**Unlikely Revolutionaries: The Curious Case of Female Nationalism in Cumann na mBan and Beyond**

In April of 1914, 100 women convened in Wynne’s Hotel, Dublin, in order to draft the constitution of a new organization- to advance the cause of Irish liberty, [and] to organise Irishwomen in the furtherance of this objective.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus began Cumann na mBan, an entirely female paramilitary nationalist group, and the only organization of its kind in Europe, even at a time when nationalism was very much in vogue on the continent. Previous scholarship conceptualizes Cumann na mBan through a feminist perspective. However, the most distinctive aspect of Cumann na mBan was not its femininity, but rather, its mode of mobilization; it was comprised of women that were motivated to organize themselves militarily in support of the nationalist cause. For my Honors History senior thesis, I plan to study the agency of certain women involved in Cumann na mBan, particularly in the aftermath of the Irish War of Independence. The actions and motivations of women involved in the revolution on all sides of the ideological spectrum will reveal how women were able to integrate themselves into a nationalist ideology created by men. The correspondence and testimonies of women on either side of the treaty debate will reveal what drew them to active engagement in the nationalist cause, and how Cumann na mBan specifically aided in their concurrent development as nationalists and as women. This summer, I plan to travel to Dublin to examine archival evidence at the National Library of Ireland, University College Dublin, and the National Archives, particularly witness statements and correspondence of women on both sides of the treaty debate in 1922, which will reveal how Irish culture and history allowed women the agency to jump barriers of expectation and take an active role in deciding the destiny of their nation.

**Background**

In the tide of nationalist sentiment that arose in the years before the 1916 Revolution, Cumann na mBan was formed as an auxiliary organization to the Irish Volunteers, to aid the nascent military group in any way possible. The main chapter in Dublin was closely followed by newly-formed branches across the country. Women worked for the Red Cross, served as couriers, gathered intelligence on scouting expeditions, and transferred arms to rebel strongholds.[[2]](#footnote-2) On multiple occasions, women joined in armed combat: Helena Molony was among the insurgents on the siege of Dublin Castle, and Countess Markievicz shot a police officer in the head as second-in-command of a troop of combatants at St Stephen's Green.[[3]](#footnote-3) Mary Colum neatly summarized the role of the organization: “we are not the auxiliaries or the handmaidens or the camp followers of the Volunteers—we are their allies."[[4]](#footnote-4) Womanhood itself is generally the foremost characteristic in any kind of female revolutionary organization. Such groups often arise because women believe that their contribution to victory will merit greater autonomy or suffrage in return. Cumann na mBan was different, in that women did indeed participate militarily, and a nationalist agenda- not their female identity- was their defining characteristic. Why was Irish society conducive to the flourishing of this type of organization? This question is broad, and so I intend to approach it through a select number of case studies. I will examine the correspondence and memorabilia of six women, from each side of the subsequent Civil War split. The correspondence, testimonies, memoirs, and witness statements of these women will reveal what impelled them to activism in the first place, what kept them involved in fighting, and what familial and gender paradigms granted them the agency to reconcile their femininity and their nationalist aspirations.

Existing scholarship on Cumann na mBan and women of the Rising tends to display the organization through a feminist lens. I would prefer to instead explore how and why a women’s nationalist group arose in Ireland specifically, and how the organization bound women with diverse views on Irish separatism together through a common goal.  I would like to study why Cumann na mBan and the nationalist cause was such a draw for Irish women, and examine their subsequent conception of their role in the nationalist politics, rather than quantifying the effect of their military engagement by their increased agency post-Rising. The creation of the new state was not necessarily favorable for women, and so their political actions and ideologies must have been based on some earlier motivations. Examining the ideas and opinions of women on either side of the treaty debate will yield insight into why a broad spectrum of women were drawn to the nationalist cause in the first place. This method of study, delving into the evidence left by a sample of members of Cumann na mBan after the Rising, will add a new perspective to existing scholarship.

**Methodology**

I plan to work mainly in the University College Dublin archives, the National Library of Ireland archives, and the National Archives, each of which contain extensive correspondence and writings of women from the Rising, through the ‘Four Glorious Years’, to the creation of the Free State. The nature of my research, examining the thoughts and motivations of women of Cumann na mBan before the creation of the Free State, dictates that I rely primarily on primary sources, including correspondence, personal diaries and journals, and witness statements. The Eithne Coyle, Mary MacSwiney, and Lily O’Brennan papers at UCD, the Sheehy Skeffington Collection and diaries and correspondence of Rosamund Jacob at the National Library, and the prison registers and crime branch special files at the National Archives are of particular interest to me. These documents span beyond the years of the Rising, and include the writings of women across the ideological spectrum, which will allow me to best craft my argument as to how Irish society was set up in such a way that allowed women to take agency in the fight for their nation's autonomy.

**Academic Credentials and Learning Goals**

Currently, I am enrolled in the Honors Methodology course, which provides an extensive introduction to archival and secondary source research in preparation for writing a senior thesis. In addition, I will be working with Aedín Clements, Notre Dame’s resident Irish Studies librarian, for direction in my eventual archival work in Ireland. I am working under the supervision of Professor Rory Rapple, who specializes in Irish history, and has personal experience with Cumann na mBan as his grandmother held a leadership role in the organization. I am currently taking Professor Rapple’s course on early modern Ireland, to provide context to the period I am researching. I studied for a few weeks in Ireland last summer, at Notre Dame’s O’Connell House, and met Kevin Whelan, a professor of Irish history who will be a valuable resource during my time in Dublin. I also will be collaborating with professors in other specialties, including Katie Jarvis, a French historian, and John Deak, who specializes in the Hapsburg empire and early modern Europe, to lend a cross-cultural lens to my research.

In a time of increasing political and ideological instability in Europe, it is more important than ever to examine the evolving ideas and beliefs that have shaped the continent into what it is today. The recent revival of nationalist sentiment across Europe is what initially piqued my interest in Cumann na mBan. My goal in undertaking this project, along with completing my senior thesis, is to examine why it was necessary for women to create their own space to achieve nationalist aims, to discover how they did so, and to infer why Irish women seemed more willing or able to exercise political agency than women from other European nations.

**Itinerary**

My intended dates of travel are July 23 to August 13, departing Chicago on the 23 and arriving in New York on August 13. I intend to fly through the night on Sunday July 23, arriving Monday morning in Dublin. I will acclimate myself, and be ready to begin archival research on Tuesday July 25. I plan to work from Tuesday July 25 to Saturday July 29 in the National Library Archives, open 9:30 to 19:45 on Tuesday and Wednesday, 9:30 to 16:45 on Thursday and Friday, and Saturday from 9:30 to 12:45. From July 31 to August 4, I will work in the UCD archives. The active hours are 10:00-17:00 Monday through Thursday, and 10:00-16:00 on Friday. On August 6, I plan on visiting the Kilmainham Gaol Museum, which houses the letters of Helena Molony. I will spend the remainder of the week at the National Archives, open from 9:15 – 17:00 Monday through Friday. I will depart Dublin early morning on Sunday August 13.

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1. Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Doughcloyne, Wilton, Cork: The Collins Press, 2014), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christi McCallum, “And They'll March with Their Brothers to Freedom- Cumann na mBan, Nationalism, and Women's Rights in Ireland 1900–1923,” (Thesis, Florida State University, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Senia Paseta, "Markievicz, Constance Georgine Countess Markievicz Gore-Booth," *Dictionary of Irish Biography,*

(ed.) James McGuire, James Quinn, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism Gender, Violence, and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914-2004* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)