

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

It is a curious fact that women as women, got a very meagre place in the pages of history. And Irish history, I am sorry to say, is no exception to this rule.¹

The many Irish women who were active in nationalist circles in the early twentieth century did not expect to be forgotten. They chronicled their own experiences as they lived them and displayed, time and time again, a sensitivity for and an appreciation of the longer history of women's political activism in Ireland. They were acutely aware of how they, and Irish women more generally, might be remembered. The many memoirs, reminiscences, rough lecture notes and half-finished autobiographical sketches which survive remind us of both the vibrancy of the world in which they lived and of their own sense that their experiences were worth remembering in and of themselves and in the context of the wider national narrative.

This is a book about those politically active nationalist women who believed they had a stake in the development of modern Ireland. It explores a wide range of their experiences and activities ranging from learning and buying Irish to participating in armed revolt. This book is emphatically a work of women's history in so far as I am less concerned with discourse analysis than with recreating the context in which the competing discourses of nationalism and feminism met, interacted and sometimes clashed. As Karen Offen has recently reminded us, 'feminist claims are primarily political claims, not philosophical claims. They never arise in – or respond to – a sociological vacuum. They are put forward in concrete settings and they pose explicit political demands for change.'² The history of feminism must be understood in the context of Ireland's broader history of political change, and a study of political change in

¹ Eithne Coyle, lecture at University College Dublin (UCD), Sighle Humphreys Papers, University College Dublin Archives (hereafter UCDA), P106/1226(1).

² Karen Offen, *European Feminisms: A Political History* (Stanford, 2000), p. xv.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Ireland in this period should take feminist political activism firmly into account. Neither was unaffected by the other.

This study builds on and has been shaped by the research of many historians of Irish women. Women had been writing about the history of women in Ireland since at least the first half of the nineteenth century, but a school of distinctly feminist history writing began to emerge in the late 1970s.³ A new world of ideas and questions emerged as scholars began to explore the political, social and economic history of women across the centuries and, for some researchers at least, to link women's campaigns in the past to contemporary events in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The political history of Irish women, and especially of nationalist women in the early years of the twentieth century, is probably the most extensively covered of all areas in Irish women's history, and it is not difficult to see why. The broader context of war, rapid social change and rebellion, the large number of women who became politically active and the dynamism of the period more generally provide a compelling context for research. The centrality, moreover, of nationalism to virtually all studies of modern Ireland has meant that historians of Irish women have been inevitably drawn to the subject area in order to recover their experiences in the first instance, and to integrate them into the national story in the second.

Beth McKillen's and Margaret Ward's research into the relationship between nationalism and feminism in the 1980s set the tone of much subsequent analysis.⁴ Ward's *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* explored three key women's nationalist organisations in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland, highlighting the difficulty women had in integrating themselves into male and mixed organisations and arguing that the 'contradictions' between feminism and nationalism were at times overwhelming for the women involved.⁵ She concluded that an overriding 'emotional and ideological identification with nationalism' was an important factor in preventing politically active women from developing a broader form of liberation and that this identification 'ultimately dissipated their radical potential'.⁶ Building on Rosemary Cullen Owens' ground-breaking study of the Irish suffrage movement, McKillen pursued related themes, arguing that 'the feminist cause in Ireland' had been

³ Mary O'Dowd, 'From Morgan to MacCurtain: Women Historians in Ireland from the 1790s to the 1990s', in Maryann G. Valiulis and Mary O'Dowd (eds.), *Women and Irish History: Essays in Honour of Margaret MacCurtain* (Dublin, 1997), p. 40.

⁴ Beth McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and Nationalist Separatism, 1914–23', *Eire-Ireland*, 17:3 (fall 1982), 52–67; Beth McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and Nationalist Separatism, 1914–23', *Eire-Ireland*, 17:4 (winter 1982), 74–90; Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1989).

⁵ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, p. 3. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

deeply damaged by constitutional and, in particular, separatist nationalism before 1916.⁷ McKillen's argument rested on three major assumptions. The first was that male (and female) separatists failed to give their support to the suffrage cause 'because of their belief that women's emancipation had to be deferred until Irish independence was won'.⁸ The second was that splits between feminists over whether to prioritise women's suffrage over Irish nationalism, fatally weakened the women's movement. The third was that the Easter Rising, and the Proclamation of Independence which guaranteed equal rights for all Irish citizens, changed this dynamic fundamentally.

Historians have subsequently produced more empirically robust and nuanced analyses of the relationships between politically active Irish men and women in the period 1900–18. Dana Hearne's perceptive work on nationalism, feminism and militarism, for example, explored the 'range of meanings' which could be found within Ireland's diverse feminist movement in the early years of the twentieth century. Although she too identified the impact of the divisions which clearly emerged between some feminists and some nationalists, she also emphasised the commonalities which linked almost all politically active women, sometimes in unexpected ways.⁹ In addition, Hearne highlighted the distorting historiographical impact of Irish nationalism on Irish women's history, arguing that women had not only been largely left out of major accounts because they did not fit easily into dominant explanatory paradigms and narratives, but because the overwhelming emphasis on nationalism, both constitutional and separatist, made it difficult to 'discern each of the many strands that went into the visions of nation-building in the decades before Independence'.¹⁰ Some of these, including feminism, were at times influenced by nationalism, but they also existed as vibrant and independent political movements, alive with ideas and possibilities about the evolution of Ireland in the new century. Louise Ryan's anthology of the *Irish Citizen*, a lively and important feminist newspaper which ran from 1912 to 1920, similarly and systematically brought to life many of the key themes which preoccupied and animated feminists. Her work, like Hearne's, suggested that women's historians would do well to look beyond the overwhelming historiographical and analytical hold of Irish nationalism in their research.¹¹

⁷ McKillen, 'Irish Feminism', p. 74. ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹ Dana Hearne, 'The *Irish Citizen*, 1914–1916: Nationalism, Feminism and Militarism', *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18:1 (July 1992), 1–14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Louise Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote: An Anthology of the 'Irish Citizen' Newspaper, 1912–1920* (Tallaght, 1996).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Irish women's history has expanded enormously in recent years, and we now have available to us a number of excellent studies of organisations, movements and individuals.¹² The field has been enriched by the increasing availability of relevant archival sources, not least because of the meticulous work of the scholars who have collated information about such material.¹³ A number of historians have expanded on the work of Ward, McKillen and others, and the result has been the production of a steady stream of fresh studies of women and Irish nationalism. Ruth Taillon and Sinéad McCooole have produced particularly enlightening accounts of the period, and recent research by Cal McCarthy and Ann Matthews on Cumann na mBan has extended our knowledge of the workings of that organisation exponentially.¹⁴ Largely through the production of several excellent biographical studies, we now have a better idea than we did only twenty years ago about who Ireland's politically active women were, what causes they championed and why.¹⁵ Scholars including Cliona Murphy, William Murphy and Paige Reynolds have continued to shift attention away from the polarising impact of public disputes between feminists and nationalists, by focusing instead or as well on important feminist issues like sexual violence and the inadequacy of the law, on feminist modes of expression including humour and theatricality and on feminists' experiences and critiques of imprisonment. Maria Luddy and Carmel Quinlan have reminded us that Irish feminism developed from a number of political and intellectual influences in the

¹² Particularly good accounts include: Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork, 2007); Diane Urquhart, *Women in Ulster Politics, 1890–1940* (Dublin, 2000); and Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican Women in Dublin: Philanthropy, Politics and Education in the Early Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 2005).

¹³ *A Directory of Sources for Women's History in Ireland*, Women's History Project/Irish Manuscripts Commission (Dublin, 1999); Angela Bourke et al. (eds.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, 2 vols. (Cork, 2001); Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, *The Irish Women's History Reader* (London and New York, 2001); Maria Luddy, *Women in Ireland, 1800–1918: A Documentary History* (Cork, 1995); Margaret Ward (ed.), *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism* (Dublin, 2001).

¹⁴ Sinéad McCooole, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916–1923* (Dublin, 1997), and *No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years, 1900–1923* (Dublin, 2004); Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women, 1900–1922* (Cork, 2010); McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*; and Ruth Taillon, *When History Was Made: The Women of 1916* (Belfast, 1996).

¹⁵ These include, but are not limited to, Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy (eds.), *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th Century Ireland* (Dublin, 1995); Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy (eds.), *Female Activists: Irish Women and Change, 1900–1960* (Dublin, 2001); Rosemary Cullen Owens, *Louie Bennett* (Cork, 2001); Charlotte H. Fallon, *Soul of Fire: A Biography of Mary MacSwiney* (Cork, 1986); Leeann Lane, *Rosamond Jacob: Third Person Singular* (Dublin, 2010); Proinsias Ó Duígneáin, *Linda Kearns: A Revolutionary Irish Woman* (Nure, 2002); Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, *Kathleen Lynn: Irishwoman, Patriot, Doctor* (Dublin, 2006); Margaret Ward, *Maud Gonne: Ireland's Joan of Arc* (London, 1990); Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life* (Dublin, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

nineteenth century. Some of these were directly related to Ireland's own political status, but others, including the anti-slavery and anti-Contagious Diseases Acts campaigns, suggested an international dimension to Irish feminism, a dimension which continued to develop into the twentieth century.¹⁶

These have been welcome developments, but gaps remain, even within the most heavily researched field within Irish women's history. So too do some older assumptions which continue to shape scholarship on the period. The idea that division characterised the Irish women's movement has, for example, remained intrinsic to most studies, and it is not difficult to see why this should be the case. In addition to the differences of opinion expressed by suffragists and separatists, there were within the Irish women's movement disagreements between nationalists and unionists, militants and non-militants, supporters of the British war effort and pacifists, as well as between Home Rulers and Republicans. The potential for discord was great, and politically active women did *at times* engage in heated debates between and among themselves. But this does not define women's political activism in the period. A remarkable level of co-operation also persisted; I argue that this co-operation was a more significant aspect of it than the dissent, and it more fairly characterises the Irish women's movement as a whole in this period. Acknowledging this allows one to explore the idea that gender provided many of the women who worked within the Irish nationalist and feminist movements with the basis for a shared 'common historical experience'.¹⁷

In the introduction to their book of collected essays devoted to exploring the connections between women and Irish nationalism, Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward argued that much of the theorising about the relationship between the two ideologies is dependent on 'how one defines feminism and what it means to be a feminist'.¹⁸ This is unquestionably the case, as the example of Cumann na mBan, an organisation founded for and by women and one which naturally remains central to studies of women's nationalist activity in the early twentieth century, shows. Does the fact that it was established in order for women to *aid* rather than *join* the all-male Irish Volunteers render it conformist, un-feminist or even anti-feminist? The debates which broke out on its inception about this very issue reveal not only that differences of opinion on these very

¹⁶ Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), and Carmel Quinlan, *Genteel Revolutionaries: Anna and Thomas Haslam and the Irish Women's Movement* (Cork, 2002).

¹⁷ Urquhart, *Women in Ulster*, pp. 1 and 204.

¹⁸ Louise Ryan and Margaret Ward (eds.), *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women and Wicked Hags* (Dublin, 2004), p. 4.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

questions existed but, perhaps more tellingly, that they deeply offended the women behind Cumann na mBan. They resented the accusation that they were in any way betraying their sex or compromising their feminism, all the more so because many of them were deeply committed and active suffragists. They presented thoughtful replies to their critics, replies which reveal why some women prioritised their political causes differently, and also that many did not feel that they had put aside their feminist principles at all. Feminism had different meanings for different women, and the republican women who put nation before sex did so in a highly practical though no less committed way, reminding their critics that, as Mary MacSwiney explained in 1914, ‘I quite agree with you that there can be no free nation without free women; but the world – women included – has taken some thousands of years to realise that fact. Three years more, in our very exceptional circumstances, will not hurt us.’¹⁹

It was of course the case that the majority of Irish women suppressed their feminist demands at times when these were seen to impede a settlement of the national question, most obviously in 1912, just as some British women put aside their suffrage agitation because their country was at war. This was not exceptional behaviour. In Ireland, as in the rest of Europe, gender was not the primary determinant of political affiliation, and it is thus not surprising that feminist politics were deferred at times of national political crisis.²⁰ In the main, however, such deferrals were neither permanent nor absolute, and many political women campaigned simultaneously on several fronts, nationalism and feminism being two that were very commonly combined. This was most obviously the case for Cumann na mBan. Although most scholars would agree with McKillen’s point that members attempted to ‘remove themselves from their subordinate position’ after the Easter Rising, less attention has been paid to the way in which Cumann na mBan was alive to the question of its auxiliary status and its position vis-à-vis the Volunteers from its inception.²¹ A core of feminists within its executive had rejected the idea that the organisation was subservient to the Volunteers and had worked to promote its independence from its earliest days. The Proclamation of Independence was important to the development of Cumann na mBan after 1916, but it conferred legitimacy on already existing feminist impulses within the organisation rather than creating them from scratch. These feminist impulses may have been more persuasive than is commonly assumed. The very fact of the egalitarian language found within

¹⁹ *Irish Citizen* (hereafter *IC*), 9 May 1914. ²⁰ Urquhart, *Women in Ulster*, p. 4.

²¹ Maria Luddy, ‘Women and Politics in Ireland, 1860–1918’, in Bourke *et al.*, *Field Day Anthology*, pp. 69–74, at p. 73.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the Proclamation, for example, demands an answer to the question of how such an emphatic declaration of the equal citizenship rights of men and women made its way into the nation's foundation document if the separatist men who wrote it had not been persuaded by the arguments of suffragists before 1916.

As well as thinking again about the appeal and reach of feminism, we can also profitably explore the question of what it meant to be a nationalist in early twentieth-century Ireland, and especially what it meant to be a female nationalist. In the first place, it did not necessarily mean commitment to Irish separatism; in fact, before 1916 at the very earliest, this remained a minority view among men and women alike. Advanced nationalist women, whether in *Inghinidhe na hÉireann*, *Sinn Féin* or, later, *Cumann na mBan* and the Irish Citizen Army, were in a tiny minority within a minority of all Irish nationalists, male and female. The case remains, nonetheless, that with the exception of Diane Urquhart's innovative research on women in Ulster, analyses of the participation of women in Irish nationalist organisations are principally devoted to studies of separatist societies, and a casual reading of any history of the period would lead the reader to conclude that the few women who were involved in nationalist politics were republicans, socialists or both. This is partly because of the tendency, only relatively recently reversed, of Irish historians, including women's historians, to focus on separatist rather than constitutional politics in this period. It is also due to the more mundane truth that separatist women generated more records than their constitutional counterparts. This book considers the fate of constitutional nationalist women, and in tracking their frustrating and ultimately futile attempts to break through the chauvinism of the Irish Party, extends our analysis of the decline of constitutional nationalism itself.

The years after 1900 were punctuated by regular collisions between the old world and the new. While there was nothing pre-ordained about the collapse of the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1918, it is possible to trace the slow advance of its major rivals. One of the most striking features of most of the new advanced nationalist societies was that they were more willing to entertain female involvement than the Irish Party. An analysis, therefore, of deepening female involvement in nationalist life can and should serve as a useful guide to broader political change. From the late nineteenth century, when Irish women began to gain access to literary and debating societies, to their enfranchisement in 1918, they were involved in almost every major advanced political association and activity apart from the Irish Republican Brotherhood. This in itself should suggest that the widely held conviction that, for example, 'the gender roles promulgated by nationalist organisations were profoundly conservative and saw

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

women clearly in a subservient position', might require some revision.²² The intrusion of determined women into the formerly male strongholds of nationalist political activism was not always welcome, but the very fact of it signified major shifts in the Irish political landscape. This was not an organic shift; it depended on the determination of women to force themselves in, and often thereafter to attempt to change the cultures of those political organisations in order that they reflect feminist views, especially in regard to women's suffrage. Most advanced political societies accommodated women, if only because they provided valuable free labour. This was to become crucial in 1918, when women's campaigning and votes helped to steer Sinn Féin to victory.

The Irish Party, in the meantime, appeared to become ever more resolutely opposed to female participation as the years passed, distancing itself from what had become a British political norm by the turn of the twentieth century, and what was fast becoming indispensable to its Irish rivals. And yet, as constitutional nationalism continued to claim the support of the majority of Irish nationalists until at least 1916, there is no reason to suppose that women's loyalty was any less solid than men's. Some nationalist women believed that they could make alliances with the liberal Irish parliamentarians who appeared to share their views on the suffrage question, and at times they did. Yet the options available to constitutionally minded women seemed to shrink in line with the Party's decline. Some radical constitutional women saw the writing on the wall and jumped ship, but others became as lost in the radicalisation of Irish politics as the Party itself, and they shared its subsequent historiographical marginalisation.

The breadth and totality of the collapse of the old political world has obscured a number of sub-cultures which operated within it and has seen them labelled inherently conservative, old-fashioned and backward-looking. This reflects a larger tendency to label some forms of women's political activism 'conservative', especially if they stood outside Ireland's republican tradition or if such activism was seen to be auxiliary or supplementary. One scholar has recently argued that all feminist activity was radical as it was undertaken in male-dominated societies and was therefore expressed in opposition to them.²³ In early twentieth-century Ireland, all women's political activism, whether explicitly feminist or not, was similarly subversive for it implicitly challenged existing ideas about the political sphere. This was no less the case for the nationalist women who, through insisting on their rights as political citizens in the context

²² Ibid.

²³ Karen Offen (ed.), *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945* (London and New York, 2010), p. xxxiii.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of a larger debate about the transfer of sovereign power, faced condemnation from all sides.

Being political was a highly complex process for these women, and this complexity was reflected, as Kathryn Gleadle has argued in another context, in the production of ‘ambivalent self-representations’.²⁴ Women presented themselves and their demands in a variety of forms, as quintessentially feminine, as stridently modern or, more usually, as a mixture of the two. The cultural revivalist and (largely) British liberal ideas about natural justice which also informed women’s ideas about political rights complicated the way women articulated their politics, and we must be sensitive to their modes of expression. I wish to widen our understanding of what it meant to be political in this period by examining the languages in which women critiqued existing social and political arrangements and understood their subordination within them. Irish feminists, in common with female activists across Europe, largely based on their assessment of the social organisation of their society and their demand for fairer treatment under the law, on the idea of ‘equality of difference’. Feminism for them implied political equality with men, but it also implied difference between the sexes, a difference which justified women’s involvement in public political life and even promised to transform it. It was the idea that the enfranchisement of women would enrich and improve the public political sphere that drove Irish feminists, much more so than any abstract sense of democratic rights, though this, too, was important for some women. This book will explore how what have been variously termed ‘domestic’ or ‘separate spheres’ discourses provided a common language for feminist women within Ireland.²⁵ The rallying cry printed in the first issue of the radical republican-feminist women’s journal *Bean na hÉireann* indicated this:

We must set about raising the present position of women in the social and political life of the country, and we must labour to make their present environment compatible with their moral and intellectual advancement, which incidentally means the development of the nation and the race. Our desire to have a voice in directing the affairs of Ireland is not based on the failure of men to do it properly, but is the inherent right of women as loyal citizens and intelligent human souls. It is not our intention to countenance any sex antagonism between Irish women and Irish men ... but we think that men would be the better for a little of women’s unselfishness and spirituality, and we look for the advent of women into public life for a loftier idealism and a purer atmosphere.²⁶

²⁴ Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009), p. 1.

²⁵ Offen, *Globalizing Feminisms*, p. xxxii.

²⁶ *Bean na hÉireann*, 1:3 (January 1909). (*Bean na hÉireann* was erratically edited, and dates and page numbers were often not given. This will be reflected in some footnotes.)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-04774-7 - Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Senia Pašeta

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918

Their belief that women possessed particular skills and sensitivities which would civilise the public sphere if allowed political expression formed the backbone of every political campaign in which Irish women were involved in this period. Historians have not devoted enough attention to this particular dynamic in their analyses of Irish women's activism in this period and have too often assessed women's contributions to political organisation and campaigns on the basis of categories almost exclusively ascribed to men in a modernising and militarising society. It is only when we understand that feminist and other progressive ideas about equal citizenship often distinguished between male and female characteristics and roles that we can comprehend how it was that the women who taught children the Irish language, raised money for male militias and administered first aid to Volunteers believed themselves to be actively working towards full citizenship. As we shall see, feminism, in its many forms, offered a number of distinctive models of emancipation to Irish women, not all of them obviously egalitarian in the way that we might today understand this idea.

Developments in broader Irish political historiography have also had a marked impact on this study. Although consensus has not been reached about the parameters or ideological coherence of Ireland's 'revolution', most historians seem to have accepted that the term may usefully and perhaps even legitimately be applied to the sequence of political ruptures which culminated in the end of the Union between Great Britain and Ireland.²⁷ Nonetheless, the term remains problematic, not least because Ireland's revolution was unbuttressed by a coherent ideology and held together only very loosely by the determination of its foot soldiers to create a 'free Ireland'. Nationalism drove republican activists, but it was a nationalism created from an assortment of odd influences including civic republicanism, Catholic mysticism and revolutionary socialism in some cases. This constituted less a theory of revolutionary change than it did a list of the interests and prejudices that animated the men and women who believed that the moment to strike out against the British presence in Ireland had arrived in 1916. These activists were as vague about the stages any revolution might follow before it accomplished its aims as they were about the political system which would be instituted at its successful conclusion. The women at the heart of this study expressed a range of ideas about what it was they had set in train and what kind of independent Ireland they wished to see established at the close of their campaign. They would continue to puzzle over quite what it was they

²⁷ Charles Townshend, 'Historiography: Telling the Irish Revolution', in Joost Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913–1923* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 1–16.