

Women and History 1912-1922

1912-1922 was not only a pivotal decade in Irish history but a period of transformation – an era in which the political and social structures were contested, altered and re-formed. In just ten years the Ireland that had been at the turn of the century was now irrevocably and unrecognisably changed. It had gone from a country under British rule to a partitioned country, imposing both a Free State and a state bound with Britain. It was a decade that saw the formation of opposing military groups, the outbreak of the First World War, a nationalist rebellion, an Anglo-Irish War and with deep-rooted political tensions coming to a head, the outbreak of Civil War. It has recently been conceded amongst historians that women's history in Ireland has been largely neglected thus far. Within such a crucial period of Irish history, historians have predominantly focused on the actions of men and their political involvement and contributions to the transformation of Ireland during this time. However, in recent years historians have begun to explore not only the role and experiences of women at such an influential time in Irish history but also women's contribution to the shaping of Ireland. It has been asserted that women 'have always been part of history, experiencing its impacts and contributing to its movement'.¹ It is indisputable that conservative and traditional women's roles did endure yet in addition there was also significant evolution in the position of women during this period. Moreover, women's involvement in the politics that dominated the decade was noteworthy. While women's participation was often kept on the periphery and separated from men it was nevertheless instrumental in Ireland's transformation. Women stood alongside men for their nationalist or unionist beliefs and moreover, simultaneously championed suffrage for their sex. Though Diarmaid Ferriter argues that female suffrage eventually became 'dwarfed by the giants of unionism and nationalism'², it nevertheless illustrates the lengths women went to in their participation and the extent women's actions contributed to the changes and events that occurred in Ireland from 1912-1922.

Women were undoubtedly in the wings and in some instances at the forefront of the many key events of this decade. Yet an element of this period that was particularly transformative and revolutionary was the campaign for female suffrage. Moreover, it was a campaign in which women were at the very centre, were the driving force and were taking their future into their own hands. Following England's lead, Emmeline Pankhurst's founding of the Women's Social and Political Union in 1903, Irish women established various suffrage organisations both in the south and the north of Ireland. The Gaelic League, an organisation which promoted Irish culture, admitted women from the beginning on equal terms to men and was as a result the most innovative group within Ireland regarding female suffrage.

¹ M. J. Boxer and J.H. Quataert quoted in J. Holmes and D. Urquhart (eds.) *Coming into the Light: The Work, Politics and Religion in Ulster 1840-1940* (Belfast, 1994), p. 94.

² D., Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 175.

However, many suffrage groups were established both preceding this period and throughout it. The Irish Suffrage Society was established in Dublin in 1876 which was later followed by the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908 by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins. In 1911, the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation was formed to co-ordinate the many suffrage organisations that had formed throughout Ireland. By 1913 there were 15 such groups which grew to 24 in 1916.³ Moreover, in 1911 Louie Bennett had established the Irish Women's Reform League which is notable for its lack of 'suffrage' or 'franchise' in its name and illustrates the growing awareness of wider social issues.⁴ However, suffrage in Ireland was up against several obstacles, a central hurdle was the simultaneous nationalist movement that dominated this period. The tension between the two saw some women abandon their feminist pursuits in favour of supporting Home Rule. The Easter Rising, 1916, was arguably a turning point for Irish Suffrage, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, a prominent feminist and nationalist of the period, supposedly marked the event as unique in its inclusion of women.⁵ The rebellion brought the suffrage and nationalist movements in to more amicable co-existence. In 1918, The Representation of the People Act was passed which extended the franchise and granted the vote to women over 30 who had the relevant property qualifications.

The tenacity and determination of female unionists was present from the fore and was enduring. With the formation of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council, on the 23rd January 1911, female unionists both created and were offered a platform through which to voice their own political beliefs and attempt to contribute to their country's fate. The UWUC were notably conservative, they viewed their political involvement as 'an extension of their maternal and protective responsibilities'.⁶ They believed that the passing of Home Rule was a threat to domestic life in Ulster. Its formation was intended to support the male Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) and act as 'a supportive bulwark to male opposition'.⁷ It appears the UWUC was largely content with its peripheral position, predominantly unconcerned with feminist issues. Members of the UWUC enacted their political beliefs through often traditional feminine pursuits including fundraising, philanthropy (particularly during the First World War) and canvassing. Canvassing was an important aspect of their participation as the Ulster Unionist Council utilised the women's council for pragmatic reasons given that the 1883 Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act forbade the payment of political canvassers which prompted the UUC to reassess electoral strategies.⁸ However, it has been argued that such

³ R., Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970* (Dublin, 2005), p. 84.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵ D., Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 217.

⁶ J. Holmes and D. Urquhart (eds.) *Coming into the Light: The Work, Politics and Religion in Ulster 1840-1940* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 96.

⁷ D., Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 118.

⁸ J. Holmes and D. Urquhart (eds.) *Coming into the Light: The Work, Politics and Religion in Ulster 1840-1940* (Belfast, 1994), pp. 94-95.

aspects of the UWUC 'should not place it within the ranks of the historically insignificant'.⁹ Female Unionists were excluded from the signing of the Ulster League and Covenant, September 1912, which conveyed unionist's staunch opposition to Home Rule. However, the UWUC organised their own equivalent covenant which significantly obtained more signatures than their male counterparts, with a total of 234 046 female signatories in contrast to 218 206 male.¹⁰ It appears that eventually some women of the UWUC did tire of their marginal position within unionism and also became frustrated with the suspension of political work during the First World War. In June 1918, six members of the UWUC met with Edward Carson to voice such grievances and as a result were granted twelve UWUC representatives into the Ulster Unionist Council.¹¹ The UWUC has been described as 'formidable'¹² and it is indisputable that the actions and involvement of female unionists were highly significant not just as an insight into women's lives during this period but to their contribution to the politics of 1912-1922.

Irish nationalism began strengthening its organisation, support base and military means in retaliation to such actions by Ulster unionists. The Irish Volunteers, for instance, were formed in November 1913 in response to the establishment of the Ulster Volunteers. Similarly to Unionism, women swiftly became involved in the nationalist cause. For instance, in 1910 the Ladies Auxiliary of the Ancient Order of Hibernians was established and not long after, April 1914, a woman's wing of the Irish Volunteers was established, Cumann na mBan. Initially, both the women's suffrage and nationalist movements were connected with many key feminists involved in the nationalist cause. As Margaret Cousins stated, 'We women were convinced that anything which improved the status of women would improve, not hinder, the coming of real national self-government'.¹³ The formation of Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) in 1900 by Maud Gonne was significant as it embodied both nationalist and feminist ideals. However, during the crucial years for Home Rule, 1912-1914 with the introduction of the third Home Rule Bill and its deliberation, there were both men and women nationalists who felt female suffrage could obstruct the enactment of Home Rule. The historian Rosemary Cullen Owens has likened such views to those in America during the anti-slavery campaign, in which some viewed a simultaneous female suffrage campaign as detrimental to its cause.¹⁴ Divisions and contradictory views became apparent during this time. Cullen Owens claims that it was the formation of Cumann na mBan in 1914 that 'crystallised the differences between those who sought national freedom first and

⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹ D., Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004), p. 119.

¹² Ibid., p. 118.

¹³ R., Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970* (Dublin, 2005), p. 84.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 109.

equal rights second, and those who sought 'suffrage first, before all else'.¹⁵ In distinct contrast to the constitution of the UWUC, the Cumann na mBan constitution stated that members pledged not only to assist men on the sidelines but 'to work for the establishment of an Irish Republic, by organising and training the women of Ireland to take their places by the side of those who are working and fighting for a free Ireland'.¹⁶ However, Pádraic Pearse had stated that while women should learn how to shoot, 'I would not like the idea of women drilling and marching in the ordinary way'.¹⁷ In reality, the contributions of the members of Cumann na mBan may have often been just as conservative as the UWUC. In fact, feminists at the time criticised Cumann na mBan's role and fundraising activities, such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington who stated, 'Any society of women which proposes to act merely as an 'animated collecting box' for men cannot have the sympathy of any self respecting woman'.¹⁸ However, Constance Markievicz did serve as second in command at St. Stephen's Green in Dublin during the Easter Rising in 1916 and was imprisoned along with male rebels for her involvement. Her death sentence was later commuted due to her sex.¹⁹ It was the Easter Rising and its aftermath, the British Government's harsh treatment of those involved, that helped unite feminists and nationalists. Furthermore, the 1916 Proclamation referred to both Irishmen and women guaranteeing equal rights as citizens.²⁰ Following the Easter Rising four women were elected to the new Sinn Féin executive, one of which was Constance Markievicz. In addition, Markievicz was one of two female Sinn Féin candidates for the election of May 1918.

Later in the period, during the War of Independence, 1919-1921, and the Irish Civil War, 1922-1923, women again held a crucial role in the Free State. Ferriter observes that women often became the primary breadwinner as their husbands were involved in revolutionary action and that the communication lines of Cumann na mBan throughout Ireland were crucial to the war.²¹ Examination of women's statements from the Bureau of Military History, collected in the 1950s from those involved in such organisations, have shed further light on women's involvement in nationalist organisations such as Cumann na mBan. Women were involved not only in conservative and feminine activities, like those of the UWUC, but smuggled in arms and participated in rifle practice. It has been stated that, 'There was nothing genteel about the revolutionary female's role'.²² During the Civil War,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁹ A., Bourke (ed.) *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature: Volume 5* (Cork, 2002), p. 118.

²⁰ R., Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1970* (Dublin, 2005), p. 117.

²¹ D., Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London, 2004), pp. 217-218.

²² Ibid., pp. 219-228.

400 Republican women were imprisoned as Ferriter states, 'It was a far cry from the domestic chores that many male nationalists had envisaged for Cumann na mBan'.²³

It is evident that women were extensively involved in many aspects of the key political events, movements and organisations between 1912-1922. As Ferriter articulates, women's role and contribution was 'multi-dimensional'.²⁴ Exploring each of these dimensions illuminates and brings to light a part of history that for some years remained unexplored.

²³ Ibid., p. 269.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 217.