Introduction

In August 1914 Letitia Overend noted in her diary, almost as an afterthought, that England had declared war on Germany.[1] Although she did not yet know it, her life, together with many other Irish women, had been irrevocably changed. Within a few weeks of the outbreak of the war, she had joined the St John Ambulance Association in Dublin, eventually reaching the position of commandant of her detachment. She was later heavily preoccupied with the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, leaving her estate in Airfield, County Dublin, to attend its headquarters at Merrion Square in the city centre most days to participate in the making of bandages and the production of dressings from sphagnum moss.[2] As an upper-class unmarried woman, the war offered her an opportunity to move beyond her cloistered pre-war environment and to develop an important role within her community. Her efforts were such that in 1920 she was offered an OBE for her war service, although she declined on the grounds that not all those who had done such great work in the war could be acknowledged.[3] Letitia Overend was one of many who experienced the transformative impact of the war: others such as Marie Martin from Dublin and Emma Duffin from Belfast served as voluntary nurses with the Red Cross overseas or, like Isabella Clarke, a sixteen-year-old Belfast girl, travelled to England to work in munition factories.[4] There were thousands more with similar experiences.

It was perhaps with women such as these in mind that the *Church of Ireland Gazette* reflected in July 1918 on the liberating impact of the war on women in Ireland, arguing that the fruits of the women's

[1] OMARC PP/AIR/1021: Diary of Letitia Overend, 4 Aug. 1914. Letitia Overend (1880–1977) was a philanthropist and motor enthusiast. She lived at Airfield House in the suburbs of Dublin.
[2] PP/AIR/ 1021–1025: Diaries of Letitia Overend, 1914–1919.
[3] PP/AIR/2460: Documents relating to offer of OBE to Letitia Overend, Jan. 1920.
[4] BRCA: Marie Helena Martin service record; Trevor Parkhill, *The First World War diaries of Emma Duffin: Belfast Voluntary Aid nurse* (Dublin, 2014); IWM Oral History, no. 774: Interview with Isabella Clarke by Ciaran O'Gallagher, June 1976.

emancipation movement had ripened and the modern girl was 'politically, economically and spiritually independent'.[5] The wartime press frequently referred to the war's impact on gender roles and it was widely accepted by the Armistice in November 1918 that the war had transformed women's position in Irish society.[6] Although the service of over 200,000 Irishmen in the armed forces during the First World War had a significant impact on the home front, historians have primarily focussed on the military aspect of Ireland's mobilisation, leaving women's experiences somewhat in the 'historical shadow'. There has been increasing attention paid to the participation of women in the Irish revolution and to their important roles in the Easter Rising and the War of Independence. By placing women's experience within the context of international conflict engulfing Ireland, this book contributes to the expanding scholarship of Ireland's revolutionary period. Taking a thematic approach, the book interrogates the assertion in the *Gazette* article that the war brought emancipation for women and explores the extent of the war's impact on women's everyday lives in Ireland.

Many women in Ireland felt some relief at the outbreak of war in 1914, realising that it offered a chance to escape civil war on the island of Ireland over Home Rule, as the urgent crisis had been averted through the distraction of European conflict. Assuming a short victorious war, they had little concept of the toll it would take and how much would have changed four years later when peace was finally restored. Women threw themselves into the war effort on the home front hoping that it might bring about some reconciliation between divided communities, seeking fulfilment from their restricted domestic spheres or simply wishing to find some means of alleviating the inevitable suffering. This mobilisation took many forms, including nursing wounded soldiers, preparing hospital supplies and parcels of comforts, undertaking auxiliary military roles in port areas or behind the lines, and producing weapons of war. In total, the war effort drew in significantly more women than the suffrage campaign or indeed the republican movement and created new roles and opportunities for the thousands of women active in the sizeable female unionist organisations. For a majority of the period of the war, many more women in Ireland were actively engaged in activities supporting the British war effort than in resisting the state and participating in insurrection.

The war's impact was felt beyond mobilisation, affecting women's household management, family relations, standard of living, and work

[5] *Church of Ireland Gazette*, 5 July 1918. [6] See, for example, ibid., 3 Dec. 1915.

conditions and opportunities. It brought greater state intervention in their lives, accompanied by societal scrutiny and policing of their behaviour. War also had a politicising impact, most evident in the participation of women in the Easter Rising rebellion in 1916, an insurrection designed to take advantage of the wartime conditions, and the 1918 anti-conscription campaigns, both key events in Ireland's wartime experience. The politicising effects were similarly apparent in the aftermath of the Easter Rising when women played an essential role in fundraising and propaganda for the republican movement as well as in the actions of soldiers' wives known as 'separation women' during the by-elections. Of all the factors affecting early twentieth-century Ireland, the First World War had the most significant and wide-ranging impact on women's lives. Exploration of the war's impact on Ireland reveals much about Irish society in this pivotal period, helping to contextualise the outbreak of rebellion in 1916, the implementation of partition and the post-war descent into guerrilla warfare.

Gender and Emancipation

The greater role available to women in the public sphere during the war raises important questions about gender and emancipation and the importance we should place upon such ideas. Within the rich international scholarship, historians have debated the extent of the war's lasting impact on gender relations, questioning whether the war constitutes progress or a parenthesis in the struggle for women's liberation.[7] Arthur Marwick's influential work in the 1960s and 1970s emphasised change and discontinuity, concluding that the war brought a sudden and irreversible advance in the economic and social power of women.[8] Marwick's arguments have been echoed by other scholars such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Angela Woollacott, while it has been the dominant narrative of popular histories of the war in the recent centenary period.[9] This perspective has been most prominently challenged by Susan Kingsley Kent in her exploration of the reconstruction of gender relations after the war. Kent concludes that any temporary emancipatory gains of the

[7] Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in history: debates and controversies 1914 to the present* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 141.
[8] Arthur Marwick, *The deluge: British society and the First World War* (London, 1967), p. 97.
[9] Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Soldier's heart: literary men, literary women and the Great War' in Margaret Randolph Higonnet et al. (eds.), *Behind the lines: gender and the two world wars* (London, 1987), p. 200; Angela Woollacott, *On her their lives depend: munitions workers in the Great War* (London, 1994), p. 215. For the popular narrative, see, for example, Kate Adie, *Fighting on the home front: the legacy of Women in World War One* (London, 2013).

war were offset by the post-war emphasis on maternalism and 'separate spheres'.[10] While aspects of Kent's work merit critique, other historians have also expressed reservations about the positive view of the war's impact, including Margaret Darrow, Üte Daniel, Penny Summerfield, Deborah Thom, Gail Braybon and Susan Grayzel.[11]

While such debates can offer a helpful framework for understanding the impact of war, this book takes up the challenge proposed by the late Gail Braybon: to move beyond the watershed argument to focus on women's lived experience of the war.[12] Observing that emphasis has been typically placed on evidence of change and difference, such as women's wartime work in 'men's jobs' and the achievement of suffrage, Braybon and Laura Lee Downs have argued that the focus on the question of emancipation risks 'limiting and distorting' our understanding of women's experiences and the impact those experiences had in shaping the post-war world.[13] It also often perpetuates a history that treats women as a homogenous identity.[14] It is impossible to generalise for the entire female population with such great differences existing between urban and rural experiences, and in the Irish case, between the north and the south. The emancipatory potential of wartime work or voluntary mobilisation was affected by social class, the pre-war circumstances of the family and the women's domestic responsibilities. We must consider how women themselves viewed their wartime experiences and how they conceptualised what happened to them.

As Jay Winter notes, war can bring quantitative structural benefits to people's standard of living or employment prospects but can nevertheless be experienced as a 'monumental disaster' by those who lived through it.[15]

[10] Susan Kingsley Kent, *Making peace: the reconstruction of gender in interwar Britain* (New Jersey, 1993); Gail Braybon, 'Winners or losers: women's symbolic role in the war story' in Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, history and the Great War: historians and the impact of 1914–18* (Oxford, 2003), p. 101.

[11] Margaret H. Darrow, *French women and the First World War* (Oxford, 2000); Üte Daniel, *The war from within: German working-class women in the First World War* (Oxford, 1997); Penny Summerfield, 'Women and war in the twentieth century' in June Purvis (ed.), *Women's history: Britain 1850–1945 – an introduction* (London, 1995), p. 309; Deborah Thom, *Nice girls and rude girls: women workers in World War I* (London, 1998); Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the cage: women's experiences in two world wars* (London, 1987), p. 131; Gail Braybon, *Women workers in the First World War* (London, 1981), pp. 208–210; Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's identities at war: gender, motherhood and politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (London, 1999).

[12] Braybon, 'Winners or losers', pp. 89–104.

[13] Laura Lee Downs, 'War work' in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the First World War*, vol. III, Civil Society (Cambridge, 2014), p. 75.

[14] Adrian Gregory, *The last great war: British society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 291–292.

[15] Jay Winter, *The Great War and the British people* (2nd ed., London, 2003), p. 2.

Returning the focus to lived experience can help us see the realities of war and gain a stronger understanding of what the war actually meant for women in Ireland, and how this might compare to other combatant countries. This book draws on concepts of everyday life formed by Sheila Fitzpatrick and developed by scholars such as Maureen Healy, Karen Hunt and Belinda Davis.[16] One of the distinctive features of the Great War was the expanded role of the state in civilian life. The separation allowances introduced by the British government, the schemes to reduce infant mortality and the growth of government-controlled sites of employment are all examples of the increased reach of the state into people's domestic lives. Healy suggests that total war creates the 'refraction of the everyday': that is, the distortion of everyday matters usually considered private or sub-political by the medium of war. War on the scale of the Great War meant that no action or deed 'was too small or insignificant to be considered a matter of state'. The everyday becomes the space between regulations and real life.[17]

This work contributes to the thriving international scholarship on gender and the war. Heather Jones recently identified a 'major transformation' in the historiography of the Great War since the 1990s, arising from the widespread adoption of cultural, comparative and transnational approaches.[18] The current generation of First World War scholars has been labelled the transnational generation, with research increasingly seeking to move beyond national boundaries.[19] While there have been several important transnational and comparative explorations of the home front, there remains significant value in undertaking the national study. We can learn much from digging deep as well as casting a wide net. While there has been a tendency towards insularity in some Irish histories of the revolutionary period, emphasising Ireland's exceptionalism, this has been gradually changing.[20] Informed by the international

[16] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: ordinary life in extraordinary times – Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999), p. 3; Maureen Healy, *Vienna and the fall of the Habsburg Empire: total war and everyday life in World War I* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 20; Belinda J. Davis, *Home fires burning: food politics and everyday life in World War I Berlin* (London, 2000), p. 3.

[17] Healy, *Vienna and the fall of the Habsburg Empire*, pp. 3, 19.

[18] Heather Jones, 'As the centenary approaches: the regeneration of First World War historiography' *Historical Journal*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2013), p. 857.

[19] Jay Winter, 'General introduction' in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the First World War*, vol. I, Global War (Cambridge, 2014), p. 6. For a broader discussion of the international historiography of the Great War and the generations of scholarship, see Prost and Winter, *The Great War in history* and Susan R. Grayzel and Tammy M. Proctor, 'The scholarship of the Great War' in Grayzel and Proctor (eds.), *Gender and the Great War* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 248–255.

[20] Recent exemplary work in this regard includes Keith Jeffery, *1916: a global history* (London, 2015).

scholarship, this book focusses on the nation-state through a transnational framework, altering the scales to bring in local, regional, national and international perspectives and placing the experience of Irish women in a global context.[21]

Ireland and the Great War

Ireland offers a valuable case study for investigating women's experiences during the Great War. As part of the United Kingdom, it was a full participant, albeit with significant differences from Great Britain. Irish society had been teetering on the edge of civil war in the summer of 1914, and consequently the impact of the European conflict was heavily affected by the political divisions at home. Unlike Britain, Ireland did not experience aerial bombardment, although civilians in Dublin endured the shelling and besieging of their city during the 1916 Easter Rising. Food shortages were less evident and farmers in rural Ireland prospered from increased demand for their products. Most importantly, conscription was not implemented due to the tense political situation. This significantly affected the extent and the type of the war's impact for Irish women. As noted by Nuala Johnson, Ireland's home front and battlefront were interconnected in different ways from the rest of the United Kingdom.[22] This political background makes the Irish case particularly interesting for exploring the mobilisation process and the diverse factors affecting women's war service. The need for re-mobilisation in the second half of the war takes place not only in the context of war weariness prevalent across Europe but also in the aftermath of armed insurrection in Ireland's capital city. The book highlights how societies were pulled into the 'vortex of war' despite domestic political crises and even without conscription, particularly high recruitment rates or the experience of bombardment.[23] War could nevertheless have a transformative effect upon society and gender identities.

Nuala Johnson perceptively observes that the war simultaneously represented in Ireland 'opportunity and postponement; quiet support and

[21] For a discussion of this framework for examining the Irish revolution, see Niall Whelehan, 'Playing with scales: transnational history and modern Ireland' in Niall Whelehan (ed.), *Transnational perspectives on modern Irish history* (London, 2015), pp. 7, 10, 23.

[22] Nuala Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the geography of remembrance* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 22.

[23] Johanna Alberti used the phrase 'vortex of war' to describe how the war dominated the activities of British suffrage societies: Johanna Alberti, *Beyond suffrage: feminists in war and peace 1914–28* (London, 1989), p. 49.

loud dissent; active participation and passive observation; victory and defeat'.[24] This book attempts to untangle the different meanings of the war for Irish people and to represent these diverse perspectives. Taking an all-island approach to the First World War period, it examines the Irish experience on the home front, observing the significant variations across the country, with the most acute differences apparent between urban and rural Ireland, and between Ulster and the southern provinces. Such divisions were not unique to Ireland. Karen Hunt's transnational study of home front communities concludes that the urban and rural experiences were so different that we can speak of 'plural local home fronts'.[25] There was no single home front experience in Ireland. Farming families prospered from the increased demand for their produce while price inflation and food shortages created grim conditions for urban dwellers. Those living in the towns and cities suffered the most from the war's impact but were also more likely to benefit from the expanded opportunities it generated. Munition factories, home front positions in clerical work, army auxiliary service and hospital nursing – these were primarily, although not exclusively, clustered in the towns. The majority Protestant population in Ulster also carved out their own experience. War service became an opportunity to prove their loyalty to Britain and the empire but also to create further distance from the south. The war effort resulted in the further polarisation of unionist and nationalist communities and accelerated the development of a partitionist mentality in Ulster. The two states that emerged on the island after the war have many roots in the home front experience.

This examination of women's lives is pieced together using a diverse range of primary sources, drawn from twenty-two archives and libraries in Ireland and the United Kingdom. Government reports, memoranda and correspondence proved valuable sources, including, for example, the records of the Treasury, the Ministry of Labour and the War Office in the British National Archives. The Chief Secretary's Office Registered Papers in the National Archives of Ireland, together with the papers of Sir Matthew Nathan in the Bodleian Library and Viscount French in the Imperial War Museum, provide essential insights into the working of the Irish administration and the attention paid to women's issues during the war. Other important records include the wartime papers of various organisations involving Irishwomen, such as the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot, Mothers' Union and Ulster Women's Unionist Council.

[24] Johnson, *Ireland, the Great War and the geography of remembrance*, p. 13.
[25] Karen Hunt, 'Gender and everyday life' in Proctor and Grayzel (eds.), *Gender and the Great War*, pp. 154–157.

Uncovering the individual experience of the war is also important and this book draws on various ego-documents, defined by Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack as documents which provide an account of or reveal information about the 'self' who produced it.[26] Intimate sources such as diaries and private correspondence reveal the subjective experience of historical events and help us to understand the varied motivations for people's actions and responses.[27] However, although adult literacy levels were exceptionally high and roughly equal among men and women in Ireland by 1914, there are relatively few surviving personal accounts of domestic and social life on the Irish home front.[28] This deficit was influenced by the lack of academic and popular interest in Irish participation in the Great War until the 1980s, which meant that items of historic value relating to the war were less likely to be valued or donated to public bodies. Although there are some oral histories of Irish veterans from the British Army, there are no similar collections with accounts of civilian experiences.[29] The interviews with former munitions workers in the Imperial War Museum, for example, have no counterpart for Irish workers. Women's voices are also under-represented in the archives, an issue also evident beyond Ireland. Alison Fell and Lucy Noakes have both observed the prioritisation of the male combatant experience, resulting in the memorialisation of fewer first-hand accounts of grief or coping with 'the wartime exigencies of family, work and shortages of food and fuel'.[30]

Nonetheless this book makes use of eighteen diaries, fourteen memoirs, three autobiographical novels and sixteen collections of private family correspondence. While sixteen of the eighteen diaries and eleven of the fourteen memoirs were authored by women, these documents come almost exclusively from women of the middle and upper classes. There is also an urban bias: eight of the diaries were written by Dublin

[26] Mary Fulbrook and Ulinka Rublack, 'In relation: the "social self" and ego-documents' *German History*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2010), p. 263.
[27] Ibid., p. 265.
[28] Close to 90 per cent of the population aged over five years could read and write by 1911: Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh, 'Languages and identities' in Mary E. Daly and Eugenio F. Biagini (eds.), *The Cambridge social history of modern Ireland* (Cambridge, 2017), p. 56; Caitriona Clear, *Social change and everyday life in Ireland, 1850–1922* (Manchester, 2007), p. 42.
[29] See, for example, Myles Dungan, *Irish voices from the Great War* (Dublin, 1998) and Neil Richardson, *A coward if I return, a hero if I fall: stories of Irish soldiers in World War I* (Dublin, 2010). They do not however include any veterans of the women's auxiliary military services.
[30] Alison Fell, *Women as veterans in Britain and France after the First World War* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 6; Lucy Noakes, 'Gender, war and memory: discourse and experience in history' *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2001), p. 664.

women and three by women from Belfast. These limitations reflect the stronger likelihood of such women having the opportunity to keep a diary or produce a memoir for publication. The dual burden of work and domesticity, especially an issue for farming women and working-class women, left little time for such reflections. There is a greater range of correspondence, notably between soldiers and their families at home, and it is hoped that recent crowd-sourced digitised projects such as the 'Letters of 1916' project at Maynooth University, which collects material from private collections, will greatly expand the sources available to researchers of the period.

In an attempt to address the upper-class bias of the majority of surviving ego-documents, I have used sampling methods to examine the experience of war workers. The membership records of 200 British Red Cross volunteers from Ireland together with those of 137 divisional or work party leaders are analysed and placed in their socio-economic context with the help of the 1901 and 1911 censuses. A similar approach is taken with the service records of seventy-five Irish members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC). This effort to avoid treating women as a homogenous group has made it possible to uncover the participation and experience of a much wider range of women and to interrogate assumptions regarding the class and religious profile of war workers.

The book also makes use of forty contemporary newspapers and periodicals from Ireland and Britain to assist with the 'history-from-below' approach. Catriona Pennell has argued convincingly for the value of newspapers as a source for investigating civil society during the Great War. She notes that examination of a wide range of newspapers from a variety of political and geographic backgrounds can yield insight into the varying public perceptions of the war. They reveal what people were doing during the years of the war and give an insight into popular collective behaviour.[31] Two periodicals of particular importance to this study are the *Lady of the House* and the *Irish Citizen*, both of which were aimed at women in Ireland.

Founded in 1890 by Findlaters' department store in Dublin, the *Lady of the House* functioned as a monthly catalogue for the store. It reported a circulation in excess of 20,000 in 1892, 3,000 of which were distributed to account customers.[32] Produced in Dublin, there was a separate Belfast

[31] Catriona Pennell, *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012), p. 6.
[32] Alex Findlater, *Findlaters: the story of a Dublin merchant family 1774–2001* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 315–319.

edition with its own social column advising on local activities and affairs. Stephanie Rains describes it as socially aspirational, politically ambiguous and proto-feminist in its editorial tone and emphasis on the important role of women in consumerism and household management.[33] The magazine included a social column, advice on suitable careers for women, suggestions for economic housekeeping and fashion, and a debate section featuring discussions on women's role in society. As such, it remains an immensely valuable source for information on women's domestic and social lives. The *Irish Citizen*, on the other hand, had rather different origins and readership. Founded in 1912, the *Irish Citizen* was Ireland's only suffrage paper during the Great War period. Not only did it serve as the 'mouthpiece of the Irishwomen's Franchise League' it also published reports of the activities of the other suffrage societies as well as articles on feminism, pacifism and socialism.[34] Although its editors, Francis and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, were strongly opposed to Irish participation in the war effort, the paper continued to provide a space for divergent views within the suffrage movement.[35] It offers a unique insight into women's politics during the Great War and is an important source of commentary on a wide range of issues affecting women in the domestic and public spheres.

Even though it is evident that the First World War had a transformative impact upon the Irish society, this has not always been readily acknowledged in the historiography of the emergence of the Irish state. In an influential article in 1967, F.X. Martin identified a 'national amnesia' surrounding Ireland's participation in the Great War and noted the disproportionate historiographic and public attention paid to the Easter Rising.[36] Twenty years later, David Fitzpatrick noted the continuing gap in scholarship and observed that references to the war in Irish historiography tended to treat it as an external political factor of little importance in the lives of ordinary people.[37] In 2018, Fitzpatrick altered

[33] Stephanie Rains, *Commodity culture and social class in Dublin 1850–1916* (Dublin, 2010), p. 132.
[34] Cliona Murphy, '"The tune of the Stars and Stripes": the American influence on the Irish suffrage movement' in Cliona Murphy and Maria Luddy (eds.), *Women surviving* (Dublin, 1989), p. 183; see also Louise Ryan, *Winning the vote for women: the Irish Citizen newspaper and the suffrage movement in Ireland* (Dublin, 2018).
[35] Francis Skeffington (1878–1916) married Hanna Sheehy (1877–1946) in 1903 and they each adopted the other's name. They were both active in the feminist, pacifist, socialist and nationalist movements. Francis was an editor and co-founder of the Irish Citizen. He was murdered by the British Army during the Easter Rising.
[36] F.X. Martin, '1916: myth, fact and mystery' *Studia Hibernica*, vol. 7 (1967), p. 68.
[37] David Fitzpatrick, 'Preface' in David Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Ireland and the First World War* (Dublin, 1986), p. vii.