I had recovered from the evil effects of the English prison system.

When I reported with the car to Commandant Mallin Stephen's Green, he told me that he must keep me. He said that owing to MacNeill's calling off the Volunteers a lot of the men who should have been under him had had to be distributed round other posts, and that few of those left him were trained to shoot, so I must stay and be ready to take up the work if a sniper. He took me round the Green and showed me how the barricading of the gates and digging trenches had begun, and he left me in charge of this work while he went to supervise the erection of barricades in the streets and arrange other work. About two hours later he definitely promoted me to be his second in command. This work was very exciting when the fighting began. I continued round and round

the Green, reporting back if anything was wanted, or tackling any sniper who was particularly objectionable.

Madeline Ffrench Mullen was in charge of the Red Cross and the commissariat in the Green. Some of the girls had revolvers, and with these they sallied forth and held up bread vans.

This was necessary because the first prisoner we took was a British Officer, and Commandant Mallin treated him as such. He took his parole as an officer and a gentleman not to escape, and he left him at large in the Green before the gates were shut. This English gentleman walked around and found out all he could and then bunked.

We had a couple of sick men and prisoners in the Bandstand, the Red Cross flag flying to protect them. The English in the Shelbourne turned a machine-gun on to them. A big group of our girls were attending to the sick, making tea for the

prisoners or resting themselves. I never saw anything like their courage. Madeline French Mullen brought them with the sick and the prisoners, out and into a safer place.

It was all done slowly and in perfect order. More than one young girl said to me, 'What is there to be afraid of? Won't I go straight to Heaven if I die for Ireland?' However it was, they came out unscathed from a shower of shrapnel. On Tuesday we began to be short of food. There were no bread carts on the streets. We retired into the College of Surgeons that evening and were joined by some of our men who had been in other places and by quite a large squad of Volunteers, and with this increase in our numbers the problem of food became very serious.

Nellie Gifford was put in charge of one large classroom with a big grate, but alas, there was nothing to cook. When we were all starving she produced a quantity of

oatmeal from somewhere and made pot after pot of the most delicious porridge, which kept us going. But all the same, on Tuesday and Wednesday we absolutely starved. There seemed to be no bread in town.

Later on Mary Hyland was given charge of a little kitchen, somewhere down through the houses, near where the Eithne workroom now is.

We had only one woman casualty Margaret Skinnider. She, like myself, was in uniform and carried an rant rifle. She had enlisted as a private in the ICA. She was one of the party who won't out to set fire to a house just behind Russell's Hotel. The English opened fire on them from the ground floor of a house just opposite. Poor Freddy Ryan was killed and Margaret was very badly wounded. She owes her life to William Partridge. He carried her away under fire and back to the College. God rest his noble soul. Brilliant orator and Labour

leader, comrade and friend of Connolly's, he was content to serve as a private in the ICA. He was never strong and the privations he suffered in an English jail left him a dying man.

Margaret's only regret was her bad luck in being disabled so early in the day(Wednesday of Easter Week) though she must have suffered terribly, but the end was nearer than we thought, for it was only a few days later we carried her over to Vincent's Hospital, so that she would not fall wounded into the hands of the English.

The memory of Easter Week with its heroic dead is sacred to us who survived. Many of us could almost wish that we had died in the moment of ecstasy when, with the tri-color over our heads we went out and proclaimed the Irish Republic, and with guns in our hands tried to establish it.

We failed, but not until we had seen regiment after regiment run from our few guns, our efforts will inspire the people who

come after us, and will give them hope and courage. If we failed to win, so did the English. They slaughtered and imprisoned, only to arouse the nation to a passion of love and loyalty, loyalty to Ireland and hatred of foreign rule. Once they see clearly that the English rule us still, only with a new personnel of traitors and new uniforms, they will finish the work begun by the men and women of Easter Week

Dr. Kathleen Lynn was born in County Mayo. She was the daughter of an Anglican Rector. At an early age she decided to be a doctor after noticing that her local doctor was a fount of help and hope. In 1899, Dr. Lynn received her medical degree from the Royal University. She taught First Aid to members of Cumann na mBan and the Irish Citizen Army. Dr. Lynn was a member of the Irish Citizen Army serving as Chief

Medical Officer and a Captain/ At the City Hall Garrison, she attended to Sean Connolly, the first casualty. When offering the surrender as the highest ranking officer, she was asked if she was doing work for the Red Cross. Her answer." I am a Red Cross Doctor and a belligerent." In her possession was an automatic revolver and 50 rounds of ammunition. She served prison time in Richmond Jail, Kilmainham and Mountjoy.

Margaret Skinnider was wounded. Margaret Skinnider was born in Glasgow. She was a member of the Glasgow Cumann na mBan where she was trained to shoot. On her trips to Ireland, she smuggled detonators. The explosives were tested in the hills close to Dublin by Margaret and Constance Markievicz. Through her friendship with the

Countess, she joined the Irish Citizen Army. During Easter week, she served at St. Stephen's Green and the College of Surgeons. Her role was carrying dispatches. The Countess requested Commandant Mallin to permit Margaret to use her skills as a sniper. She offered a plan to dislodge the soldiers from the roof of the Shelbourne Hotel. Mallin thought the idea was good but too dangerous. He was not willing to let a woman take that risk. Her reply was "that women had taken the same right to risk our lives as the men, that in the Constitution of the Irish Republic, women were on a equality with men. Mallin gave her the assignment. During the assignment one of the men was killed and she was wounded. She was shot in the arm, leg and back. She was in the hospital at the time of

the surrender and was taken from the hospital to prison.

All of these women and many more should not be airbrushed out of history. They had an important role in 1916. Serving in all of the garrisons except for one: Boland's Mill under the Command of Eamonn De Valera. Remember over 200 women served and 77 were imprisoned. Kathleen Clarke had a very important role in providing for the needs of the families and to resurrect the cause. Cumann na mBan always kept their goal of an independent Republic of Ireland. We as the Irish Diaspora owe these women our gratitude. GO RAIBH MAITH AGAT to these women mentioned today by name, all the 200 women who served and the many

unknown women who supported the cause of free and independent Ireland.

To learn more about these remarkable women, I recommend the following resources: No Ordinary Women and Easter Widows by Sinead McCool, The Prison Letters of Constance Markievicz, Unmanageable Revolutionaries and In Their Own Voices by Margaret Ward, I did my bit for Ireland by Margaret Skinnider, Women of the Revolution by Liz Gillis, Cumann na mBan by Cal Mc Cathy, Revolutionary Women My Fight for Ireland's Freedom by Kathleen Clarke, Irish Republican Women 1900-1922 by Ann Matthews, When History Was Made the Women of 1916 by Ruth Tallon, Irish Nationalist Women by Senia Pasetta,

Bureau of Military History and many
documentaries from RTE.

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