

Emasculation and Erasure: Gender and Sexuality in Irish Nationalism

The Irish nationalist movement, originating in the late eighteenth century¹ with the purpose of establishing autonomy from Great Britain, heavily relied on the concept of masculinity in order to empower and advance the movement. Charles Stewart Parnell, a central figure in the nationalist movement who was dubbed the “Uncrowned King of Ireland,” would use the concept of masculinity to his advantage. Defined by his “almost monastic” sexual restraint, his public image was that of a “calm, silent, and restrained” man, popularizing the idea of a “symbolic marriage between Parnell and Ireland” and transforming him into a martyr for Home Rule.² Nationalist parties like *Sinn Féin* would also use the concept of masculinity in order to “imagine what national sovereignty and the end of British colonial rule would look like” and “critique...British rule as an effeminizing influence on Irish men.”³ The Irish writer and nationalist Patrick Pearse would even make the claim that “[The English] have planned and established an education system which more wickedly does violence to the elementary rights of Irish children than would an edict for the general castration of Irish males.”⁴ Masculinity would become a dominating force in the nationalist movement, leaving little room for women to assert their presence.

With such forces at work, women seem to hold a contentious position in Irish nationalist history: they are often neglected in historical documents from the movement—remembered merely as accessories to male organizations—and when they are mentioned, they are often the object of ridicule. As such, it may seem difficult to prove that women, too, were driving forces

¹ Walker, Graham, Review of *Irish Nationalism and the Uses of History*, by Richard Davis, Tom Garvin, Austen Morgan, and Michael Hopkinson, *Past & Present*, no. 126 (1990): 203, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650815>.

² Lloyd (Meadhbh) Houston, 2017, “A Portrait of the Chief as a General Paralytic: Rhetorics of Sexual Pathology in the Parnell Split*,” *Irish Studies Review* 25 (4): 473, doi:10.1080/09670882.2017.1371105.

³ Aidan Beatty, “Nationalists as Real Men.” *Aidan Beatty* (blog), April 16, 2016, <https://aidanbeatty.com/blog/>.

⁴ Patrick Pearse, “The Political Writings and Speeches of Pádraig Pearse,” (1916): 5.

behind change in Ireland. However, not only did women's struggle for equality play a crucial role in advancing the nationalist cause, it is because of their role in change that early histories of the movement were revised. Male nationalists, who first documented the movement, felt emasculated by female activists' growing presence. Further, as the Home Rule movement "brought Great Britain to the verge of civil war"⁵ amidst the start of World War I in 1914, the tension between male and female nationalists would build and come to a head in the Easter Rising of 1916. The Easter Rising was the turning point for the Irish nationalist movement as a whole due to the "radicalization of public opinion" that followed the failed rebellion.⁶ However, this deliberate mischaracterization of female nationalists would continue through the War of Independence (1919-1921) that ended with the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty "granting a twenty-six county Ireland dominion status within the empire."⁷ Ultimately, this mischaracterization would not cease until the time of Ireland's formal independence in 1922 and the Irish Civil War (1922-1923), which was fought "[following] a split in the Irish nationalist movement...over the Anglo-Irish treaty."⁸

Although women were limited by Ireland's conservative society, they were able to contribute to the nationalist movement, with writer P.S. O'Hegarty acknowledging that "women in politics was no new thing in Ireland."⁹ In O'Hegarty's *Sinn Féin: An Illumination* (1919), he attributes the growth of the eponymous party to the "de-Anglicizing movement initiated by the

⁵ Michael Tierney,, "Origin and Growth of Modern Irish Nationalism," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 30, no. 119 (1941): 331, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30098131>.

⁶ Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, "THE IRISH NATIONAL AID ASSOCIATION AND THE RADICALIZATION OF PUBLIC OPINION IN IRELAND, 1916—1918," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 705, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23263270>.

⁷ Graham Walker, Review of *Irish Nationalism and the Uses of History*, 212.

⁸ Walker, 212.

⁹ P.S. O'Hegarty, "The Victory of Sinn Féin," (1924): 56.

Gaelic League,” founded in 1893.¹⁰ The Gaelic League was unique in that they “accepted women for membership on an equal basis.” These women “were not restricted to subordinate roles, but played an active part in leadership,” which “contributed significantly to enlarging the public role of women” in Ireland.¹¹ In addition to the Gaelic League, Irish women would go on to establish their own organizations, with *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* [Daughters of Ireland] being founded in 1900 by Maud Gonne. *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* not only worked alongside *Sinn Féin* but would also publish the “first nationalist/feminist newspaper,”¹² *Bean na hÉireann*. *Sinn Féin* even congratulated *Bean na hÉireann*’s inaugural issue in 1908.¹³ The endorsement of female nationalists by groups like the Gaelic League and *Sinn Féin* would reinforce women’s importance, with *Sinn Féin* stating that women were entitled to a “voice and influence in matters concerning the economic welfare of their country in the industries and the arts, the health and the wealth of Ireland; and, above all, in the education of their children.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, as progressive as these organizations were, they did not significantly challenge the idea that “Irish manhood [had] long been synonymous with Irish nationhood.”¹⁵ Mary Butler, a member of the Gaelic League, wrote in *Sinn Féin*’s publications that “the women of Ireland are by far the most denationalised element in the community, and by far the most active denationalising force existing.”¹⁶ However, Butler also noted that “by her work in the

¹⁰ “LATEST IRISH LITERATURE,” *The Athenaeum* no. 4639 (03, 1919): 102.

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/latest-irish-literature/docview/9207682/se-2>.

¹¹ Frank A. Biletz, “Women and Irish-Ireland: The Domestic Nationalism of Mary Butler,” *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua* 6, no. 1 (2002): 59–60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20646366>.

¹² Mary McAuliffe, “From Inghinidhe Na hÉireann to the Irish Citizen Army: Women, Radical Politics & the 1916 Rising,” *Saothar* 41 (2016): 69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45283318>.

¹³ Lauren Arrington, “Suffrage, Nationalism, and the Daughters of Ireland.” *In Revolutionary Lives: Constance and Casimir Markievicz*, 52. Princeton University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc776nf.7>.

¹⁴ Arrington, 52–53.

¹⁵ Agata Szczeszak-Brewer, “Joyce’s Vagina Dentata: Irish Nationalism and the Colonial Dilemma of Manhood,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 34, no. 2 (2013): 2. <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.34.2.0001>.

¹⁶ Biletz, “The Domestic Nationalism of Mary Butler,” 69.

home the Irishwoman could ‘use her domestic skills to create the ideal Irish home.’”¹⁷ Moreover, Maud Gonne argued that “only after Ireland had won its independence could the role of women in Irish society be properly addressed.” As such, events held by *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* were generally not aimed at liberation efforts and were instead “largely cultural, including monthly *céilidh* as well as weekly classes for children in [the] Irish language, history, and music.”¹⁸ While these activities were important in cultivating Irish nationalist spirit, they largely adhered to traditional gender roles; as such, *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* would be praised by male nationalists, with O’Hegarty labeling them as “active and useful.”¹⁹ Thus, the organization’s “auxiliary role” would be cemented,²⁰ and they would occupy an inferior position to their male counterparts.

Yet, this second-class citizenry would begin to shift in 1908, as “more radical women were looking for another platform to express their views.”²¹ In the same year, the Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL) was founded by Hanna and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. The IWFL “represented a new generation of suffrage activists” who “had lost patience with the more moderate tactics of the older suffrage organisations,” and who believed that “female suffrage should take precedence over all ideologies,”²² even nationalism. Notably, during Sheehy-Skeffington’s imprisonment following an IWFL protest against “lack of women’s suffrage provisions in the new Home Rule Bill,” she pioneered the tactic of hunger strikes. While “[protesting] the treatment of two English suffragettes,”²³ Sheehy-Skeffington’s hunger strikes

¹⁷ McAuliffe, “Women, Radical Politics & the 1916 Rising,” 71.

¹⁸ Biletz, “The Domestic Nationalism of Mary Butler,” 62.

¹⁹ O’Hegarty, “The Victory of Sinn Féin,” 56.

²⁰ Arrington, “Suffrage, Nationalism, and the Daughters of Ireland,” 52.

²¹ McAuliffe, “Women, Radical Politics & the 1916 Rising,” 71.

²² McAuliffe, 72.

²³ “Revealing History: Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington,” *National Library of Ireland*, <https://www.nli.ie/sites/default/files/2022-12/nli-revealing-history-hanna-sheehy-skeffington.pdf>.

were “so original that they would later be emulated by male nationalists.”²⁴ The fact that the fight for suffrage had been instrumental in advancing the nationalist movement contradicted the popular belief held by male nationalists that women did not have a place in the movement beyond their traditional roles. Another notable female nationalist group that arose in 1914 was *Cumann na mBan* [The Woman’s Organization], though it was initially an auxiliary to the male-only Irish Volunteers and was “hardly a strong nationalist organisation” in its early days.²⁵ *Cumann na mBan*’s “subordinate role” to the Volunteers seemed to be further reinforced following the group’s merger with *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* in the same year, with the organization becoming “more culturally directed” and holding events like “dances and céilithe”²⁶ as *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann* had done. However, they would soon depart from the traditional expectations of women in the nationalist movement, as unlike *Inghinidhe na h-Éireann*—whose “immediate” activities had not directly contributed to independence efforts²⁷—*Cumann na mBan* would begin to “engage themselves in concrete activities to support Irish independence.”²⁸ These activities were more gender transgressive, even radical in nature, and included “learning first aid, carrying dispatches, learning signalling, rifle practice and maintenance.”²⁹ Gradually, the organization would increase their influence and establish themselves in the nationalist movement.

In particular, female activists’ actions during and following the Easter Rising in 1916 would make their influence irrefutable. The attempted uprising against the British “was a

²⁴ Kiberd, Declan, and P.J. Mathews, eds, “Women and Citizenship,” In *Handbook of the Irish Revival: An Anthology of Irish Cultural and Political Writings 1891–1922*, University of Notre Dame Press (2015): 337, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpj78dg.20>.

²⁵ Sharon Furlong, “‘Herstory’ Recovered: Assessing the Contribution of Cumann Na mBan 1914–1923,” *The Past: The Organ of the Uí Cinsealaigh Historical Society*, no. 30 (2009): 75. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44554533>.

²⁶ Furlong, 74–75.

²⁷ Biletz, “The Domestic Nationalism of Mary Butler,” 62.

²⁸ Furlong, “Assessing the Contribution of Cumann Na mBan,” 75.

²⁹ Furlong, 81.

military failure for the Irish and resulted in the incarceration of many men”; however, it was also when many women would take charge of the movement, with Constance Markievicz, a member of *Cumann na mBan* who would become its leader following the Rising, being a key figure in the skirmish.³⁰ Crucially, in addition to participating in the fighting, “it was the women who kept the spirit alive . . . the flag flying,” as morale within the nationalist movement had been rapidly collapsing following the arrest of “most male leaders.”³¹ *Cumann na mBan* “carried dispatches, dangerously liaised with British soldiers for information,” and “raised money to help the Volunteer movement,” all of which would aid in preparing for the War of Independence.³²

However, their numerous contributions would draw the ire of male nationalists, and the erasure of women’s efforts would subsequently become apparent. Documentation of the Easter Rising by the *Irish Times* and the *Irish Independent* described the event in “predominantly masculine terms,” and “while both papers mentioned that there were women among the prisoners, little information was given about who these women were or what part they played in events.”³³ Even when Markievicz and another woman, Grace Gifford, received coverage for their actions, “the focus of press attention on Markievicz and Gifford helped to underestimate and render invisible the various roles which almost 200 women played in the Easter Rising.”³⁴ While the erasure of women’s efforts is not surprising given the general attitude of male nationalists at the time, the magnitude of this censorship is remarkably extreme. A particularly egregious example is a doctored photo that originally included Pearse and Elizabeth O’Farrell, a member of *Cumann na mBan*. The photo of them “surrendering to [the] Brigadier General” to end the

³⁰ Furlong, 77.

³¹ Furlong, 79.

³² Furlong, “Assessing the Contribution of Cumann Na mBan,” 71.

³³ Louise Ryan, “‘Furies’ and ‘Die-heads’: Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Gender & History* 11, no.2 (1999): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00142>.

³⁴ Louise, 261.

conflict would feature only Pearse: O'Farrell was "airbrushed" out of the photo, and the edited version would be published.³⁵ It was clear that male nationalists felt perturbed, with an "unmistakable connection between the feminine and the threat of loss" being created.³⁶

In male nationalists' attempts to restore masculinity as the dominant force in the movement, their commentary on female nationalist groups would take the form of bitter ridicule. In O'Hegarty's *The Victory of Sinn Féin* (1924), the author praised the men who fought in the Easter Rising, professing that "they knew they could not win. They knew that the people were against them and that the people would hate them for it," but that "never did any body of men go forth on a more desperate enterprise, with purer hearts, or unfaltering courage."³⁷ On the other hand, he insulted the women involved. He attributed the decline of *Sinn Féin*, which he casts as a "simple, straightforward, and essentially moral movement" in its "pre-1916 days,"³⁸ to women's "implacability," "bitterness," and "hysteria,"³⁹; O'Hegarty's words here unreservedly deride and pathologize the movement's women. O'Hegarty particularly scorned *Cumann na mBan*, mocking how "these women busied themselves with nothing but the things of death—first aid, bandages, splints, gunshot wounds and broken limbs and broken bodies"⁴⁰ despite their training in first aid being critical in tending to wounded men during the Easter Rising.⁴¹ Ultimately, O'Hegarty declared, "we know that with women in political power there would be no more peace."⁴²

³⁵ Marie O'Halloran, "Portrait of 1916 nurse 'airbrushed from history' unveiled in Seanad," *The Irish Times*, Mar. 8 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/portrait-of-1916-nurse-airbrushed-from-history-unveiled-in-seanad-1.4504519>.

³⁶ Szczeszak-Brewer, "Joyce's Vagina Dentata," 2.

³⁷ O'Hegarty, "The Victory of Sinn Féin," 4–5.

³⁸ O'Hegarty, 54.

³⁹ O'Hegarty, 105.

⁴⁰ O'Hegarty, 57.

⁴¹ Furlong, 77.

⁴² O'Hegarty, 105.

Although male nationalists ceased to actively antagonize female nationalists in the 1920's due to more pressing concerns of running the newly-independent state, those initial claims would go unchallenged even in later years. A review of *The Victory of Sinn Féin* by Stephen Gwynn in 1926 stated that O'Hegarty "gives new authority for believing what we knew, less completely, before," agreeing with O'Hegarty's sentiments even as he recognized "the price [was] paid in demoralisation, especially of women."⁴³ Yet another review by U.S. diplomat David Grey, published by *The New York Times* in 1952, stated, "I was unable to discover evidence that would discredit his [O'Hegarty's] statements or the conclusion which he drew from them. The book is not only a history but a document."⁴⁴ Thus, despite O'Hegarty himself stating that "this book is not a history," and that he is merely writing from his "good memory,"⁴⁵ despite its distortions of women's roles, stood as the official record of the period.

Unfortunately, many misconceptions about the nationalist movement still remain, with groups like *Cumann na mBan* being remembered only as auxiliaries and figures like Sheehy-Skeffington being largely unknown despite their indisputable impact. However, there have been recent efforts to undo the perception of nationalism as a masculine construct: Historians such as Louise Ryan, Jennifer Redmond, Mary McAuliffe, Linda Connolly and Margaret Ward have documented not only female nationalists' direct contributions to the movement but also how they challenged the "gendered hierarchies"⁴⁶ in their daily lives. For instance, Margaret Skinnider, a

⁴³ Stephen Gwynn, "SIDELIGHTS ON REVOLUTIONARY IRELAND." *Fortnightly Review*, May 1865–June 1934 119, no. 709 (01, 1926): 61, 63. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-periodicals/sidelights-on-revolutionary-ireland/docview/2455813/se-2>.

⁴⁴ David Gray, "The Spirit of Sinn Féin: A HISTORY OF IRELAND UNDER THE UNION, 1801-1922. by P. S. O'Hegarty. 811 Pp. New. York: British Book Centre. \$9.50," *New York Times* (1923-), Aug 31, 1952. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/spirit-sinn-fein/docview/112330829/se-2>.

⁴⁵ O'Hegarty, "The Victory of Sinn Féin," v–vi.

⁴⁶ Mary McAuliffe, "MARGARET SKINNIDER—: A LIFE AFTER REVOLUTION?" *History Ireland* 28, no. 2 (2020): 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26915182>.

Cumann na mBan member and a “important but overlooked national figure,”⁴⁷ never married and instead had likely been in a relationship with another *Cumann na mBan* member named Nora O’Keeffe, a fact that had previously been unknown due to the “absence of any personal archival material.”⁴⁸ Figures like O’Farrell were also discovered to have likely had same-sex partners who had worked alongside them in the nationalist movement.⁴⁹ Revelations like these deconstruct the premise that female nationalists could only operate within their traditional roles, and only with further research into the lives of these women can we gain a holistic understanding of the nationalist movement and the forces that drove it.

⁴⁷ McAuliffe, 41.

⁴⁸ McAuliffe, 41.

⁴⁹ Louisa McGrath, “It’s Time to Acknowledge the Lesbians Who Fought in the Easter Rising,” *Dublin Inquirer*, November 25, 2015, <https://dublininquirer.com/2015/11/25/it-s-time-to-acknowledge-the-lesbians-who-fought-in-the-easter-rising/>.

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