

# Nationalism, Feminism, and the Women of Ireland's Revolutionary Period

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## Nationalism, Feminism, and the Women of Ireland's Revolutionary Period



This photograph was taken in Dublin on April 29, 1916. The frame captures the official surrender of Irish republican Patrick Pearse, right, to British commanders. The Easter Rising of 1916, as the rebellion was later called, was destined for failure from the very start; for this reason, the act of surrender was more ceremonial than monumental.<sup>1</sup> Yet the photographer who decided to capture this moment must have possessed some sense of its historical significance; perhaps he or she was commissioned by the British press to take the photograph in order to memorialize the imperialist dominance over the

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<sup>1</sup> This claim is reiterated in all historical accounts of the Rising. In one such example, Cal McCarthy describes the rebellion as “an enterprise that was already doomed for failure.” (McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution*, 68).

colony. Or perhaps the photographer was merely struck by Pearse's company. If one takes a closer look at the photograph, a second pair of shoes emerges from the darkness beneath Pearse's overcoat. These sturdy boots belong to nurse and Cumann na mBan member, Elizabeth O'Farrell, one of the many female revolutionaries forgotten in Irish history.<sup>2</sup>

Ireland's revolutionary period spanned roughly the first quarter of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, Ireland remained part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, ruled by the British parliament. As nationalistic fervor spread throughout Europe, Irish politicians pressed for independence and the Irish nationalist movement was further fueled by the Gaelic League, an organization founded to promote Irish language and culture.<sup>3</sup> When Britain gave Irish diplomats no indication that greater independence would be forthcoming, disparate Irish rebel militias formed throughout the country. In 1916, the clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood planned a strike against England and sought cooperation from the Irish Volunteers, a paramilitary group dedicated to defending Home Rule, and the labor movement's Irish Citizen's Army.<sup>4</sup> This attack, the Easter Rising of 1916, was a strategic demonstration of defiance: with few weapons and little training, the rebels hoped to impress upon the British government the seriousness of their demands, even if the rebellion was doomed to be a military failure.

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<sup>2</sup> Cumann na mBan, or the Irishwomen's Council, was a women's nationalist group founded in 1914 to aid the Irish Volunteers (see below) in their fight for Irish independence.

<sup>3</sup> Diarmaid, Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland* (Woodstock, NY, The Overlook Press, 2005), 30. The Gaelic League set out to revive the Irish language, which was spoken as a sole tongue by a mere 60,000 countrymen by the year 1891. (Ferriter, 99.) With similar goals, the Gaelic Athletic Association formed to boost unique Irish sports, such as Gaelic football and hurling. Both leagues drew the support of many young Irish to the nationalist cause with cultural enrichment and newfound pride in Ireland. (Ferriter, 36.)

<sup>4</sup> The Irish Volunteers was founded in 1913 with the stated purpose of defending Irish Home Rule, or the act of self-governance under the purview of a larger government. The group assembled in reaction to the emergence of the Ulster Volunteers, an organization of unionists in opposition to Home Rule. The Irish Volunteers eventually evolved into the Irish Republican Army, commonly known as the IRA. James Larkin founded the Irish Citizen Army and became the face of the militant labor movement along with James Connolly, the socialist leader of the Irish Labor Party.

The rebels chose Easter weekend of 1916 in the desperate middle years of the First World War, a perceived time of weakness for the British armed forces. Despite this relative advantage, the Irish rebels were quelled within the week. During the Easter Rising and throughout Ireland's revolutionary period, women were active political participants on both the national and local levels.

The study of women's history during Ireland's revolutionary period has largely focused on the internal debate among contemporary Irish women regarding the prioritization of nationalist versus feminist issues. While the two ideologies are not inherently at odds, Irish women faced the necessity of prioritizing their battles, championing only one cause at a time. I attribute this "either-or" attitude as originating from three main sources: the realpolitik advantages of single-issue organizations in early twentieth century Ireland, the relatively new concept of feminism competing with the long-standing tradition of Irish nationalism, and the unwillingness of many female leaders from both movements to create a united female front. By engaging in debate, women reaped the benefits of a forum through which they were able to voice agendas that otherwise would have been largely ignored. I argue that while women crafted and articulated a fierce debate between the nationalist and feminist movements, advances in each camp furthered the progress of the other.

Using contemporary newspapers, Cumann na mBan documents, and some revolution-era memoirs, one can trace the development of the nationalist-feminist debate. Through close examination of these primary sources, the historian is able to identify the arguments from each political movement, as well as to examine the political education rank-and-file women would have garnered by reading these contemporary materials.

Articles written by women during this period demonstrate a detailed understanding of political nuance; because of this grasp, women are able to argue for the same end goal – universal suffrage – through strikingly different means. In order to bolster these unmistakably parallel arguments, some women resorted to attacking the other’s persona rather than her reasoning. Nonetheless, when roused into action and plucked away from rhetorical debate, women from both the nationalist and feminist camps furthered both causes, whether wittingly or not.

***Historiography: restoring Irish women to their rightful place in history***

The photograph of Pearse and O’Farrell appears to be a perfect metaphor for women’s history in Ireland’s larger historical context: man, standing in the spotlight, woman, hidden from view. While this may seem like an oversimplification, evidence supports the argument that historians have literally and figuratively cut women from history. Historian Mary Cullen explains that the study of women’s history traditionally undergoes a series of stages, beginning first with the acknowledgment that women have been “invisible” in traditional histories.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Ward rescues Elizabeth O’Farrell, and other Irish women, from anonymity. While Irish women’s history is not yet at the final stage – “the writing of a new integrated history incorporating the historical experience of both sexes”<sup>6</sup> – my research builds on the work of earlier historians, examining the ideological development of women’s groups at the turn of the century.

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<sup>5</sup> Cullen, Mary, “History Women and History Men: The Politics of Women’s History,” *History Ireland* 2 (1994): 32. The second phase identifies “great women,” and the third focuses on women’s contribution to intellectual, political, and social movements; the fourth views women as a distinct group about whom historians should write.

<sup>6</sup> Cullen, “History Women and History Men,” 32.

The seminal text in the historiography regarding female involvement during Ireland's revolutionary period is Margaret Ward's extensive study, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*. Written in 1983, Ward's history attempts to redress the invisibility of Irish women in history. An unmistakable tone of frustrated outrage seeps out in her writing; Ward takes umbrage at the lack of attention women have received, interpreting this void as an intentional slight rather than an ignorant oversight.

Hinting at complicity, Ward writes:

Because women have been so marginal in the consciousness of those who have researched events, their significance has remained hidden within historical records, waiting for the understanding of someone who wants to know what women did, what they thought, and how they were affected by the upheavals of the past century. Although women's history clearly reveals the importance of the powerless in contributing to the success of those who became powerful, this contribution has at times been deliberately played down, and not just simply undervalued.<sup>7</sup>

While Ward is harsh on her fellow historians, she is no more lenient on her subjects. She traces women's involvement in Irish politics from the 1880s, beginning with the Land League campaign, and continues through the post-Civil War era. As a feminist, Ward is tough on her activist predecessors, often appearing to ignore the historical context in which the women operated and the difficulties this posed for larger gains.<sup>8</sup> Ward acknowledges the efforts women demonstrated in working subversively within the patriarchal society of the times. Yet despite this recognition, she relegates these examples to a small portion of her scholarship. Instead, she directs her focus toward

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>8</sup> While Ward's factual presentation appears flawless, her disappointment in the women of the past is unmistakable. For example, she declares: "By deciding to remain with the male Republicans in their total dismissal of the issue, Cumann na mBan failed to give any lead to the women of the country." Ward's overcritical eye blinds her from seeing the complexities of the nationalist-feminist debate.

the unremitting debate that plagued all women's groups in the revolutionary period: whether to prioritize nationalism or feminism.

Ward analyzes many women's groups in her tome though focuses most closely on Cumann na mBan, or the Irishwomen's Council. Founded in April, 1914, Cumann na mBan was the first and only women's nationalist organization in Western Europe, a region where nationalism was the current political trend.<sup>9</sup> The exclusively female group developed when nationalist women decided that rather than exist as a subsidiary wing of the Irish Volunteers, they preferred to become an autonomous organization. Ward appears unable to forgive Cumann na mBan for what she interprets as the group's unapologetic and unwavering prioritization of nationalism over feminism. She writes,

as an organisation claiming to represent the nationalist women of Ireland, it did fail to give any lead to Irish women and it was a failure that originated in their narrow conception of their role as guardians of the Republican conscience, rather than as representative of the interests of women.<sup>10</sup>

Ward fails to look beyond the nationalist labels Cumann na mBan assumes, preventing a thorough analysis of the complexities of the group's actions.

A decade later, Ruth Taillon, another feminist historian, published the second substantial effort in the historiography, *When History Was Made: The Women of 1916*, a work that applauds Irish women for their involvement in the rebellion. Unlike Ward, Taillon presents the events without critical analysis of the women's mistakes and achievements. Conscious of how her approach diverges from Ward's, Taillon suggests that historians might credit the women for their accomplishments, regardless of their effectiveness or breadth: "Perhaps we should hesitate before being too critical of the choices made in 1916, or of applying standards of modern day political correctness to

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<sup>9</sup> Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Collins Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 250.

their actions, and instead give credit for having achieved the independence of action to the extent which they did.”<sup>11</sup> In Taillon’s attempt to refrain from passing judgment on the women of 1916, her work presents little of the internal debate between feminism and nationalism. However, her research operates in a parallel, but equally significant, debate in Irish history: the extent to which the Easter Rising should be studied and commemorated.<sup>12</sup> Taillon laments the fact that, like the Easter Rising, the acknowledgment of its female participants also has “been largely reduced to caricature and stereotype.”<sup>13</sup>

Historian Cal McCarthy borrows methodology and focus from both Ward and Taillon in his book, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution*, published in 2007. Narrowing his scope, McCarthy homes in on the largest and longest lasting women’s group, Cumann na mBan. For many of the same reasons as McCarthy, I, too, have elected to focus on Cumann na mBan: as the largest female organization, it is more representative of nationalist women, and many of the group’s documents and records have survived for historical research. Yet McCarthy distances himself from Ward more significantly in his approach, viewing the subject with a different eye.

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<sup>11</sup> Ruth Taillon, *When History Was Made: The Women of 1916* (Dublin: Beyond the Pale Publications, 1996), xviii.

<sup>12</sup> A faction of historians defends the uprising’s importance, revering the rebels, while revisionist historians draw on the Rising in order to attack modern day republicanism. Revisionist Irish history challenges the established history of Ireland as the victim pitted against England, the ruthless, colonizing perpetrator. As the Provisional IRA re-emerged in the late 1970s and 80s to defend the republican cause in the Northern Irish civil war known as The Troubles, some historians criticized the Republic of Ireland for state-supported commemoration of the Irish Republican Brotherhood of 1916 which later became the IRA.

<sup>13</sup> Taillon, *When History Was Made*, xiv. The approach Taillon adopts is reasonable, though flawed in execution. Most glaringly, Taillon’s lack of footnoting and other referencing forces the reader to question the validity of her claims and the existence of her evidence. Moreover, because Taillon’s work follows Ward’s meticulous research, her generalizations are unconvincing. In an example that illuminates both of these shortcomings, Taillon writes: “The rapport between men and women, officers and rank and file was very strong.” (Taillon, 52.) Undoubtedly, there is some truth to this statement, but without qualification or documentation, the reader is loath to accept it.

He explains, “as most of this research has been undertaken by those who study women’s history, it was intended to contribute primarily to our understanding of Irish women’s history and not specifically our understanding of Cumann na mBan.”<sup>14</sup> McCarthy analyzes witness statements, police and intelligence reports, and other contemporary documents to assess the impact of Cumann na mBan on the nationalist movement. As McCarthy draws from newly available archival documents, he is better able to discern the nuances of the nationalist-feminist debate. Moreover, McCarthy approaches the subject without biases or undue expectations like some of his predecessors.<sup>15</sup> McCarthy attributes feminist motivations to some of Cumann na mBan’s decisions and actions that previous scholars have ignored. While he concludes that the women involved in the 1916 Rising had little impact on the final outcome of the rebellion, his interpretation focuses on their presence:

But it is not fair to suggest that Cumann na mBan’s activities during Easter week were insignificant in themselves. Their primary significance was not the advancement of republicanism but rather the unintended advancement of feminism. The determination of nationalist women to place themselves by the sides of men, during what came to be regarded as the birth of a new nation, ensured that this new generation of republicans could not ignore changing opinions regarding the female role in Irish society.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps Cumann na mBan had not purposefully set out to advance feminism, McCarthy argues, but their actions demonstrated the desire to be treated as equals by their male comrades.

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<sup>14</sup> Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, at time McCarthy presents some of his conclusions unequivocally, adding little to the existing scholarship. For example: “With or without Cumann na mBan, the rising would have occurred, the rising would have been crushed within days and the leaders would have been executed.” (McCarthy, 68.) However, examples such as this are few and far between.

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 68-9.

Although Ward bemoans the lack of recognition women received from earlier historians, these historians cannot be held solely accountable for the paucity of Irish women's history. Unfortunately, in patriarchal, conservative, and religious societies, men play the leading roles and women are all too often ushered to the wings. Coupled with this trend is the added difficulty of tracing female histories; logistically, women marry and change their names, and other societal conditions, such as few opportunities for women to work outside the home, leave little chance for public record.<sup>17</sup> However, these trends alone do not fully explain the lack of attention women received in the history of Ireland's revolutionary period.

### ***Focusing Through The Historical Lens: Ireland at the turn of the century***

To retrospectively evaluate, the historian must precisely view his or her subject in its appropriate historical context. In 1900, Ireland's demographics were largely rural and agrarian, and overwhelmingly Catholic.<sup>18</sup> The devastating famine of the mid-1800s crippled the population of the island through emigration and death, though by the turn of the century, Ireland's population had grown slightly and steadied.<sup>19</sup> The urban standard of living was dismally poor for those living in the extensive slums. New opportunities arose for the middle and upper classes to some extent, access to higher education for women being one example.<sup>20</sup> Few women were able to take advantage of the possibility of a post-

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<sup>17</sup> Lisa Weihman, "Doing My Bit for Ireland: Transgressing Gender in the Easter Rising," *Eire-Ireland* 39 (Fall/Winter 2004): 228-49.

<sup>18</sup> Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 28. The southern three provinces, which currently make up the majority of the Republic of Ireland, were 89.6% Catholic in 1911. However, the fourth, northernmost province of Ulster had a 56.33% Protestant majority in 1911.

<sup>19</sup> Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 31.

secondary education however, and those who earned university degrees found few worthy professions open to them.<sup>21</sup>

It was during the land war of the 1880s, as small tenant farmers fought to redistribute the land and abolish landlordism, when women stood at the helm of a political movement for the first time. The campaign's male leadership was systematically jailed and thereby prevented from carrying out a planned strategy of encouraging farmers to refuse to pay rent. In an unprecedented political move, the occupied leaders called upon women for help. Under the direction of Anna Parnell, sister of the Irish National Land League's president, Charles Stewart Parnell, the Ladies' Land League took up the charge and "infused new life into the campaign of resistance."<sup>22</sup> The women's success was tempered by its aftermath; Margaret Ward maintains that the women's achievement embarrassed the men, who subsequently downplayed the women's involvement.<sup>23</sup> In 1881, the editor of the *Belfast News-Letter* wrote, "Sensible people in the North of Ireland dislike to see woman out of the place she is gifted to occupy, and at no time is woman further from her natural position than when she appears upon a political platform."<sup>24</sup> Public statements such as this, coupled with the purposeful downplay of women's successes with the Ladies' Land League, discouraged women from taking active public roles in politics.

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<sup>21</sup> Louise Ryan, "A Question of Loyalty: War, Nation, and Feminism in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland," *Women's Studies International Forum* 20 (1997): 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 39. However, a woman temporarily replacing a man in a leadership role emerges as a common theme in the early Irish revolutionary period.

<sup>24</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 23. As quoted from the *Belfast News-Letter*, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1881.

Twenty years later, nationalist women in Dublin reemerged to make a political statement when Queen Victoria visited the city in 1900.<sup>25</sup> During the pomp and circumstance of her Irish tour, one event offered children a free treat in Phoenix Park.<sup>26</sup> Though the Queen received a warm welcome by most, a group of nationalist women took the initiative to boycott the event.<sup>27</sup> These women formed an ad-hoc Patriotic Children's Treat Committee, promising an even more impressive affair to reward those children who did not attend the Queen's treat. The women raised money for the event, guaranteed donations of baked goods from sympathetic bakers, and registered 25,000 children, five times the number attending the Queen's outing.<sup>28</sup> Three men and one woman, Maud Gonne, spoke at the Patriotic Children's Treat, preaching the importance of the nationalist struggle.<sup>29</sup>

Ward credits the ad-hoc committee for putting on an event "of crucial importance for women themselves as it demonstrated they had the ability to organize and it provided

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<sup>25</sup> The term "nationalist" in this context describes any Irishman or Irishwoman who believed the island of Ireland should have greater political and cultural independence from Britain. The Irish Nationalist movement supported the promotion of a distinct Irish culture and the political separation from British rule. "Nationalist" is a catchall term for those opposed to a British colonizing presence. Within the nationalist camp, many methods of attaining this separation are suggested. The two major factions support a constitutional approach to independence on the one hand, and using violence as a means to an end on the other.

<sup>26</sup> Phoenix Park is the largest enclosed urban park in Europe, measuring 1,760 acres.

<sup>27</sup> Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, 30.

<sup>28</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Irish poet W. B. Yeats supposedly thought to himself while listening to the speeches, "How many of these children will carry bomb or rifle when a little under or a little over thirty?" (Ward, 50.) Little did he know that it would be exactly that time when Ireland would be engaged in both a war for independence and a civil war. Yeats once wished to marry Maud Gonne, the female speaker at the event. They never married; rather, she had children with French journalist Lucian Millevoye and lived and worked in Paris in her early adulthood. There she published a newspaper called *L'Irlande Libre* and lectured in Europe about Irish matters until moving back to Ireland where she founded Inghinidhe na hEireann after being barred from membership to other, exclusively male nationalist groups. In 1903, she married John MacBride, who was later executed for his involvement in the 1916 Rising. Gonne maintained an active political role throughout her life, rallying against the violence of the Black and Tans, founding the Women's Prisoners' Defence League, and participating in a hunger strike when jailed. Maud Gonne lived until she was 86.

a justification for forming a permanent group.”<sup>30</sup> In 1900, this group called themselves Inghinidhe na hEireann, or Daughters of Ireland, and dedicated themselves to the promotion of Irish culture and greater political autonomy for Ireland. At the inaugural meeting, the Daughters ambitiously outlined their goals. The first item on the list stood apart from the rest for its blunt political agenda: “The re-establishment of the complete independence of Ireland.”<sup>31</sup> To achieve the cultural aims, Inghinidhe na hEireann arranged for theater performances of Irish tales and legends, and initiated the first nationalist journal specifically aimed at a female audience, *Bean na hEireann*.<sup>32</sup>

Women contributed to the nationalist movement within a more traditionally defined domain, while others branched out, assuming new responsibilities. Some women focused on educating children in the Irish language and local history – a small but measurable effort of the inculcation of republican ideals to the youth under their tutelage.<sup>33</sup> In more seditious service, women capitalized on their relative freedom to deliver messages for republican groups; deemed less of a threat, women were less likely to be stopped and searched, and the fashion of the day provided ample room for hiding illicit literature or even weapons.<sup>34</sup> Some women trained as nurses, or in the art of semaphore signaling, while others boycotted non-Irish goods.<sup>35</sup> Each played a role, however small, in the fight for Irish independence. While Irish women assisted political movements prior to the twentieth century, the upsurge of women’s involvement in politics occurred after the publication of *Bean na hEireann* and other, similar periodicals.

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<sup>30</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> Bean na hEireann means “Women of Ireland” in Irish.

<sup>33</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 47.

Of this possible correlation the historian must ask, what did the newspapers exhort? In what ways did the press educate its readers about the political and social movements of the day?

### ***The Irish Press: A forum for political debate***

Irish periodicals of the early twentieth century represented and catered to a wide spectrum of political, cultural, and societal interests. For the historian, these newspapers and other semi-regular publications offer unique insights into the rhetoric drawn upon in the nationalist-feminist debate. For my research, I have focused on three contemporary periodicals: *Bean na hEireann*, the *Irish Citizen*, and the *Catholic Bulletin*, spanning the period 1908 to 1919. As the editors of the *Irish Citizen* approached their publication as a forum for debate, it is most relevant to the discussion of feminism and nationalism. However, the other two periodicals prove apt comparisons: *Bean na hEireann* presents the first foray into the niche of the Irish feminist press while the *Catholic Bulletin* offers a more traditionally patriarchal nationalist perspective.

A penny-monthly circulating from late 1908 to early 1911, *Bean na hEireann* emerged as an addition to the “advanced nationalist press” tradition.<sup>36</sup> Founder and editor, Helena Moloney, described the publication as “a woman’s paper advocating militancy, separatism, and feminism.”<sup>37</sup> The paper identified its audience as one similar to Arthur Griffith’s nationalist paper, *United Irishman*, but with a feminist bent; the masthead, a depiction of a woman touting Irish symbols, asserted the paper’s dedication

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<sup>36</sup> Karen Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 22, 109. The “advanced nationalist press” was a genre of publication existing in Ireland as early as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Distinct from nationalist papers, the advanced nationalist press articulated an extreme nationalism, both in its ambition and approach.

<sup>37</sup> Helena Maloney, as quoted in Steele’s *Women, Press, and Politics*, 109.

to “complete separatism; the rising cause of feminism, and the interest of Irishwomen generally.”<sup>38</sup> Rife with advanced nationalist vocabulary, *Bean*’s readership – largely women – could not but help learn the political stance and jargon argued by the nationalist camp.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as the newspaper encouraged readers to actively participate in the monthly by publishing amateur pieces, the publication acted as a “textual meeting place” in an otherwise isolated community of women.<sup>40</sup>

The only political education many women received came through reading newspapers, though the education reforms of the 1870s afforded privileged women the opportunity of a university education.<sup>41</sup> Irish universities began cultivating female writers who took advantage of the literary outlets, such as *Bean na hEireann*, to express themselves.<sup>42</sup> As the number of female writers grew, many wrote under multiple Gaelic pen names, making it difficult for the historian to discern the exact number of women actively participating. In her memoir, Sidney Gifford explains that she often signed her work by her Irish name, “Sorcha Ni Hanlon,” or by her male alias, “John Brennan.”<sup>43</sup> Despite the occasional male nom de plume or the publication of a man’s article, women controlled *Bean*. However, Gifford explains the wide audience the newspaper reached:

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<sup>38</sup> *Bean na hEireann*, 1908 – 1911.

<sup>39</sup> Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> I have used the term “privileged” here because higher education in early twentieth century Ireland was limited to a small, advantaged part of Irish society. Trinity College Dublin, the oldest and most prestigious university in Ireland, was established as a center for protestant learning. It was not until 1793, two hundred years after it’s founding, that Trinity accepted catholic students, and not until 1904 that women of any religious denomination were admitted. According to Ferriter, “the great majority of children had no access to secondary education, and it was clear that access to university would be confined to the already well-off minority. (By 1911, only 6 percent of the school-going population were enrolled at secondary schools and the majority dropped out before finishing their final year.)” (Ferriter, 78.) Moreover, few women came from families who could both afford and support the education of a woman.

<sup>42</sup> Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Sydney Gifford Czira, *The Years Flew By*, 48. As quoted in Margaret Ward’s *In Their Own Voice*. Ward argues that Gifford chose a man’s name for her anglicized nom de plume hoping to elicit more authority as a man.

Although *Bean na h-Eireann* was meant to be a magazine for women, it was so well written and so outspoken on national and social questions, that it was soon circulating through Ireland, and even in the United States, and had as many or more men readers as it had women.<sup>44</sup>

Correspondingly, the subject matter addressed in *Bean* spanned international borders, informing readers about other nationalist and feminist struggles.

Although the content of the publication encompassed a wide range of social and political movements, when writing about the Irish situation, *Bean* gave voice to the stance of *Inghinidhe na hEireann*. Before the organization merged with *Cumann na mBan* in 1915, it proposed a unique view on the nationalist-feminist debate. Perceiving national independence and women's emancipation as inseparable issues, *Inghinidhe na hEireann* saw the fight as a unified battle for emancipation. Proponents of political action by means of physical force, the group distanced itself from the pacifistic feminist movement. Ward summarizes their position:

The solution to both the national question and to women's oppression was, therefore, conveniently the same: greater representation of women within the existing nationalist organizations, which would strengthen the organizations and enhance women's status—a combination which would eventually result in the obtaining of independence through the self-activity of the people and not by an act of parliament.<sup>45</sup>

In this earlier presentation of Irish nationalist and feminist thought, the two ideologies were considered parallel. As the nationalist track became more aggressively focused on independence and Irish feminists vehemently rejected violent means, the collaborative effort proposed by *Inghinidhe na hEireann* no longer stood as a viable option.

*Bean* set the precedent for a woman's paper run by women, though the subsequent, and ultimately more influential, feminist publication was founded and edited

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<sup>44</sup> Gifford Czira, *The Years Flew By*, 48.

<sup>45</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 70.

by two men.<sup>46</sup> The brainchild of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and James Cousins, the *Irish Citizen*, an eight page weekly, was first published May 25, 1912.<sup>47</sup> The motto of the periodical, apt, given its name, was decidedly gender-equal and all-inclusive: “For men and women equally the Rights of Citizenship. From men and women equally the Duties of Citizenship.”<sup>48</sup> The *Irish Citizen* proposed equal rights and welcomed equal responsibility. Despite the egalitarian sentiments behind the publication, men served as editors and women as writers.<sup>49</sup> In a single exception, when Francis Sheehy Skeffington served a jail sentence and then spent months in the United States, his wife Hanna assumed the role of editor.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was no stranger to politics or leadership roles. Her father, a nationalist member of parliament, and her uncle, supporter of the Ladies’ Land League, introduced her to civics at a young age. She received a BA degree from the Royal University of Ireland and three years later, in 1902, earned a distinguished MA degree. Hanna married Francis, a feminist and activist, and at times in their marriage, she served as main breadwinner for the couple. After working for the *Irish Citizen*, Sheehy Skeffington held an editorial position at *An Phoblact* (The Republic) and *Republican Life*.<sup>50</sup> Jailed many times for political activism, on one occasion she cleverly thanked the police for the attention she was given in the press:

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<sup>46</sup> While this assertion of influence is of course impossible to prove, based on the length of each paper’s existence, the *Irish Citizen*’s eight years of publication dwarfs *Bean*’s less-than-two years.

<sup>47</sup> Lousie Ryan, “The *Irish Citizen*, 1912-1920,” *Saothar* 17 (1992): 105.

<sup>48</sup> Louise Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote: An Anthology of the Irish Citizen Newspaper, 1912-1920*, (Dublin, Folens Publishers, 1996), 10.

<sup>49</sup> However, it must be noted that these specific men were much more attuned to the feminist cause than most of their contemporaries. For example, Francis and his wife, Hanna, adopted both of their given last names so that they were, collectively, the “Sheehy Skeffingtons.” Additionally, the obstacles women faced starting their own businesses was a practical reason for this editorial arrangement.

<sup>50</sup> Sinead McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923* (Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 209-11.

It is gratifying to realise that Sergeant Thomas, by his assault on me, and the police who illegally attempted to break up the protest meetings, have unwittingly rendered us a great service, and given a fine impetus to our movement by rousing public indignation against police methods and the ways of police magistrates.<sup>51</sup>

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's *Irish Citizen* articles, and those of other Irish female writers in the early twentieth century, demonstrate a political shrewdness and commitment to the publication of women's political views and actions.

While Sheehy Skeffington and other activists led the feminist charge, they were mindful to include as many women as possible in their crusade. To do so, they published articles in the *Irish Citizen* that served to educate women on the relevant issues. In May, 1913, the editors printed "The Suffragists' Catechism," which aimed to arm women with solid defenses against the most-often cited reasons why they should not vote. Written in traditional call-and-response pattern, the editors first asked a series of simple, rallying questions beginning with: "What do suffragists want?/ Votes for women." The questions continue, playing a devil's advocate: "But women don't understand politics; would they know how to vote right?" or, "But isn't it better for women to know nothing about politics, and to mind their homes instead?"<sup>52</sup>

The editors' decision to draw from the church's arsenal illuminated their ability to simultaneously navigate and subvert the contemporary institutions. The catechism formula was a familiar one to all Irish women and offered an efficient means of conveying information. Staying true to the catechism analogy, the editors answered on behalf of all feminists, many of whom viewed the issue of women's suffrage differently. The answer to the question, "Then you approve of restricting the vote to people of property?" demonstrates the editors' understanding of the nuances of the issue:

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<sup>51</sup> Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, "Message From Mrs Sheehy Skeffington," *Irish Citizen*, December 13, 1913.

<sup>52</sup> "The Suffragists' Catechism," *Irish Citizen*, May 17, 1913.

Not necessarily. Some suffragists do and some don't. What they are all agreed on is, that whatever entitles a man to vote should entitle a woman to vote also – that she should not be forbidden to vote simply because she is a woman.<sup>53</sup>

In 2003, like in 1913, women were still attempting to reconcile the apparent disconnect between their political beliefs and their Catholic faith. In her essay, “Feminism and Catholicism,” Janet Kalven posed the question, “Is it possible to be both Catholic and feminist?”<sup>54</sup> Nearly a century after the editors wrote “The Suffragists’ Catechism,” Kalven is unable to provide a compelling negotiation of the two doctrines: she answers, a resounding *no* from both extremes – “antifeminists” and feminists alike – and a *conflictual but possible* answer from those trying to reconcile both ideologies.<sup>55</sup> Rather than reject the often adversarial philosophies of feminism and Catholicism, the editors and contributors of the Irish nationalist and feminist press artfully maneuvered through both creeds.

Countess Markievicz demonstrated this style of subtle opposition in her monthly column, “Woman with a Garden,” which appeared in *Bean* from February 1909 to March 1910.<sup>56</sup> At first glance, Markievicz’s column appears to be little more than a benign serial, offering pruning and weeding advice for the well-to-do housewife. However, for

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<sup>53</sup> “The Suffragists’ Catechism,” *Irish Citizen*, May 17, 1913.

<sup>54</sup> Janet Kalven, “Feminism and Catholicism,” in *Reconciling Catholicism and Feminism? Personal Reflections on Tradition and Change*, ed. Sally Barr Ebest and Ron Ebest (Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 42.

<sup>55</sup> Kalven, “Feminism and Catholicism,” 42-3.

<sup>56</sup> It is not difficult to understand why a unique and iconic figure like Countess Markievicz has lived on in Ireland’s historical memory. Married and separated from a Polish count, Markievicz dedicated her life to socialist and labor causes. She was sentenced to death for her part in the Easter Rising, though her punishment was commuted to a life-long incarceration that she only partially served. Markievicz’s punishment was supposedly lessened due to her sex. However, only a year before, the British protested against the German decision to execute a nurse given shelter to British soldiers. Therefore, it is likely the British commanders felt unable to execute a woman for fear of bad press for hypocritical behavior. During her impressive political career, she was elected Cumann na mBan president, the first female member of Parliament, and appointed Minister for Labor in the First Dail, or the Irish legislative body.

those who knew how to read between the lines, her allusions presented militant ideas on feminism and nationalism. Steele explains:

Markievicz's innovation in her *Bean na hEireann* columns was to reclaim the garden's political potential for both women and nationalists by composing features that allegorically described how readers could resist domesticity *and* imperialism through that most visible icon of the Ascendancy class, the garden.<sup>57</sup>

These cunning and sometimes satiric articles confirm that the women contributing to *Bean na hEireann* and the *Irish Citizen* understood the multi-faceted political questions of the day, and the extent to which they could be discussed in writing. As Irish society fragmented into divergent factions – Unionism vs. Nationalism, Nationalism vs. Feminism, Home Rule vs. Republic, Protestant vs. Catholic – political and social tensions grew. Through these published articles, it is clear that the women were conversant with the arguments and rhetoric of each dualism, and learned which subjects to broach or avoid, depending on the company.

### ***Nationalism and Feminism: The 'either-or' construction***

These diverging factions crossed political and religious lines, offering no neat and simple division of the Irish population. For this reason, it became nearly impossible to assemble a significant number of people who agreed on all the current debates; rather, many chose to put their energies behind one central political issue about which they felt most passionate. While the editors of the *Irish Citizen* staunchly focused on equal

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<sup>57</sup> Steele, *Women, Press, and Politics*, 117. (italics hers) For a much richer and nuanced description of Markievicz's "Woman with a Garden" column, see Karen Steele's chapter, "Allegory as Resistance." For a snippet of Markievicz's writing, in August, 1909 she writes: "You must watch your wall fruit trees well for snails and slugs as well as for wasps and flies, and the tender-hearted colleen will have to make up her mind which she wishes to preserve—insects or fruit! For both in one garden are impossible." (Steele, 120-1.)

suffrage, they used the newspaper as “a distinct feminist organ”<sup>58</sup> to voice all variations of suffragists’ opinions on the issue of enfranchisement. The articles of the periodical articulate the nationalist-feminist debate, providing arguments from each camp.

The editors of the *Irish Citizen* rallied behind the “Suffrage First” policy defined by Helena Moloney, the founder of *Bean na hEireann*, in an editorial on May 2, 1914:

There can be no nation without women, and there can be no free nation without free women. By denying freedom to the women of the nation, the Party led by Mr Redmond have lost the right to call themselves “Nationalist” in any other than a Party sense; and the Nationalist woman who supports them is false not only to her sex, but to the highest ideals of Nationalism.<sup>59</sup>

A week later, Cumann na mBan member Mary McSwiney presented the nationalist argument in reaction to Moloney’s editorial:

I am not a follower of Mr Redmond – nor of Mr O’Brien either – I use the word Nationalist to include all those who believe that self-government for Ireland is the most important question in this country at present, and must be paramount until Home Rule is attained. I do not put Party first; I put Ireland first.<sup>60</sup>

Half a year later, Cumann na mBan published a manifesto outlining its perceived role in the nationalist fight, similar to the Suffrage First policy set forth by Irish feminists: “We came into being to advance the cause of Irish liberty and to organise Irishwomen in furtherance of that object.”<sup>61</sup> From the beginning of Cumann na mBan’s existence, the group warned members of the potential dangers of political distraction if political causes

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<sup>58</sup> “Editorial: Our Policy and Our Critics,” October 1919.

<sup>59</sup> “Editorial: The Slave Women,” *Irish Citizen*, May 2, 1914. John Redmond represented Ireland as a member of the British parliament. He was a moderate nationalist who fought for Home Rule through constitutional means. In 1914, Great Britain passed the Irish Home Rule Act under his guidance, though its implementation was indefinitely postponed with the outbreak of war.

<sup>60</sup> “Correspondence,” *Irish Citizen*, May 9, 1914. Interestingly, the views McSwiney outlines in this article are a far change from her original philosophy regarding nationalism and feminism. Before joining Cumann na mBan, McSwiney was a member of the Munster Women’s Franchise League and “argued for the necessity of the vote, regardless of the compromise that would entail.” (Ward, 71.)

<sup>61</sup> Cumann na mBan, “Manifesto from Cumann na mBan,” October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914.

were not prioritized. This enforced hierarchization only exacerbated the division of the nationalist and feminist movements.

At the time of the *Irish Citizen* exchange in the spring of 1914, women had no voting privileges and the first strike for Irish independence, the Easter Rising, was not yet in the planning stages.<sup>62</sup> Never static, the nationalist-feminist debate proved more complicated than other contemporary dualisms. Despite voicing opposition to the Suffrage First doctrine, Mary McSwiney considered herself a suffragist.<sup>63</sup> However, McSwiney believed she might only demand enfranchisement from an independent Ireland; to her mind, receiving the vote from the imperial British government would prove meaningless. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Helena Moloney aimed to prioritize women's suffrage above other considerations and unite women of both nationalist and unionist beliefs within the broader feminist movement. Mary Baker of the Irish Women's Suffrage Society summed up this position nicely: "As suffragists we are to have a single aim until we have the vote – party politics and party concerns are not for us."<sup>64</sup> Her use of the word "until" is crucial: suffragists must stand together to secure the vote, Baker asserts, but once this is accomplished, they are entitled to devote themselves to the next political debate as individuals.

The question McSwiney and Maloney debated was not whether women should receive the vote – for they both agreed they should – but when and how to fight for it. In often spiteful dialogue, each woman challenged the other's stance by attacking her political understanding. In response to Maloney's editorial on the Suffrage First policy, McSwiney retorts: "Are you so totally devoid of commonsense – not to speak of political

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<sup>62</sup> In 1918, women aged 30 or above were granted the vote.

<sup>63</sup> Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote*, 149.

<sup>64</sup> Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote*, 147.

acumen – that you cannot discriminate between the attitude of Nationalist women in Ireland and Party women in England?”<sup>65</sup> In turn, Maloney’s rebuttal completely dismisses McSwiney, stating flatly, “What Miss McSwiney lacks is political education.”<sup>66</sup> The women argue for the same end goal with strikingly different justification and rationale; rather than draw attention to this shared aim, they superficially denigrate one another. However, their other articles confirm a political prowess and dedication to their individual causes, rendering the mean-spirited attacks spurious.

Each woman purports to represent a larger group, though it is unclear how many women identified with each camp, and how many remained aloof. McSwiney insists that her stance is the “attitude...adopted by the vast majority of Nationalist suffragists.”<sup>67</sup> The question then follows, how many Nationalist suffragists were there? Certainly Unionist suffragists and Nationalist women existed, but the overlap of Nationalist suffragists is unknown. McSwiney’s argument is bolstered by the fact that Irish nationalism existed for centuries; ever since Henry VIII conquered the chiefdoms of Ireland in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Irish resented England’s presence and took action, however futile, to dispel imperialist advances. Nationalism was a family inheritance not limited to male heirs. It was no coincidence that the majority of the founding executive council of Cumann na mBan was related to leading figures of the Irish Volunteers.<sup>68</sup> Cumann na mBan aimed to recruit as many women as possible by scheduling its events to coincide with those of the Irish Volunteers ensuring that nationalist activism could be a family affair. For example,

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<sup>65</sup> “Correspondence,” *Irish Citizen*, May 2, 1914. In an attempt to identify with the international feminist movement, Irish suffragists developed an alliance with likeminded Britons. This partnership infuriated nationalists who otherwise were supportive of the appeal for universal suffrage.

<sup>66</sup> “Editorial: The Slave Women Again,” *Irish Citizen*, May 23, 1914.

<sup>67</sup> “Correspondence,” *Irish Citizen*, May 2, 1914.

<sup>68</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 93.

Cumann na mBan held its annual convention the same day as the Volunteers' so that women could travel to Dublin in the company of their male relatives.<sup>69</sup>

Later, when the Volunteers evolved into the guerilla militant IRA, the men called upon the women whom they could trust to deliver messages and disseminate propaganda. This relationship proved symbiotic: the IRA needed reliable support and the women sought political clout. As family members, women of Cumann na mBan were trusted, earning the political respect they desired. However, the familial dedication to the nationalist cause strengthened the movement, but often curtailed women's involvement. At times, men expected women to assume responsibilities in the political arena similar to their roles within the household: "[the relationship] was a division of labour that duplicated the differentiation of sex roles in the wider society and discouraged the expression of any alternative views."<sup>70</sup>

Unlike nationalism, women's suffrage was a bold, new movement. As poor transportation and communication isolated rural Ireland from the urban centers, much of Ireland's female population was cut off from the burgeoning suffrage movement.<sup>71</sup> Yet author S.R. Day writes of her promising discovery of suffragist women in rural county Kerry: "It was exhilarating to talk to such women; shrewd, capable, honest, they knew they wanted the vote, and knew why. Yet they had not been at the meeting. They could not leave their homes and their children."<sup>72</sup> Day's description illustrates rural women's desire for enfranchisement curbed by family obligations; however, given that Day published this comment in the *Irish Citizen*, one must be wary of exaggeration or

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<sup>69</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 98.

<sup>71</sup> Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote*, 21.

<sup>72</sup> S.R. Day, "Touring In Kerry," September 20, 1913.

hyperbole used for propaganda purposes. Day set out to bolster the Suffragist First argument, though her writing supports nationalism as well. By identifying the suffrage movement as the “newest phase on the emancipation of Irish people,” Day establishes feminism as a stage in the larger fight for emancipation, one that implicitly begins with independence from Britain.<sup>73</sup>

### ***Practical Politics and the Added Obstacles Facing Women***

Rancorous debates such as the ones published in the *Irish Citizen* created an artificial political divide between nationalist women and suffragist feminists. Ironically, this constructed divide fueled the opposing factions. Louise Ryan argues, “nationalism indirectly facilitated feminism by providing a vocabulary and strategies of dissent. It created an atmosphere of protest which facilitated feminist mobilization.”<sup>74</sup> Despite women’s insistence on choosing one movement to champion while renouncing all other causes, in reality, their actions supported both ideologies. However, without the other camp with which to argue, the women would have found themselves largely ignored. By crafting the debate between nationalism and feminism, politically active women guaranteed themselves a forum in which to voice their ideas. As men were largely unconcerned with feminist issues, through this forum women were able to raise male consciousness regarding the issue of universal suffrage.

Men who opposed women’s suffrage outright often claimed that women’s ignorance of politics should deny them the vote. While the female contributors to the *Irish Citizen* disprove this reasoning by the sophistication of their political essays, some

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<sup>73</sup> S.R. Day, “Touring In Kerry,” September 20, 1913.

<sup>74</sup> Ryan, “A Question of Loyalty,” 24.

addressed it directly. Sidney Gifford, writing under the pseudonym of John Brennan, argues the women's case:

...we find in every group, and on every council, that women are not only eligible, but well represented. In the Gaelic civilisation, which was never quite cast down and trampled out, and which the Gaelic League and Sinn Fein organisation are attempting to rebuild, the woman was the equal of the man in all things; she was never the woman of the harem, but the proud and independent comrade of her mate.<sup>75</sup>

Gifford's decision to argue her position as a man sheds light on her appraisal of men and women; whether she thought a man's name would seem more reputable, or that a woman should not argue her own case, it is clear she believed her argument would hold greater weight were it to originate from a male perspective. Months earlier, Francis Sheehy Skeffington presented a separate defense for women's suffrage founded on the principle of equity. He explains, "Irish women have contributed to build up local government and to make it a success... they have helped to lay the foundations. To refuse them that entry is inconsistent with the spirit of Nationalism."<sup>76</sup> Mr. Skeffington argues that nationalist and feminist ideologies do not contradict the other but rather reinforce the other; whereas McSwiney and Maloney view the debate as an *either-or* proposition, Francis Sheehy Skeffington perceives the possibility of it as an *and* debate.

Mr. Skeffington's contributions to the newspaper, while vital to our understanding of one interpretation of the nationalist-feminist debate, cannot be assumed to represent the opinions of all men. For this reason, the *Irish Citizen* can be misleading if taken at face value. In the eight pages of the monthly, three basic arguments are set forth: feminist goals trump nationalist, nationalist aims trump feminist, and nothing inherent in either ideology prevents the cooperation of both camps. Francis Sheehy Skeffington

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<sup>75</sup> John Brennan, "The True-Born Irishman," *Irish Citizen*, September 14, 1912.

<sup>76</sup> F. Sheehy Skeffington, M.A., "Home Rule and Votes for Women," *Irish Citizen*, July 13, 1912.

championed the third argument, as represented in the *Irish Citizen*. As most Irishmen found the issue of women's suffrage inconsequential, they largely ignored the issue, making Skeffington's voice unique.<sup>77</sup> Women demanded the prioritization of either feminism or nationalism, unprovoked by male politicians.

However, this prioritization was a necessary feature of realpolitik practiced by all political groups. McCarthy explains:

It is clear that Cumann na mBan (like the Volunteers and, later, Sinn Fein) had to work hard to hold many diverse shades of Irish separatism together within their ranks. A practical part of that effort was to avoid the discussion of [other] politics.<sup>78</sup>

In other words, in order to stand politically united, groups had to remain apolitical on other divisive issues. Furthermore, women's groups faced the obstacle of engaging in politics while negotiating the spheres that society deemed gender appropriate. For example, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington praised women for their knack for organization: "Women possess the genius for organisation, for skilled manipulation of effect. Their unfailing attention to details gives their meetings an element of the picturesque lacking in male-run assemblies."<sup>79</sup>

### ***The Organized Woman: Limitations to politically active women***

The characterization of the "organized woman" is repeated nearly five years later in another publication, the *Catholic Bulletin*. The *Bulletin*, published from 1911 to 1939,

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<sup>77</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 84. While outside the immediate scope of this paper, an investigation into the range of male perspectives on the issue of suffrage as presented in the Irish press would prove interesting and fit nicely into the final, "new integrated history," in Cullen's outline for the progression of women's history.

<sup>78</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 20.

<sup>79</sup> Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, "Mass Meeting of Irish Women: An Impression from the Platform," June 8, 1912.

was known for its conservative content and far-right, zealous editors.<sup>80</sup> Although many religious leaders sympathized with the nationalist cause, few condoned militaristic means to achieving this end.<sup>81</sup> However, the *Catholic Bulletin* memorialized the participants of the Easter Rising in episodic tributes entitled, “Events of Easter Week.”<sup>82</sup> The *Bulletin* failed to give any attention to the women involved until nearly a year after the rebellion: “We are glad to be able to publish this month, brief biographical notices of some of the Irishwomen—the mothers and widows—whose sacrifices through the Easter Rising have imprinted themselves indelibly on Ireland’s story.”<sup>83</sup> The publication provided a thumbnail biography for each of the women.

Years later, following Hanna Sheehy Skeffington’s generalization in the *Irish Citizen*, the *Bulletin* reported a certain Countess Plunkett as having “the great gift of organisation to a rare degree.”<sup>84</sup> Granted, two references to the organizational capabilities of women over the course of five years is hardly startling; however, this example typifies the manner in which women were acknowledged and praised during the early twentieth century. Rather than command, manage, govern, or orchestrate, women *organize*; rather than directly participating in Ireland’s struggle for independence, women raised sons for this purpose: “A brave Irishwoman, [Countess Plunkett] has reared her children to be true

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<sup>80</sup> Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland*, 335, 351.

<sup>81</sup> In a 1925 issue of “The Official Paper of the Organisation” published by Cumann na mBan, there is an advertisement encouraging readers to “Subscribe to the *Catholic Bulletin*.” We can assume that the *Bulletin* advertised with the Cumann na mBan periodical thinking there was overlap among each newspaper’s audience, locating *Catholic Bulletin* decidedly on the nationalist side.

<sup>82</sup> Other monthly installments include “Children’s Corner” and “Mothers and Daughters.” By titling these sections by their intended readership, the *Bulletin* implies that the other sections of the newspaper are not meant to be read by mothers, daughters, and other women.

<sup>83</sup> “Events of Easter Week,” *Catholic Bulletin* VII (February 1917): 125. One woman, the late Mrs. Kent, received a fleeting reference months earlier in the *Bulletin* – “the tragic story of the Kent family of Castlelyons, involving a widowed mother and four devoted sons.” – but only attained printed homage after her death months later.

<sup>84</sup> “Events of Easter Week,” *Catholic Bulletin* VII (February 1917): 126.

to the land of their birth.”<sup>85</sup> In her essay, “Feminism and Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century,” Ida Blom explains: “Emphasizing education as a special female responsibility and stressing the education of boys as future protectors of the nation emphasized gender differences.”<sup>86</sup> Although the women in Countess Plunkett’s generation were primarily relegated to issues of the hearth and home, the women of the next generation organized nursing training and certification, fundraising efforts, spread propaganda, and arranged for cultural activities within their communities.

Through these organizational efforts, women learned they were capable of operating within the political arena to which they were exposed. Although women championed separate causes, their experiences were analogous. The Irishwomen’s Franchise League, Irishwomen’s Suffrage and Local Government Association, and Cumann na mBan represented autonomous women’s groups, and therefore were permitted the same metaphorical political leash by the patriarchal establishment. Much of the women’s work consisted of fundraising and propaganda distribution, tasks delegated to women in arenas other than politics, most notably the Catholic Church.<sup>87</sup> Advocating nationalism or feminism, women learned similar skills through comparable experiences.

### ***The Shades of Irish Feminism***

Feminist historian Karen Offen explains that two types of feminisms emerge during this time period: relational and individualist. Relational feminism rallied for

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<sup>85</sup> “Events of Easter Week,” *Catholic Bulletin* VII (February 1917): 126. In this specific case, Countess Plunkett did indeed raise influential children. Of her seven children, all of her sons dedicated themselves to the nationalist cause: Joseph Mary was executed and John Patrick and George Oliver were sentenced to ten years of prison all for their involvement in the Easter Rising.

<sup>86</sup> Ida Blom, “Feminism and Nationalism in the Early Twentieth Century: A Cross-Cultural Perspective,” *Journal of Women’s History* 7, 86.

<sup>87</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 119-120.

women's rights in relation to men, whereas individualist feminism championed rights for the individual, man or woman. Relational feminism emphasized that women's unique ability to bear children, and penchant for nurturing, should complement men's capacities and earn recognition that such contributions are just as important to greater society.<sup>88</sup> Louise Ryan echoes Offen's argument, adding that Irish feminists demonstrated "a range of feminisms in their attempts to come to terms with Irish nationalism."<sup>89</sup> Early twentieth century Irish nationalism and feminism centered around liberation, though there were clear distinctions on which women focused.<sup>90</sup> While it is tempting to designate the two factions of nationalist and suffragist women neatly into relational and individualist feminists respectively, the task is far from black and white.

To begin with, at the turn of the century, women did not use such nuanced terms to articulate their feminist beliefs, if they these beliefs were articulated at all.<sup>91</sup> However, it appears as if women fighting for nationalism supported the principles of relational feminism and those pressing for universal suffrage would have identified as individualist. Nationalist women commonly exonerated Irish men of their patriarchal habits, blaming their behavior on the influence of imperialistic British men.<sup>92</sup> To many nationalist women, the family unit could achieve its pinnacle if, and only if, "the contaminating

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<sup>88</sup> Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism, a Comparative Historical Approach," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 1 (1988).

<sup>89</sup> Lois A. West, "Feminist Intra/Internationalism, Dualisms, and Method: A Response to Louise Ryan's 'A Question of Loyalty,'" *Women's Studies International Forum* 20 (1997): 547.

<sup>90</sup> Of the distinctions, the issue of violence was probably the most apparent. Cumann na mBan's support of the militant IRA – and in some cases, Cumann na mBan members' participation in training and combat – presented a huge obstacle for the reconciliation of the two women's factions as feminists, in principle, were also pacifists.

<sup>91</sup> Blom explains: "Defining feminism is no easy task. Indeed, to use this term at all when speaking about the early 1900s is anachronistic. Nevertheless, I use it as a collective denomination for apolitical ideology, a foundation for actions to redress gender imbalance in access to power and rights in society." (Blom, 82.)

<sup>92</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, xiv.

effects of foreign influence are removed.”<sup>93</sup> Suffragists held Irish men to a higher standard and therefore rejected this notion of temporary absolution. As mentioned earlier, for many women during this time, primary access to political activism came through male relatives; in this context, the relational association is not superficial.<sup>94</sup> However, this affiliation also worked against women. Men opposed to universal suffrage argued that women would simply mimic their husband’s or father’s political persuasion, rather than draw their own political conclusions if given the vote.<sup>95</sup> Demanding equality within the patriarchal society was an important step for Irish women, and one way to do so was through a familial relation.

### ***The Easter Rising: A unified call for emancipation***

Relational ties bound women to female relatives as well as male. Kathleen Clarke, founding member of Cumann na mBan and widow of one of the leaders of the Rising, wrote a letter in 1936 in which she asserted the responsibility of all women to defend that which their mothers and sisters earned in the Easter Rising. She writes, “I think it is up to every Irish woman to see that no man or no group of men robs us of our status enshrined in [the] Proclamation.”<sup>96</sup> Historians support this notion of collective ownership – that republican men and women waged their first battle for independence as united comrades.

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<sup>93</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 255. The full excerpt reads: “In Republican mythology, Irish men used to be non-oppressive and this dubious proposition somehow becomes transmuted into an assurance that they will automatically become so again—as soon as the contaminating effects of ‘foreign influence’ are removed.”

<sup>94</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 121.

<sup>95</sup> McCooile, *No Ordinary Women*, 86.

<sup>96</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 243.

Despite the poor planning and confusion leading up to the Easter Rising,<sup>97</sup> its effects were deeply significant for Irish women: approximately 150 nationalist women were directly involved in the rising,<sup>98</sup> nursing, cooking, and delivering messages, but all Irish women understood the implications of the Proclamation, issued by the self-proclaimed provisional government, that promised equal rights to men and women:

The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens... Until our arms have brought the opportune moment for the establishment of a permanent National Government, representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrages of all her men and women, the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.<sup>99</sup>

Irishwomen never forgot that the first demonstration of nationalism was simultaneously the first official affirmation of feminism.

The women had good reason to put faith in the future Republic, as the leaders of 1916 valued the women's involvement in the nationalist cause and expressed gratitude for their contributions to the Rising. At the inaugural meeting, Patrick Pearse voiced his reason for joining the Irish Volunteers as a means to defend "the rights common to Irish men and Irish women."<sup>100</sup> McCool reports an occasion when certain male soldiers threatened to desert if ordered to fight alongside women. James Connolly allegedly

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<sup>97</sup> The Rising was planned for Easter Sunday, April 23, 1916; however, due to a series of countermanding orders, the Rising did not begin until Monday. Because of the confusion, many fewer men and women turned out to fight than the leaders had originally accounted for.

<sup>98</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 67-8. McCarthy compares the varying estimates of the number of women involved during the Rising arriving at 150 women: around 80-90 within Dublin and the remaining women were volunteering in Galway and Wexford. The women involved were predominantly young and unmarried.

<sup>99</sup> Patrick Pearse, et. al, "The Proclamation of the Irish Republic," as printed on April 24, 1916. At the time of the Rising, the majority of Dubliners were unsupportive of the rebels who were destroying their own city. A group of wives, known as "Separation Allowance" women, received government payments while their husbands were off at war. The Separation Allowance women led the hostilities against the rebels for the disruption they caused many poor Dubliners. After the British executed leaders of the rebellion, public opinion turned sympathetic to their deceased countrymen and only further fueled anti-British sentiments.

<sup>100</sup> As quoted in Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 90.

replied, “if none of the men turned out, the fight would go on with the women.”<sup>101</sup>

Indeed, Connolly never shied from voicing his support for universal suffrage. In 1915, he spoke out against the “economic conscription”<sup>102</sup> in Irish factories:

Women must protect themselves. Sex distinctions are harmful alike to men and women... Women must organise. They must ask for a minimum wage; and insist upon having it. They must ask for war bonuses. They must give the employers even more trouble than do men. They must make a row about the parliamentary vote!<sup>103</sup>

These men did not merely preach gender equality, but practiced it as well. Patrick Pearse trusted Elizabeth O’Farrell with the crucial responsibility of negotiating the surrender with the British forces at the end of the weeklong rebellion.

This combined effort of nationalism and feminism proved inspiring, yet ultimately devastating, for the women who aligned themselves with the nationalist camp. The gender-equal republic for which they fought failed to materialize. The leaders of the Rising who authored the Proclamation were the most sympathetic to the feminist cause but in a blow to Irish nationalism and Irish feminism, every one of the 1916 Rising leaders were executed. This demonstration of combined nationalist and feminist ideals was the exception, not the rule. More often, nationalist and suffragist groups championed one primary goal first; if, and only if, the opportunity presented they would then promote

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<sup>101</sup> McCoolle, *No Ordinary Women*, 31.

<sup>102</sup> “Economic conscription” is the term used to describe the mandated discriminatory hiring practices during World War I in Ireland. The British army was suffering an unanticipated number of casualties and needed more soldiers. Rather than instate conscription, the government forced British-owned factories to hire no man between the ages of 16 and 62 so that the only work available would be to enlist. Nationalist women urged other women not to take the vacant jobs on nationalist and feminist principles: they resented Britain’s tactics and the fact that women were never paid equal wages.

<sup>103</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 253.

secondary objectives. The letter Cumann na mBan sent to the American government in 1918 is evidence of this trend.<sup>104</sup>

Addressed “To The President and House of Congress of The United States of America,” the letter opens with a plea:

We, the undersigned, representing a large body of Irish Women whose President was condemned to death for her share in a struggle for the freedom of our country, make an appeal to you, and we base our appeal, first, on the generosity of the American Administration in all things affecting Women’s lives and welfare, and secondly, on your recognition, many times extended, of the justice of Ireland’s demand for political freedom.<sup>105</sup>

To achieve an Irish republic, Cumann na mBan seems willing to employ any rhetorical tactic and seek help from unlikely sources.<sup>106</sup> The group praises the world leader for its patriarchal habits, a decidedly anti-feminist assertion. Yet the women’s group does not abandon feminist issues entirely; rather, the request for universal suffrage appears in the last line of the letter, as opposed to sharing primacy with the plea for an Irish republic in the opening paragraph. When the letter finally focuses on women’s issues, Cumann na mBan proudly demands what it believes it deserves: “the recognition of an Irish Republic virtually in existence since 1916 – the only Republic which from its inauguration was prepared to give women their full place in the Councils of their Nation.”<sup>107</sup> Clearly, the women’s group believes the Irish republic has potential for gender-equality and aims to

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<sup>104</sup> Although the document is undated, historians surmise the letter was written in January, 1918, during Woodrow Wilson’s term in office.

<sup>105</sup> Cumann na mBan, “To The President and Houses of Congress of The United States of America,” Dublin, 1918.

<sup>106</sup> One must remember the historical context of this letter: the end of the First World War, Britain and America victorious over the Central powers. Wilson and the allied powers hoped to rebuild and construct European democracies in the wake of the First World War; however, this letter was an ambitious – and arguably naïve – plot to seek aid from the United States, the ally of Irish nationalist’s enemy. McCarthy explains that while this act of reaching out to the American government – the supposed enemy – for help after the war seems naïve, Cumann na mBan was not the only Irish nationalist group who believed the US would take an interest in their plight.

<sup>107</sup> Cumann na mBan, “To The President and Houses of Congress of The United States of America,” Dublin, 1918.

achieve national independence before waging the battle for equal rights, as the latter might materialize with the fulfillment of the first.

### *Irish Collective Memory*

While modern historians lament the small amount of scholarship devoted to Irish women's history, contemporary sources also noticed this lack of attention. The *Catholic Bulletin* blamed its dearth of substantial information on the women themselves, for withholding details:

As was our previous experience, the repugnance of these noble women to the notoriety of the press renders it extremely difficult, where not impossible, to obtain the information desired, and we are, therefore, indebted to mutual friends for the particulars here submitted.<sup>108</sup>

At first glance, this assertion appears to be a weak excuse for poor reporting. However, Ward maintains that once women's direct involvement in politics was over, most "kept silent about their past life."<sup>109</sup> When women did provide insight into their participation, they often humbly understated their role. Elizabeth O'Farrell, whose boots appear beneath Pearse's overcoat in the photograph, is one such example.

In her own account of the Rising, she began the detailed document with humility, taking only partial credit for her contributions: "I spent the night helping to nurse them...helping to cook..."<sup>110</sup> As she continues, however, O'Farrell conveys her role more realistically. She describes her trek through the firing line as "a very difficult job

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<sup>108</sup> "Events of Easter Week," *Catholic Bulletin* VII (February 1917): 125.

<sup>109</sup> Ward, introduction to, *No Ordinary Women* by Sinead McCoolle, 13.

<sup>110</sup> The National Commemoration Committee, "In memory of Elizabeth O'Farrell 1883-1959: the story of the 1916 surrender" (Dublin: The Workers' Party, 1981), 2. It is unclear when O'Farrell originally wrote the document, though as she quotes exact dialogue, one may presume little time had elapsed since the rising.

and I had to take my life in my hands several times.”<sup>111</sup> O’Farrell’s modest prose is emblematic of a larger trend Ward identifies: “Most of the women who wrote accounts of their activities eliminated any trace of heroism from their experiences.”<sup>112</sup>

I first came across the photograph of Pearse and O’Farrell in a text outlining the details of the weeklong rebellion. The image was reproduced with the simple caption:

Patrick Pearse surrenders to General Lowe at the corner of Moore Street and Parnell Street at 2.30pm on Saturday. Lowe is accompanied by his son, while hidden from view behind Pearse is Nurse Elizabeth O’Farrell, who had conveyed messages between rebels and military.<sup>113</sup>

Nearly a century after the photograph was taken, a Dubliner by the name of Conor McCabe posted an entry on the Dublin Opinion weblog entitled, “Women, Photoshop, and the 1916 Rising.” The short piece references this now-famous picture of the rebels, questioning whether it had been doctored in order to dislodge the nurse from history.<sup>114</sup> The same photograph was printed on the cover of popular historian Tim Pat Coogan’s book, *Ireland in the Twentieth Century*; however, in this reproduction, O’Farrell’s feet were erased from the image, completely absenting her image from the surrender.<sup>115</sup>

McCabe writes:

I suppose this is what happens when aesthetics dictates history. Tim Pat Coogan may have set out to write an old-style nationalist history of Ireland, and as such the cover sits perfectly with his attempt. All except “the boys” are left out of

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<sup>111</sup> The National Commemoration Committee, “In memory of Elizabeth O’Farrell,” 8.

<sup>112</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 113. McCool reminds us that many women were ultimately ashamed of their involvement with Cumann na mBan or other organizations that fell on the “losing” side of the Irish Civil War. Many of the women who actively participated were young and single at the time; so as not to tarnish their reputation, some never spoke of their contribution, even to their future families.

<sup>113</sup> Shane Hegarty and Fintan O’Toole, *The Irish Times Book of The 1916 Rising* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006), 132.

<sup>114</sup> Conor McCabe, post “Women, Photoshop, and the 1916 Rising,” The Dublin Opinion Blog, comment posted July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2007, <http://dublinopinion.com/2007/07/14/women-photoshop-and-the-1916-rising/> (accessed September 29, 2008). Another blogger, 511kev, referenced a RTE radio documentary that cites the English press as responsible for the removal of O’Farrell from the photograph. Allegedly the press believed the image would look more “heroic” if a woman was not present.

<sup>115</sup> *Ireland in the Twentieth Century* was published in 2006, ninety years after the photograph was taken.

Coogan's view of the past – in some cases, as with O'Farrell, with a “pro-active” Photoshop editor as the gleeful assistant.<sup>116</sup>

Dubliners responded to the blog post, creating a dynamic online dialogue – a virtual meeting place like the textual meeting place created decades earlier through the Irish press. This discussion suggests that the issue of women's history remains at the forefront of Irish collective memory, and that this memory is still challenged and questioned today. Here, McCabe accuses Coogan of writing “an old-style nationalist history,” a fair assessment given his lack of sensitivity about the doctoring of the photograph. However, Coogan is not the only guilty historian.

### ***In Conclusion: The charge of future historians***

In December, 1921, the English and Irish governments signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, drawing to an end the War of Independence.<sup>117</sup> The treaty proved highly controversial as it failed to secure an autonomous Irish Republic. Cumann na mBan was the first organization to reject the treaty, resulting in dire consequences for the cause of women's suffrage.<sup>118</sup> The organization's opposition to the treaty led pro-treaty politicians to argue against the enfranchisement of women, in the fear that all women would join the anti-treaty ranks. While the notion of women voting in a unified bloc was unsound, male politicians capitalized on this opportunity to limit the franchise. Despite the fact that

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<sup>116</sup> McCabe, “Women, Photoshop, and the 1916 Rising.”

<sup>117</sup> The Anglo-Irish Treaty, or An Conradh Angla-Éireannach in Irish, ended the Irish War of Independence by granting the southern 26 counties autonomous dominion while the northern six counties opted to remain part of the United Kingdom. Five plenipotentiaries represented Ireland in London and signed the treaty that offered Ireland dominion status. (Mary McSwiney was considered for one of the positions but ultimately was not asked to join the group.) The Irish Free State had the same constitutional status within the British Empire as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa: the dream of a sovereign Republic remained just that. The treaty was subsequently ratified despite a fierce debate among Irish nationalists of whether to accept it, as some viewed it as an inadequate compromise. The debate led to a split in the nationalist party, resulting in a civil war that the pro-treaty side eventually won.

<sup>118</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 171.

Cumann na mBan's stance greatly affected the push for universal Irish suffrage, when assessing the group's rhetoric and actions from 1914, the historian cannot take into consideration the organization's staunch nationalist position nearly a decade later.

Although hindsight may be a helpful tool for the historian, assigning the motives of Irish women in the early twentieth century through historical retrospect proves unfair. The nationalist and feminist women of Ireland's revolutionary period must be understood and analyzed within their own cultural context and not held to modern day standards. The first historians to address Irish women's history were unfairly critical of their historical subjects. As the author of the seminal work for this historiography, Ward sets unreasonable standards for the female activists, standards that subsequent historians adopted as well. The resulting dialogue between modern feminist historians and the women of Ireland's revolutionary period reads harshly, and therefore unconvincing.

Moreover, historians emphasize women's rhetoric far more than they do their actions. This clouds the historians' visions so that they are unable to see beyond the written debate. Although the debate appears locked, nationalism versus feminism, in truth, the advancement of each group only furthered the progress of the other. In 2007, McCarthy began to widen the previously limited scope and expand upon the scholarship that had focused merely on rhetorical analysis. I sought to search further, to answer a two-part question that remains open-ended: did women involved in politics during the revolutionary period need to separate nationalist and feminist agendas, or did they successfully combine the two?

When analyzing the women of Ireland's revolutionary period in the appropriate context, one finds that the majority of women lacked the wherewithal even to participate

in politics. *Cumann na mBan*'s inaugural meeting was called for four o'clock in the afternoon on a weekday; while this posed little problem for white-collar workers and more affluent women, hourly wage earners could not have left work to attend.<sup>119</sup> At the turn of the century, Irish men were limited in their options for education, work, social opportunities, and civic engagement – women were afforded even fewer. The rare, fortunate women who received an education found few professions open to them commensurate with their schooling. Still, extraordinary women pepper Irish history at the turn of the century: Anna Parnell, Maud Gonne, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, and Countess Markievicz are some examples. Many other anonymous women participated in politics: “woman the consumer had become woman the activist,” as Ward explains.<sup>120</sup> For the majority of Irish women, political action came only after political education, which was most readily and widely available through the productions of the Irish press.

The Irish press catered to a wide sampling of Irish demographics at the turn of the century, women included. In traditionally conservative periodicals, sections were designated for mothers, daughters, and wives. Other, more progressive newspapers were managed by women. These papers presented nationalist and feminist issues from Ireland and abroad and attracted female and male readers alike. Print media acted as a textual meeting place for isolated women and encouraged them to take part in any ways they could: organizing fundraisers, nursing wounded rebels, or disseminating propaganda, as examples. Perhaps most importantly, the newspapers acted as a forum for debate, allowing readers to keep abreast with the nationalist-feminist dialogue of the day, and writers to voice their controversial opinions. Suffragism may have been a relatively new

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<sup>119</sup> McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 15.

<sup>120</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 186.

movement compared to nationalism, but it earned a place in the political spotlight by debating the established political tradition.

Although many women were sympathetic to both nationalist and feminist movements, women structured the debate so that individuals were forced to prioritize their political goals. This tendency of organizations to rally around an individual issue was not peculiar; significant realpolitik advantages existed for groups that focused on a single issue while choosing not to address others. For this reason, the women should not be questioned for following the political norm and choosing one issue to champion. However, the ideologies of nationalism and feminism are predominantly similar. While the women might have worked in tandem, they instead forged an artificial divide, creating two sides from which to debate. The dialogue featured in the *Irish Citizen* between Cumann na mBan member Mary McSwiney and suffragist Helena Moloney demonstrates that women understood this ideological parallel but chose to enforce it, rather than unite. Debating among themselves, the women facilitated an outlet for expression.

With a clearer understanding of what to look for when sifting through archives – evidence of actions, not simply rhetoric – the historian is poised to better explain the ‘either-or’ construction of the nationalist-feminist debate. The articulated debate between nationalism and feminism preceding the 1916 Easter Rising is fairly well-trodden, and for good reason. Contemporary newspapers and periodicals provide a rich and valuable source for the historian, though their potential may be fully realized only when analyzed in conjunction with the activities and undertakings of the women’s groups. The

publications have preserved the rhetoric of the past; now historians must dig deeper to uncover the actions that accompanied this discourse.

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