



## Limerick 1912-1922

The impact of women on public life in Limerick during the seminal decade of 1912-22 was probably most pronounced in the political and military actions of the republican organisation Cumann na mBan. While the influence of the organisation on the national stage may remain debatable, in Limerick at least, Cumann na mBan was a revolutionary organisation, prepared to offer continual resistance to British rule. However, the women of Cumann na mBan do not feature as prominently as the men of the Irish Volunteers/Irish Republican Army in many of the historical sources from the period. For instance, of the nearly seventy Bureau of Military History Witness Statements that concentrate on events in Limerick between 1913 and 1921, only five are made by women, and a number of these relate primarily to the activities of male relatives of the witness.

Notwithstanding a dearth of relevant primary material, Deirdre McCarthy has completed a significant assessment of the contribution of the Limerick branch of Cumann na mBan to the republican campaign for political independence. The Limerick branch was founded on 5 June 1914, with over 100 women joining. The close relationship between Cumann na mBan and the Irish Volunteers was demonstrated by the fact that all correspondence was to be sent to 1 Hartstonge Street, Volunteer Headquarters. The Daly sisters, led by Madge, dominated Cumann na mBan in Limerick. The split in the Volunteers, over John Redmond's policy of support for recruiting for World War One, had repercussions within Cumann na mBan. Redmond had sought to attain control of the Volunteers, and a similar effort was made to permeate Cumann na mBan. When the Redmondite faction in Cumann na mBan failed to gain access to funds that had been raised for the Volunteers prior to the split, they resigned en masse and formed the National Volunteers Ladies' Association, an organisation unique to Limerick but that soon faded away. The several hundred pounds that had been raised was passed to Eoin MacNeill's Volunteers to fund the purchase of arms.

In May 1915, the *Irish Volunteer* newspaper described the Limerick city branch of Cumann na mBan as one of the most 'flourishing' in the country. The comments of local Volunteer organiser Robert Monteith on Cumann na mBan (even if they do perhaps begin in a slightly patronising tone) were applicable throughout the period:

“Not only did the women learn to use firearms, but they showed a lead to the men in many ways. They organised an efficient Red Cross service, collected funds, were active recruiters, and relieved the monotony of hard work by social affairs, dances, outings etc. In fact without their help the Volunteer movement could never have been



the success it was. These women did not theorise, they did practical work. At Limerick they accompanied us on all field work in order to train the Red Cross section ... they knew what should be done, they knew how to do it, and they did it. With the collection of funds it was the same. All socials managed by Cumann na mBan were a financial success, and the proceeds went to the arms and equipment fund or toward the purchase of Red Cross supplies.”

Despite all this, not all the women of Limerick were supportive of the Irish Volunteers. In 1915 the impact of the war became more keenly felt in Limerick. Food supplies decreased but despite high prices many soldiers’ families were better off than they had been before the war due to the separation allowance. On 23 May 1915, Whitsunday, there was a large Volunteer parade through the city. The organised, persistent, and extensive barracking and physical challenges that the Volunteers encountered, particularly at the hands of the women of the Irishtown district and of Mungret Street specifically, many of whom had men-folk serving in the British army, highlighted the state of public opinion at the time. This was around the area where the women of the city had heroically defended a breach in the walls against William of Orange’s besieging forces in 1690. The ‘separation wives’ of the Irishtown received an allowance in compensation for the absence of their soldier husbands and feared the potential threat to their livelihoods posed by the Volunteers. The separation allowance, however, was viewed in some quarters as a system that facilitated, if not encouraged, excessive consumption of alcohol. A number of soldiers’ wives were brought before the City Petty Sessions in September 1915 and it was claimed that ‘something should be done to put an end to the drinking habits prevalent among these women ... which, to say the least, constituted a grave scandal’. One magistrate even proposed that some form of supervision be imposed on soldiers’ wives in receipt of separation allowance so as to direct their spending.

Robert Monteith’s comments above might seem to suggest that Cumann na mBan played a strictly auxiliary role to the Volunteers but this was not always the case. Admittedly, Cumann na mBan was designed to function primarily as an auxiliary organisation, facilitating and supporting the work of male republicans, and in fulfilling this function Cumann na mBan contributed significantly to the republican movement. However, Madge Daly, for one, often dictated to, rather than simply followed the lead of, her male colleagues. She had a direct and controlling influence, for instance, on one of the major developments in the republican campaign in Limerick, namely a split within the ranks of the City Volunteers from 1917 until



1921. Furthermore, on at least one occasion in Limerick, members of Cumann na mBan participated directly in the military campaign by assuming a combat function.

Also during this period of 1912-22, in the municipal election of January 1920, a woman was elected to Limerick Corporation for the first time and, in April 1921, another woman served as the first female Mayor of Limerick. These women, Eileen Crowe and Máire O'Donovan, were representing Sinn Féin, but they were also members of Cumann na mBan. Sinn Féin, unlike the Irish Parliamentary Party's grassroots organisation, the United Irish League, did not exclude women from membership. There were women members in eighteen of the sixty Sinn Féin clubs in Limerick at the time of the Truce in July 1921, when nine per cent, or 401 out of a total membership of 4,698, of Limerick Sinn Féiners were women.

Of course, Cumann na mBan was not without its critics in Limerick. When a 'Woman's Day of Protest' against conscription was held in St. John's Square in the city on 6 June 1918, the socialist *Bottom Dog* newspaper suggested that it did not involve a procession because this would have forced the middle-class members of the organisation to walk through the slum areas of the city and to be accompanied by women from such areas:

“Everyone of these so-called middle-classes should be compelled to spend at least two nights a week in Jones Row or Wilkinson's Bow and we would soon have processions not only against conscription but against such damnable housing conditions.”

The members of Cumann na mBan came not from Jones Row or Wilkinson's Bow but from wealthy merchant families, and were well educated.