

2014 – Centenary year of the Formation of Cumann na mBan

Memorial Speech – Glasnevin Cemetery, 2 April 2014

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A Uachtarán, Mrs. Higgins, Minister, Ambassador, Lord Mayor, Chief of staff, members of the Oireachtas, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great honour to be here today on the centenary of the founding of Cumann na mBan. As an historian and as President of the Women's History Association of Ireland, it is important to be here to witness the commemoration of the role of women in the revolutionary movements of this country.

Cumann na mBan was officially founded on this day, 2nd April in 1914, at a meeting held in Wynn's Hotel, Dublin. Earlier, in November 1913, the Irish Volunteers had held their inaugural meeting in the same hotel, and while women were not given any particular role within the Volunteers, many of the male leaders agreed that there would be work for women to do. However, in response to queries from them on their role, Pádraig Pearse rather evasively stated that 'while the women would have ambulance and Red Cross work to do and that a women's rifle club was desirable', he 'would not like the idea of women drilling and marching in the ordinary way, but there is no reason why they should not learn how to shoot'. The contradictions in this statement are symptomatic of the difficulties that the men had in envisioning the sort of work nationalist women would do, and how to incorporate that work within the Irish Volunteers.

The women who were asking the questions of the Irish Volunteer leadership were women who had been activists for many years, women like Jennie Wyse Power, a nationalist and

suffragist, who had been a fervent campaigner since her days in the Ladies Land League in 1880 with Anna Parnell. She was a co-founder of the cultural-nationalist group, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, and involved with Sinn Féin from the beginning, as well as being a member of several suffrage organisations. In *Leabhar na mBan*, published in 1919, Wyse Power remembers that Cumann na mBan came from the 'many information meetings which took place' in the months after the formation of the Volunteers 'to discuss the formation of a women's society whose aim would be to work independently, and at the same time to organise nationalist women to be of service to the Irish Volunteers'. Finally, a meeting was called for all interested women to meet, at 4pm on Thursday, 2nd April, 1914, in Wynn's Hotel meeting room.

In attendance were Jennie Wyse Power and several other women who would become leaders of this organisation in the coming years. It is worth noting the names and backgrounds of these women and acknowledging their place in the history of Cumann na mBan and of Ireland. This group included many serious political women, women who had already contributed, like Jennie Wyse Power, to cultural activism, feminist activism, political activism and trade unionism; they were serious women who came to this meeting with serious intent to participate fully in the nationalist politics of Ireland. Among them were Louise Gavan Duffy, a noted Gaelic scholar and nationalist who was also very sympathetic to the suffrage cause – she had supported the campaign to have female suffrage included in the 1912 Home Rule Bill. She was one of the first women to graduate from UCD and managed and taught at Scóil Ide with Pádraig Pearse. Another was Elizabeth Bloxham, who had been involved in suffrage and nationalist activity before her involvement in Cumann na mBan. Indeed, Arthur Griffith published some of her writings in the Sinn Féin newspaper. Agnes O'Farrell, a noted Gaelic scholar and lecturer in modern Irish at UCD, and one of the most prominent women in the Gaelic League at the time, presided over the inaugural meeting at which over one hundred women attended.

They adopted a constitution which stated the aims of Cumann na mBan were to

1. Advance the cause of Irish liberty
2. To organise Irish women in the furtherance of that objective
3. To assist in arming and equipping a body of Irish men for the defence of Ireland
4. To form a fund for these purposes to be called the 'Defence of Ireland Fund'
5. To engage in training, including for first aid, drill and signalling, and rifle practice.

O'Farrelly delivered the inaugural speech to the new organisation. She stated that the meeting was called so Irishwomen could 'work in conjunction with the recently formed Irish Volunteers in any action they would decide, to break the connection with England' and that Cumann na mBan would 'welcome as members and sisters in work every Irishwoman who puts Ireland first and who believes it is worthy striving for the liberty and rights of our historic nation'.

From April 1914, Cumann na mBan developed their membership. By October 1914, there were over sixty branches countrywide, some of which had over one hundred members. By April 17th, 1914, Inghinidhe na hÉireann had become a branch of Cumann na mBan. By June 5th, 1914, a Cumann na mBan branch had formed in Limerick at a meeting in the Gaelic League Rooms, Thomas Street, led by the Daly sisters. Mary MacSwiney and Madeline O'Hegarty launched the Cork Cumann na mBan branch in Cork City Hall on June 8th, 1914. In March 1915, the County Inspector for Kerry noted that a Miss McCarthy from Dungarvan had 'formed branches of Cumann na mBan in Tralee and Dingle'.

The early development of Cumann na mBan was not without its tensions and splits. Many Cumann na mBan members resented the accusations from suffragists that they were auxiliaries or 'handmaidens' to the Volunteers - they 'resented the accusations from suffragists that they were "slave women" (as they were termed), subservient in the role to the Volunteers'. In the suffrage newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*, on May 2nd, 1914, there was much scorn poured on the Cumann na mBan members, it was stated that the women 'offer ...homage to the men' ... 'their first duty is to give ... allegiance and support to the men.... We are satisfied that this movement, like the movement of Ulster Unionist Women which it

is imitating, is a thoroughly reactionary one, and opposed to the best interests of the women's movement in Ireland'.

However, the Cumann na mBan women put up a stout defence of their work and their objectives; as Mary Colum said in their defence, 'From the start, we, of Cumann na mBan, decided to do any national work that came within the scope of our aims. We would collect money or arms, we would learn ambulance work, learn how to make haversacks and bandoliers, we would study the question of food supplies, we would practise the use of the rifle, we would make speeches, we would do everything that came in our way - nothing is too high or too low for us to attempt, for we are not the auxiliaries or the handmaidens or the camp followers of the Volunteers - we are their allies ... If some unhappy fate were now to destroy the Volunteers, Cumann na mBan is not only capable of still growing and flourishing, it is capable of bringing the whole Volunteer movement to life again'.

The women adopted a green uniform with a slouch hat and a badge, which was in the shape of a rifle with the initials of the organisation intertwined. Their militarism was evident from their uniform, statements and training. On the outbreak of war, as John Redmond offered the services of the Volunteers to the British government (leading to the inevitable split in that organisation) Cumann na mBan stated that '...we feel bound to make the pronouncement that to urge or encourage Irish Volunteers to enlist in the British Army cannot, under any circumstances, be regarded as consistent with the work we have set ourselves to do'. Cumann na mBan split on the Remondmite issue; many women were supportive of the national Volunteers and their participation in the war effort. However, despite losing many of its early members, including some leading members like Agnes O'Farrelly, many of the women felt, as Jennie Wyse Power said, that the split 'cleared the road for the work of Cumann na mBan'.

Cumann na mBan participated fully in the Easter Rising 1916. Almost all women (other than the few in the Irish Citizen Army) who participated in the Rising were members of Cumann

na mBan. When confusion was rife about orders and counter-orders in the initial stages of the Rising, it was the women of Cumann na mBan who traversed the country, carrying messages from Pearse, Connolly and the other leaders in the GPO. During the week of the Rising there were Cumann na mBan women in all the outposts except Boland's Mill. As the week ended and defeat became inevitable, Pearse selected Elizabeth O'Farrell to present the surrender to the British authorities. O'Farrell, a working class Dublin woman, born and raised in the tenements on City Quay, had been a long time member of Cumann na mBan. Like so many Cumann na mBan women, she had also been involved previously in the Gaelic League, Inghinidhe na hÉireann, and had been a member of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's suffrage organisation, the Irish Women's Franchise League. She was also a member of the Irish Women Workers' Union and had worked in Liberty Hall helping to feed the poor of Dublin during the 1913 Lockout.

During Easter week, she and other Cumann na mBan women were active as couriers, carrying messages and arms from the GPO to other outposts; they also served as nurses and provided first aid for the wounded, including James Connolly whom O'Farrell nursed in the GPO as it came under heavy artillery fire and began to burn. With the wounded Connolly in tow, she and other women, including Sheila Grennan and Connolly's long-time secretary, Winifred Carney, retreated with the remaining rebels down Moore Street. There, Pearse choose O'Farrell to leave 16 Moore Street under a white flag and make contact with the British military to discuss the terms of surrender. O'Farrell had to walk out under heavy fire towards hostile, armed soldiers who could have shot her at any moment. She survived, however, and was taken to Brigadier-General Lowe who sent her back to Moore Street with a demand for unconditional surrender. Later that afternoon, she accompanied Pearse towards Lowe and his aide de camp, and can be seen beside him, partially obscured, in the famous photograph of that moment as he surrenders. While the men and remaining women in Moore Street were marched away, O'Farrell had more, dangerous work to do in delivering the surrender order to Volunteer and Citizen Army units at the Four Courts, the College of Surgeons, Boland's Mill and Jacob's factory.

In the post-Rising period, Cumann na mBan worked to keep the revolutionary spirit alive in Ireland as many of the male leadership languished in prison. For instance, in 1917, they sent

an appeal to the President of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, looking for his recognition 'of the justice of Ireland's demand for political freedom'. By 1918, Cumann na mBan women were fighting both for freedom for Ireland and equal citizenship within that new State for all, regardless of gender. By then, its President, Countess Markievicz, stated Cumann na mBan demanded full suffrage, and at the 1918 Cumann na mBan convention, the women reaffirmed their role in fighting for an Irish Republic. They also insisted that they would 'follow the policy of the Republican Proclamation by seeing that women take up their proper position in the life of the nation'.

Local meetings of Cumann na mBan councils in early 1918 decided to help organise women voters and to assist them to ensure that every eligible woman voted. The women of Cumann na mBan worked to secure elections for Sinn Féin candidates, raising funds, canvassing and distributing pamphlets. One pamphlet, *The Present Duty of Irishwomen*, was addressed specifically to the new women voters. It stated: 'Irishwomen, your country calls to you to do your share in restoring her to her rightful place among the nations. No great sacrifice is asked of you. You have merely to secure the votes, to which you are entitled, and use them on behalf of SF [Sinn Féin] candidates at the next general election'. All the work paid off when Cumann na mBan President, Countess Markievicz, was elected. Like all Sinn Féin members, the Countess did not take their seats in Westminster, but chose to be part of the first Dáil Eireann, formed in the Mansion House in Dublin in January 1919.

During the War of Independence, Cumann na mBan played many vital roles. Throughout these years they shared the risks with the men, of violence, death, arrest and imprisonment. They participated in gun running, message carrying, running safe houses; they were the ones who faced constant raids on their homes by Black and Tans/Auxiliaries and they were often violently mistreated. They more than answered the call to arms and, in return, demanded a full role in the anticipated Irish republic.

On the matter of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Cumann na mBan split. On February 5th, 1922, a convention of the organisation was held where 419 members voted against the Treaty as opposed to 63 in favour. In the ensuing Civil War, with the moderate members leaving in droves, its remaining, more radical membership, largely supported the anti-Treaty

Republican forces. Cumann na mBan was banned in 1923 and over 400 of its members were imprisoned during the civil war.

During the War of Independence, Cumann na mBan saw a huge upsurge in membership. Women and girls from urban and rural backgrounds, working class and middle class, daughters of shop owners and tenant farmers, landowners and labourers – sisters, daughters, sweethearts of men on the run, women young and old – all flocked to the Cumann na mBan banner. Among them was a 17-year-old from Duagh, North Kerry, Johanna McAuliffe (nee O'Connor), my grandmother. She was secretary of the Duagh Cumann na mBan and, like so many of the women of this period, she later kept largely silent about her activities within the organisation. From what we know of her service, she was involved in gun running, in keeping a safe house and, on one tragic occasion, in preparing for burial the bloody body of an IRA volunteer and neighbour, Jeremiah Lyons, who was assassinated in Gortaglanna by the Black and Tans. I would also take a moment to name her sister Minnie Mulcare (nee O'Connor) and my other grandaunts, Josie Nolan (nee Kennelly) of Farnastack and Mamie Ahern (nee O'Brien) of Ballyline, Ballylongford, who also saw active service with Cumann na mBan during the War of Independence. It is these women, and women like them all over Ireland, whose stories are still largely silent and which need to be restored to history.

The release of the Military Service Pensions is a boon to historians and researchers seeking to elicit the true picture of the role people other than the leadership and members of the Volunteers - that is women, young boys and girls, workers, trade unionists and others - played in the Rising, in the War of Independence and in the Civil War. The combining of the many sources and resources we now have can give us a much more complicated, nuanced and complex history of the participation of Cumann na mBan in the decade 1914-1923. Combining what we have from the Bureau of Military Archives with other online databases like the 1901/1911 census, as well as archival material in national and local archives, memoirs, diaries and oral histories, can tell so much more about the women of Cumann na mBan, their socio-economic background, their families, their networks, their activities, their alliances with various republican, socialist, feminist and other women's organisations, their

debates and splits, and their legacies. This will also help historians further understand the contribution of women. Therefore I would call out to historians, researchers and interested parties to look to 2014 as an opportunity to bring the contribution of nationalist women, national and local, to the Independence struggle fully into the light. Today we pay due homage to the work of the women of Cumann na mBan, tomorrow we continue the work of elucidating and understanding their role and its importance in the revolutionary struggle.