

Redefining Éireann:
The Decline of Women's Rights in the Era of Irish Nationalism
1916-1937

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“We were like the story of the Irishman and the leprechaun. So long as the Irishman kept his eyes on the leprechaun he would be on the way to the crock of gold and the foot of the rainbow. But if he looked away for a moment, then he lost sight of the leprechaun for good. So it was with us. We took our eyes off the leprechaun. Our women lost sight of the voting privilege until men voted away our equality.”

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, interview by Sally MacDougall,
“Irish Woman Leader Seeks Equality for Sex,” Dec 1937-38.

Introduction

One of Dublin's most prominent public history installations is Kilmainham Gaol. The prison-turned-tourist attraction housed virtually every prominent Irish nationalist in its nearly 200 year run as a functioning jail and serves as a tribute to their memory in today's independent Ireland. The current Kilmainham tour finishes in the prison's courtyard, where two black crosses mark the sites of the executions of fifteen leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising at the hands of the British. Although the prison has witnessed many important moments in Irish history, none proved more seminal to Irish Independence than these killings. The prison's cells wear plaques proudly claiming their former occupants: Éamon de Valera, Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, and the other doomed leaders of the Easter Rising. One cell bears the undeniably female name, Countess Markievicz. Although later commuted of her death sentence, Markievicz was arrested alongside the other male leaders of the Rising. The tour guide will briefly recount her sharpshooting antics with the St. Stephen's Green garrison and then move on to the tragic story of Grace Gifford, who visited Kilmainham to marry her fiancé, Joseph Plunkett, the day before his execution and would later be held at Kilmainham herself during the Civil War. These stories, presented as interesting, yet secondary, details offer tourists hints about the role of women in the struggle for Irish Independence, but they are exceptional examples even among women engaging in the Irish nationalist conversation at the highest levels.

The years that followed the executions of the Risings' leaders, culminating in the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann Constitution (Constitution of Ireland), created the

modern Irish nation. The 1937 Constitution affirmed a commitment to traditional, Catholic ideas of Irish womanhood in the new nation, marking a departure from the egalitarian socialism proclaimed during the 1916 Easter Rising and imposing a social structure that continues to impact women in Ireland today. To understand women's current position and rights it is necessary to analyze the political and cultural conversation by and about women in this critical developmental era. The transition from the progressive nationalism of the 1916 rebels, which included support for gender equality, to the conservative Bunreacht na hÉireann Constitution, which severely restricted women's position in Irish society, offers historians a complex narrative of nationalism and feminism with which to grapple.

English rule in Ireland has a long history. Although the first periods of English rule date back to the 12th century, the English government in Ireland dealt with in this thesis was established in the 17th century and cemented with the 1801 Act of Union officially incorporating Ireland into Great Britain. Running parallel to the history of British control is a history of Irish rebellion, with notable risings in 1798, 1803, 1848 and a protracted land war in the late 19th century. In 1916, Irish discontent with British rule once again boiled over into violence, known as the Easter Rising. The product of a century-long series of doomed rebellions orchestrated by legendary Irish patriots, the Easter Rising also failed in its immediate aims of overthrowing British rule. However, the brutal British crackdown shifted public opinion and set in motion the later War of Independence and Civil War. Nearly one hundred years out from Easter Week 1916, the Rising has

come to symbolize the moment Irish independence became possible for the first time in hundreds of years and the founding of a free Ireland.

By 1916, women were becoming increasingly involved in Irish political life through the nationalist and suffrage causes. The nationalist women's military group, Cumann na mBan (The Irishwomen's Council) had arisen to provide support to the male rebels and provided many crucial auxiliary services during the Rising. The suffragists, despite many of them having personal connections to the nationalist movement, had a much more contentious political relationship with the Irish nationalists. Irish nationalists often criticized suffragists for cooperating with English women and implicitly accepting British rule by petitioning Westminster for the vote. Many Irish nationalists advocated gender equality, but believed suffrage would only be legitimate if granted by an independent Irish state.

The Rising's leaders confirmed their commitment to equality in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. The Proclamation established itself as the first document in a lineage of writing attempting to define and structure a modern, independent Irish nation. This statement, addressed to both Irishmen and Irishwomen, called for a representative government in Ireland, "elected by the suffrages of all her men and women."¹ The drafters of the Proclamation included many prominent Irish socialists and close friends of the suffragists who valued or understood the importance of appearing to value women's equality with men. The public declaration of these egalitarian sentiments at such a critical time in the conception of modern Ireland cheered many women working for the nationalist

¹ Thomas Clarke, et. al., *Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, April 25, 1916.

cause and set a precedent among nationalists of at least appearing to support women's interests. The Proclamation also contributed to a new, expanding ideal of Irish womanhood that now included displaying national devotion through political or military involvement.

British forces quickly suppressed the Rising and executed its leaders, galvanizing a previously complacent Irish public. From 1919 to 1922, the same groups that were just forming in 1916 regrouped and waged a full-scale War of Independence against the British. The Irish succeeded in reducing their relationship with Britain to that of a dominion state with the right of autonomous self-government as guaranteed by the new Irish Free State Constitution. However, the Anglo-Irish Treaty ending the war was highly controversial among nationalists. Dominion status for Ireland still acknowledged England's supremacy over the island and was a far cry from the independent Irish republic that they had fought for. The nationalist movement quickly splintered into those who supported the Treaty as a step in the right direction for Irish republicanism and those who rejected the treaty for not going far enough. The Treaty proved so contentious that civil war broke out in Ireland even before the provisions of the Treaty went into effect.

The Civil War ended in the spring of 1923 when the anti-Treatyites suspended action following the assassination of their army's chief of staff. In the years following the Civil War, Ireland worked to establish itself as a nation, while coping with the limitations established by the Treaty, the devastation of years of war, and the continued tensions within Irish politics. In these years, the new Irish nation turned to the Catholic Church for stability and developed a social policy

heavily influenced by the Vatican's teachings, which was evident particularly in its treatment of women. In 1932, Éamon de Valera and his newly formed political party, Fianna Fáil, came to power. De Valera, the only other Easter Rising leader besides Markievicz to have his death sentence commuted, could claim a personal history of involvement in militant Irish nationalism that few others could, which he leveraged to his advantage in seeking political power. However, de Valera's history also alienated him from the Church and he recognized the importance of courting the Catholic Church in order to lend credibility and public support to his government. As a result of de Valera's overtures to the Church, his administration churned out some of the most restrictive legislation on women. This political savvy kept de Valera in the upper echelons of Irish government for nearly fifty years.

De Valera's most lasting contribution to the Irish nation was the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann Constitution, the Constitution adhered to in Ireland today. Although many of the major issues in the 1922 Constitution had been repealed or addressed by 1937, the Constitution remained a British document and a symbol of Irish repression. De Valera, the President of the Executive Council at the time, adopted the project of creating a new Constitution with the help of a selected team of drafters. The document that emerged reflected widely differing social values than the 1922 Constitution and certainly the 1916 Proclamation. Rather than celebrating the Irishwoman as political actor or militant, as in 1916, the constitution emphasized women's value as mother and housekeeper by explicitly recognizing the value of women's work in the home, restricting employment options for women, and prohibiting divorce. These clauses outraged the former members of Cumann na

mBan, suffrage societies, and other women's organizations, who prompted an extended public debate on women's rights in Ireland, but the constitution was approved by national plebiscite with most of the clauses concerning the position of women intact. While people voted for and against the constitution for a variety of reasons, the plebiscite's results indicate a general willingness to abandon the progressive idea of Irish womanhood that had been developed early in the independence process in favor of the other benefits of de Valera's Constitution.

In studying the position of women during this time period it is crucial to recognize the ways in which Irish nationalists and Irish feminists found themselves united and the ways in which they found themselves opposed, as well as the divisions within these movements themselves. Although many prominent theorists have studied the ways in which nationalism is imagined and invented to reflect a certain identity, little attention had initially been paid to how these identities were gendered and their ideologies firmly planted in a patriarchal understanding of society.² Therefore a relatively new wave of feminist analysis has been largely critical of women's space in nationalist movements—one of the most popular nationalist images of women is as a mother figure responsible for the biological and social reproduction of the nation, which allows space for limiting women's employment opportunities, reproductive rights, and political involvement.³

² The seminal book on the theory of nationalism is of course Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1982).

³ Theresa O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development and Activism in Revolutionary Movements*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

In an article for *Feminist Review*, Anne McClintock declares, “All nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous.”⁴ McClintock represents a side of the conversation that believes nationalists’ subjugation of women’s rights to the national cause irrevocably stalls feminist movements and women’s liberation. Few disagree with the premise of gendered nationalism, but some worry about the strict dichotomization of nationalism and feminism. Historian Lucy Delap and her colleagues write that, “the two [nationalism and feminism] do not represent opposed poles, but came together as mutually constitutive at certain points.”⁵ In her book on feminism and revolutionary movements, Theresa O’Keefe also worries that these criticisms, which certainly apply to the case of early 20th century Irish nationalism and feminism, can deny the agency of women involved in revolutionary movements, especially women acting as combatants, and lead to a disdain for female nationalists among feminist scholars.⁶ As opposed to McClintock, these scholars assert that not only do the two movements interact, but women’s work within nationalist movements has also helped to create a political identity for women. In grappling with these concerns in this paper, I have relied on this approach, which acknowledges the complexities of the historical reality. I have tried to balance the Irish nationalist, Irish feminist, and female nationalist perspectives in order to provide a nuanced demonstration of the Irish nationalist successes and failures in the realm of women’s rights.

⁴ Anne McClintock, “Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family,” *Feminist Review* 44, (Summer 1993), 61.

⁵ Lucy Delap, et. al. “Self-determination, race, and empire: Feminist nationalists in Britain, Ireland and the United States, 1830s to World War One,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29, (2006), 243.

⁶ O’Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*.

Many notable scholars have helped me to understand Irish history from 1916 to 1937 from both a political and social history perspective. The work of Dermot Keogh, Andrew McCarthy, and Charles Townshend on the governmental and religious politics of this time period has been immensely helpful in creating a backdrop for my work on women's rights.⁷ Benedict Anderson and Brian Porter-Szűcs' analysis of nationalism, and particularly the way in which it so often abandons its progressive roots for authoritarianism, has provided a useful way of conceptualizing nationalism as a dynamic and vague entity.⁸ Theresa O'Keefe's book, and many articles by feminist historians, sociologist, and political scientists added a gendered context to the study of nationalism.⁹ Margaret Ward and Ann Matthews' books on Irish female republicans and the articles of Caitriona Beaumont and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis on gender in the Irish Free State have begun the process of recognizing women's contributions to this significant historical moment and providing insightful study of the history of gender in Ireland.¹⁰ However, none of the

⁷ Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995); Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007); Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence, 1918-1923*, (Allen Lane, 2013).

⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Brian Porter, *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland*, (Oxford University Press, 2002); Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*; Delap, et. al. "Self-determination, race and empire;" McClintock, "Family Feuds."

¹⁰ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1983); Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922*, (Mercier Press Ltd., 2010); Ann Matthews, *Dissidents: Irish Republican Women 1923-1941*, (Mercier Press Ltd., 2012); Caitriona Beaumont, "Women, citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish free state, 1922-1948," *Women's History Review* 6 no. 4 (1997): 563-585.

works listed above fully consider the ways in which early 20th century Irish nationalism relied on images of Irish womanhood for success. Irish nationalism and Irish feminism did not just pass each other by as they intersected in the early 20th century; they actively engaged each other, both in cooperation and opposition. Molly Mullin's "Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference" elaborates on the importance of writing and remembering Irish women's history not only to pay homage to female political actors, but also to establish a "tradition of feminist resistance that is Irish."¹¹ I hope to carry out Mullin's charge to uncover the gendered tensions of Irish history and contribute, in small part, to the historical body of work that is building this feminist tradition and shaping the future of women's rights in Ireland.

In this thesis, I argue that the Irish independence process relied on changing conceptions of Irish womanhood to first establish difference from the English to justify rebellion and then to reestablish domestic stability and security. As the independent Irish nation came into being and the national leadership became an increasingly mainstream, conservative force, their opinion of women's rights shifted from progressive and egalitarian to traditional and Catholic. This project is divided into two main chapters. The first will explore the work of the women's branch of the nationalist movement, the suffrage movement, and the language of the 1916 Easter Rising's Proclamation of the Irish Republic in order to show how the early nationalist movement incorporated and used women as well as how Irish

Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, "The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937," *Women's History Review* 20 no. 4 (Sept. 2011): 569-578.

¹¹ Molly Mullin, "Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference," *Feminist Studies* 17 no. 1 (Spring 1991): 29-50.

nationalism redefined Irish womanhood to emphasize military and political participation. The second chapter will primarily focus on the years following the Irish Civil War, particularly those in which Éamon de Valera served as president, culminating in the 1937 Constitution. This chapter will document the ways women's position in Ireland was redefined along traditional gender norms and the political, social, and religious forces that contributed to this departure from the ideals of the 1916 Proclamation. I will argue that this shift was fundamental to the success of the Irish nationalist movement and the ideal of Irish womanhood that emerged in 1937 went beyond a social norm to become a legal fact embedded in the foundation of the new nation—which women in Ireland continue to grapple with today. As Ireland approaches decades of centennial celebrations, which will begin in earnest in 2016, it is important that public memory acknowledges, discusses, and analyzes women's role in creating modern Ireland and the lasting implications this time period had for women.

A few notes on language and spellings. At the time of the events in this thesis, Irish nationalists and politicians attempted to resurrect the Irish language, and as a result many organizations and political parties have Irish names. I have provided translations for these names when they are introduced, but refer to them by their Irish names throughout the paper, as these are their official names. Additionally, when quoting primary sources I have retained the original spellings, which often use British spellings and occasionally contain typos and true misspellings. I have retained these spelling quirks to preserve the integrity of these sources and to provide some comic relief to the following seventy-odd pages.

Chapter I. Irish Nationalism and Progressive Gender Politics from Home Rule to the 1922 Constitution

Celtic Revival

A period of cultural revivalism preceded Ireland's 1916 Easter Rising and entry into an ultimately successful military fight for independence. Although militant nationalism was not new in Ireland, the Celtic Revival of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was unprecedented in its scope and impact on Irish society.¹ The movement was based on a desire to return to a "true" Irish identity while abandoning the English habits that had been forced on them by their longtime rulers. Proponents of the Irish movement focused on promoting the Irish language, traditional sports, Irish-made products, and the tradition of Celtic history and mythology as a means of revitalizing this Irish identity.

At this point in the modern Irish nationalist movement, religion did not yet play the defining role it later would. That is not to say it played no role, however. Until full Catholic Emancipation in 1829, the English had deprived Irish Catholics, the long-time religious majority on the island, of fundamental rights through a series of laws and codes. The bitter history of religious repression significantly contributed to Irish dissatisfaction with England and the rhetoric of the nationalist movement often incorporated Irish Catholicism. That said, several historical heroes of previous Irish nationalist movements had been Protestant and because Irish nationalism relied so heavily on a historical lineage, a strict adherence to Catholicism would

¹ Notable Irish rebellions include: Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen's Rebellion in 1798, Robert Emmet's 1803 Rebellion, and the 1848 Young Irelander Rebellion.

discount these forefathers of the Irish nation (as well as the sizeable minority of Irish Protestants).

Many of the institutions and ideas of the Celtic Revival persist today. The Gaelic Athletic Association, established in 1884, continues to promote traditional Irish sports like hurling and Gaelic football as the largest sports organization in Ireland today.² Irish Gaelic (popularly referred to simply as Irish) has become the first official language of Ireland thanks in large part to the work of organizations like the Gaelic League, founded in 1893. Although only a small percentage of the Irish population speak Irish fluently, all materials produced by the government (including street signs) are printed in both English and Irish and Irish language is taught in all primary schools (and required for entrance to the colleges of the National University). Some of the greatest sources of pride for the Irish today are the contributions of writers like William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, and George Bernard Shaw, who all wrote during this time period. In fact, the outpouring of Irish literature as a part of the Celtic Revival is so well established that it has been designated as its own movement known as the Irish Literary Revival. The national literary and dramatic communities of Ireland converged at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which was founded in 1904 as the National Theater of Ireland and continues to function in that capacity.

² Bill Wilson, "Doing sports business the GAA way," *BBC News*, March 27, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7962884.stm>

A renewed interest in Celtic history and mythology was obvious in the works of the Irish Literary Revival and included many women as quintessential Irish symbols. The Irish name for Ireland—*Éire*—comes from the word *Éireann*, which Anglicizes to the popular girl's name Erin. Nationalist writings and images of the time heavily relied on a woman named *Éire* or Erin to represent Ireland, often dressed in green and accompanied by a harp or Irish wolfhound, other national symbols. Ireland's female personification also took the form of Saint Brigid, a patron



Figure 1. Erin looks towards the "dawn of freedom" while wearing a green cloth, sitting in front of a Celtic cross in the ruins of an ancient monastery, holding a harp, and accompanied by an Irish wolfhound--all traditional Irish symbols. Thomas Fitzpatrick, "Dawn of Freedom," *The Weekly Freeman and National Press*, Images of Erin in the Age of Parnell/L. Perry Curtis Jr. National Library of Ireland, 2000 ; (Fig 41.) p. 54-55.

saint of Ireland, an Irish Joan of Arc figure, a righteous female warrior, or Mother *Éire*, a frail old woman. A classic example of this is a 1902 play by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory entitled *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in which the titular character, an old, vaguely mystical woman, repeatedly asks a family to sacrifice their able sons on her

behalf—an unsubtle message about the duties of patriotism.³ Representations of Ireland as a woman contrasted with the widespread depiction of the English as the caricature John Bull—a rotund, well dressed Englishman—further establishing a difference in Irish and English identity. By using women as symbols, Ireland was associated with the stereotypical feminine traits of purity, innocence, motherhood, and nature, all of which lent themselves well to the protectionist exclamations of the Irish nationalists.

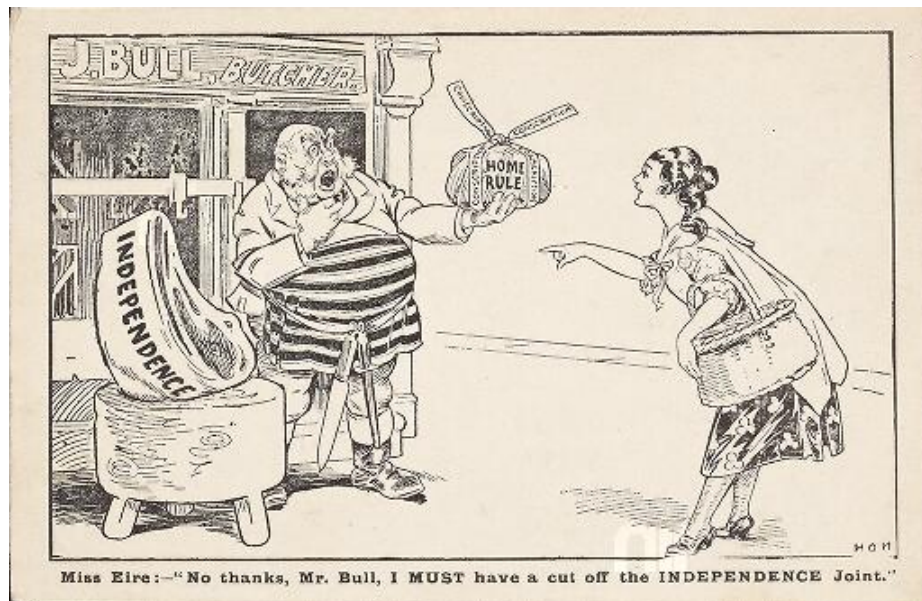


Figure 2. "Miss Eire" asks for a cut off the independence joint rather than the Home Rule package offered by Mr. Bull. H.O.N., (Dublin: Sinn Féin, 1918), Department of Ephemera, National Library of Ireland.

While mythical women were important symbols of Irish nationalism, living women sought to be important to the cause. However, women found it difficult to find a way off of the pedestal and into the trenches because most nationalist organizations forbade female membership. In fact, the only prominent group to

³ Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, (Dublin: 1902). Occasionally spelled "Kathleen."

accept women was the Gaelic League, an apolitical organization that advocated for the reestablishment of the Irish language and a general return to Gaelic culture. The Gaelic League also included a strong social component, which accounts for its mixed membership. The dearth of options for women prompted the founding of *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland) by women like Maud Gonne and Jennie Wyse Power who already had begun to accumulate a nationalist reputation.

Like the Gaelic League, *Inghinidhe* also saw themselves as a cultural institution, drawing much inspiration from the work of the Parnell sisters' Ladies' Land League of the 1880s and the Ladies Committee for the Relief of the State Prisoners in the 1860s which had served as fundraising bodies for men or men's organizations during periods of social upheaval. As president of *Inghinidhe*, Maud Gonne organized many fundraisers in collaboration with the literary and artistic community in Dublin with which she had strong ties.⁴ A popular fundraising strategy for *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* was the production of *tableaux vivants* (living pictures), in which members would recreate famous nationalist scenes or figures in front of an audience. The *Inghinidhe* women also devoted much time to the care and education of children. Their activities included offering free meals to the children of union workers during the 1913 Dublin Lockout, teaching classes emphasizing Irish nationalism to poor children, and organizing the Patriotic Children's Treat, a parade of sorts rebuking Queen Victoria's visit to Dublin in 1900.

⁴ Public memory may recall Gonne chiefly as W.B. Yeats' muse, but she had attended art school in Paris and made a start as an actress in Dublin before dedicating all her efforts to the national cause. Indeed, Gonne originated the role of Cathleen ni Houlihan when the show premiered in 1902.

This swell of cultural nationalism likely did not represent the return to an Irish identity that pre-dated English influence, as many at the time claimed, because much of the island's history prior to the 12th century had been marked by warring internal kingdoms, and there had been a huge time lapse between early medieval Ireland and the revivalism of the 19th century. Benedict Anderson explains this phenomenon, "If nation-states are widely conceded to be 'new' and 'historical,' the nations to which they give political expression always loom out of an immemorial past, and...glide into a limitless future."⁵ Rather than serving as a literal means of returning to an Irish identity, Celtic Revivalism served as an effective ideological tool to unite a large cross section of Irish citizens against the English by prescribing identifiable characteristics to each nationality.⁶ An important component of this new understanding of Irish nationality was an understanding of Irish womanhood. Inghinidhe na hÉireann played a crucial role in establishing a position for women in the national movement and redefining the role of Irishwomen. As Margaret Ward points out, the formation of Inghinidhe marked an important departure from women's passive support of a movement that excluded them to active participation in Irish politics. Ward argues that "the formation of their own organisation gave the lie to this stereotyped notion of women's interests being focused exclusively around

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1982), 11.

⁶ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities* for more on the role of language, religion, and history in the invention of nationality and national identity and Molly Mullin, "Representations of History, Irish Feminism, and the Politics of Difference," *Feminist Studies*, Spring 1999, 17(1), 29-50 for more on Celtic female symbolism and Irish national history.

hearth and home,”⁷ but this is only partially true. Indeed, Inghinidhe was a crucial step in the development of Irish feminism, and it rebuked many of the constraints and assumptions imposed on women, but in doing so it inevitably reinforced certain expectations of Irishwomen. Most significantly, Inghinidhe found it impossible to disregard the commonly held belief in the centrality of women’s role in the domestic sphere and the group’s education and fundraising efforts reinforced the idea that women’s influence lay in their purchasing power, the education of their children, and their support of their nationalist husbands. The ever-narrowing construction of Irish womanhood provides a gauge for the developing ideological categorizations of Irish and English that continued throughout the early 20th century that culminated in the socially restrictive 1937 Constitution.

Political Involvement

Although Inghinidhe na hÉireann arose from an era of cultural nationalism, it soon became clear that its members were interested in promoting a political agenda, unlike similar cultural organizations like the Gaelic League. Their political leanings became clear with the publication of their newspaper, *Bean na hÉireann* (Woman of Ireland), beginning in 1908. Helena Moloney, the paper’s editor, described the publication’s goals: “We wanted it to be a women’s paper, advocating militancy, separatism and feminism.”⁸ The October 1909 issue of the paper included advertisements for Irish goods, stories of Celtic mythology, the second installment of

⁷ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London: Pluto Press Limited, 1983), 86.

⁸ Moloney as quoted in Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 67.

a piece on the conditions of Irish nurses, an article denouncing England's attempts to recruit Irish boys to the army, and Countess Markievicz's allegorical "Woman with a Garden" column. The paper generally devoted more time to discussion of nationalist issues than women's issues, which reflected the organization's priorities in establishing themselves as a part of the national political conversation. However, after 1910 Inghinidhe experienced a decline as the debate over the Home Rule bill, which would grant Ireland a separate parliament within the United Kingdom, escalated and the Inghinidhe membership sought out more explicitly political involvement in the form of suffrage and labor organizations, military groups, and political parties. In 1914, Inghinidhe na hÉireann was incorporated into the new women's military organization Cumann na mBan.

The Irish Volunteers, a nationalist army launched in 1913 in response to the formation of the unionist Ulster Volunteer Force earlier that year, created Cumann na mBan in 1914 as a way to incorporate women into their membership. At their April founding meeting, the women of Cumann na mBan adopted a constitution with four main objectives:

1. To advance the cause of Irish liberty.
2. To organise 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.'

In her entry in the 1915 pamphlet "The Volunteers, the Women and the Nation," Cumann na mBan Secretary Mary Colum describes the organization's initial aims in

⁹ Cumann na mBan, *Manifesto From Cumann na mBan*, October 5, 1914. Irish Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Ireland.

more detail. “We would collect money for arms,” she begins, “We would learn ambulance work, learn how to make haversacks and bandoliers, we would study the question of food supplies, we would practice the use of the rifle, we would make speeches” in order to support the “best drilled and most efficient regiments” of the Irish Volunteers.¹⁰ Essentially, Cumann na mBan was originally founded as an auxiliary organization for the Volunteers, strategically created to broaden the Volunteers’ support base while providing support and resources in a subsidiary capacity.

However, members of Cumann na mBan rejected the assertion that they were the “hand-maidens” of the Volunteers. In the same pamphlet, Colum qualified her statements, “If some unhappy fate were now to destroy the Volunteers, Cumann na mBan is not only capable of still growing and flourishing, it is capable of bringing the whole Volunteer movement to life again.”¹¹ While this is certainly an over-exaggeration of Cumann na mBan’s abilities, they had proven popular among women and had established several dozen branches across Ireland by the time of publication of Colum’s piece. However, perhaps even more so than Inghinidhe na hÉireann before them, who acknowledged feminist motivations, Cumann na mBan was a nationalist organization before it was a women’s organization. In an October 1914 news clipping, the Provisional Committee “would point out to our members that it is their duty in all controversial matters to abide by the principles of

¹⁰ M. M. Colum, *The Volunteers, the Women, and the Nation: Cumann na mBan* (Dublin: P Mahon Printer, 1915), 3. Librarian’s Office Collection, National Library of Ireland.

¹¹ Colum, *The Volunteers*, 3.

nationality.”¹² Cumann na mBan’s activities and goals changed in the years it was active and did allow women a degree of involvement in the events that shaped an independent Ireland that would have otherwise been unavailable, but the group was not established to assume the mantle of Inghinidhe na hÉireann in promoting women within the nationalist cause. Cumann na mBan may have given Irishwomen a voice (of debatable strength) in Irish nationalist politics, but it was not an organization that actively sought to advance the place of women in public life.

Both supporters and opponents of Cumann na mBan began to find other public outlets for their nationalist sentiment around this time as well. The leading nationalist political party of the time, Sinn Féin (Ourselves Alone), accepted women on its executive board from its founding in 1905. Prominent nationalist women took advantage of this and Sinn Féin always had a couple of female representatives on its board. In the early years, many of these women came from the Inghinidhe na hÉireann executive—for example Jenny Wyse Power, a founding member of Inghinidhe, was elected a vice president of the party in 1911. However, Sinn Féin’s continued advocacy of a dual monarchy system until 1917 garnered criticism from Irish nationalists and many, including women, turned to the labor movement. The Irish labor movement, led in large part by James Larkin and James Connolly, had strong ties to the Irish socialist scene and represented a more radical strain of Irish nationalism. From September 1913 to February 1914 Larkin and Connolly, through the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU), orchestrated a strike of the Dublin Tramway Company that escalated into a citywide lockout. Several

¹² Cumann na mBan, “Manifesto.”

organizations provided support for the locked out workers. The Irish Citizen Army (ICA) was launched as a force separate from the Irish Volunteers in the midst of the Dublin Lockout to protect the workers from physical harm. Like the Irish Volunteers, the ICA developed a women's section, but unlike the Volunteers, the ICA was much more egalitarian in their incorporation of women. Countess Constance Markievicz, a member of Inghinidhe na hÉireann who would eventually become one of the most famous women in Irish history for her involvement in the 1916 Easter Rising and election as the first female Member of Parliament, rose to prominence in the Irish Citizen Army, eventually being elected honorary treasurer.

The other organization that proved critical to the well-being of the striking workers was the Irish Women's Workers Union (IWWU), founded by James Larkin's sister Delia Larkin 1911. During the Lockout, the IWWU, in collaboration with Inghinidhe and the Irish Women's Franchise League, helped organize meals for the children of union workers. However, the IWWU did not serve merely as a support organization. The union sought to organize and protect working women, as they did with the establishment of a sewing shop for women who had lost their jobs as a consequence of their union membership, for example. In addition to the improved position of these women in relationship to their male counterparts, the IWWU members represented a more accurate economic cross section of Ireland than did other the women of other organizations. Cumann na mBan, for example, required members to make a financial contribution to the "Defence of Ireland Fund" and held

their meetings in the afternoons¹³—both of which would present barriers to working women.

Organizations like Inghinidhe na hÉireann, Cumann na mBan, and the Irish Women's Workers Union allowed women to be involved in Irish politics in a systematic, official way for the first time in recent Irish history.¹⁴ Increasingly women working through these organizations became more and more accepted into the Irish nationalist movement and their presence presumably helped shape the leaders' egalitarian gender policies. Another result of women's participation in the nationalist movement was a shift in some expectations of Irishwomen. Women had a long history of being used as symbols for Irish independence, but with the rise of sanctioned female nationalists Irishwomen also came to be seen as actors in the fight for independence. Slowly, these women were changing what it meant to be an Irishwoman. However, these organizations always prioritized their identity as nationalists or workers over their identity as women, which minimized friction with male nationalists and occasionally reinforced traditional gender roles. The women who primarily focused on women's rights regardless of political pressures joined the suffrage movement.

¹³ Cumann na mBan, "Manifesto."

¹⁴ Women's political organizations were not entirely new. A Quaker family, the Haslams, had established an Irish feminist presence in the early 19th century and the Ladies Land League emerged as a women's alternative to the prominent Land League of the late 1800s. 20th century feminists also often invoked the Middle Ages as a bastion of women's equality as Mary Hayden did in an *Irish Independent* response to the 1937 Constitution. (Mary Hayden, "Under the Feudal System," *The Irish Independent*, May 12, 1937.)

Suffrage Movement

Cultural organizations, political parties, and labor unions created a space for women in the political arena, but none of them functioned in a primarily feminist capacity. Instead, this role was filled by suffrage organizations. As citizens of the United Kingdom, Irish women were dependent on Parliament in London for their right to vote in national elections (which was achieved in a limited sense in 1918, prior to Irish independence). In this way, Irish and English suffragists shared a common aim, and Irish suffragists learned from and collaborated with English suffragists. In the years before the outbreak of World War I, Irish suffragists petitioned for a provision extending the voting privileges they already enjoyed at the municipal level to a national level in the Home Rule Bill. However, their cooperation with the English and interference with the Home Rule efforts proved controversial among Irish nationalists and led to a rift with other women's organizations.

Suffrage groups had existed for decades in England, but in the 1910s the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), founded by the sisters Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, introduced militant strategies that elevated public awareness of the suffrage movement. Margaret Cousins, a founder of the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), describes the influence of these women on the burgeoning Irish suffrage movement in the book she co-authored with her husband, *We Two Together*. Not only did Cousins and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, her IWFL co-founder, draw inspiration from the WSPU *Votes for Women* publication and their strategy of refusing to support Parliamentary candidates until votes for women had

been granted, they also received direct support from the English suffragists.¹⁵ In 1910, Emmeline Pankhurst launched an Irish speaking tour to raise support for the cause and much of the funding for the IWFL's paper *The Irish Citizen*, the self-proclaimed "backbone of the Irish Suffrage Movement,"¹⁶ came from English suffrage organizations.¹⁷ However, Cousins and Sheehy Skeffington purposefully chose to create a specifically Irish suffrage organization rather than establishing an Irish chapter of the Women's Social and Political Union in recognition of the differing political climates and in order to promote home rule.¹⁸ In an IWFL pamphlet entitled "To the Electors" they made this distinction clear, stating, "The Irish Women's Franchise League is an independent Irish organisation, unconnected with any English Suffrage Society...and consists of Irish women of all shades of political opinion." Suffragists attempted to organize above the nationalist fray and encouraged nationalist and unionists alike to join the cause. However, this ultimately resulted in the development of separate suffrage organizations for nationalists and unionists, as the Irish question proved unavoidable. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and the IWFL particularly would come to develop strong ties with the nationalist movement, but the organization saw themselves as a women's organization first, with the primary goal of winning votes for women.

The militant, nationalist Irishwomen's Franchise League emerged as the dominant force in Irish suffrage, but the movement represented a broad range of

¹⁵ James and Margaret Cousins, "Chapter XIV: Votes for Women: Ireland I," *We Two Together*, (Madras, Ganesh, 1950) 163-174.

¹⁶ Motto, *Irish Citizen*, front page. Irish Collection, National Library of Ireland.

¹⁷ Cousins, Margaret & James Cousins. "Chapter XVII: The Other Side of Freedom," *We Two Together*, 195-212.

¹⁸ Cousins, "Votes for Women," *We Two Together*, 163-174.

ideologies and political views. Whereas nationalist suffragists sought the vote to establish an independent Ireland, unionist suffragists sought the vote to save the union. As Mrs. Chambers from the Irish Women's Suffrage Society in Belfast put it, "Every member of our society has been asked to help save the Union. How can we do so without the vote?"¹⁹ Suffragists, identified primarily by their feminism, took pride in their diversity as indicative of a truly representative women's movement, unlike the female nationalist organizations. The Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association Report of 1911, giving an overview of the suffrage movement in Ireland, describes this variety: "Our various Societies, whilst all devoted Suffragists, are not absolutely agreed as to either their aims, or their methods," however, the "Irish Branch of the Conservative and Unionist Women's Suffrage Association and Irish Women's Franchise League are both doing excellent work."²⁰

These diverse groups were more or less united in two specific aims prior to the 1916 Rising. One aim of the suffragists was to obtain political prisoner status for their imprisoned members. Classified as common criminals, suffragists felt disrespected by a government that failed to recognize their legitimate political aims. Imprisoned suffragists protested this categorization primarily through hunger strike. The strikes and resulting forced feedings were well publicized by suffrage organizations and public disapproval put pressure on the prisons to stop the

¹⁹ Chambers, "The Voice of Irish Womanhood: The Voice of Ulster. 'Saving the Union,'" *The Irish Citizen*, June 8, 1912. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

²⁰ "Report of the Executive Committee of the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association for 1911," (Dublin: Ormond Printing Company, Limited, 1912), 11. Irish Collection, National Library of Ireland.

practice. Rather than achieving political prisoner status, however, the hunger strikes led to the implementation of the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Act, popularly known as the “Cat and Mouse Act” in 1913. The Act provided for the release of female prisoners as soon as their hunger strikes compromised their health, but allowed police to re-arrest the women when they recovered. The suffragists quickly mobilized against this legislation and Cat and Mouse Act protests came to occupy a significant amount of the suffragists’ time. Suffragists popularized the hunger strike strategy that would be used throughout the fight for independence by both men and women seeking political prisoner status and improved conditions.

The other aim was the inclusion of women’s franchise in the Home Rule bill. Women enjoyed limited enfranchisement at the municipal level, and suffragists fought for this Local Government Register to be used as the Parliamentary Register as well. While not all suffrage societies supported home rule, many reasoned that should home rule become reality, they wanted their voices heard. At a June 1912 mass meeting, delegates from the Irish Suffrage Societies adopted the following resolution:

That while expressing no opinion on the general question of Home Rule, this Mass Meeting of Delegates from the Irish Suffrage Societies and other women’s organisations representing all shades of political and religious opinion...calls upon the Government to amend the Home

Rule Bill in Committee by adopting the Local Government Register (which includes women) as the basis for the new Parliament.²¹

The Irish Citizen ran a collection of articles written by various prominent suffragists from across the political spectrum in response to the Home Rule bill, including one by Mary Hayden in which she cites the unity among suffragists. “We have joined on this one issue,” she writes, “without sacrificing our individual political opinions, and we ask the members of all parties in the British Parliament to help us to obtain this measure of justice to women.”²² The unification of suffrage groups from varying political persuasions on the issue of home rule indicates a high level of nuance and political savvy when dealing with the Irish nationalists.

Relationship with Nationalists

Feminist organizations, while often (but not always) to the left on the political spectrum, did not always enjoy close relationships with other radical movements of early 20th century Europe. The relationship between feminists and socialists, for example, was tense. Most socialist organizations, predominantly comprised of men, paid lip service to women’s rights but did not prioritize them, alienating feminists. And many feminists, particularly in the suffrage campaign, promoted upper and middle class women at the expense of poor women as they sought respectability in the political sphere, distancing themselves from socialist

²¹ “Mass Meeting to Demand Inclusion of Suffrage in HR Bill” *The Irish Citizen*, June 8, 1912. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

²² Mary Hayden, “The Voice of Irish Womanhood: The Demand Stated and a Warning Uttered,” *The Irish Citizen*, June 8, 1912. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

aims.²³ Nationalist movements across Europe represented a broader political spread, with some closely tied to the socialist scene and others heavily reliant on fascist authoritarianism, but regardless of their political leanings nationalist organizations largely excluded women's rights. Nationalist groups valued women's role as mother and reproducer of the nation as central to female identity and purpose—which allowed them to restrict women's options significantly.²⁴ While this rhetorical tool had been used by feminist organizations to make an argument for political involvement due to their moral superiority, nationalists used it to promote national independence, often at the expense of women's rights.²⁵ In 1916 Ireland, the nationalist movement was closely tied to the socialist movement under the leadership of James Connolly, and Irish feminists—largely united in the suffrage movement—often found themselves at odds with the growing Irish nationalist force.

In their fight for enfranchisement in the Home Rule bill, suffragists found themselves working with and against the political parties of Ireland. Most suffragists felt outright antagonism towards the Irish Parliamentary Party, the established home rule party of Ireland, for their handling of the Home Rule bill and refusal to include women's suffrage. Support for Sinn Féin, the relatively new nationalist party, varied. Sinn Féin claimed to stand for women's equality, but hadn't had a chance to prove itself yet. Suffragists who came down hard on Sinn Féin generally

²³ Marie Kennedy and Chris Tilly, "Socialism, Feminism and the Stillbirth of Socialist Feminism in Europe, 1890-1920," *Science and Society*, 51 no. 1 (Spring 1987), 6-42.

²⁴ O'Keefe, *Feminist Identity Development*.

²⁵ Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the 19th Century*, (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1984).

did so for nationalist reasons, as Sinn Féin advocated a dual monarchy rather than republican structure until 1917.

Many nationalist organizations were wary of the suffragists from the very beginning. Not only did petitioning for suffrage seem distracting to the real work of Irish independence, it legitimized British rule in Ireland by recognizing Parliament as the means of enfranchisement, often coordinating with English women to do so. At a public event for Home Rule, twenty-two suffragists marched through the streets wearing placards and shouting slogans demanding the vote in the Home Rule bill. *The Irish Times*, reporting on the demonstration, notes the respect shown to the women until they reach a group of men from the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Irish National Foresters, fraternal organizations that supported the more conservative Irish Parliamentary Party and Home Rule, who “appeared to see in the procession some evil design against the cause of Home Rule, and determinedly opposed its passage through the street.”²⁶ The men then proceeded to pull the placards from the women and jostle them as they marched by—a very public display of the tension between some nationalists and suffragists.²⁷ The general public too, was split on the issue. The existence of organizations like the National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage, a conglomeration of the Men’s League for Opposing Woman Suffrage and the Women’s Anti-Suffrage League, indicate that at least a small minority of the population felt strongly opposed to votes for women. The League’s meetings, described as well attended by the *Irish Press*, attracted

²⁶ “Demonstration in Dublin,” *The Irish Times*, April 6, 1912, 13.

²⁷ The Ancient Order of Hibernians had a bit of a reputation for public disruption, for which Cardinal Logue publicly condemned them in 1909. See “Ancient Order of Hibernians: Condemned by Cardinal Logue,” *The Irish Times*, May 14, 1909.

speakers from throughout Great Britain. Frank Fox, speaking at a 1911 meeting about the extension of the vote in his native Australia, “asked was it right at this critical period to add to the electorate some thirteen millions of uninstructed and sentimental voters.”²⁸ However, he did note that at least in Australia, unlike in England and Ireland, there was no attempt to “organise the women of the community on the basis of a sex war,” referring to the increasingly militant strategies of suffragists.²⁹ Women, too, opposed granting votes to women, and in fact comprised the majority of the League’s membership. Mrs. Albert E. Murray noted that suffrage movements “always indicated a lack of virility in the men of a nation and decadence in its women”—a subversion of the traditional gender norms of the time.³⁰

However, early nationalists had a progressive image to uphold (although how progressive depended on the individual) and many claimed to support women’s equality, although this was often demonstrated through rhetoric and not in practice. Sinn Féin, for example, offered verbal support of the suffrage movement, but refused to back the demand that an extension of suffrage be added to the Home Rule bill when it became clear that its inclusion would jeopardize the bill’s chances of passing through Parliament.³¹ Moves like this demonstrated a major difference in priorities between nationalist and suffrage groups. Nationalist groups supported women’s suffrage as a characteristic of the better society they would build once

²⁸ “Opposing Women Suffrage: A Lively Meeting,” *The Irish Times*, Dec 7, 1911.

²⁹ “Opposing Women Suffrage.” *The Irish Times*, Dec 7, 1911.

³⁰ “National League for Opposing Woman Suffrage: Annual Meeting of Irish Branch,” *Weekly Irish Times*, March 28, 1914.

³¹ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 84.

Ireland won its freedom, whereas suffragists demanded political equality as a first step towards a truly free Ireland.

The division between nationalists and suffragists caused a sizeable amount of tension within and between women's groups. The nationalist and feminist causes drew from the same pool of women who had politically supportive and financially stable families, and as a result the memberships overlapped considerably. However, the Home Rule bill debate forced these women to take sides. No longer were nationalist-feminist organizations like Inghinidhe na hÉireann viable options and a categorization of organizations as *either* nationalist *or* suffragist developed. When coupled with the existing prejudice against suffrage groups for their involvement with England, this dichotomy made suffrage organizations appear even more obstructionist by providing the "good" nationalist foil of groups like Cumann na mBan. By the outbreak of WWI, the concept of Irish womanhood had changed. Inghinidhe na hÉireann and later nationalist and suffragist organizations had used a legacy of Celtic and Catholic heroines—from Maeve to Brigid to Joan of Arc—to craft an image of the Irishwoman, but political realities had further refined that definition. Although traditional expectations of women as mothers and caretakers remained, the ideal Irishwoman no longer just bought Irish-made products and supported Irish theater, she had to prioritize Irish freedom above all else. The cultural duties of Irish womanhood had morphed into political duties—national pride was not enough; an Irish identity demanded a nationalist opinion. For women, there was no more appropriate way to demonstrate their commitment to the national cause than through membership in Cumann na mBan.

The 1916 Easter Rising

On Monday, April 24th, 1916 the Irish Volunteers and the Irish Citizen Army—collectively known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA)—occupied the General Post Office, St. Stephen’s Green, and other strategic locations around Dublin in the hopes of starting the Irish revolution. The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) forces mobilized in response and the 1916 Easter Rising, one of the most celebrated events in Irish history, began. For five days, Dublin became a war zone, complete with trenches, barricades, and sniper fire, which resulted in significant loss of combatant and civilian life, property damage, and food shortages. By the 29th, the order came down from the Rising’s leaders (via Elizabeth O’Farrell, a Cumann na mBan member) for an unconditional surrender “in order to prevent the further slaughter of Dublin citizens,”³² and Ireland’s attempt at revolution ended. Although the Rising was not successful in and of itself, it set in motion the pieces that would converge again in the 1919 War of Independence and lead to the establishment of the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland. It was also significant as a test of the military capacity of the Volunteers and ICA and their female counterparts. Not only was the women’s training in first aid and rifle handling demonstrated, their position within the nationalist military was confirmed, setting a precedent for the later armed conflicts to come.

³² Padraig Pearse, James Connolly and Thomas MacDonagh, “Surrender notice,” De Coucy-Wheeler Papers, in “The 1916 Rising: Personalities & Perspectives” online exhibit, National Library of Ireland. Accessed 31 Dec 2014.
<http://www.nli.ie/1916/pdf/8.pdf>

Roughly 90 women directly took part in the Rising, of which 30 participated through the Citizen Army Ambulance Corps. James Connolly emphasized that these women were to be fully integrated members of the IRA, although most of them did not take part in the actual fighting. However, a small group of women accompanied an IRA contingent attacking Dublin Castle, the symbolic center of British rule in Ireland, and they received revolvers as a protective measure. Connolly's egalitarian approach to the role of nationalist women was not shared by other leaders of the Rising, and the majority of women participated in much more traditional roles through Cumann na mBan.

The duties of Cumann na mBan, as auxiliaries to the Volunteers, included cooking, nursing, secretarial work, and message carrying. As Ward points out, many nationalist women contentedly viewed this work as an extension of their domestic duties, but that is an oversimplification of their impact.³³ Cumann na mBan women played a crucial role as messengers and supply carriers, as they could slip past RIC guard posts and arouse little suspicion, yet they still ran the risk of being discovered with their cargo or getting caught by a stray bullet as they navigated the most dangerous streets in Dublin. Indeed, two women did die as a result of their involvement, one during an attack and the other as she attended to a wounded Volunteer, and dozens were arrested. Regardless of the bigger implications for women as a result of their involvement, at its most fundamental, the Rising would have suffered without the coordination the women enabled, as well as their efforts in providing food, arms, and first aid.

³³ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 93.

This most basic contribution of the women of the Easter Rising is reflected in the comments of the only commander to turn away Cumann na mBan women from his garrison—Éamon de Valera—who later expressed regret for this decision because it forced some of his men to waste time cooking.³⁴ De Valera, the future president of the Irish Republic and creator of the 1937 Constitution, was haunted by this action for the rest of his long political career. And while his explanation that he did not want untrained women adding to his anxieties certainly demonstrates a lack of respect for the abilities of Cumann na mBan, holding this incident up as exemplary of de Valera's exceptional sexism is irresponsible. The Rising's leaders, Padraig Pearse, James Connolly, and Tom Clarke, had ordered garrison commanders to incorporate the women in response to initial reports from Cumann na mBan leaders detailing their difficulty gaining admission to many garrisons. De Valera's actions were not extraordinary, and rather than revealing his individual prejudice, they exemplify a widespread prejudice against the women who sought involvement in political and military life.

These women did not go unnoticed by international press coverage of the Rising. The *Manchester Guardian* quoted an observer of the events in Dublin as saying, "There are a conspicuous number of women fighting with the rebels, and some have been shot and some captured."³⁵ This statement is slightly misleading, as the overwhelming majority of women did not participate in the fighting itself, but a few women gained prominence for their unusual experiences during the Rising.

³⁴ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 110.

³⁵ "Better News from Ireland," *The Manchester Guardian*, May 1, 1916.

The most famous of these women is Countess Constance Markievicz, a member of the Irish nobility class and ex-wife of a Polish count who became involved in Irish politics through her friendship with James Connolly and work with the labor movement and the Irish Citizens Army. Uninterested in the work of the women's nationalist groups and through a combination of her social status, connections, and signature tenacity, Markievicz confidently established herself as a lieutenant in the garrison positioned at Stephen's Green during the Rebellion. Newspapers loved the image of the middle-aged woman dressed in "a uniform consisting of a green tunic and trousers and carr[y]ing a rifle with a fixed bayonet."³⁶ *The Los Angeles Times* mentioned her arrest three times in their coverage of the surrender; she was the only arrested leader they named.³⁷ *The San Francisco Chronicle* gleefully recounted her dramatic surrender, which involved kissing her revolver before handing it over and declaring "I am ready" to the British officers.³⁸ *The New York Times* repeatedly ran her name in their headlines.³⁹ The attention that Markievicz received for her role in the Rising has everything to do with her being a woman, but as a woman who purposefully distanced herself from the other women working for the nationalist cause—the American press had seized on her story as a curiosity, not as representative of women's involvement. Markievicz would later go on to become the President of Cumann na mBan, and many historians and

³⁶ "Woman a Rebel Leader," Special Cable to *The New York Times*, April 29, 1916.

³⁷ "Sinn Fein to Submit: Order from Dublin to Surrender," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1916.

³⁸ "Uprising in Ireland is at an End," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, May 2, 1916.

³⁹ "Woman a Rebel Leader," *Special cable to The New York Times*, April 29, 1916; "Insurrection Started with Easter "Parade": Countess Markievicz, Sister of an Irish Baron, Took a Leading Part in it," *The New York Times*, April 29, 1916.

interested lay people alike confuse this timeline, misattributing her Easter Week involvement to Cumann na mBan. It is important to keep this point clear—Markievicz's involvement was exceptional and does not represent the experience of any other women, and certainly not the experience of the Cumann na mBan women.

The other two women who emerged from the Rising with greater name recognition for their unusual experiences were Dr. Kathleen Lynn and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Lynn, an accomplished Dublin doctor, had taught first aid classes for the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan and was made chief medical officer during the Rising. Her position as an officer of the IRA in itself is a notable accomplishment, but she received much more attention when the city hall garrison surrendered. Having been called there to treat a wounded Volunteer shortly before the surrender, Lynn was the only officer present when the order was issued. She insisted on following military protocol and delivered the garrison's surrender herself. Sheehy Skeffington, already a prominent figure in Irish society for her suffrage work, transformed into a powerful nationalist figure after the Rising. During the chaos of Easter Week, her husband, noted Irish pacifist Francis Sheehy Skeffington (a proud feminist couple, they combined their last names upon marriage) was shot by a British officer as he attempted to organize a group to prevent looting.⁴⁰ Hanna, grief stricken and enraged by these events, launched a campaign to bring her husband's murderer to trial. Part of this campaign included an American tour, in which Sheehy Skeffington described her husband's death and the situation in Ireland. Tours like Sheehy Skeffington's succeeded as fundraising

⁴⁰ A proud feminist couple, Hanna and Francis combined their last names upon marriage.

efforts, raising thousands of dollars from Irish-American groups for the nationalist effort.

Initially the people of Ireland, and particularly of Dublin where the fighting had been concentrated, reacted negatively to the Rising, but within a matter of months the events of Easter Week 1916 began to be celebrated as the beginning of the Irish Republic. As the defeated leaders marched to Kilmainham Gaol under the supervision of the British, the Risings' outposts lay in ruins, businesses had been looted, food shortages continued, and nearly two hundred civilians—roughly fifty of whom were women—would never return home.⁴¹ Understandably, the Irish people were generally unimpressed with the Rising's leaders. After accepting the unconditional surrender of Pearse and the other leaders, the British imprisoned everyone they could link to the IRA, Sinn Féin, or Cumann na mBan and executed 15 prominent Republicans—including Pearse and Connolly—within two weeks of the surrender. Connolly, wounded during the Rising and unable to stand, was tied to a chair before being shot by firing squad. Two notable leaders' death sentences were commuted to life in prison: Éamon de Valera, presumably for his claim to American citizenship, and Constance Markievicz, presumably for her gender. The British response appeared vengeful and excessive to many and provided an opportunity for nationalists to pivot public opinion of the Rising. An extensive campaign publicizing the prison conditions of republican men and women held in British jails ensued, largely orchestrated by women in the absence of male leadership. Finally,

⁴¹ Glasnevin Trust, "1916 Necrology 485," <http://www.glasnevintrust.ie> accessed March 11, 2015.

nationalist sympathies were ensured by Parliamentary discussions of Irish conscription into the British army as WWI entered its final years.

The significance that the Easter Rising gained in Irish history also elevated women's involvement. Cumann na mBan would be able to claim membership in the nationalist movement on the basis of their 1916 participation for many years and a handful of women gained a certain prestige from the media coverage of their experiences. In many ways, Cumann na mBan pushed the envelope on gender roles. By organizing themselves to achieve a military and political goal and coordinating with the highest IRA leaders in an official way, Cumann na mBan demonstrated a confidence and independence that had previously eluded Irish women's organizations. However, Cumann na mBan was not immune to the gender norms of the time, nor were they explicitly trying to combat them, and in many ways reinforced ideas about divisions of labor. The services they provided, which largely mirrored their domestic duties of cooking, sewing, and nursing, while instrumental to the structure and organization of the Rising, did not threaten the men of the IRA and this likely helped the women gain acceptance to their ranks. In this way, although Cumann na mBan helped to redefine Irishwomen as active participants in the independence process, but this was only one small step towards gender equality. Rather than a primary focus of Cumann na mBan, women's rights were more like a side effect of the organization's nationalist work. And for most Irish nationalists, who relentlessly criticized the suffrage movement, this was the right approach to take.

1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic

The legitimacy that the Easter Rising gained through the propaganda efforts of nationalists established it as the widely accepted foundation of the Irish Republic. The events and ideas of the Rising, as recorded in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic declared by Pearse outside the General Post Office, would be cited again and again in the conflicts and debates over an independent Ireland that would follow. For their involvement in this critical event in Irish history, the women of the Ambulance Corps and Cumann na mBan gained a claim to the nationalist movement that they had not had previously. Their work providing first aid, carrying messages, and doing other supportive tasks during this foundational military conflict set a precedent that they used to justify their continued involvement during the War of Independence and Civil War that followed. However, the women's claim would have been seriously weakened without the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, which explicitly guaranteed their equality.

As the Easter Rising became the Republic's founding event, the Proclamation became the Rising's founding document. The Proclamation, posted as flyers and printed in newspapers, was a widely circulated evocation of Irish identity and history, including quotes like, "In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty; six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms."⁴² The inclusion of explicit calls for gender equality, in no small part due to Connolly's influence on the drafting process, are therefore intertwined with the nationalist Irish identity being developed in this

⁴² Thomas Clarke, et. al., *Proclamation of the Irish Republic*, April 25, 1916.

document. Addressed to both Irishmen and Irishwomen, the Proclamation “guarantees equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” and calls for a government “representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women.”⁴³ It is worth noting here that these inclusions reflect the influence of suffragists on the Proclamation’s drafters, most notably James Connolly who enjoyed close friendships with early feminists like Countess Markievicz and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and not the work of Cumann na mBan (although that organization would benefit from these protections). The rank and file of the Irish nationalists accepted this declaration of women’s rights because it came from an independent Ireland, but would have (and had) been unreceptive to women’s suffrage in any other form.

Women took the rights guaranteed them in the Proclamation seriously and the document’s significance forced most nationalist men to respect these declarations when women confronted them with the Proclamation. Margaret Skinnider successfully invoked her right to take the same risk as men when convincing Michael Mallin, commander of the Stephen’s Green garrison, to approve her plan for bombing the Shelbourne Hotel.⁴⁴ Women also cited the Proclamation in their arguments for more explicit protection of their rights in the 1937 Constitution. The Irish Women Citizens’ Association wrote a letter to de Valera in 1937 expressing the opinion that “the position of women in Saorstát Éireann [Irish Free State] has deteriorated in recent years from the ideal implicit in the Proclamation of

⁴³ Clarke, et. al., *Proclamation*.

⁴⁴ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 113.

1916.”⁴⁵ The Proclamation gave women a claim to equal citizenship in an independent Ireland by enshrining gender equality in Irish identity, but considering women’s need to repeatedly remind the male leaders of the movement of this right, it is worth questioning how much the Proclamation reflect its drafters view rather than the views of the majority of Irish nationalists.

At this time, nationalists at least valued an appearance of supporting gender equality and included a “without the distinction of sex” provision to citizenship and voting rights in the 1922 Constitution of the Irish Free State.⁴⁶ However, this appearance was often belied as political maneuvering by the same documents that claimed to promote equal rights. The 1916 Proclamation, for example, credited the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Irish Volunteers, and Irish Citizen Army with orchestrating and carrying out the Rising with no mention of the contributions of Cumann na mBan. Even with these oversights, the Proclamation remains an unprecedented declaration of women’s equality and the seven signatories likely represented a more progressive wing of Irish nationalism (think of Mallin and de Valera’s responses to women during the Rising). It is troubling then, that the British executed all seven of these men—leaving a leadership vacuum that could only be filled by more conservative figures in the movement.

⁴⁵ Irish Women Citizens’ Association to Éamon de Valera, May 20, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁴⁶ The Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Éireann), 1922, art. 3, 14, & 15.

Constraints of early 20th Century Feminism

Long-standing ideas of womanhood limited the women of both feminist and nationalist organizations during the first decades of the 1900s. The expectation that women's work was limited to her role in the home—as a mother, cook, and shopper—dictated the activities available to women as they entered the public sphere. The formation of Inghinidhe na hÉireann, as a dedicated women's organization when none existed, was undoubtedly a feminist act. However, the members of Inghinidhe largely operated within the constraints of this accepted womanhood—teaching classes to children, offering food during the 1913 Lockout, urging members to use their purchasing power to buy Irish-made goods. Cumann na mBan too used these gender roles as the foundation for the organization's activities as demonstrated during the Easter Rising. No member of Cumann na mBan directly took part in the fighting, rather acting in a subservient capacity to the Irish Republican Army by cooking, nursing, and delivering messages. In some ways Cumann na mBan pushed against these constraints; their very existence as a women's military organization that trained women in the handling and, occasionally, the use of firearms is significant for introducing women into a previously closed section of society. Even suffragists, avowed feminists working for the promotion of women, operated within these constraints. Suffragists often argued that governmental committees concerning child welfare or healthcare would be better served by the inclusion of women, considering their expertise in these fields. Assertion of women's higher morals also helped suffragists who posited that woman would, “exert her purer influence upon the political atmosphere of her

time."⁴⁷ Undoubtedly these feminists realized the limitations of an ideal womanhood, as James Stephens (possibly a pen name) lamented in the *Irish Citizen*:

I would like to get rid of the stained-glass woman: she has looked interesting and played the piano too long and too badly, and her legend has been a disastrous one for her sisters who have no soft places to pose in, and who have been continually victimised by her mean pretensions.⁴⁸

Yet to shatter the stained-glass woman would inevitably alienate the general public who subscribed to and promoted her rosy light. Women in public positions, both feminist and nationalist, likely upheld many of traditional expectations of women partly from an internalized acceptance of these traits, and partly as a calculated strategy to gain public approval and support.

Pre-existing, traditional gender roles influenced the women's groups that arose during this swell in Irish nationalism, but the years between the formation of Inghinidhe na hÉireann and the execution of the leaders of the Easter Rising witnessed the creation of a new ideal of specifically *Irish* womanhood in addition to the traditional ideals of womanhood. The Celtic Revival's use of history, mythology, and religion to form an Irish identity separate from England resurrected heroines like St. Brigid and Joan of Arc and feminized Ireland as a motherland. These images contributed to a perception of women as pure, moral, untouchable, and almost sacred—women who needed protection from the vulgarities of public life, not

⁴⁷ Cardinal Moran, Archbishop of Sydney in Irish Women's Franchise League leaflet, undated. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁴⁸ James Stephens, "The Populace Mind II," *The Irish Citizen*, June 8, 1912. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

participation in it. The 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic confirmed another expectation of Irishwomen: their support of the nationalist cause. Nationalism represented both true Irishness and, as the Proclamation declared, a respect for women's rights. This text implied that an Irishwoman who rejected nationalism denied both her Irish identity and her female identity. A Cumann na mBan pamphlet following the passage of the 1918 Representation of the People Act granting the vote to women of the United Kingdom emphasized women's duty to their country: "Ireland demands this service of you; to ignore that demand would be treason."⁴⁹ The definition of Irish womanhood narrowed as a side effect of the nationalists' development and refinement of an Irish identity during their formative years. As nationalists worked through the independence process, the categorization of Irish identity only gained importance and the pressure this put on the already limited identity of Irish women became unbearable, erupting during the debate over de Valera's 1937 Constitution. The position of Irishwomen, perhaps more than any other metric, exposes the transition of Irish nationalists from 1916 progressives to 1937 conservatives.

⁴⁹ As quoted in Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 127.

Chapter II.

The Catholicization of Irish Nationalism and Return to Traditional Gender Roles

Overview of Events between 1916 and 1936

The 1916 Easter Rising precipitated an extended period of military conflict in Ireland. The executions of the Risings' leaders, the introduction of a British conscription bill in 1918, and the republican propaganda campaign that followed increased the popularity of the Irish nationalists. The December 1918 election demonstrated the improving public opinion of the republicans as their political party, Sinn Féin, won a majority of the Irish seats in Parliament. Following through with their policy of abstention, the newly elected Sinn Féin MPs defiantly established an Irish parliament in Dublin, named Dáil Éireann, rather than taking their seats in London.¹ Just as the Easter Rising became the founding moment in the Irish revolution, the first Dáil Éireann became the founding moment in the independent Irish nation. Nationalists, particularly Sinn Féin as they slipped farther and farther from the political main stream following the Civil War, stressed their allegiance to the first Dáil and some refused to recognize subsequent Dáils convened by the Irish Free State.

The establishment of the Dáil increased pre-existing tensions between the Irish and English, which reached a breaking point within a month when Irish Volunteers raided the Royal Irish Constabulary (the armed police branch of British rule in Ireland) and ignited the Irish War of Independence, or Anglo-Irish War.

¹ In this election, Constance Markievicz became the first female Member of Parliament in British history, although she never actually took her seat in London.

Fighting between the Irish Volunteers and the English military police (popularly referred to as the Black and Tans) lasted until July 1921 and the war officially ended with the Dáil's approval of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in early 1922. The Treaty proved extremely contentious in establishing the Irish Free State as a dominion of the United Kingdom—on par with Canada—rather than as an independent state. Ireland was granted their own parliament, but all members were required to swear an Oath of Allegiance to the English king and were subject to the supervision of a governor-general appointed by the English.² A 1922 Constitution, drafted under the supervision of the British, incorporated these provisions into Irish law.

The controversy over the Anglo-Irish Treaty split Irish Republicans into pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty factions. Led by Éamon de Valera and backed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the anti-Treaty faction (also known as the Republicans or the “Irregulars”) rejected the Free State leaders' promotion of a constitutional path to independence. The Irregulars were comprised of the IRA, Cumann na mBan, and the anti-Treaty wing of Sinn Féin, re-christened Cumann na Poblachta (League of the Republic), however it quickly became clear that the IRA dominated Treaty opposition, as Cumann na Poblachta was unable to make any significant gains in national elections and Cumann na mBan was never meant to be more than a support organization. In April 1922, the IRA occupied the Four Courts in central Dublin, prompting a month-long standoff ended by the Free State's extended shelling

² Anglo-Irish Treaty of 6 December 1921 signed by the British and Irish delegates at 10 Downing Street, London. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

campaign and the surrender of the occupying Republican forces.³ For the next year, the Free State and Irregular forces, former republican allies, engaged in a bitter civil war. After the death of its chief of staff in May 1923, the IRA capitulated to the National Army and called off future actions. Because Sinn Féin refused to sign the Oath of Allegiance—a requirement for Free State employment—the pro-treaty political wing, Cumann na nGaedheal (Society of the Gaels), controlled Irish politics under the leadership of William Cosgrave for nearly a decade. Cosgrave's administration benefited from the legitimacy bestowed on them by the Irish Catholic hierarchy and an increasingly conservative, Catholic nation emerged from the Civil War. Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Justice, encapsulated Cumann na nGaedheal's ideology when he boasted that they were "probably the most conservative-minded revolutionaries who ever put through a successful revolution."⁴

During Cosgrave's administration, de Valera formed a Sinn Féin splinter party named Fianna Fáil, which maintained allegiance to an independent Irish republic, but agreed to sign the Oath as a formality. Sinn Féin's unyielding adherence to its Republican principles made it an increasingly irrelevant force in Irish political life as Fianna Fáil steadily increased its power. In 1932, Fianna Fáil swept the national elections and de Valera returned to power as the President of the Executive

³ This incident is particularly disturbing to historians as the entire Irish Public Record Office was destroyed during the bombardment, obliterating hundreds of years of archived materials.

⁴ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, "The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937," *Women's History Review*, September 2011, 20:4, 575.

O'Higgins is of course ignoring the contributions of many of the revolutions leaders, like James Connolly, that sought a socialist Ireland and the decidedly more radical nationalists that would go on to oppose the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

Council of the Irish Free State. For the next few years, De Valera systematically worked to remove British influence from Irish government—eventually succeeding in discarding the Oath and position of governor-general—but continued to feel constrained by the 1922 Constitution. The Constitution, de Valera argued, had been drafted under a great deal of British influence and was limited by the Anglo-Irish Treaty “which was imposed by the threat of force;” it had also been passed by an inexperienced and naïve Irish legislature.⁵ Therefore, in 1936 de Valera and a small group of officials undertook the task of drafting a new Irish constitution, which was approved by public referendum in 1937 and remains the constitution of Ireland today. The 1937 Constitution changed the state’s name from the Irish Free State to simply Ireland—Ireland wouldn’t be declared a republic until 1949 when ties were officially severed with the United Kingdom.

Although de Valera’s political career spanned more than fifty years, an unmatched political legacy in Ireland, his time in power was often marked by controversy.⁶ His tenure as President of the Free State Executive Council (from 1932 to 1937) garnered more criticism from women’s organizations than any other period of his leadership and highlighted a change in republican rhetoric. As de Valera grappled with putting an Irish republic into practice, he relied on Catholic

⁵ Éamon de Valera *Dáil Debates* 67, 3, 13 May 1937. Accessed via www.oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie

⁶ De Valera was involved in Irish politics almost continuously for the bulk of the 20th century. He had been elected to Parliament in 1917, was a founding member of the first Dáil Éireann in 1919, served as president of the Dáil and president of the Irish Republic during the War of Independence, returned as Free State Executive Council President in 1932, served as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) after the passage of the 1937 Constitution until 1948 and then again from 1951 to 1954. Finally, he served as President of the Irish Republic from 1959 to 1973.

social doctrine and popular opinion to guide his decision-making in a way that would ensure public support for the new nation and later for the new constitution. This practical rather than ideologically-driven approach resulted in a narrowing of what it meant to be Irish, particularly what it meant to be an Irish woman, and was exemplified by the 1937 Constitution's departure from the language of sex equality in the 1916 Proclamation in favor of a reiteration of traditional gender roles and emphasis on the family.

Women's Participation in the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars

Following the Easter Rising, women continued to participate in military and political life in Ireland. In 1918, suffragists won a major victory when Parliament passed the Representation of the People Act extending the vote to men and women over thirty years old. During the War of Independence, Cumann na mBan continued to provide support to the Irish forces and a small number of women (less than fifty) were arrested for their involvement. However, the focus on women during the Anglo-Irish war revolved around reports of "atrocities" committed against women by the Black and Tan forces.

Historians have questioned the extent of British violence against women because sources often rely on collected anecdotes, but most agree that it was present.⁷ In general, incidents like those reported in pamphlets published by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and others as well as reports from the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland and the British Labour Party Commission to Ireland cite

⁷ See Ann Matthews and Margaret Ward.

indignations or atrocities rather than violence—as many complaints centered on late night raids, inability to see doctors after curfew, and other non-explicitly violent burdens that disproportionately affected women.⁸ However, these incidents often straddled the line of embarrassment and violence. Sheehy Skeffington describes a raid of a Sinn Féin leader's house:

When the man on the run is not found his wife, sister, etc., frequently threatened separated for hours from her terrified children and sometimes compelled to stand in the street under the rain barefooted in her nightdress while her house is being sacked and dismantled or even burned.⁹

Many raids similar to this were reported throughout the Anglo-Irish and Civil Wars, and terrible acts of undeniable physical violence were also recorded. The British Labour Party Commission describes shootings, forcible hair cutting, and beatings of women by the British forces as well as the IRA. Information on rapes was hard to come by and unreliable, which Sheehy Skeffington attributes to the fear and shame of victims in coming forward, whereas the American Commission took the lack of reported rapes at face value as “one bright spot in the darkness of war.”¹⁰ Like Sheehy Skeffington's account of the barefoot woman in her nightdress, many of the anecdotes collected by these writers and agencies relied on vulnerable, feminine

⁸ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *Statement on Atrocities on Women in Ireland*, undated, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland; L. Hollingsworth Wood, *American Commission on Conditions in Ireland: Interim Report*, Washington D.C., 1921; Arthur Henderson, *Report of the Labour Party Commission to Ireland*, November 1920.

⁹ Sheehy Skeffington, *Statement on Atrocities*.

¹⁰ Wood, *American Commission on Conditions in Ireland: Interim Report*, 53.

images to further vilify the perpetrators. Forcible hair cuttings were one of the most common complaints during these years, which represented the theft of a classically feminine characteristic—long hair. Compared to the media’s fascination with Constance Markievicz and the women of Cumann na mBan in 1916, the focus on violence against women during the Anglo-Irish War represented a shift in Irish women’s narrative from actors to victims.

Women were further marginalized by the Treaty debates that followed the war. Many prominent female members of the Dáil came out strongly against the treaty. Constance Markievicz passionately declared that, “I rise to-day to oppose with all the force of my will, with all the force of my whole existence, this so-called Treaty,” and Mary MacSwiney, sister of the late Republican Terence MacSwiney, gave a nearly three hour speech condemning the Treaty.¹¹ In the Dáil there was a sense that women were united in opposition to the Treaty—as MacSwiney proudly stated, “I would take a plebiscite of the women of Ireland gladly, and I know what the answer would be.”¹² Many male TDs¹³ ridiculed women’s opposition to the Treaty as being motivated by their personal losses rather than a consideration for the welfare of the entire state. Alexander McCabe repeatedly suggested that this explained MacSwiney’s opposition and wondered aloud during the debates if “there is one woman in this assembly who could rise to the great opportunity...and, sacrificing her personality as others sacrificed their lives, vote for the good of her country,” simultaneously attacking women’s abilities as politicians and as

¹¹ Mary MacSwiney *Dáil Debates, T, 10, 3 January 1922.*

¹² Mary MacSwiney *Dáil Debates, T, 8, 21 December 1921.*

¹³ TD stands for Teachta Dála, meaning member of the Dáil, and is essentially equivalent to the British Member of Parliament (MP).

militants.¹⁴ The passage of the treaty allowed supporters to push anti-treatyites to the political sidelines and the perception, true or false, that MacSwiney and Markievicz had developed of women as anti-treaty ensured that women were disregarded along with the rest of the opposition.

Cumann na mBan also came out strongly against the Treaty as the Civil War broke out. The women of Cumann na mBan, working closely with the anti-treaty forces, maneuvered a much more difficult situation than they had during the Anglo-Irish War. Not only did the Civil War create a divided public that was nearly impossible for women to navigate as intelligence gatherers and supply carriers, women also became eligible for arrest under the Coercion Act—which criminalized possession of arms, among other things. Under this act, more than four times as many women were arrested as during the War of Independence. The huge increase in the female prison population strained the system and resulted in many conflicts over the treatment of prisoners, adding considerably to the workload of the Women Prisoner's Defence League.¹⁵

Not every Cumann na mBan member identified as anti-treaty and a small group splintered from the organization, naming themselves Cumann na Saoirse (Society of Freedom). Although Cumann na Saoirse's membership was small and their impact as a pro-treaty organization limited, they pulled away some prominent Cumann na mBan members, namely the labor organizer Louise Gavan Duffy and former Cumann na mBan president Jennie Wyse Power. The internal conflict over

¹⁴ Alexander McCabe *Dáil Debates*, T, 11, 04 January 1922.

¹⁵ The Women Prisoners' Defence League was established in November 1922 by Maud Gonne MacBride and Charlotte Despard to protest and publicize the conditions of imprisoned anti-treatyites.

the treaty as well as the increasing marginalization of women from the political and military arena negatively impacted Cumann na mBan. Their October 1921 convention marked the organization's peak, but by February of the next year the group's membership had shrunk noticeably.¹⁶ Along with most other republican military forces following the Civil War and the end of military conflict in Ireland, Cumann na mBan became increasingly irrelevant in the new state.

By the early 1920s the position of women in Ireland had already begun to shift from what had been outlined in 1916. The victimization of women during the Anglo-Irish War, their political sidelining over the treaty, and the decline of Cumann na mBan began the process of re-establishing women in the domestic sphere as the new Irish nation began to emerge and define itself. The bright spots among this retrenchment, of course, were the gains made in women's suffrage. Expanding upon the guarantees of the 1918 Representation of the People Act, the 1922 Constitution extended the franchise to women over 21 years old, six years before England did. In introducing this bill to the Dáil, Kathleen O'Callaghan invoked, "the brave men who put their names on the proclamation of the Irish Republic in Easter Week," and women in their twenties who had risked their lives in the conflicts of the past five years.¹⁷ This appeal worked, despite Arthur Griffith's insistence that votes for women was simply a political play to "torpedo" the Treaty. O'Callaghan's tactic of invoking the 1916 Proclamation and women's service would be employed by women's groups repeatedly in the coming decade, but to lesser and lesser effect. The

¹⁶ Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922*, (Mercier Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Kathleen O'Callaghan *Dáil Debates*, S2, 3, 2 March 1922.

passage of suffrage also had the effect of rendering most suffrage organizations useless—removing or significantly diminishing some of the strongest Irish feminist organizations.

Irish Nationalism and the Catholic Church

At this point in Irish history, the Catholic Church becomes immensely significant. Although the Catholic Church had played a large role in Irish life since St. Patrick converted the Celts in the fifth century, its prominence in the 1937 Constitution institutionalized the Church as a cornerstone of independent Ireland and Irish identity in a way previously unseen. That's not to say that a majority of Irish people did not already identify as Catholic—in the 1911 census, nearly three-quarters of the entire Irish population identified as Catholic, and in 1936 over ninety percent of post-partition Ireland (which excluded the six northeastern counties that make up Northern Ireland today) were Catholic—but the Catholic faith had never been used so openly in an official capacity to dictate and shape Irish life.¹⁸

The Catholic Church in Ireland was (and is) governed by a hierarchy of archbishops on the island, with the Archbishop of Armagh at the top as the Primate of All Ireland, followed by the Archbishop of Dublin as Primate of Ireland. These two primates oversaw an extensive network of archbishops and bishops throughout Ireland—referred to as the Church hierarchy—who in turn monitored the local priests and parishes. The Irish Catholic Church's relationship with the Holy See was

¹⁸ Ireland Central Statistics Office, "Religion and Birthplaces," *1936 Census of Population*, Volume 3 Part I 01A.-01C., 1939, Accessed at www.cso.ie/en/census/historicalreports

not as clearly structured. Prior to 1929, the Irish hierarchy had had uneven contact with the Holy See and pope in Rome: Before the Anglo-Irish War, Ireland's official communication with Rome came through the pope's representative to Great Britain and following the Civil War the pope waited until 1929 to appoint a nuncio to Ireland and recognize the Free State Government. In the early 20th century the bulk of Ireland's interaction with the Vatican came through the Irish College in Rome, a seminary established in 1625 to train Irish Catholic leaders, which provided both official news and gossip to the Irish Church officials.

The Vatican's reluctance to accept the Irish Free State reflects a larger, well-documented hesitation to support nationalist movements throughout Europe. In Spain, the Catholic Church resented republican Manuel Azaña's comments that "Spain is no longer Catholic" as well as the outbreak of anticlerical violence following the establishment of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931.¹⁹ (Rome's experience with Azaña would directly inform their lukewarm approach to the election of de Valera a year later.)²⁰ France's nationalist movement of the early 20th century, *Action Française*, a monarchist, anti-republican group, also received criticism from the Vatican—in 1926 Pope Pius XI publicly condemned the organization and added their newspaper to the list of forbidden reading.²¹ Additionally, the Catholic Church has been described as "one of the few consistent bastions of loyalism [to

¹⁹ Manuel Azaña as quoted in Sid Lowe, *Catholicism, War and the Foundation of Francoism: The Juventud de Acción Popular in Spain 1931-1939*, Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2010, 2.

²⁰ Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 94.

²¹ Michael Sutton, *Nationalism, Positivism and Catholicism: The Politics of Charles Maurras and French Catholics 1890-1914*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Russia] in partitioned Poland,” despite the country’s many nationalist movements and overwhelming Catholic majority.²² In this European context therefore, the Church’s reluctance to accept the Irish nationalist movement, and the nation that emerged from the movement, is not surprising.

The Irish hierarchy largely welcomed the lack of enthusiasm shown to Ireland by the Holy See, as many of them were wary of the close ties between London and Rome.²³ This feeling was reinforced by the memory of the “Perisco report.” Ignatius Perisco, apostolic delegate to Ireland in the late 1800s, assembled a report for the pope on the relationship between clergy and political actors during a period of agricultural crisis that resulted in Pope Leo XIII’s condemnation of the Irish Plan of Campaign—a series of boycotts against exploitative landowners organized by an Irish nationalist political party. While this specific action may have angered nationalist segments of the Irish public, the Irish hierarchy (not exactly enthusiastic nationalists themselves) resented the pope’s interference in their domain and lack of deference to their authority in their homeland.²⁴ William Walsh and Edward Byrne, the two men who served as Archbishop of Dublin throughout the independence process of the early 20th century, were among the Catholic leadership that developed an unsympathetic attitude towards the Holy See as a result of these events. The perception that the church in Rome leant pro-English was reinforced in the early 20th century by reports coming from the Irish College.

Throughout the 1920s, the College’s rector, John Hagan, kept the Catholic and

²² Brian Porter-Szűcs, *Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 8.

²³ Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995).

²⁴ Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 4-5.

political leadership of Ireland apprised of the comings and goings of the British ambassadors to the Holy See in Rome. Dermot Keogh describes the strategy that Hagan, an ardent nationalist who would side with de Valera in the Treaty debate, advocated:

Firstly, he believed that English Catholics and the English government exercised an undue influence over Vatican policy toward Ireland.

Secondly, he felt that it was necessary to ensure that the Vatican was kept as far away as possible from Irish politics.²⁵

The information provided by the rector, in addition to Ireland's recent history with the pope, led to a widely held opinion that the establishment of any sort of formal relationship between Ireland and the Holy See would result in a reduction of the power of the archbishops and an increase in British influence.²⁶

In the years between 1916 and 1929 the pope did have sporadic contact with the Irish Catholic Church. In the midst of the Anglo-Irish War, Pope Benedict XV wrote to Cardinal Logue, Archbishop of Armagh, that he was "most especially concerned about the condition of Ireland," and included a 200,000 lire donation to the Irish White Cross, a monetary relief organization for Irish citizens.²⁷ Adamant that the Church retain a neutral position both in Rome and in Dublin, the pope scolded Irish Catholics for their rash actions in the name of the faith: "Unflinching, even unto the shedding of blood, in her devotion to the ancient Faith and in her reverence for the Holy See, [Ireland] is subjected today to the indignity of

²⁵ Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 5.

²⁶ Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 7.

²⁷ Pope Benedict XV to Cardinal Logue, 27 April 1921. Published in *The Tablet*, 28 May 1921.

devastation and slaughter.”²⁸ Benedict did not deny Ireland’s long Catholic history, but he did emphasize the perversion of the Catholic faith by Irish nationalists. The pope’s message to Logue was clear: do not take sides, but especially do not take the Irish Nationalists’ side.

Despite their tense relationship with the Holy See, the Irish bishops largely did fall in line with the pope’s policy of neutrality and peace promotion throughout the Anglo-Irish War. Although the Bishop of Limerick did express hope that perhaps World War I would present an opportunity for Ireland, “that ancient Catholic Kingdom,” to be “restored to its place amongst the nations,”²⁹ official communications from the Irish hierarchy after the outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War uniformly condemned violence. However, the bishops often seemed sympathetic to the idea of an independent Ireland, should it be established peacefully. In a pronouncement from their Maynooth general meeting, the bishops issued a blistering critique of the British, declaring,

It is the indiscriminate vengeance of savages, deliberately wreaked on a whole town or countryside, without any proof of its complicity in crime, by those who ostensibly are employed by the British

²⁸ Pope Benedict to Cardinal Logue, 27 April 1921.

²⁹ Edward Thomas, Bishop of Limerick, *Pastoral Letter to the Clergy and Laity of the Diocese of Limerick, for Quinquagesima Sunday*, 18 February 1917. Samuels Collection of Printed Ephemera, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/?utm_expid=68026435-1.utkesif9QkKGG0Mll18G2NQ.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F#searchresults Accessed 13 February 2015.

Government to protect the lives and property of the people and restore order in Ireland.³⁰

Yet the Hierarchy retained their commitment to peace, urging self-restraint in the face of such outrages and upholding their commitment to excommunicate socialists, whom they perceived as an anti-Catholic, radical fringe group.³¹

During the Civil War, the bishops stood particularly united, not just in their opposition to violence, but also in their opposition to the Irregulars. While the hierarchy maintained their commitment to peace, they no longer attempted to appear neutral. This position often created tensions between local churches and the national hierarchy over the political situation in Ireland. For local priests with deep ties to Republican communities, the hierarchy's dictates were impossible to carry out, both due to external pressure and the priests' personal convictions. The dissemination of a pastoral letter in 1922 and the responses it garnered illustrated this conflict and shed light on the complicated role of Catholicism in the development of an Irish nation. In October, as the Civil War raged on, Cardinal Logue issued a pastoral letter on behalf of the Irish hierarchy to the priests and people of Ireland in which he reiterated the Church's support of the Treaty and disapproval of the Irregular forces who continued to immerse the country in violence, clearly stating that, **"the guerrilla warfare now being carried on by the Irregulars is**

³⁰ "Statement Issued by the Cardinal Primate and the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland on the Present Condition of their Country," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Ser. 5, Vol. 16, Maynooth, 19 October 1920, 424.

³¹ M.J. O'Donnell, "Socialists and Excommunicates," *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, Ser. 5, Vol. 15, January-June 1920.

without moral sanction” (original boldface).³² These sorts of statements were not unusual for the Catholic Church, who had preached peace and order in Ireland throughout the many military conflicts of the past decade.³³ However, the October pastoral went farther than just employing strong language and denied the sacraments of confession and communion to anyone who partook in the destructive work of the Irregular forces. **“Furthermore,”** Logue continued, **“we, each for his own diocese, hereby forbid, under pain of suspension, ipso facto, reserved to the Ordinary, any priest to advocate or encourage this revolt, publicly or privately.”**³⁴ The hierarchy’s chastisement of its own priests was not well received in many parts of Ireland.

Priests and Republicans alike wrote to Logue criticizing the blatant political motivations of excluding Irregulars from communion and absolution and the Hierarchy’s history of neutrality in the face of Irish repression. They also sought to reaffirm the Catholic loyalty and purity of the Irish nationalists. Even before Logue’s October Pastoral, one anonymous priest wrote, “I charge that the Bishops have failed you, as they failed you in 1916 and 1920,” when, “the men and women of

³² Cardinal Logue, *Pastoral Letter of His Eminence Cardinal Logue, the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, to the Priests and People of Ireland*, (Brown and Nolan, Limited: Dublin, 22 October 1922), 7. Samuels Collection of Printed Ephemera, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/?utm_expid=68026435-1.utkesif9QkKG0Ml18G2NQ.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F#searchresults Accessed 13 February 2015.

³³ See Irish Ecclesiastical Record, Bishops’ Reports on Present Condition of the Country, Series 5, Volumes 14-19. (Listed individually in bibliography).

³⁴ Logue, *Pastoral Letter*, October 1922, 7.

1916, 1920 and 1921 answered God's call."³⁵ Another added that, "when the political side of a national question is controverted, the Church is utterly incapable of making a definite certain pronouncement on the ethical side."³⁶ Margaret Ward points out that, as the teachers and guardians of the faith in the home, women were particularly targeted by the 1922 Pastoral. Implicit in Logue's condemnation of the faith of the Irregulars was a condemnation of the wives and mothers who failed in their role as moral guide of their household.³⁷

Near the end of the Civil War, rumors began circulating that the new pope, Pius XI, was preparing to send a delegation to Ireland on a peace mission. The Vatican, worried by reports of excommunications and executions by pro-treatyites, began debating a more involved role in the Irish question. For the pro-treaty government in Ireland, who had indeed implemented an execution policy and were in the process of cleaning up a war they had effectively already won, Vatican intervention at this time would certainly hurt their image as stable, reasonable governors. The Irish hierarchy also had concerns about a peace delegation from Rome. Many bishops feared that the peace delegation was a first step towards an established papal influence in Ireland and therefore an established British influence

³⁵ *An Irish Priest's Appeal to the Men & Women of Ireland*, 3 July 1922. Samuels Collection of Printed Ephemera, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/?utm_expId=68026435-1.utkesif9QkKG0Mll18G2NQ.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F#searchresults Accessed on 13 February 2015.

³⁶ *Reply to the Pastoral Issued by the Irish Hierarchy October, 1922: The following Reply to the Bishops' Pastoral is Written by a Priest*, (Kirkwood & Co: Glasgow). Samuels Collection of Printed Ephemera, Trinity College Library, Dublin, Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie/home/?utm_expId=68026435-1.utkesif9QkKG0Mll18G2NQ.0&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F#searchresults Accessed on 13 February 2015.

³⁷ Ward, Margaret, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 192.

over the Irish Catholic Church. The period of military conflict in Ireland did nothing to improve Irish relations with the Vatican.

Clearly the realities of Catholicism on the ground were much more complicated than the monolithic statements of the Irish bishops at Maynooth or the pope's sparse words on the issue. A debate had emerged centered on the issue of Catholic identity—who was a good Catholic, who was allowed to be a Catholic at all—and in the bishops' decision to condemn a group fighting for the Irish nation it also became a debate about *Irish* identity. Catholicism had always been a foundational element in defining the Irish as different from their Protestant, English rulers and had been elevated by Irish nationalists in recent years. The letters to Cardinal Logue make it clear that the Irregular forces viewed their Catholic identity as a crucial aspect of a legitimate Irish identity and would continue to claim it regardless of the hierarchy's statements. Catholicism's firm entrenchment on both sides of the treaty issue ensured that, regardless of the outcome of the Civil War, the Catholic Church would have an imposing presence on Irish life going forward.

The pro-Treaty side eventually did win the Civil War with the support of the Irish hierarchy. Cosgrave and his cabinet, representing the more conservative branch of Irish nationalism, eagerly incorporated Catholic teaching into Irish law—often by reaffirming women's role as homemakers and mothers. The Juries Acts of 1924 and 1927 provided a clear distinction of gender roles and rights in the new Irish nation. The earlier act allowed women the right to seek an exemption from jury duty and the later automatically exempted all women from service. After protestations from women's organizations, the 1927 act was slightly modified to

allow women to apply to keep their names on the jury rolls. The politicians supporting these acts reasoned that women were too busy with their domestic duties to serve on juries and therefore an exemption would recognize their work in the home. However, many feminists saw this as an erosion of citizenship rights for women that would prevent women accused of crimes from being tried by a jury of their peers. Beaumont questions the implications of this legislation, "If a woman was to be barred from the jury service because of her work within the home what was to stop the government excluding women from other areas of public life on similar grounds."³⁸

Valiulis attributes the success of Catholicism in the Irish Free State to its power to provide stability to the fledgling nation, its importance in differentiating from the English, and because it "reinforced the gender stereotypes which the 'conservative revolutionaries' carried with them and which seemed necessary for the new State to flourish."³⁹ However, this last point is not independent of the preceding points—gender stereotypes were crucial to providing stability to Irish social life and to the nationalist justification for independence from England. As the previous chapter explains, ideas of Irish womanhood contributed to the ideological categorization of Ireland and England as separate cultures and identities that justified the Anglo-Irish War. But as the State now sought stability after years of conflict, ideas of Catholic Irish womanhood, which focused on the centrality of the home, would be used to preserve social order as it largely reflected the views of the

³⁸ Caitriona Beaumont, "Women, Citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948," *Women's History Review*, (1997) 6:4, 570.

³⁹ Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, "The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937," *Women's History Review*, September 2011, 20:4, 575.

majority Catholic nation. Cosgrave would not lead forever, but he had built the new Irish nation on a foundation of Catholic social teaching that could not be easily reversed.

In 1932 de Valera's anti-Treaty political splinter party, Fianna Fáil, swept the national elections. Although Fianna Fáil had conceded certain points in order to enter political life in the Irish Free State, many religious leaders still regarded de Valera and his party as radical and communist-tinged.⁴⁰ De Valera, firm in his commitment to the Catholic faith and a truly independent Ireland, understood the importance of changing this perception in order to win support from the dominant social institution in Ireland. Fortuitously for de Valera, Dublin had been selected to host the 1932 International Eucharistic Congress, presenting the new government with a ready-made affirmation of their Catholic loyalty. For four days in June, crowds from around the world, including seven cardinals and two hundred bishops, gathered in Dublin's streets and parks to hear a midnight mass, a women's mass, and the Pontifical high mass from Italian Cardinal Lorenzo Lauri, as well as witness other demonstrations of Catholic unity.⁴¹ The *New York Times* estimated one million people attended Cardinal Lauri's mass in Phoenix Park and dubbed it "the largest congregation in the history of Christendom."⁴² De Valera introduced Cardinal Lauri at a reception with praise for the pope's "loving zeal" towards Ireland, claiming that "that special affection was ever the more amply given, in proportion to the

⁴⁰ Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 93-97.

⁴¹ "The Eucharistic Congress," *The Irish Times*, June 20, 1932.

⁴² "1,000,000 Hear Mass at Eucharistic Rite as Congress Ends," Special Cable to *The New York Times*, June 27, 1932.

sufferings of Ireland.”⁴³ Clearly worded very carefully, this statement implied the pope’s continual support for Ireland without actually saying it—evoking the pope’s emotions rather than his actions. De Valera actively sought the approval of the Vatican, but did he was not quite willing to rewrite such recent history to get it. The 1932 Eucharistic Congress proceeded smoothly and was widely considered a success, helping to boost the legitimacy of the Fianna Fáil government in the eyes of the Holy See.

De Valera would continue to make a series of appeals to the Catholic Church in Rome on behalf of the Irish state. In a letter to Charles Bewley, Irish envoy to the Holy See, de Valera’s Vatican representative Joseph Walshe describes the president’s approach to eliminating poverty “by governing the State according to the Christian principles laid down in the *Rerum Novarum*.”⁴⁴ *Rerum Novarum*, a papal encyclical issued by Leo XIII in 1891, and *Quadragesimo Anno*, an encyclical celebrating the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, definitively outlined the Vatican’s position on many domestic issues, and was intended to serve as a model for Catholic nations’ social policy. The two encyclicals would guide much more than just de Valera’s poverty strategy, and their influence is particularly evident in his approach to women’s issues. For example, *Quadragesimo Anno* warned against abusing the “limited strength of women” and advocated for fair wages to prevent mothers from being forced to take work outside the home.⁴⁵ These exact ideas would be incorporated into Irish law throughout the 1930s. Early on, de Valera emphasized

⁴³ De Valera speech at St. Patrick’s Hall, Dublin, June 21, 1932 as quoted in Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 97.

⁴⁴ Joseph Walshe to Bewley as quoted in Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 102.

⁴⁵ Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, May 15, 1931 via www.papalencyclicals.net

his alignment with Catholic social teaching on women's issues, making a point of having his vice president explain Ireland's opposition to contraception recommendations within the League of Nations to Pius XI. Very quickly, de Valera began incorporating these types of stances into Ireland's legal framework.

Beginnings of the 1937 Constitution

Following a trend started under Cosgrave, women's legal status continued to deteriorate throughout the 1930s. Cosgrave's condemnation of divorce and passage of two juries bills restricting women from serving as jurors made him unpopular among feminists, but de Valera proved no different. In 1932 a marriage bar was introduced in Ireland that prevented married women from working as teachers and civil servants and a 1935 amendment to the Criminal Law Act prohibited the sale of contraception. But by far the most controversial measure was the 1936 Conditions of Employment Act, which allowed the Minister for Industry and Commerce to set limitations on the proportions of women working in industrial jobs. Undoubtedly, the social messages of *Quadragesimo Anno* and *Rerum Novarum* influenced both Cosgrave and de Valera's domestic policies. De Valera especially, feeling pressure to prove himself and his government to the Catholic Church, did not hesitate to incorporate these traditional and widely accepted expectations of women into the legal framework of the new country. In 1938, de Valera would boast that the constitution "found its inspiration in the Papal encyclicals."⁴⁶ Women's groups, however, objected to the legal codification of Catholic social teaching that

⁴⁶ De Valera broadcast on Vatican Radio, Christmas 1938 as quoted in Keogh, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007), 173.

represented the ultimate marriage of Irish identity and Catholic identity, and voiced their concerns directly to de Valera, through public protests and in the press.

However, in 1936 a new opportunity presented itself for women to make drastic, lasting change in their legal position—a new constitution. By this time, de Valera’s work on a new Constitution was widely known, although no official draft had been released to the public, and women’s organizations began to campaign de Valera for specific reforms they wanted included in the document.

The Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers did much of this lobbying. Composed of sixteen women’s organizations, the Committee imagined themselves as a gauge of the Irishwomen’s perspective. Regardless of the accuracy of their sweepingly generalized statement that they “confidently claim that the Committee is representative of women’s opinion in Ireland,”⁴⁷ the Committee did include many notable groups, including the Irish Women Workers’ Union, two branches of the Women Graduates’ Association, the Irish Countrywomen’s Association, and the Legion of Mary, that represented women from diverse socioeconomic, geographic, and religious backgrounds. Throughout the last months of 1936, the Committee repeatedly sought a meeting with de Valera to discuss their opinion of the current state of women’s rights in Ireland and make suggestions for the forthcoming constitution, and was repeatedly denied. De Valera’s personal secretary even went so far as to suggest that, “he is fearfully busy working on the Constitution; [he] is in the office here from 9 in the morning until 11 at night,” as an

⁴⁷ Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers, Memorandum to Department of the President, undated [1936]. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

excuse for rejecting a meeting with an organization claiming to represent half of the population and wishing to discuss the very same constitution he was working so hard on.⁴⁸

Following the suggestion of these rejection letters, the Committee submitted a memorandum summarizing their grievances and recommendations. The memorandum paints a grim picture of women's position in Ireland in 1936, implying constitutional transgressions and a decline in women's rights since British rule. The Joint Committee focused much of their outrage on the Conditions of Employment Act. Ostensibly, the Act aimed to increase male employment, which was explicitly prioritized above female employment. This approach emphasized a traditional family structure in which a man worked to support a wife and children and provided little to no flexibility for any other family structures or single women. The Joint Committee called the Act, "one of the most reactionary pieces of legislation in recent times...plac[ing] the Irish Free State at the head of an international black list."⁴⁹

Another main point of the memorandum concerned a restructuring of the Seanad, or Irish Senate.⁵⁰ In 1932, the Seanad had staunchly opposed the removal of the Oath of Allegiance and succeeded in delaying the relevant legislation for a year, creating serious tensions with the Dáil. Backed by de Valera, the lower house of the

⁴⁸ Department of the President to Concannon, Oct 21, 1936, Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁴⁹ Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers, Memorandum to Department of the President, undated [1936]. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁵⁰ The 1922 Constitution outlined a bicameral Irish Parliament, or Oireachtas, very closely modeled on the British system where the Dáil corresponded to the House of Commons and the Seanad to the House of Lords.

Oireachtas (the Irish Parliament) voted to abolish the Seanad altogether in 1936.⁵¹ This move ensured that the reestablishment of a second chamber in the new constitution would be a contentious issue and de Valera appointed a Second House Commission to develop recommendations for a revised Seanad. As previously outlined in the 1922 Constitution, the Seanad had been made up of Senators elected from a panel selected by both houses of the legislature. This gave government leaders a high degree of control over the demographics of the Seanad, yet only three of the sixty Senators sitting in Leinster House immediately prior to abolition were women. The total redevelopment of the Seanad presented a unique opportunity to introduce structural reforms that would increase female representation. In order to right the legislative wrongs that imposed strict restrictions on Irishwomen, the Joint Committee of Womens' Societies and Social Workers argued, equal representation of women in the legislature was vital. "In Parliamentary representation the balance is not properly held," they acknowledged, but "a properly constituted Second Chamber should be capable of putting right this defect."⁵² The Second House Commission made a lukewarm overture to the Joint Committee in their report by suggesting that nominees "be persons with a competent knowledge of public affairs,

⁵¹ Interestingly, the Irish government is once again debating abolishing the modern Seanad Éireann. In 2011 a referendum on eliminating the Seanad was narrowly defeated. For more information on de Valera's distain for the Seanad see Keogh, Dermot and Andrew McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007).

⁵² Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers, Memorandum to Department of the President, undated [1936]. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

of the national language, be over thirty-five years of age and that some should be women.”⁵³

The women of the Committee offered several recommendations for improving the position of women in politics. Generally, they believed that there would be no issue getting women elected if women were on the ballot, and introduced a requirement to de Valera that at least one female candidate be listed on the ballot in each precinct. The group firmly upheld that “women will do the rest” at the polls because they were so eager to see themselves represented.⁵⁴ For the new Seanad, they suggested a reorganization of the candidate nominating committees. Central to this suggestion was the lack of committees that dealt with “women’s issues” like social welfare, healthcare, and primary education. The Joint Committee argued that should committees with these emphases receive nominating privileges, women’s concerns would have a voice in government, if not actual female representation. Certainly one of the most conservative recommendations put forth by the committee, it was also the only one de Valera acknowledged. However, when de Valera released the draft constitution to the press in mid-1937 he received criticism from women’s groups that finally had specific targets and caught the public’s attention. De Valera could no longer avoid a conversation about the future of women’s rights in Ireland.

⁵³ Keogh, *Making of the Irish Constitution*, 62.

⁵⁴ Joint Society of Women’s Societies and Social Workers to the Department of the President, 5 February 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

1937 Constitution

The Constitution put forth by de Valera in mid-1937, known in Irish as Bunreacht na hÉireann, was the work of several men. Although de Valera oversaw the writing and drafting process, legal expert John Hearne actually wrote the document with input from a small committee assembled by the president. One of the men on the constitutional committee was John Charles McQuaid, then president of the Catholic boys school Blackrock College and later appointed Archbishop of Dublin. A close personal friend of de Valera, McQuaid both advised him and made his own contributions throughout the drafting process. Keogh describes McQuaid's involvement: "The probable methodology of the drafting process was that McQuaid assembled the relevant excerpts from the papal encyclicals which were then passed on."⁵⁵ Undoubtedly, McQuaid, a Catholic priest, had much input into the social policy outlined in the Constitution, including the clauses dealing with the rights of women and the family. De Valera also made a point of seeking approval from the Vatican, presenting the pope with multiple drafts of the early constitution. Although Pius XI said he was "not to be taken as approving 'or as disapproving'" of the constitution, he certainly appreciated the deference shown to him by the Irish president.⁵⁶

Once the committee had gathered and responded to feedback from various government departments as well as outside interests like the Vatican, a draft of the constitution was released to the public in the spring of 1937. The constitution, which would be approved by public referendum in July with minor changes, consumed political discourse in Ireland for several months. Early on, the

⁵⁵ Keogh, *The Making of the Irish Constitution*, 109.

⁵⁶ Joseph Walshe letter as quoted in Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican*, 135.

constitution's treatment of women became a major focus of the debate and almost immediately women's groups publicly raised objections to the clauses relating to women.

The constitution proposed in 1937 contained five articles that proved particularly objectionable to women's groups. Articles 9 and 16, intended as reiterations of the citizenship rights outlined in the 1916 Proclamation and 1922 Constitution, no longer contained the "without distinction of sex" caveat. De Valera and other defenders of the new constitution explained that these phrases had been deleted because the sentiment was now so widely accepted in Irish society that their inclusion was unnecessary.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the drafters added the phrase back to these articles with little fuss, but articles 40, 41, and 45 proved much more contentious. Rather than a semantic issue, these articles furthered the process of redefining Irish womanhood as subservient, domestic, and fragile—a process based in religious teaching, victimization, and the gradual accumulation of a legal precedent. Gone was the ideal of the politically or militarily engaged Irishwoman that suffragists and nationalists had started to develop less than twenty years prior. In patronizing, vague language, these three sections claimed to protect and respect Irishwomen's abilities, which fell largely within the domestic sphere. Article 40, which affirmed the equality of all citizens, also included an open-ended qualifying sentence allowing the State "due regard to differences of capacity, physical and moral, and of social function"⁵⁸ in its actions. Article 41 on the family stated that,

⁵⁷ "Draft Constitution Passes Second Stage," *The Irish Press*, May 14, 1937.

⁵⁸ Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Art. 40 via www.irishstatutebook.ie

In particular the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.⁵⁹

The article also went on to prohibit divorce. The last source of criticism from women, article 45 promised that the State would endeavor to ensure “that citizens shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength.”⁶⁰ In the initial public draft this clause also included a provision to protect the “inadequate strength of women” in ensuring them suitable employment, which almost exactly quoted the *Quadragesimo Anno*’s “limited strength of women” clause.⁶¹

The *Irish Press* describes a scene in a May Dáil debate when, “holding up the draft copy of the Constitution in his hand...Mr. de Valera asked, ‘Who is the woman who will tell us there is an attack on womankind in that?’” As it turned out, many women could find an attack on women’s rights in de Valera’s new constitution. The implications of weakness, domesticity, and social class provoked angry responses from militant female nationalists, professional women with university degrees, and working class women alike. In newspaper editorials, women like Mary Hayden of the Irish Women Graduates’ Association and Louie Bennet of the Irish Women Workers’ Union, both veterans of the earlier nationalist and suffragist movements,

⁵⁹ Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Art. 41.2 via www.irishstatutebook.ie

⁶⁰ Bunreacht na hÉireann, 1937, Art. 45.4.2 via www.irishstatutebook.ie

⁶¹ Éamon de Valera *Dáil Debates*, 67, 3, May 13, 1937.

combed through the proposed constitution clause by clause to show Fianna Fáil and the general public exactly where their criticisms were directed.⁶² In an open letter to de Valera, Bennet summarized the crux of women's fears, "Certain sections are dangerous not so much for what they actually state, as because of their ambiguity and the implications that may be given to them."⁶³ Indeed, this was how many women viewed the issue: with the exception of the inadequate strength comment, women were not explicitly discriminated against in the Constitution, but the language of these clauses left the door wide open to interpretations that could disadvantage women. Some women were not so polite in their criticism of de Valera. The Six Point Group, a British feminist organization, wrote to de Valera that "these clauses are based on a fascist and slave conception of woman," and an editorial in the *Independent* asserted that de Valera "dislikes and distrusts us as a sex."⁶⁴

Those opposed to the constitution, including "members of the vanguard of old suffrage days," did not hesitate to remind de Valera of women's role in the nationalist movement.⁶⁵ Many prominent women's organizations wrote to de Valera chastising him for turning his back on the women who had helped create the Irish nation. "In Ireland," the Joint Committee wrote, "men and women have worked

⁶² Mary Hayden, "Under the Feudal System," *The Irish Independent*, May 12, 1937. Irish Women Worker's Union to Department of the President, May 28, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁶³ Louie Bennet to Éamon de Valera, "Women and the Constitution," *The Irish Press*, May 12, 1937.

⁶⁴ Six Points Group to Department of the President, June 14, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

Gertrude Gaffney, "A Woman's View of the Constitution," *The Irish Independent*, May 7, 1937.

⁶⁵ "Echoes of the Town," *The Irish Times*, June 25, 1937.

together freely and loyally, as comrades, in the national movement.”⁶⁶ The Association of Old Cumann na mBan noted that the inadequate strength clause was “particularly hurtful to us who in the various phases of the struggle for National Independence, were so frequently called on by the I.R.Army.”⁶⁷ Other groups cited the gender equality principles of early nationalists. The Irish Women Citizens’ and Local Government Association felt “that the position of women in Saorstát Éireann [the Irish Free State] has deteriorated in recent years from the ideal implicit in the Proclamation of 1916 and the Constitution of 1922.”⁶⁸ According to the Dublin University Women Graduates’ Association the “principle of equal citizenship for men and women” espoused by these documents should be “retained, and clearly reaffirmed, in any new Constitution.”⁶⁹

In addition to reminders of women’s role in Ireland’s military conflicts were reminders of De Valera’s refusal to accommodate Cumann na mBan members in his garrison during the Rising. When Cumann na mBan was inevitably brought up as a counterargument to the “inadequate strength” clause in the Dáil debates, De Valera responded with exasperation, “that may be the beginning of all my trouble,” before explaining that he had turned the women away because he did not want to add untrained women to the fray, although he had asked them to provide first aid and cooks so that more male soldiers would be available. De Valera’s response, if an

⁶⁶ Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers to Department of the President, May 24, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁶⁷ Association of Old Cumann na mBan to Department of the President, May 18, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁶⁸ Irish Women Citizens’ and Local Government Association to Department of the President, May 20, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

⁶⁹ Dublin University Women Graduates’ Association to Department of the President, May 22, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach, National Archives of Ireland.

accurate recollection of the events of twenty years ago, indicates that he had very little idea of what Cumann na mBan actually did. The women never claimed to be soldiers and were in fact thoroughly trained for the work they sought to do. De Valera's ideas about women as nurses and cooks were not that far off from Cumann na mBan's own ideas, but his ignorance and dismissal of the organization indicate that, unlike the other Rising's leaders, he had little interest in working or appearing to work, towards gender equality.

The hesitation many women felt to criticize the clause prohibiting divorce exemplified their complicated relationship with Catholic social teaching. Many of the strongest opponents of the constitution were themselves devout Catholics who did not object to traditional gender roles on principle. Caitriona Beaumont explains, "[Women's] Organizations... did not deny that women had an important duty as homemakers. What they did object to was the way in which the State attempted to confine women to this role."⁷⁰ Even non-Catholics understood that publicly deriding fundamental social norms in Ireland's religious climate would be ineffective and counterproductive. As Edna Fitz Henry wrote to the *Independent*, objecting to the divorce clause "is to lay oneself open to misinterpretation; the reason, I suppose, why many Catholics and non-Catholics who have privately expressed disapproval of it have hitherto hesitated to do so publicly."⁷¹

And for many the constitution's position on women was not problematic at all. The clauses concerning women were not seen as limiting but rather celebrated

⁷⁰ Caitriona Beaumont, "Women, citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948," *Women's History Review*, (1997) 6:4, 563-585.

⁷¹ Edna C. Fitz Henry, "Draft Constitution: The Status of Women," *The Irish Independent*, May 13, 1937.

for protecting women. Men and women alike voiced their support for the constitution and distaste for the women opposing it. A letter in the *Irish Times* noted the author's approval of the constitution's handling of marriage because "women have a right to the protection of the State in fulfilling this vocation, which is their most important social function."⁷² Even the Association of Old Cumann na mBan was pleased with the constitution after the "inadequate strength" clause was removed: "To vote against it is...an acceptance of the Treaty of Surrender, and we are amazed that any body of Irishwomen should advocate such a course."⁷³ The women's groups petitioning against the constitution directly spawned many of these statements in support of the constitution. An *Irish Press* editorial demanded that Mary Kettle, a vocal critic of the constitution, "apologise to the men whom she has grossly and wantonly libelled."⁷⁴ A private letter to De Valera lamented that, "you are disposed to take the clamour of those Suffragettes so seriously." The writer concluded "the agitation has been worked up by one or two or three women who are by no means disinterested in the matter of political limelight," however, his letter itself is a testament to the extent and influence of the women's opposition campaign.⁷⁵

The outpouring of editorials, letters to the editor, and personal letters to De Valera on both side of the women's rights debate made the issue one of the most contentious of the entire drafting process. As De Valera himself acknowledged "the

⁷² B.B. Waters, "Women and the Constitution," *The Irish Times*, May 22, 1937.

⁷³ Bridig O'Mullane, Hon. Secretary, "Support for Constitution: Old Cumann na mBan Letter to Mr. de Valera," *The Irish Press*, June 30, 1937.

⁷⁴ "A Gratuitous Libel," *The Irish Press*, May 11, 1937. Spellings as they appeared in print.

⁷⁵ Letter to Éamon de Valera, May 15, 1937. Department of the Taoiseach. National Archives of Ireland.

whole debate has ranged on two main questions,” one of which was the position of women.⁷⁶ The constitution’s stance on women hammered the last nail in the coffin of the image of woman as militant and political that nationalists and suffragists had developed in the early years of the Irish independence process. The burial of this ideal was both mourned and celebrated by various factions of Irish society, revealing a fundamental disagreement over women’s purpose in Irish society. However, with the passage of the constitution by national plebiscite in July of 1937, this disagreement was put to rest, at least in an official capacity. As the government shifted to adopt the more conservative, Catholic views of the Irish majority, they further manipulated women’s rights in order to achieve stability and order. Just as ideas of Irish womanhood had been developed to justify disorder in the name of Irish independence, they were now molded to facilitate order in the name of Irish independence.

Although de Valera had no qualms about adopting social policy from the papal encyclicals, he did not give in to pressure from the Irish hierarchy to acknowledge the supremacy of Catholic Church over other religions in Ireland. De Valera had been thorough in his approach to the religious clause of the constitution, consulting with Irish Protestant and Jewish leaders during the drafting process. What resulted was a section that “recognize[d] the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens,” but which also recognized the Anglican Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Religious Society of

⁷⁶ Éamon de Valera *Dáil debates*, 67, 3, 13 May 1937.

Friends, the Jewish Congregations, and other religions.⁷⁷ Catholic church leaders objected to their position at the same level as these religious minorities, but de Valera was adamant in not officially privileging Catholicism. His approach may seem contradictory, but outside of the constitution's social policy he worked to put together a document that would reaffirm Ireland's democracy, protect its citizens, and ultimately limit his own power. Dermot Keogh goes so far as to declare that the 1937 Constitution was not a step back from its predecessor, which, in the case of women's rights, is not true, but De Valera's constitution does deserve a more nuanced analysis than has been afforded him. As Keogh concludes:

It may be of more historical relevance to ask: how did a document so protective of citizens' rights emerge from a decade so heavily influenced by anti-democratic ideas rooted in Catholic authoritarianism, vocationalism, corporatism, fascism and Nazism.

Perhaps, or indeed, de Valera was far more complex a political thinker and constitutionalist than may have yet been realized.⁷⁸

But celebrating the 1937 Constitution for avoiding Catholic authoritarianism and fascism is one-dimensional as well. In analyzing this critical document, there has to be room for both celebration of its democratic principles and criticism of its restrictive stance on women—a stance that undermines its very own democratic principles. It also has to be acknowledged that the retrenchment of women's rights in Ireland in the new constitution represented a culmination of Irish nationalism's transformation from radical to conservative that was years in the making; De

⁷⁷ Bunreacht na hÉireann, Art. 44, as published in 1937 via wikisource.org

⁷⁸ Keogh and McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937*, 207.

Valera's constitution was certainly not the first attack on women's rights since 1916, but it was the most significant.

Conclusion

The period of Celtic Revivalism that preceded the 1916 Easter Rising began the process of incorporating women into the Irish nationalist movement, at least symbolically. Images of Eire or Erin—the female embodiment of Ireland—attributed certain feminine characteristics to the country like purity, motherhood, and innocence. These traits contrasted sharply with the rotund, blustering image of the English as John Bull. With the introduction of Cumann na mBan to the nationalist scene in 1914, the female warrior image gained new prominence, although in reality the women of Cumann na mBan were constrained by widely held beliefs about division of labor and did not serve in a combat role during 1916. Although the women of Cumann na mBan never reached, or attempted to reach, full equality with their male counterparts in the IRA, they did break many gendered assumptions about women in military conflict. Women now had the option to participate in the conflict, rather than staying home and waiting to hear news of their loved ones, or becoming victims themselves. Cumann na mBan reimagined Irishwomen as active participants in a social movement rather than just symbols of it and the gender equality components of the 1916 Proclamation redefined Irish nationalism to include women's rights. However, the language of the Proclamation may be better attributed to specific drafters' personal friendships with several prominent Irish suffragists. The Irish suffragists, the only truly feminist movement in Irish politics at the time, often clashed with Irish nationalists over proper procedure for securing voting rights. The nationalists' acceptance of Cumann na mBan and derision of the suffragists reveal the majority opinion of women's rights. For the rank and file of the

nationalist movement, women's advancement was a fine side effect of nationalist aims, but women's equality with men was not an aim unto itself. With the execution of the Rising's leaders, the more conservative nationalists who held these views ascended to the top of the nationalist movement.

These new leaders created the Irish nation after the Civil War. Cosgrave, a veteran of the more conservative pro-treaty side and the first President of the Executive Council of the Irish Free State, relied on the stability of the Catholic Church as the nation emerged from years of political and military unrest. The combination of Cosgrave's own conservatism and the influence of the Church resulted in significant legislation restricting the position of women in Irish life, most notably with the Juries Acts of 1924 and 1927. When de Valera came to power in 1932 he actively courted the Church's favor to dispel his reputation as a radical. As a result, de Valera continued to block women's rights in Ireland, relying heavily on papal encyclicals and personal relationships with Irish clergy to shape his social policy. This culminated in the 1937 Bunreacht na hÉireann Constitution, which praised women's work in the home, employed ambiguous language that could be used to prevent women from certain occupations, and emphasize the importance of the family. Despite loud protestations from women's groups, the constitution passed a national plebiscite with most of these clauses intact.

As Irish independence was put into practice, the nation's leaders developed increasingly traditional and conservative stances in order to gain the support of the Irish public. This is particularly evident in the case of women's rights and the 1937 Constitution. The constitution prescribed new standards of Irish womanhood that

were in many ways a departure from those outlined in the 1916 Proclamation. The ideal Irish citizen was no longer the revolutionary agitator, which meant the ideal Irishwoman was no longer the Cumann na mBan member and women's service in the domestic sphere was once again promoted over work in the public sphere. Political awareness and participation ceased to be markers of Irish womanhood in favor of women's role as mother and wife. The shift in women's position from 1916 to 1937 parallels the increasing conservatism of the Irish leaders, but it also reveals the ways these leaders manipulated ideas of Irish womanhood and femininity to achieve their own ends. When it was advantageous for the Irish nationalists to promote gender equality in order to differentiate themselves from the English and benefit from the services of organizations like Cumann na mBan, they did. But when the Irish state was put into practice and its leaders, the descendants and veterans of 1916, sought stability for the country and their own political careers, espousing a more traditional and Catholic ideal of Irish womanhood benefited them more than declarations of equality. The Irish nationalists' use of gender ideology as a tool for nation building indicates a disregard for the actual lived experience of women. In addition to creating lasting restrictions and limitations for women in Ireland, the legacy of Irish independence has also negated the participation of women in the creation of modern Ireland.

The retroactive effects of leaving women out of this history and the proactive effects of precluding future women of their rights are two sides of the same coin. By excluding women from their own historical legacy and rebuilding traditional ideals of Irish womanhood, Irish politicians and historians have denied women a context

for imagining of feminist change in Ireland, which helps to support many of the legal and social limitations that were placed on women in the early years of the Irish republic. One of the most striking examples of this is the difficulty the country had in repealing its constitutional ban on divorce. The ban was finally repealed by national plebiscite in 1995, but with only 50.3% of the vote, suggesting continued widespread acceptance of the Catholic social principles of the 1937 Constitution.¹ However, a dedicated group of Irish historians have begun the process of exploring women's role throughout Irish history and the historical context of women's rights in Ireland today. In this thesis, I have attempted to add to this growing body of work by analyzing the relationships between male Irish nationalists, female Irish nationalists, and Irish feminists to conclude that the shift in nationalist gender policy from 1916 to 1937 represents political maneuvering and disrespect for the actual contributions of women and women's rights. Today, as a new wave of Irish feminists battles old issues like political representation and new issues like abortion rights in Ireland and the country approaches the one hundred year anniversary of the Easter Rising, it is only becoming more important to pursue women's history of this time period.

¹ Environment, Community, and Local Government, "Referendum on dissolution of marriage (1995)," *Referendum Results 1937-2013*, <http://www.environ.ie/en/LocalGovernment/Voting/Referenda/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,1894,en.pdf> Accessed 9 March 2015.

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