

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education

## “If I write I must tell the truth as I know it”

Gender, Conflict, and Nationalism in Women's Memoirs of the Easter Rising

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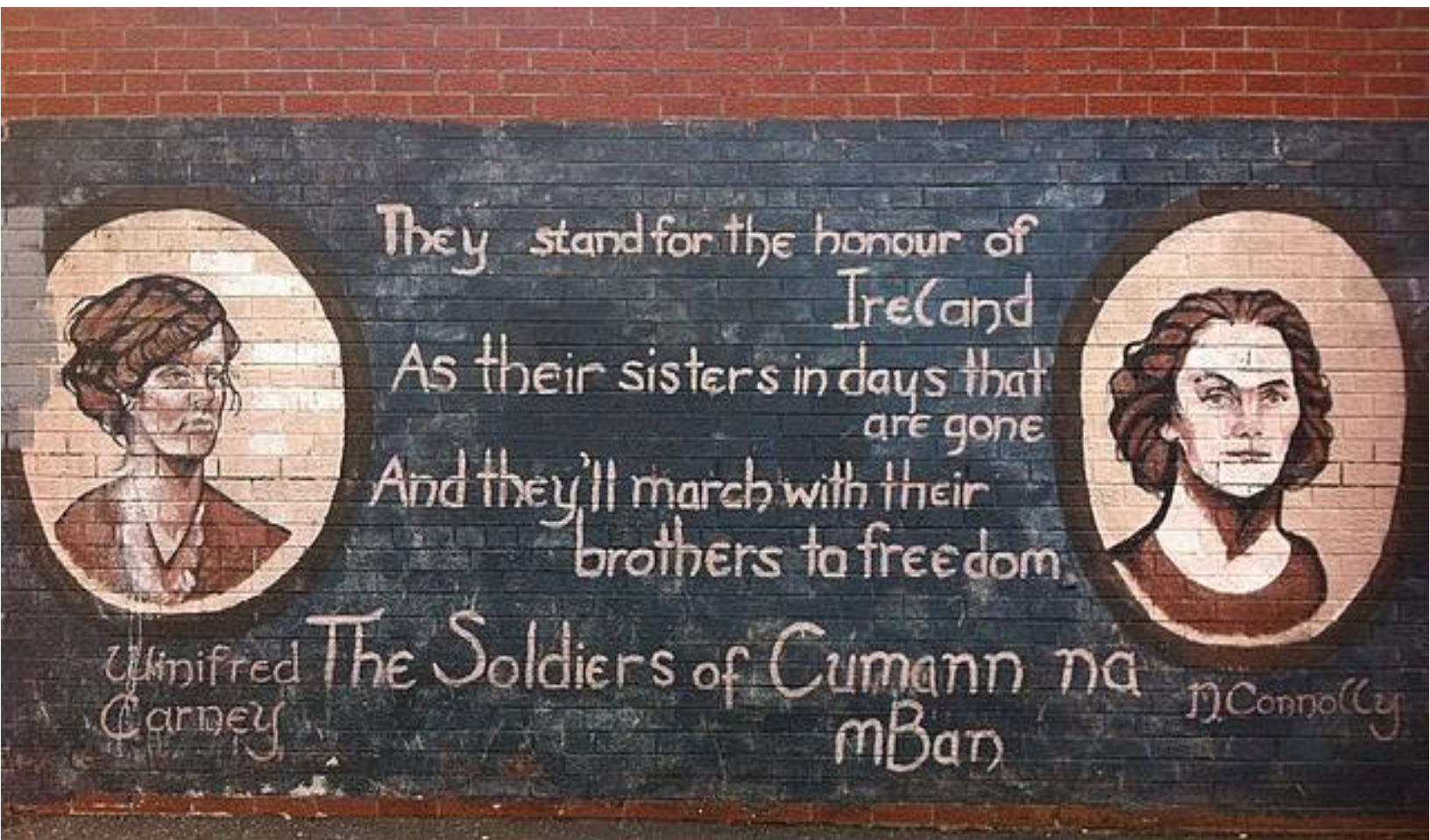


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*This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Pauline Giles, whose love and constant curiosity about the world has been an endless source of inspiration.*

## **Abstract**

The Easter Rising was a pivotal moment in the fight for Irish independence and retains a potent place in Irish Republican mythology. Memory of the Rising has frequently centered the men, particularly those who were executed in its aftermath and so became Republican martyrs.

This thesis explores Republican women's memories of the Rising, through analysis of four memoirs of the period. I identify six key themes in the memoirs regarding nationalism, gender, and conflict and explore how the women constructed these issues in relation to the Rising.

While memoir, constrained as it is by individual memory, has some limitations, in this thesis, I argue that reading Republican women's memoirs and considering how they position issues of self, gender, and nation, can provide crucial challenges and disruptions to established narratives of revolution.

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# **1. Introduction**

This thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions concerning the memorialization of the Easter Rising. This is a ‘foundational event’ in modern-day Ireland, frequently seen as the pre-eminent moment that directly led to the independence of twenty-six of Ireland’s thirty-two counties from British rule. As such a monumental event, the ways in which the Rising is remembered and by whom remain important, but its memory has frequently been a difficult and divisive issue. When the conflict has been remembered or commemorated, deeper questions concerning its impacts and legacy have often arisen.

The recent 2016 centenary, occurring among a set of wider commemorations referred to as "The Decade of Centenaries" (2012-2023), has reignited prominent debates regarding how and by whom the Rising should be commemorated. These debates have covered a multitude of issues such as the frequent prioritization of commemorating rebel deaths over the many civilian casualties, the tensions associated with commemorating republican violence in a country with a much more recent history of violent conflict, and whether the Ireland that emerged from the revolution resembles the one that the rebels fought for.

## **1.1 Problem Statement and Contribution**

One of the debates surrounding the centenaries has been the question of the frequent omission or marginalization of women in discourses of the Easter Rising and of the wider revolutionary and nationalist movement. Although women played prominent roles at all stages of the Rising, its predominant narrative has been one of male heroes and martyrs fighting and dying for Ireland while women's contributions have been sidelined. Despite a tradition of scholarship aimed at uncovering women’s participation dating back to the 1980s, when women have been included in mainstream commemoration narratives, it has often been in a limited capacity; either acknowledging only one or two 'exceptional' women or acknowledging only limited, usually auxiliary, roles such as cooking and nursing, a phenomenon which historian Mary McAuliffe has called the “Nurse Narrative.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mary McAuliffe, “Remembered for Being Forgotten: The Women of 1916 Memory and Commemoration,” in

In his book exploring the difficult legacy of the Catholic Church in Ireland, *The Best Catholics in the World*, journalist Derek Scally reflects on the memory of the Rising:

Across from the bus stop, on the walls of Ballymun's derelict shopping centre, is a mural with the faces of leaders of the 1916 Rising. 'Is cuimhinn linn' – we will remember you. We didn't always. For decades, particularly after the outbreak of violence in the North in the late 1960s, mainstream Ireland struggled with how to remember its revolutionary origins, and reacted allergically to those who did. In recent years the state's foundational event has been reclaimed, explored and commemorated. Not so the damage done to vulnerable citizens of the new state. While the words of the 1916 Proclamation were addressed to 'Irishmen and Irishwomen' and vowed that, in pursuing the happiness and prosperity of the nation, Ireland would cherish 'all the children of the nation equally' – the new, independent Irish state fell far short of this.<sup>2</sup>

Another mural,<sup>3</sup> this one in Belfast, displays images of Nora Connolly and Winifred Carney alongside words taken from a 1916 poem by Brian O'Higgins:

*They stand for the honour of Ireland,  
As their sisters in days that are gone.  
And they'll march with their brothers to freedom,  
The soldiers of Cumann na mBan.*

This poem has been set to music on multiple occasions. One of these was a 2016 rendition by Derek Warfield and the Young Wolfe Tones, which made some alterations to the original text including a new closing verse:

*And we'll cherish forever their story  
When the pages of history we scan.  
Of the valiant, brave daughters of Erin  
The soldiers of Cumann na mBan.*

The response to this could be, as Scally's, 'we didn't always.' However, as this song's 2016 release demonstrates, the centenary of the Rising has led to an increased interest in and awareness of the complex issues surrounding the Rising's memory, both in academia and in popular culture.

This thesis aims to contribute to this discussion through exploring the memory of the Rising and its impacts as documented in the memoirs of four women actively involved in the nationalist movement of the time. In analyzing the four memoirs, it seeks to address the question: how do women portray their memories of issues of conflict and nationalism in the Easter Rising and their gendered positions within it?

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*Women and the Decade of Commemorations*, ed. Oona Frawley (Indiana University Press, 2021), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World* (Sandycove, 2021), 200.

<sup>3</sup> See thesis cover



## **1.2 Choice of Approach**

One factor that drew me to the Peace and Conflict Transformation program at UiT was the commitment to an interdisciplinary approach. Despite this, a majority of the teaching and research in Peace and Conflict studies is firmly based in Social Science and Political Science. I was keen to explore an interdisciplinary approach in my thesis taking a dataset, theories and methodologies not only from the Social Sciences but also history and literature.

Autobiographical writing, in dealing with personal events, is frequently emotional and evocative and standard analysis which typically presents only brief sections can dilute this emotional impact. The thesis thus approaches the topic of these women's life-writing through a combination of standard and creative analytical strategies. Specifically, the thesis presents poetic representations of data alongside a standard academic analysis, an approach Laura Ellingson terms 'Integrated Crystallization.' These poetic pieces take their words from the memoirs themselves but are restructured and edited into poems to capture some of the evocative nature of the writing. Through the process of producing and reading these poetic representations, I hope to offer both the reader and myself an alternative way to engage with the data which can raise new questions and insights and enrich the accompanying analysis.

## **1.3 Thesis Outline**

This thesis follows the following structure.

Chapter 1 introduces the research questions and approach and provides outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 gives a historical background to the period and brief overviews of the four memoirs and their writers.

Chapter 3 provides the methodological framework of the thesis. It gives an overview of Thematic Analysis and Crystallization as methodologies as well as how they will be applied in this research. In addition, it explains the selection of data sources and reflects on researcher positionality.

Chapter 4 establishes the conceptual framework applied in this thesis, providing a description of the three concepts of 'autobiography as performance,' 'the myth of the band of brothers,' and

‘women as “keepers of memory,”’ and detailing how they apply to this thesis.

Chapter 5 presents the analysis of the four data sources, exploring six key themes that emerge in the memoirs.

Chapter 6 provides a conclusion which summarizes the research and presents its findings.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 The Easter Rising**

The Easter Rising was a complex event and many books have been written to examine its origins, events, and impact. It is, therefore, well beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full picture of the Rising. However, this background chapter attempts to give a brief overview of the Rising and the wider revolutionary period in Ireland to provide context to the four autobiographies analyzed in this thesis.

In the period leading up to 1916, the dominant movement for self-rule in Ireland was for ‘Home Rule,’ a system similar to modern-day devolution in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This would have established a domestic parliament for Ireland while the country remained within the United Kingdom, which it had been subsumed into by the Act of Union in 1801. This movement was fiercely opposed by Unionists, predominantly in the northern province of Ulster, who favored the continuation of a full union with Great Britain and, on the other hand, there remained a committed group in support of physical force republicanism and of an armed uprising to establish a fully independent republic. Two Home Rule bills, in 1886 and 1893, were never passed, the first being defeated in the House of Commons and the second in the House of Lords, and a third was introduced in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

The introduction of the bill was met with significant hostility in Ulster and led to the forming of the Ulster Volunteer Force, an armed group committed to resisting Home Rule by force, and to the drafting of an amendment which would exclude at least part of Ulster from Home Rule for an undetermined amount of time.<sup>5</sup>

While the bill was passed, the issues surrounding the Home Rule Bill (officially the

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag* (Penguin UK, 2000), 463.

<sup>5</sup> Kee, *The Green Flag*, 477; Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2015), 127.

Government of Ireland Act 1914) and the disagreements on Ulster's status within it were never resolved as the outbreak of the First World War in July 1914 led to the Suspensory Act 1914 which suspended the implementation of the act for one year and allowed for further suspensions if the war was still ongoing at that time.<sup>6</sup>

A well-known phrase among Irish republicans, attributed to Daniel O'Connell, claims that "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity" and this became a rallying cry for republicans to take advantage of the outbreak of war and the suspension of the Home Rule Bill to stage an armed uprising. This uprising began on Easter Monday, 24th April, 1916.

The Rising was marred with difficulty from the outset. It was originally planned to begin the previous day, Easter Sunday, but the discovery and scuttling of a German vessel, the *Aud* carrying arms to Ireland and the arrest of Roger Casement, the orchestrator of the smuggling, on Good Friday led to a lack of arms for the Rising. In addition, Eoin MacNeill, who was Chief-of-staff of the Irish Volunteers but was previously unaware of the plans, discovered the intentions of the leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) on Holy Thursday, 20th April. On learning of the sinking of *The Aud* the following day, he issued a countermanding order calling off all volunteer maneuvers which was disseminated by messengers across the country and printed in the Sunday papers.<sup>7</sup>

MacNeill's countermanding order caused confusion and chaos and its impact was significant. Though the IRB leaders met and decided to postpone the Rising by one day but continue with their plans, what was envisioned to be an all-island uprising became confined mostly to Dublin and, even here, the forces were depleted; approximately 1,500 men and 300 women<sup>8</sup> took part in the Easter Rising.

The rebels captured various buildings in the center of Dublin, though they did not succeed in their attempt to take Dublin Castle, which had been the seat of British control in Ireland. A police officer was killed during the failed attempt and is widely acknowledged as the first casualty of the Rising. According to statistics from the Dublin Metropolitan Police in 1916, the death toll during the six days of the Rising would reach 429 while a further 2,582 people were

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<sup>6</sup> Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, 150-1.

<sup>7</sup> Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, 151-6; Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Pluto Press, 2015), 196-7.

<sup>8</sup> The number of women who participated in the Easter Rising has been disputed. Early estimates suggested that only around 90 women were involved but later investigations by historians aimed at uncovering the participation of

wounded.<sup>9</sup> New research has indicated that this number may have been even higher, around 485 fatalities, of which most were civilians and 40 were children.<sup>10</sup>

The rebels formed a headquarters at the General Post Office (GPO) and established garrisons in other buildings in the capital, including Jacob's Biscuit Factory, the Royal College of Surgeons, and Boland's Bakery. Margaret Skinnider explained the logic of the buildings captured saying: "The names of these places do not sound martial... but each had been chosen for the strategic advantage it would give those defending Dublin with a few men against a great number."<sup>11</sup>

This supposed strategic advantage, however, was not enough to secure victory for the Irish forces. Less than a week after the Rising had commenced, it was over, with all garrisons surrendering on Saturday 29th April and Sunday 30th April.

Despite its brief span and ultimate failure, the Easter Rising's impact was tremendous and it came to be seen as a central symbol of Irish nationalist mythology and as a crucial turning point from support for Home Rule to support for physical force Republicanism.

This impact came first from the ferocity of the British response. Hundreds were arrested in the Rising's aftermath and tried by court martial. Sixteen men were executed, including all seven signatories of the Proclamation of the Republic, which had been read by Pádraig Pearse on the steps of the GPO on the Tuesday of Easter Week and which declared "the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible."<sup>12</sup>

These executions, as well as the discovery of the summary execution of writer and activist Francis Sheehy Skeffington and two other men by British Captain John Bowen-Colthurst, shocked the public and led to increasing hostility towards the British and to calls for the executions to stop.<sup>13</sup> Skinnider attributed a significant amount of the "bitterness" of the people to "the fact that people remembered how, after the war in South Africa which lasted three years

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women has led to the estimated figures rising. See Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Central Statistics Office, "Crime - CSO - Central Statistics Office," [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie), accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-1916/1916irl/society/crime/>.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah Smyth, "The Civilian Dead: Counting the Human Cost of the 1916 Rising | Century Ireland," [www.rte.ie](http://www.rte.ie), accessed April 29, 2023, <https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/the-civilian-dead>.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Skinnider, *Doing My Bit for Ireland* (New York: The Century Co., 1917), 103.

<sup>12</sup> Copy of 'The Proclamation of the Republic', 1916, National Library of Ireland, Joseph McGarrity Papers, MS 17,544/4/14.

<sup>13</sup> Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble*, 162-3.

instead of five days, only one man had been executed. After *our* rising sixteen men had been put to death.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the executions, a key factor in cementing the centrality of the Rising’s memory to the Nationalist cause and in changing the tide of public opinion was the relentless propaganda campaign in the following years which worked to portray the executed men as heroic martyrs in the tradition of other executed Irish rebels. With many of the Rising’s central male figures dead or imprisoned, this propaganda was largely the work of nationalist women who worked tirelessly in campaigning in Ireland and in the United States, as well as working to support the dependents of dead and imprisoned soldiers.

If the brutal response of the British had been intended to quell any potential for future uprisings in Ireland, it was enormously misjudged. With public opinion largely shifted away from the political approach of Home Rule and towards armed rebellion, the War of Independence began in 1919. Many veterans of 1916, men and women, also participated in the War of Independence.

The war lasted until 1921, with a truce being called on 11th July. Unfortunately, this was not to be the end of war in Ireland. The peace talks resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921. The Treaty allowed for the establishment of an ‘Irish Free State’ in twenty-six of Ireland’s thirty-two counties, excluding the six counties of ‘Northern Ireland’, created by the Government of Ireland Act 1920, which remained within the United Kingdom. The Free State was to have its own parliament in Dublin, however, it would remain a dominion within the British Empire with the British monarch, then King George VI, as head of state.

While those in favor of the treaty argued that it was a significant stepping stone towards full independence, for others a treaty that partitioned the country, ‘abandoned’ Ulster, left Ireland a dominion of the Empire, and necessitated allegiance to an English king was an untenable betrayal of the Republic declared in 1916.

The debates on the Treaty in the Dáil<sup>15</sup> were argued fiercely on both sides. A majority of Nationalist women, including all six female Teachtaí Dála (TDs),<sup>16</sup> took an anti-Treaty stance and their impassioned arguments against the Treaty were frequently lambasted by their

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<sup>14</sup> Skinnider, 200-1.

<sup>15</sup> Lower house of the *Oireachtas* (Irish parliament)

<sup>16</sup> Members of the Dáil; singular – *Teachta Dála*; abbreviated

pro-Treaty colleagues who accused them of arguing, not from logic or sincere belief, but from emotionality and personal grievance.<sup>17</sup>

Though the Treaty was passed by a narrow margin, the anti-Treaty Republicans refused to accept it and the Irish Civil War began in June 1922. The Civil War was a short but bloody and difficult period as those who had fought together in previous years now fought each other and families and friendships were torn apart by opposing allegiances.

The Civil War came to an end in May 1923, with the pro-Treaty forces emerging as the victors, though its divisions continued to profoundly impact the country for many years afterwards. With the victory of the pro-Treaty side, the Irish Free State continued until the passing of the 1937 Constitution renaming the state 'Ireland' and, in 1949, the Republic Act was passed ending residual ties with the British monarchy and establishing Ireland as a republic with an elected president as head of state.

How much this republic reflected that declared in 1916 remains, however, a source of much debate. Those who took power in the newly independent state were, as historian Mary McAuliffe put it, "the most conservative of revolutionaries"<sup>18</sup> and this, combined with the growing influence of the Catholic Church, deeply impacted the course of the country.

The four women whose autobiographies are analyzed in this thesis continued their involvement during this conflict, all on the anti-Treaty side, with three, Margaret Skinnider, Nora Connolly, and Máire Comerford, being imprisoned by Free State forces.<sup>19</sup>

Though the Proclamation had promised gender equality, the new state, far from honoring this aspect, introduced a range of legislation that reduced women's rights including barring them from sitting on juries, limiting their employment opportunities, and prohibiting advertising on contraception.<sup>20</sup> To this day, the dominant discourse which emerged, viewing women's position in society as centered on domestic responsibilities, remains enshrined in Article 41.1 of the constitution which states that "the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 281-2

<sup>18</sup> Mary McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider* (University College Dublin Press, 2020), 78.

<sup>19</sup> McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider*, 65-7.

<sup>20</sup> Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality: Women, Power and Gender Ideology in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937* (Dublin; Chicago: Four Courts Press, 2019), 78, 87 & 155.

<sup>21</sup> *Bunreacht na hÉireann 1937*, Article 41.1.1-2. A referendum proposing the removal of the gendered language in this article is due to be held in November 2023.

## 2.2 Margaret Skinnider - Doing My Bit for Ireland (1917)

Margaret Skinnider was born in 1892 in Scotland to Irish parents. She worked as a teacher of mathematics and became involved with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and the Glasgow branches of Na Fianna Éireann<sup>22</sup> and Cumann na mBan.<sup>23</sup> She traveled to Dublin in 1915, carrying explosives in her hat, where she became acquainted with Constance Markievicz and other revolutionary figures.

She returned to Dublin on Holy Thursday 1916 to join in the Easter Rising. During the conflict she was attached to the garrison at the College of Surgeons led by Michael Mallin and Markievicz. Here, she became one of the few women to take on the role of a direct combatant, being among the garrison's snipers, and was the only female rebel to sustain serious injuries. She was shot in three places and, following the Rising, she spent many weeks recuperating at St. Vincent's Hospital in Dublin.

In December 1916, she, like many other Nationalist women, traveled to the USA to conduct fundraising and propaganda work aimed at raising support for the nationalist movement among Americans, particularly the large number of Irish Americans. Her memoir, *Doing My Bit for Ireland*, was published in 1917 and was a key contribution to this propaganda effort.

On her return to Ireland, where she settled permanently in 1919, she lived with her partner, Nóra O'Keefe and was active in the War of Independence and on the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War. Following the Civil War, Skinnider and O'Keefe, like many who had been active 'irregulars',<sup>24</sup> faced financial hardship and struggled to gain employment. She eventually secured a teaching position in 1928 and joined the trade union, the Irish National Teachers' Organization (INTO). She became heavily involved with activism through INTO, including advocating for the union to adequately represent the concerns of female teachers, and was elected to its Central Executive Council in 1949. She remained involved in the causes of labor, women and nationalism throughout the rest of her life, until her death in 1971 at the age of seventy-nine.

*Doing My Bit for Ireland* was published in the USA in 1917 and was one of the first

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<sup>22</sup> Na Fianna Éireann (The Soldiers of Ireland) was a nationalist movement for young boys founded in 1909.

<sup>23</sup> Cumann na mBan (The Irishwomen's Council) was founded in 1914 as a Republican organization for women.

<sup>24</sup> 'Irregulars' is a term applied to those who opposed the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, particularly members of the anti-Treaty IRA.

published eyewitness accounts of the Rising. Written while on a propaganda tour with many other nationalist women, the memoir's clear target audience is Irish Americans, intending to inform them about the Rising and the situation in Ireland and to win their hearts and wallets to the nationalist cause.

The memoir opens with an introduction which makes this intended audience clear, as she directly ties the ideals and intentions of the Rising to those of the 1776 American Revolution. She then gives a very brief account of her childhood and schooling, in both cases tied firmly to the nationalist and republican influences these provided, before moving to her activity leading up to the Rising, including learning to shoot and her 1915 trip to Dublin. The principle focus of the memoir is the Easter Rising itself, and she describes the various activities she was engaged in and things she observed during Easter Week.

The final chapters deal with the aftermath of the Rising and Skinnider recounts the observations she made of reactions to the conflict, and to the British response which included executions and martial law, in the months before she left for the US. She closes the memoir with a final section entitled *Songs sung by the Irish before and after the Easter Rising*, in which she presents the lyrics of a number of patriotic songs with brief introductions detailing where she has heard them sung and by whom.

### **2.3 Nora Connolly - *The 1916 Rebellion; or the Unbroken Tradition (1918)***

Nora Connolly was born in 1893 in Edinburgh, Scotland, the second of seven children born to Rising leader James Connolly and his wife Lillie. She grew up in Dublin and New York and finally moved to Belfast at the age of sixteen.

She became involved in the labor and nationalist movements and was a founding member of Belfast Cumann na mBan as well as the president of the Betsy Gray sluagh of Na Fianna Éireann, the only girls' branch of the organization. In later life, she was elected to Seanad Éireann.<sup>25</sup>

Connolly wrote three memoirs over her lifetime. The first, *The Irish Rebellion of 1916; or The Unbroken Tradition* was published in 1918 and focuses on the period of the Rising. The second, *Portrait of a Rebel Father*, was published in 1935 and focuses on her father, James



Connolly. It uses an unusual writing style for a memoir as she refers to herself in third person, using her childhood nickname, Nono. The third, *We Shall Rise Again*, was published in 1981, shortly before her death, and deals with the then current situation in Northern Ireland.

*The Unbroken Tradition* is one of the earliest memoirs of the Easter Rising and, like *Doing My Bit for Ireland*, it was published while on a propaganda tour of the US. In *We Shall Rise Again*, Connolly refers to the book, explaining its title and making lofty claims about its accuracy:

I wrote a book on the rising, called *The Unbroken Tradition*. It was only short, but it was the first book to tell the truth about the rising. The title referred to the fact that every generation of the Irish people has had an armed uprising against the British. 1916 showed that the tradition was still unbroken. I wrote the book during 1916, while events were still hot in my mind.<sup>26</sup>

In the introduction to this memoir, Connolly presents her explanation of the causes of the Rising and its historical context. The memoir itself opens with Connolly's experiences of the 1913 Dublin Lockout and then the period leading up to the Rising 1914-16 when she was engaged in activities such as the moving of arms and smuggling Liam Mellows, a member of the Irish Volunteers, back into Ireland. The majority of the memoir then focuses on her experiences during the rebellion. She led a division of Cumann na mBan women in the north of Ireland, however, after the Volunteers in the north demobilized following Eoin McNeill's orders, she then went to Dublin as a courier to bring information from the North to her father. Returning to Coalisland, she was dismayed to find that no fighting was occurring in the North. This led her to resolve to go to Dublin and join in the fight. However, the closure of the railways disrupted her plans and she undertook an approximately 85km walk from Dundalk to Dublin alongside her younger sister, Agna, arriving just after the Irish forces in Dublin had surrendered. The final section of the memoir then deals with her father, James Connolly's, execution while a final chapter explains in more detail the demobilization initiated by McNeill.

#### **2.4 Kathleen Clarke - Revolutionary Woman (1991)**

Kathleen Clarke was born Kathleen Daly in Limerick in 1872, into what she described as a Fenian<sup>27</sup> family. Her father, Edward Daly, and uncle, John Daly, had both taken part in the 1867

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<sup>25</sup> The upper house of the *Oireachtas* (Irish Parliament)

<sup>26</sup> Nora Connolly O'Brien, *We Shall Rise Again* (Mosquito Press, 1981), 43.

<sup>27</sup> Fenian was a term applied to members of revolutionary organizations the Irish Republican Brotherhood and its

Fenian Rising and had both been imprisoned by the British.

In 1901, she married Tom Clarke, a Fenian who had been a friend of her uncle John while they were imprisoned together, and they went on to have three children: John (called Daly), 1902; Tom, 1908; and Emmet, 1909. From 1901-1907 they lived in New York, but returned to Ireland as Tom was sure that a rebellion was coming.

Clarke is often remembered principally as Tom's widow, but she was equally dedicated to the nationalist movement and involved in the plans for the Rising. She was made aware of the plans and given instructions and funds to care for the dependents of the Irish Volunteers by her husband and other members of the IRB, who she claims at that time imagined they could "hold out for four or five months."<sup>28</sup>

Following the Rising, Clarke took a leading role in arranging support for the dependents of those killed or imprisoned and was herself imprisoned in Holloway Jail in 1918. She had an active public life, among other positions serving as a judge in the Republican courts during the War of Independence, a Teachta Dála (TD) in the Second Dáil (1921-2) and Fifth Dáil (1927), a Senator in the Free State Seanad (1928-36) and Lord Mayor of Dublin (1939-41).

In later life, she moved to live with her youngest son, Emmet, in Liverpool where she died in 1972, aged ninety-four, and was buried in a state funeral in Dublin.

Clarke's memoir, *Revolutionary Woman*, was written mostly in the 1940s. However, it was not until almost two decades after her death that the memoir was published in 1991. It was edited and published by her grand-niece, Helen Litton, who added contextualizing notes and an epilogue. A second edition, with a short additional preface, was published in 2008. Litton emphasized that she added information to increase clarity and removed some repetitive material but did not otherwise make changes to the words themselves, saying that the memoir "is the voice of Kathleen Clarke, stubborn energetic and driven by a fierce commitment to a cause."<sup>29</sup>

The events of *Revolutionary Woman* stretch from Clarke's sixth birthday in 1884 to her retirement from public life in 1943. However, the principal focus is on the period surrounding the Rising with chapters 3-7, about 45% of the memoir, covering the period 1911-17.

Following this, she details her experiences in Holloway Prison, the events of the War of

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US counterpart, the Fenian Brotherhood.

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman*, ed. Helen Litton, 2nd ed. (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2008), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Helen Litton, preface to *Revolutionary Woman*, 6.

Independence and Civil War, and her participation in the Treaty Debates in 1921. The nearly twenty years of her public political life after the revolutionary period is condensed into the final chapter. Litton notes in the epilogue that “her public life is covered in only a few pages,”<sup>30</sup> and expands on some details of this brief chapter, providing further information on her activities while in public office, specifically illuminating her work on women’s rights in the Dáil and Seanad.

As Clarke gives little space to this lengthy public life, Litton contends that she wrote her memoir “in order to secure Tom Clarke’s position in the pantheon of republican leaders.”<sup>31</sup> While it is certainly the case that this was among her motivations and she is frequently concerned with Tom’s memory, it seems a limited view to designate this as her sole motivation. She could as easily have written Tom’s biography, and the simple fact that she chose to write a memoir in which Tom is a significant but nonetheless secondary figure, suggests that there were additional motivations. Clarke’s prologue states that she promised Reverend Father Alfred Bibby that she would write her memoirs as he considered her to know more than anyone about the Rising and she explains that she has “tried to tell the truth without causing disillusionment, as I would fear the effect of that on young minds.”<sup>32</sup> This suggests that the explanation for her lack of concern with her later political life was not due to a focus on preserving just Tom’s memory but that of the Rising and wider revolutionary period in general, and that she considered her own experiences and thoughts to be a powerful way to impart this on future generations.

### **2.5 Máire Comerford - On Dangerous Ground (2021)**

Máire Comerford was born Mary Comerford in 1893 in County Wicklow. Her family was from a privileged, Catholic background and Comerford was educated first in convent schools in Ireland, one of which she ran away from because of the lack of sports in girls’ schools, and was later sent to school in Hampshire, England. After finishing school, she attended a secretarial course in London, by which point she was increasingly interested in Irish nationalism.

She was in Dublin during the Rising in 1916, and following this became involved in Sinn Féin and Cumann na mBan and took an active part in the War of Independence and Civil War.

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<sup>30</sup> Litton, epilogue of *Revolutionary Woman*, 313.

<sup>31</sup> Litton, epilogue of *Revolutionary Woman*, 313.

She struggled financially following the Civil War, running a poultry farm in Wexford. She later became a journalist and collected information on the Republican movement, publishing a book *The First Dáil*, in 1969. She died aged eighty-nine in 1982 and was buried in Wexford.

Her memoir *On Dangerous Ground* was written between the 1950s and her death but was not published until 2021. Prior to this, the drafts were available in archives at University College Dublin but her niece-in-law, Hilary Dully, was determined to make her story more widely available. She notes in her preface that Comerford had hoped that her memoir would be published while she was alive and would

find a place in the rich tapestry of the history of this fascinating time. Sadly, this was not to be. As editor of her memoir, I can only hope that almost forty years after her death, I have served her intentions well.<sup>33</sup>

On its publication in 2021, Dully reflected that *On Dangerous Ground* was special among the many books published during the Decade of Centenaries as “it may well be one of the last comprehensive witness accounts of the revolutionary period to emerge into the public realm.”<sup>34</sup>

Dully, like Litton, emphasizes that her editing was focused on providing clarifying information, which she does through extensive footnotes explaining the people and events that Comerford referenced, and that she was determined “to preserve the authenticity of Máire’s voice in the telling of her own story.”<sup>35</sup>

Comerford begins her memoir describing her childhood and schooling, consistently with reference to Irish politics, and goes on to detail her experiences during the Rising. The period from the end of the Easter Rising to the Civil War during which Comerford was involved in a wide variety of activities for the Republican movement, makes up the majority of the memoir. Following the Civil War Comerford, like many who had been on the anti-Treaty side, faced enormous financial struggles and was largely cut off from politics in Dublin for many years. The final chapter of her memoir reflects on this “time of terrible poverty”<sup>36</sup> for herself and many of her comrades and concludes with her ejection from Sinn Féin in 1927, after she voted in the 1927 Free State election. She then devotes the final page to reflecting on the current state of Ireland

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<sup>32</sup> Clarke, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Hilary Dully, preface to Máire Comerford, *On Dangerous Ground*, ed. Hilary Dully (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2021), ix.

<sup>34</sup> Hilary Dully, “Máire Comerford: The Last Irish Revolutionary to Tell Her Story,” *The Irish Times*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/maire-comerford-the-last-irish-revolutionary-to-tell-her-story-1.4748047>.

<sup>35</sup> Hilary Dully, preface to *On Dangerous Ground*, viii

<sup>36</sup> Máire Comerford, *On Dangerous Ground*, ed. Hilary Dully (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2021), 287.

and the process of writing her memoir.

### **3. Methodological Framework**

In order to examine the central question of this thesis, how do women portray their memories of issues of conflict and nationalism in the Easter Rising and their gendered positions within it?, I will use a methodology consisting of Thematic Analysis and Crystallization.

#### **3.1 Research design**

I intend to explore how nationalist women conceptualize the Easter Rising, its impacts and their roles within it in their memoirs and what these portrayals can reveal about their gendered positions. In analyzing this I will use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research can follow several variant approaches but it is broadly concerned with a greater emphasis on language over quantifiable, generalizable data. Regarding epistemology, I take an interpretivist perspective. Interpretivism derives from critiques of positivism such as phenomenology and holds that the social world should not be studied in the same way as the natural world.<sup>37</sup> Alfred Schütz argued that while the environments studied by natural scientists do not have a meaning to the subjects of their study, social scientists study a social reality occupied by people who do attribute meaning to their environments and therefore “the thought objects constructed by the social scientist, in order to grasp this social reality, have to be founded upon the thought objects constructed by the common-sense thinking of men [and women!], living their daily life within the social world.”<sup>38</sup>

Schütz’s afterthought of [and women!] leads well into the second epistemological basis in this thesis, feminism. Dorothy E. Smith criticizes traditional approaches to sociology, arguing that the constraints of established academia alienate women as their methods, theories, and concepts were devised in male led and dominated environments and therefore “impose the concepts and terms in which the world of men is thought as the concepts and terms in which women must think their world.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Sandra Harding argues that these

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<sup>37</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26-7.

<sup>38</sup> Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), quoted in Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. (Don Mills, Ontario, Canada: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27.

<sup>39</sup> Dorothy E. Smith, “Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” *Sociological Inquiry* 44, no. 1

traditional approaches posit men as representing ‘the human’ and therefore complicate viewing their actions as also gendered.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, feminist academics such as Smith and Harding advocated for new approaches which would allow for the inclusion of wider perspectives and experiences, not limited to those of women but also of class, race and culture as Harding emphasizes that “women come only in different classes, races, and cultures: there is no “woman” and no “woman’s experience.”<sup>41</sup> Both Smith and Harding hold that this alternate approach must be based in acknowledgment of the researcher’s standpoint and a critical reflexivity on the researcher’s own beliefs and assumptions. As my research questions focus on the gendered position of women within a conflict traditionally thought of in masculine terms, taking a feminist epistemological approach, such as that advocated for by Smith and Harding, will allow me to interrogate issues of gender within the texts.

### **3.2 Selection of data**

My initial research interest was to analyze how women have been portrayed in literature in relation to the Easter Rising. During the process of data collection, the writing that stood out was that of women themselves. While the most well-known writers of the revolutionary era are men - Yeats, Breen, Pearse and others - many women have also written about this period. This intersects with another issue that has been frequently highlighted by Irish feminists, that many women writers have been overlooked by the canon. These areas have explicitly intersected in the form of the #WakingTheFeminists movement which countered the male dominated program announced by Dublin’s Abbey Theatre for the Rising’s centenary.<sup>42</sup>

Within this area, women’s autobiographical writing on the Rising became my focus. Several women wrote and published their recollections of the Rising, both soon afterwards and in later years. While these works have been increasingly used as sources, there is little specific academic analysis of these memoirs.

In her essay *Gender and the Post-Colonial Archive*, Karen Steele considers some of the

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(1974): pp. 7-13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682x.1974.tb00718.x>, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Sandra Harding, “Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?,” in *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, ed. Sandra Harding (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Harding, “Is There a Feminist Method?,” 7.

<sup>42</sup> Miriam Haughton, “‘Them the Breaks’: #WakingTheFeminists and Staging the Easter/Estrogen Rising,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28, no. 3 (July 3, 2018): 345–54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2018.1475363>.

challenges of uncovering the “buried stories of Irish nationalist women” in a postcolonial archive which she describes as both “tensile and compressive”, being scattered across continents and profoundly influenced by gendered divisions which have frequently seen male voices privileged and women’s records excluded or sequestered among the files of various male relatives. Steele concludes that when dealing with the postcolonial archive “it is difficult to pry open the door without feminine guides - women’s memoirs, letters, interviews, journalism - to show us what we could not even see that we were missing.”<sup>43</sup>

Gail Hershatter similarly identifies women as guides to what is missing in her oral history research of women in rural China. She describes the stories revealed in women’s memories as “good enough” stories. These are narratives which cannot capture a full picture of history, either of the individual or of society. However, their value is in their ability to surprise, to interrupt established narratives, and to incite a questioning of where the stories that we tell are limited and not “good enough.”<sup>44</sup>

Memoirs, like any historical source, cannot provide us with a full understanding of history or society, however, like Steele and Hershatter, I believe that analyzing women’s Easter Rising narratives and exploring how they construct issues of gender and conflict in their recollections of revolution can help to broaden the picture of gender and nationalism in Ireland.

The memoirs which my analysis will focus on are:

*Doing My Bit for Ireland* - Margaret Skinnider (1917)

*The 1916 Rising; or The Unbroken Tradition* - Nora Connolly (1918)

*Revolutionary Woman* - Kathleen Clarke (1991)

*On Dangerous Ground* - Máire Comerford (2021)

While all four feature women’s personal recollections of the Easter Rising, they represent a range of experiences and time periods. Margaret Skinnider and Nora Connolly’s memoirs focus almost exclusively on the period of the Rising and were published in its immediate aftermath - in 1917 and 1918 respectively.

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<sup>43</sup> Karen Steele, “Gender and the Postcolonial Archive,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 10, no. 1 (2010): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2010.0030>.

<sup>44</sup> Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past*, Asia Pacific Modern

In contrast, Kathleen Clarke and Máire Comerford's memoirs reflect on events from a distance of many decades and cover not just the Rising but the subsequent War of Independence, Civil War, and the early years of the Irish Free State. Both Clarke and Comerford's memoirs were published posthumously; Clarke's in the mid-1990s and Comerford's in 2021.

Therefore, there were also significantly different motivations surrounding the writing and publishing of the memoirs. Both Connolly and Skinnider's were published in the United States and a key motivation for their publication was to galvanize support among Irish Americans for the forthcoming continuation of revolution; a significant task that many Republicans were engaged in at the time.

Clarke and Comerford take a different tone as they reflect on the Rising from the vantage point of an Ireland with some measure of independence and having faced the horrors of the Civil War and partition.

Taking sources produced in these very different contexts allows for a comparison of how thinking around the Rising and women's roles within it may have changed.

### **3.3 Thematic Analysis**

Thematic Analysis is a method of qualitative analysis which aims to uncover "themes" across a set of qualitative data. This approach conceptualizes "themes as reflecting a *pattern* of shared meaning, organized around a core concept or idea."<sup>45</sup> While, as Braun et al. note, it is not possible to arrive at data analysis with no preconceived notions,<sup>46</sup> this thesis takes an inductive approach to coding, using the texts themselves as the starting point for identifying themes rather than pre-existing theory.

My thesis focuses on four memoirs, which represents only a tiny fraction of the women connected to the Easter Rising. While I have no illusions that this small sample can produce generalizable answers concerning all nationalist women of the time, it is useful to examine common themes in the memoirs and the differences and similarities in how they approach them. Identifying the common themes that emerge in the memoirs can help to illuminate some of the

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Virginia Braun et al., "Thematic Analysis," in *Handbook of Research Methods in Health Social Sciences*, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4\\_103](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5251-4_103), 855.

<sup>46</sup> Virginia Braun et al., "Thematic Analysis," 853.



key questions and ideas concerning nationalist women of the time. Thematic analysis is a beneficial methodological approach to help identify these common themes and to explore both the parallels and contrasts in the memoirs.

Following the approach laid out by Braun and Clarke, I coded my datasets, identifying potentially relevant sections of the data and possible connections between them. I then collated this large number of codes into potential themes. Following this, I reviewed these themes and narrowed them down into the six themes that will be covered in the analysis.

### **3.4 Crystallization**

Crystallization was first outlined by Laurel Richardson in 2003 and later expanded on by Laura Ellingson in her book *Engaging Crystallization in Qualitative Research*.

Richardson argues that the concept of triangulation is limited as it focuses on the use of different methods to validate findings and therefore rests on the assumption that there is a fixed point to be triangulated. She proposes an alternative conceptualization of a crystal “which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach.”<sup>47</sup>

Crystallization challenges the traditional dichotomy separating literary and scientific writing. Instead, it views qualitative research as a continuum and writing as a method of inquiry in itself and synthesizes creative and analytical approaches. Nationalist autobiography occupies liminal spaces between history and literature, fact and fiction, self and nation. Therefore, it is helpful to employ a methodology that embraces liminality and the merging of genre.

Though highlighting several potential approaches, Richardson and Ellingson both place a focus on poetry and poetic representation as a method for engaging with crystallization in research. Autobiographical writing, in dealing with personal events, is frequently emotional and evocative and standard analysis which typically presents only brief sections can dilute this emotional impact. Ellingson states that poetic representations of data allow for presenting more of the participants’ words while Richardson quotes Robert Frost’s maxim that “a poem is the shortest emotional distance between two points” and asserts that the process of putting words

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<sup>47</sup> Laurel Richardson, “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research: Tying Knots in a Handkerchief*, ed. Yvonna S. Lincoln and Norman K. Denzin (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2003), 934

together in new ways “lets us hear, see, and *feel* the world in new dimensions.” Richardson further argues that the highly structured nature of poetry draws our attention to the fact that texts, both poetry and prose, are constructed and therefore “helps problematize reliability, validity, transparency, and “truth.””<sup>48</sup>

### **3.5 Positionality**

Throughout my research I have worked to remain reflexive and consider how my own positionality may influence my understanding and interpretations of my data. While engaging with the memoirs, I found many recollections within them brought to mind my own “autobiographical memories.” Therefore, I relate to and understand the data from a different perspective that that which a researcher with another background might have. One example of this is a reference in *Doing My Bit for Ireland* to the history that Margaret Skinnider learned in school. I spent a few months in the Baby Infants class at school in Ireland when I was five. If we learned any history, I don’t recall it; my memory of that time is dominated by growing cress and my pride in bringing it home to show to my grandmother. Beyond that, my schooling was in England, but I was lucky to have parents with a keen interest in history and, through them, I learned about Ireland. Skinnider’s expression of the “resentment” she felt on reading the “school histories” of Ireland at her school in Scotland evoked my own memories of the confusion, and later anger, I felt in the conspicuous absence of Ireland, or indeed any other part of Britain’s expansive empire, in the curriculum of my own “school histories.” This personal relation to the ideas that Skinnider expresses here has the potential to influence how I understand and analyze them.

My personal interest in the Easter Rising arises from my childhood. When I was six or seven I decided, I’m sure to my parents’ horror, to try to learn to play the tin whistle. The texts of the song books we had were filled with lyrics that aroused my curiosity, particularly the ballad of James Connolly who “*went to his death like a true son of Ireland.*”<sup>49</sup> This song was my first introduction to the Rising and I was enthralled. Music remained a way that I felt connected to a history and culture that I was disconnected from living in England. A cousin once noted that I

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<sup>48</sup> Richardson, “A Method of Inquiry,” 933.

<sup>49</sup> The Wolfe Tones, *James Connolly*, YouTube, October 11, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwR5\\_EG8DDs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwR5_EG8DDs).

knew Irish songs better than she did and I was delighted one St. Patrick's Day when a woman I met praised my "good education" in Irish songs. Later, books were added to this and, while there are many fascinating periods in Irish history, the Rising remained the focus of my interest. When I chose it all these years later as the focus of my thesis, I began to reflect on why specifically this conflict was of interest to me. While there are many answers, one that I considered for the first time was the question of Irish identity around the Rising. Among others, Constance Markievicz was from an Anglo-Irish family and spoke with an English accent while Nora Connolly, James Connolly and Margaret Skinnider were all born in Scotland and the latter two spoke with Scottish accents throughout their lives.

A world map hangs on the wall of the classroom where most of the classes of my master's program were conducted displaying the names of current and former students pinned on their countries. On the first day of class, we added our names to this map. I cannot and do not intend to speak for my classmates, some of them may have found this exercise a struggle as well, but it seemed to me that they had an easy answer to where their names were displayed. I hesitated. I was born and grew up in England and have an English father so, at first glance, it should have been a simple choice. But, throughout my life, I always identified as Irish, the nationality of my mother. It was, at first, something obvious, indisputable, and intrinsic. I simply was Irish and never questioned it. The first time it ever was questioned was by a girl at my new school when I was six years old. When I said I was Irish, she quickly responded, "No you're not, you're English." The idea that a child I had just met could tell me I was something that, as far as I was concerned, I wasn't, bemused and infuriated me. As I grew up and had an awareness of my dual nationality and background, the question became more complicated and the idea of my own national identity was something I struggled with immensely, but I continued to balk at any description of myself as "English" and to think of myself as "Irish." When asked where I'm from, my scripted answer is "I'm Irish but I grew up in the UK," a description which, only when reflecting on it now, I realize eludes the notion of 'England' from the equation entirely, providing a more ambiguous term that could as easily be Scotland or Wales.

Ultimately, I placed my pin in the middle of the Irish sea, a sea I looked out on from the deck of ferries on so many trips 'home' to Ireland and 'back' to England. It was a quick decision in a panicked moment, but which perhaps represents my fraught sense of identity better than anything else; unable to connect straightforwardly with either country, I end up in an uneasy in-between

that is at once either, both, and neither. Therefore, outside of my intellectual interest in the Rising as an undeniably significant and influential event in Irish history, part of my interest is connected, I'm sure, to an identification with the complicated, mixed background of many of those involved and a certain sense of gratification in the idea of others who shared a similar background to my own but who saw themselves as Irish and contributed to the realization of Ireland as an independent state.

### **3.5 Limitations**

One limitation of this thesis is the small data set, consisting of just four memoirs. This provides just four women's voices and perspectives on an event in which up to 300 women are thought to have participated while many others, just as Máire Comerford, witnessed and were impacted by the Rising. Other women have written memoirs concerning the Rising while women's experiences can also be examined in a range of other sources, such as the Bureau of Military History witness statements and Military Service Pensions Collection, the releases of which have greatly enriched discourse on the Rising in the 21st century. However, the scope of a master's thesis necessitated the narrowing of this available data.

The choice of memoir comes with some limitations and considerations. In the process of writing this thesis, it has been important to always keep in mind the intentions of the writers and how political or personal considerations may have impacted how they divulged information in their writing. Furthermore, memoirs are written by those who both have the time, education and resources to write them and who also believe they have something significant to say. Therefore, they could be seen to emphasize more privileged voices while obscuring those who did not have these resources.

However, while the narrow scope of data comes with limitations, it also provides opportunities. The memoirs have been used as sources for a wide variety of publications regarding the Rising, however, they have primarily provided relatively small additions to a wide range of sources and there is little academic analysis of the memoirs themselves. Centering this thesis on just four memoirs allows for a deeper analysis of their contents and the memories their writers constructed within them than would be possible with a wider range of data.

## **4. Conceptual Framework**

Three key concepts, drawn from the theoretical backgrounds of gender and memory, form my conceptual framework: autobiography as performance, the ‘Band of Brothers’ myth, and women as ‘keepers of memory.’

### **4.1 Autobiography as performance**

The first concept which I intend to apply in this thesis is the concept of autobiography as performance, as articulated by Kristine Ann Byron in her doctoral thesis *Women Write Revolution* in which she analyzes the autobiographical writing of women revolutionaries in Ireland, Spain, Cuba, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Byron draws on the work of Sidonie Smith and Nancy Miller in her conceptualization of performance.

Smith argues that the theory of self-expression in autobiography is flawed in its assumption that there exists an essential, objective ‘inner self’ which can be accessed at any point in an individual’s history and transcribed into language. Rather, just as cultural memory studies rests on the premise that remembering can exist only alongside forgetting, Smith contends that “the very sense of self as identity derives paradoxically from the loss to consciousness of fragments of experiential history.”<sup>50</sup>

In the inverse of the assumption that the ‘self’ precedes and forms the autobiographical narrative, the self is instead seen as constructed through the process of writing as the writer ‘performs’ elements of the self, such as gender and race, on the page. As in any writing of history, what is remembered and ‘forgotten’ within autobiographical narratives is not neutral but rather the result of active selections by its writer in how the self is performed and represented.

Moreover, Byron argues that performativity is of particular importance in the life-writing of women revolutionaries who not only perform the self in their texts but also as political actors “in the street, in the mountains, and across national boundaries.”<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the self that is constructed within the narratives of revolutionary women is arguably doubly performed. The recounted memory of what Byron terms ‘performance gestures’

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<sup>50</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Wisconsin Studies in American Autobiography (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 108.

in the narrative represent an encore of an earlier performance, though one which is necessarily altered by a change of medium and audience.

While, in relation to Irish women, Byron focuses on Maud Gonne, Constance Markievicz, and Kathleen Clarke, she centers her discussion of performance on Gonne and Markievicz and does not fully expand this concept as it relates to Clarke.

Therefore, I intend to engage with the concept of autobiography as performance in the writing of Clarke as well as to apply it to the other women of focus in this thesis, Máire Comerford, Margaret Skinnider, and Nora Connolly, to examine how they can be seen to perform their ‘selves’ as Irish women and revolutionaries in their memory of the Easter Rising.

#### **4.2 The ‘Band of Brothers’ Myth**

Megan Mackenzie’s 2015 book *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth that Women Can’t Fight* explores the combat exclusion policy that barred women from serving in combat roles in the US Armed Forces until 2013.

Mackenzie argues that this policy was fueled by the myth of the ‘Band of Brothers,’ which presents three supposed truths:

First, the myth casts the nonsexual, brotherly love, male bonding, and feelings of trust, pride, honor, and loyalty between men as mysterious, indescribable, and **exceptional**. Second, male bonding is treated as both primal and an **essential** element of an orderly, civilized, society. Third, all male units are seen as **elite** as a result of their social bonds and physical superiority; it is assumed that these qualities render them more capable of accomplishing military missions and defending the country compared to mixed-gender units.<sup>52</sup>

These accepted “truths” require the exclusion of women, viewing them as a potential threat to military cohesion and bonding and to security. This exclusion, Mackenzie holds, was based not on evidence but rather on feeling and emotion shaped by the Band of Brothers myth. She argues that “in particular, the myth of the band of brothers shapes our understanding of what men and women can, and should do, in war.”<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, Mackenzie argues that the myth perpetuates militarism, a view of war as natural and honorable, and violence as a necessary political tool. She also challenges the assumption that merely ‘adding women’ is sufficient to disrupt this myth or to address gendered

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<sup>51</sup> Kristine Ann Byron, “Women Write Revolution” (Doctoral Thesis, University of Connecticut, 2001): 9.

<sup>52</sup> Mackenzie, Megan. *Beyond the Band of Brothers: The US Military and the Myth That Women Can’t Fight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 3.

issues in the military.

While Mackenzie analyzes the Band of Brothers myth in relation to the US military, the ideas and emotions connected to it are paralleled in many military groups, including in Ireland.

Women were excluded from the largest military group active during the Rising, the Irish Volunteers, instead they were members of the women's organization Cumann na mBan. While the Irish Citizen Army included both men and women in their ranks, Margaret Ward has demonstrated that, in practice, during the Rising there remained "a traditional division of labour between the sexes within the ICA, and a discernible reluctance by many Volunteers about having women involved at all."<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, women were involved in a variety of capacities in the Rising. This involvement was often excluded from dominant narratives which emerged after the rebellion which, akin to the Band of Brothers myth, emphasized brave, male soldiers fighting for Ireland and rendered women near invisible.

Work by historians such as Ward and Margaret MacCurtain has, since the 1980s, sought to correct this and to highlight the actions of women in the revolutionary period. However, this has not always permeated the wider public memory of the Rising. Despite women's involvement, the popular view of military groups as a Band of Brothers, has endured and these narratives have all too often continued to center its male figures and to relegate women, where they are included, to auxiliary, trivialized positions, or to include merely one or two 'exceptional' women.

Applying the Band of Brothers myth to women's memoirs concerning the Easter Rising, can help to elucidate why and how this enduring narrative was constructed and, moreover, has a considerable potential in assisting analysis of how women constructed and framed their positions as women within a traditionally masculine environment and where they may challenge the "truths" of this myth.

### **4.3 Women as 'keepers of memory'**

In his article *Matilda Tone in America: Exile, Gender, and Memory in the Making of Irish Republican Nationalism*, David Brundage discusses women connected to an earlier Irish

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<sup>53</sup> Megan Mackenzie, *Band of Brothers*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 196.

revolution, the 1798 Rebellion. Brundage contends that, excluded from the political and military roles of rebellion, women carved out a position for themselves as “keepers of historical memory.”<sup>55</sup>

The focus of the article is on Matilda Tone, the wife of one of the central figures of Irish revolutionary mythology, Theobald Wolfe Tone. While the book *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone* was published under the name of his son, Brundage demonstrates that Matilda was the driving force behind its curation and publication and argues that it was this text which established Wolfe Tone’s position as a heroic martyr who had a profound influence on many of the Irish rebels of 1916, particularly Pádraig Pearse and Roger Casement. On this basis, he argues that Matilda’s work in compiling the volume was “arguably one of the Irish diaspora’s greatest contributions to the making of republican nationalism.”<sup>56</sup>

Matilda Tone was not alone in this. Brundage also highlights the efforts of Jane Rowan in publishing the autobiography of her father, Hamilton Rowan, and of the numerous wives and daughters of other 1798 rebels who made essential contributions to another key text in the memory of the rebellion, Richard Robert Madden’s *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*.

In Brundage’s view, while the fraternal nature of Irish republicanism barred women from direct participation, this role that they established for themselves was one which “in the final analysis, proved to be more important for the long-term fortunes of the republican project: the construction and transmission across generations of nationalist memory.”<sup>57</sup>

The Easter Rising, inspired at least in part by the cultural memory of 1798, ended with the execution and imprisonment of the vast majority of its prominent male figures. Many Nationalist women once again took up the mantle of ‘keepers of memory,’ and, as Cathal Brugha acknowledged in the Dáil in 1922, “it was the women... who kept the spirit alive, who kept the flame alive and the flag flying.”<sup>58</sup>

It was women who were engaged in establishing the memory of the latest rebellion and in establishing the image of a new generation of rebels as heroic martyrs. This was undertaken in numerous ways, including the Easter Rising memoirs of Margaret Skinnider and Nora Connolly.

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<sup>55</sup> David Brundage, “Matilda Tone in America: Exile, Gender, and Memory in the Making of Irish Republican Nationalism,” *New Hibernia Review* 14, no. 1 (2010):108, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.0.0122>.

<sup>56</sup> David Brundage, “Matilda Tone,” 98.

<sup>57</sup> David Brundage, “Matilda Tone,” 98.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 222.



While Matilda Tone had been in America writing the text that would establish Wolfe Tone's memory in Ireland, Skinnider and Connolly demonstrate the important exchange of cultural memory across the Atlantic in the opposite direction. Both memoirs, Skinnider's in 1917 and Connolly's in 1918, were published in the United States and intended to establish the place of the Rising in nationalist memory particularly in the minds of an Irish American audience.

Writing decades later, after the establishment of the Irish Free State, Kathleen Clarke and Máire Comerford were profoundly aware of their positions as contributors to nationalist memory, although their accounts would not be published until long after their deaths. In the prologue to her autobiography, Clarke speaks of her hesitation to write and outlines her intention as being to "tell the truth without causing disillusionment, as I would fear the effect of that on young minds."<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, in the conclusion to her own autobiography, Comerford acknowledges that "this memoir is not history per se; it is merely my own narrative and my personal reconstruction of what happened."<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, I believe that applying the concept of women as 'keepers of memory,' that is, women taking an active and intentional role in constructing and transmitting memories of revolution, will allow for a deep analysis of how, and for what purpose, women conceptualized and framed the memory of the Rising in their autobiographical writing.

## **5. Analysis**

This chapter presents the analysis of the four memoirs through the exploration of six key themes: *Revolutionary Awakenings*, *Isn't this a good end?*, *Ireland Over All*, *Soldiers are We*, *Sisters in Arms*, and *Ní Saoirse go Saoirse na mBan*.

*Revolutionary Awakenings* analyzes how the women construct their evolution into Irish Nationalists and involvement in the revolutionary movement in their memoirs. I argue that their presentation of these 'awakenings' in their memoirs serves to generate a sense of authority and validity to their positions, through explaining and justifying their commitment to their beliefs, thus countering accusations of women's involvement lacking ideological motivation.

The executions that occurred in the wake of the Rising are frequently presented as a

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<sup>59</sup> Clarke, 8.

<sup>60</sup> Comerford, 290.

‘revolutionary awakening’ for the country as a whole, turning the tide from parliamentary efforts for Home Rule towards physical force republicanism. *Isn't this a good end?* explores the idea and impact of this heroic martyrdom through analyzing how the women present their often-ambivalent reactions to these executions, ranging from profound grief to powerful feelings of pride and honor.

Martyrdom is inexorably linked to the idea of valuing country over all else, even life itself. *Ireland Over All* discusses how the women grapple with questions of Irish identity and the value they place on devotion to country above all else. In any nationalist movement, the construction of a national identity is paramount. Within this theme, I analyze the myriad ways in which the women address the question of what it means to be Irish, arguing that they present a complex and layered notion of ‘Irishness’, encompassing heritage, language, history and culture but, ultimately, most prominently connect the idea of ‘Irishness’ to a devotion to, and willingness to fight for, Ireland.

While many women expressed this willingness to fight for their country, *Soldiers are We?* explores the complexities of women’s position within the category of ‘soldier.’ Using Megan Mackenzie’s concept of the ‘band of brothers’ myth, I argue that the women’s self-construction through identification with militaristic language and tropes can challenge traditional conceptualizations of what it means to be a ‘soldier,’ and particularly its enduring association with masculinity.

*Sisters in Arms* expands on the ‘band of brothers’ myth through exploring the presentation of relationships between female revolutionaries in the memoirs. Here, I argue that the memoirs can further challenge this myth through their demonstration of the close and significant bonds formed between female comrades, creating an idea of ‘sisters in arms’ analogous to the familiar concept of male soldiers as ‘brothers in arms.’

Finally, *Ní Saoirse go Saoirse na mBan (No freedom until women’s freedom)* builds on these themes of women’s uneasy place in the revolutionary movement through analyzing how the women construct their sense of self as women, their gendered positions in the movement and their connections to the contemporaneous feminist movement. Nationalism and feminism are frequently conceptualized as competing or opposing ideologies. However, I argue that, though seeing themselves first as nationalists, in their memoirs the women demonstrate a deep attentiveness to and interest in the issues of women’s place in society. Far from seeing this as

contradictory to their nationalist commitments, they frequently present the issues of the movements as deeply linked. They present national freedom as crucial to the attainment of women's freedom and, where this proved not to be the case, continually tie their objections to the curtailing of women's rights to the ideals of the Rising and women's work within the revolution.

### **5.1 Revolutionary Awakenings**

Participating in insurrection is, inevitably, a subversive act and to do so as a woman is doubly subversive as it defies not only law but also the prescribed roles of women in early twentieth century Ireland. News of the involvement of women in the Easter Rising was met with a range of shock, horror, and derision. Louise Ryan found that newspaper accounts focused on two women connected to the Rising, Constance Markievicz and Grace Gifford, whose tragic marriage to Rising leader Joseph Plunkett just hours before his execution is one of the most enduring stories of the Rising. This, Ryan contends, was because they could be accommodated into easy, unchallenging roles; Markievicz as a "ridiculous character" whose characterization in the press was used to mock the Rising itself and Gifford as "young, beautiful and lovelorn", and therefore serve to "underestimate and render invisible the various roles which almost 200 women played in the Easter Rising."<sup>61</sup> The motives of the women involved were frequently questioned and criticized, particularly in later years when the rejection of the Anglo-Irish Treaty by many Republican women was attributed to "personal grievance"<sup>62</sup> because of the deaths of male relatives, and many pro-Treaty men lay the blame for the civil war at the feet of Republican women.

When Alexander McCabe accused the women voting against the Treaty of acting emotionally and referred to "the exploitation of the dead," Dr. Ada English passionately rejected this idea of the women's motivations saying:

It was a most unworthy thing for any man to say here. I can say this more freely because, I thank my God, I have no dead men to throw in my teeth as a reason for holding the opinions I hold.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Louise Ryan, "'Furies' and 'Die-Hards': Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century," *Gender & History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 256–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00142>, 261.

<sup>62</sup> *Dáil Éireann debate*, Vol. T No. 11, Wednesday, 4 Jan 1922, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-01-04/2/>.

<sup>63</sup> *Dáil Éireann debate*, Vol. T No. 11, Wednesday, 4 Jan 1922, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-01-04/2/>.

The inclusion by the four writers of their early exposure to revolutionary ideas and recounting of their motivations for involvement in nationalist activities can be seen as dismissing, like English, accusations of their participation being fueled by anything other than a sincere belief in the cause.

I have termed these recollections ‘revolutionary awakenings.’ In all four texts, these are not simply a single ‘awakening’ which convert the narrator to the national cause but rather a range of experiences which build upon each other and explain and justify their respective narrator’s later action in the revolution and beyond.

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The small and poor homes  
of the Irish  
with their wee bit of ground.  
It was then I began  
to feel resentment  
though I was only a child.

I was not more than twelve  
when a boy friend loaned me  
an Irish history of Ireland.  
Later I read the school histories.  
*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*

We had left a cheerful happy home,  
but the home we returned to  
was a grief-stricken one.  
I did not quite understand  
what it meant  
when I was told the reason  
for their tears,  
that Uncle John had been arrested  
in England,  
but seeing the grief all around me  
killed the joy  
in my birthday.  
*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*

She picked on me,  
the only Catholic in the class.  
I was being forced  
into the Irish struggle  
Miss Gradwell drove me  
to my history books  
and to the decision  
that I would be nobody's secretary  
except on my own terms –  
in, and for,  
Ireland.

*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*

It was never again possible for me to think  
that any British government  
would ever rule Ireland  
for Ireland's good -  
or any part  
of Ireland  
either.

*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*

The people contrasted the difference  
in the treatment accorded the Nationalists  
when they had a gun-running,  
with that accorded  
the Ulster gun-runners.  
And they knew once more  
that England would kill  
and destroy them  
rather than permit them  
to have the means  
to protect their lives  
and to fight  
for their liberties.

*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*

What if the theme of play or poem  
was a free Ireland?  
What if school-boys under a Gaelic name  
did play at soldiering?  
"Dangerous?"  
some one asked.  
"Nonsense!"  
retorted mighty England.  
"Would poets, pedagogues, and dreamers  
dare to lead the Irish people  
against the imperial power  
that had dominated them  
for centuries?  
Unthinkable!"  
*The resentment I felt grew hotter.*<sup>64</sup>

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### *Revolutionary Awakening: Margaret Skinnider*

While life-writing can take many forms, traditional autobiographical writing is chronological. The women largely follow this convention and, aside from Connolly, begin their life stories in childhood. While their childhoods, families, and influences were varied, they share a desire to recount their early exposures to and interest in nationalism and revolution and to locate the first of these in their early, formative years.

Margaret Skinnider, born and raised in Scotland to Irish parents, may have felt an additional need to explain her commitment to the nationalist cause, coming as she did from an émigré background. She opens her narrative with a definitive declaration of her allegiances: "Scotland is my home, but Ireland my country."<sup>65</sup> She goes on to describe her summer holidays in County Monaghan and the contrast she observed between the lavish homes of the "Planter people" and the "the small and poor homes of the Irish, with their wee bit of ground."<sup>66</sup> She identifies this as

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<sup>64</sup> Words taken from *Doing My Bit for Ireland, On Dangerous Ground, Revolutionary Woman, and Unbroken Tradition*.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Skinnider, *Doing My Bit for Ireland* (New York: The Century Co., 1917), 3.

<sup>66</sup> Skinnider, 4.

the origin of her nationalist sentiment and anger towards England, noting that: “It was then I began to feel resentment, though I was only a child.”<sup>67</sup>

Her ‘revolutionary awakenings’ are also influenced by the contrasts between what she terms “Irish history” and “school histories” or “Anglicized histories.” The clear implication is that, to Skinnider, “Irish history” represents a true, accurate portrayal of the history of Ireland while the “school histories” are false corruptions. On reading these “school histories,” she recalls that “the resentment I had felt in County Monaghan grew hotter.”<sup>68</sup>

Skinnider seems to give equal weight to the cultural memory of songs, which she counts as equally significant in shaping her ideals and view of Ireland as the history books. She writes enthusiastically of her favorite childhood song, *The Jackets Green*, and of the influential symbolism it contained: “The red coat and the green jacket! All the differences between the British and Irish lay in the contrast between those two colors.”<sup>69</sup>

### *Revolutionary Awakening: Nora Connolly*

While Skinnider makes no mention of her parents’ influence in her emerging revolutionary beliefs, although she describes her mother later as “a good rebel,”<sup>70</sup> Nora Connolly’s ‘revolutionary awakenings’ were profoundly influenced by her father, James.

James Connolly is one of the most well-known and influential figures associated with the Rising. He was not only heavily involved in the nationalist movement but also in the labor movement and he saw these as being inexorably linked, arguing that Ireland could only be truly free by overthrowing both British rule and the capitalist system. These nationalist and socialist views were passed on to and encouraged in his children.

A key moment of revolutionary awakening for Connolly was during the Dublin Lockout in 1913, which she describes as her “first mingling with an actively, openly drilling revolutionary body.”<sup>71</sup> The Lockout was a major strike lasting from August 1913 to January 1914, and still widely considered the most significant incident of industrial action in Ireland’s history. The

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<sup>67</sup> Skinnider, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Skinnider, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Skinnider, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Skinnider, 197.

<sup>71</sup> Nora Connolly, *The Irish Rebellion of 1916; or the Unbroken Tradition* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), 1.

principal figures on the side of the workers in the strike were Jim Larkin, founder of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, his deputy, James Connolly. Larkin and Connolly, along with Jack White, formed the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) to defend the striking workers, an organization which would go on to play a key role in the Rising with many important figures connected to it including both Connollys, Margaret Skinnider, Constance Markievicz and Michael Mallin.

In discussing her visit to Dublin during the Lockout, Connolly presents her motivation to see it as being to “see how things were managed, how the food was being distributed and the kitchens run; and, in fact, to feel the spirit of the people.”<sup>72</sup> In this she describes her father as her “pilot”, as he directed her around the areas of Liberty Hall, where the Citizen Army congregated.

The significant effect of watching the ICA on Connolly is clear in her many descriptions of the group. She recalls marching back to the city with the ICA, an experience she deems “exhilarating”<sup>73</sup> and she had a deep admiration for it, presenting it as a body of dedicated, hardworking volunteers committed to fighting for the causes of both labor and Ireland. Her father is a central presence in her portrayal of the ICA as she quotes him stating that its members “have so trained themselves that at the worst the laying down of their lives shall constitute the starting point of another glorious tradition —a tradition that will keep alive the soul of the nation.’ And this was the knowledge that lightened all the labor of drilling and soldiering.”<sup>74</sup> On another occasion she recalls Captain Jack White being angry at their misinterpretation of his orders, while her father calms him, reminding him that they were only volunteers, an action which serves to change White's demeanor as “he forgot his rage in his admiration of the men of a few weeks' training.”<sup>75</sup>

The ICA remains an important organization to Connolly through to the Rising. Her frequent reference to and lofty praise of the group throughout the memoir illustrates its enduring impact on her. Though she makes no reference to being a member herself in the memoir, being connected to Cumann na mBan, in her later 1981 memoir she claims that she organized for Cumann na mBan in the North but, when she was in Dublin, she was “in the Citizen Army.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Connolly, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Connolly, 5.

<sup>74</sup> Connolly, 6.

<sup>75</sup> Connolly, 5.

<sup>76</sup> Connolly O'Brien, *We Shall Rise Again*, 14.



While observing the martial ICA and its military maneuvers clearly impacted Connolly, she was also affected by the less militaristic elements of Liberty Hall. Her father first led her to the kitchens where “the Countess de Markievicz reigned supreme.”<sup>77</sup> Meals were prepared for the strikers and their families while, in another area of the hall, “several women and girls were working from morning to night altering the clothes”<sup>78</sup> that had been donated for the strikers' wives and children. As would frequently be the case in the Rising three years later, the participation of these women and girls in the Lockout was through the channel of traditionally feminine occupations: cooking and dressmaking. However, this work of materially supporting the striking workers and their families was likely far more significant to the success and longevity of the Lockout than was the creation of a military organization to defend them physically.

Furthermore, though engaged in traditionally feminine, domestic pursuits, the women engaged in these acts of cooking and dressmaking outside of the domestic sphere and in the direct pursuit of political and ideological goals.

A further moment of revolutionary awakening for Connolly was the 1914 Howth Gun-Running. On 26th July 1914, Mauser rifles were delivered at Howth harbor, near to Dublin, and collected by the Irish Volunteers. While the Volunteers successfully obtained the arms, a regiment of British troops, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, who had been sent to prevent this were verbally accosted by unarmed civilians on Bachelor's Walk in central Dublin. The battalion's response to this was to attack the civilians with rifles and bayonets, killing four people and wounding many others in what became known as the Bachelor's Walk massacre.

Connolly identifies this massacre as a key moment of revolutionary awakening, and it is one that she extrapolates to the whole of Ireland as she says that:

The people contrasted the difference in the treatment accorded the Nationalists when they had a gun-running, with that accorded the Ulster gun-runners. And they knew once more that England would kill and destroy them rather than permit them to have the means to protect their lives and to fight for their liberties.<sup>79</sup>

She also strongly criticizes British recruitment efforts which began soon after the massacre and urged Irishmen to “avenge the shooting of the citizens of Catholic Belgium” ignoring that “English soldiers had but shortly shot down and killed the unarmed citizens of Catholic Dublin.

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<sup>77</sup> Connolly, 2.

<sup>78</sup> Connolly, 3.

But Dublin did not forget.”<sup>80</sup> Many thousands of Irish men and boys did join the British army during the First World War, so Connolly's universal descriptions of the attitudes and beliefs of "the people" as a collective ring hollow. However, she was not alone in her presentation of Bachelor's Walk; Rising leader Pádraig Pearse declared that, as a result of the massacre, “the whole movement, the whole country, has been re-baptised by bloodshed for Ireland.”<sup>81</sup>

Of the four dead, three were men and one a woman. Despite this, Connolly's recollection of the massacre, through the dialogue of a young Fianna boy who brought the news, characterizes the event as the British shooting down “defenseless women and children.”<sup>82</sup> The inclusion of this description of the massacre was likely intended to elicit the sympathies of her readers, based on an assumption that the shooting of unarmed women and children is necessarily a more reprehensible act than the shooting of unarmed men.

While she frames the massacre as a site of revolutionary awakening for the entirety of Ireland, the first reactions she depicts are far more concerned with the gun-running itself than the victims of Bachelor's Walk. In her recollection of events, the young Fianna boy brings the news of the massacre, telling them that he didn't know how many were killed, but rumors suggested five or more. Markievicz's response to this is to say: “But you brought the rifles safe,” while Connolly recalls being excited by the news of the gun-running and wanting to go into Dublin as “we wanted a share of the excitement, if we had not had any share in the fight.”<sup>83</sup>

This brief reference is Connolly's only mention of having been left out of the Howth Gun-Running, but her younger sister, Agna,<sup>84</sup> recalling the same event for the Bureau of Military History in 1954, makes it clear that their lack of involvement was due to their gender, and that she resented this as she says that “had I been a boy I would not have been overlooked.”<sup>85</sup>

However, the Connolly sisters were later directly involved in the transportation of these rifles. They used their gender to their own advantage as “the police would be less suspicious of a

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<sup>79</sup> Connolly, 17.

<sup>80</sup> Connolly, 18.

<sup>81</sup> Patrick Pearse, letter to McGarrity, Quoted in: Joost Augusteijn, *Patrick Pearse: The Making of a Revolutionary* (Houndmills: Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, 2010), 256.

<sup>82</sup> Connolly, 12.

<sup>83</sup> Connolly, 13.

<sup>84</sup> Connolly's sister is more commonly known as Ina Connolly. However, throughout her memoir, Connolly refers to her sister exclusively using the Irish spelling 'Agna' (modern Irish *Aghna*). Therefore, for the sake of clarity, all references to Ina/Agna in this thesis are spelled Agna.

<sup>85</sup> Ina Heron statement, Bureau of Military History, Irish Defence Forces Military Archives, WS #919 (1954), 90.

taxi with girls in it”<sup>86</sup> and Connolly recalls that “I sat on quite a number of rifles that day. And at the end of the day I had a rifle of my own.”<sup>87</sup> For her part, Agna concludes that the thrill of the risk she took in transporting arms to Belfast “more than made up for the disappointment that I received earlier.”<sup>88</sup>

*Revolutionary Awakening: Kathleen Clarke*

Clarke and Connolly both feature other women prominently in their recollections of revolutionary awakenings. For Connolly, this is Constance Markievicz and for Clarke it is her grandmother, Margaret, and her Aunt Lollie. In both cases, the women in question are depicted as engaged in traditionally feminine pursuits; Markievicz is cooking and Clarke’s grandmother and aunt are looking after children. However, both also subvert traditional ideas of feminine gender roles. Markievicz is cooking for strikers in the Lockout, an activity inspired by her socialist political beliefs, while Margaret and especially Lollie inspire the young Daly sisters with republican, nationalist ideals.

Clarke's image of her grandmother as a staunchly revolutionary woman is repeatedly reinforced. Clarke recalls saying prayers with her grandmother, in which the first prayer, above those even for family, “was always for Ireland's freedom.”<sup>89</sup> She also describes her as “the kindest and most generous-hearted woman” who could “see good in everyone and everything but England,”<sup>90</sup> and as “a rebel against England to her last breath.”<sup>91</sup> She also describes her grandmother's sorrow at the imprisonment of her son, Clarke's uncle John Daly, but insists that her “pride in the fact that he could suffer and, if necessary, die for Ireland's freedom was greater.”<sup>92</sup>

Meanwhile, Aunt Lollie, who Clarke describes as being “for her time, a highly-educated woman,”<sup>93</sup> enthralled and inspired the young Clarke sisters with stories of Irish history. Clarke describes the impact of these stories, saying that her aunt:

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<sup>86</sup> Connolly, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Connolly, 17.

<sup>88</sup> Heron, Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement #919, 91.

<sup>89</sup> Clarke, 13.

<sup>90</sup> Clarke, 13.

<sup>91</sup> Clarke, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Clarke, 13.

had a wonderful way of recounting things so that we seemed to live the events all over again, and she wove history into the most beautiful stories for us. She would dwell particularly on the Fenian period, in which she had taken an active part; this she painted in the most glowing and romantic colours so that all our early enthusiasm was centred round the Fenians.<sup>94</sup>

Clarke also emphasizes the significance that she placed on the history she learned from her aunt. Describing her mother reproaching Lollie for “keeping the children from their beds with your rambling,” Clarke contends that the impact of this "rambling" and the knowledge it imparted on its young listeners was great as it “in later years brought us through one of the most difficult periods of our history with our heads up; we knew our history.”<sup>95</sup>

Clarke's uncle John is also a central figure of her revolutionary awakenings and her memoir begins with his arrest on her sixth birthday. This is framed as a seismic incident in Clarke's life, one that she says, “was to influence my whole life profoundly.”<sup>96</sup> She opens with a description of the joy of a child on her birthday, describing herself as “one of the happiest children in Ireland”<sup>97</sup> as she ran to show her neighbors her new doll. However, she says that “the home we returned to was a grief-stricken one” and that, though she did not quite comprehend what was happening, “seeing the grief all around me killed the joy in my birthday.”<sup>98</sup> This event is established as destroying the innocence and joy of childhood as she follows it with descriptions of the horrors faced by Irish prisoners. This theme of imprisonment by the British destroying childhoods and influencing her towards revolutionary ideals recurs again as she recalls the death of her father in 1890, when she was twelve. She blames this on the consequences of his imprisonment and his death, she recounts, “ended the childhood” of the eldest three of his nine daughters, including Clarke, as their mother, aunt and grandmother were “prostrate with grief” which “forced on us responsibilities not normally placed on children's shoulders.”<sup>99</sup>

Her first recollection of activity towards the nationalist movement was also connected to her uncle's imprisonment. A family friend, Jim Jones, did work for the Amnesty Association at the Daly house and Clarke recalls “pleading to be allowed to help” and feeling pride in her tasks of folding and putting stamps on letters. She reflects on her childhood feelings towards this,

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<sup>93</sup> Clarke, 13.

<sup>94</sup> Clarke, 13-4.

<sup>95</sup> Clarke, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Clarke, 9.

<sup>97</sup> Clarke, 9.

<sup>98</sup> Clarke, 10.

<sup>99</sup> Clarke, 21.

recalling that she aggrandized these small contributions so that “in my imagination I was helping to free Uncle John and, of course, Ireland.”<sup>100</sup>

These early influences of her revolutionary family continued to have a strong effect on Clarke. When she became the first female Lord Mayor of Dublin in 1939, one of her first, and very controversial, acts was to remove a portrait of Queen Victoria from the Lord Mayor's residence. This bears a striking resemblance to one of the first acts of her Uncle John on becoming Lord Mayor of Limerick in 1899, when he removed the British Royal Arms from the town hall. She recounts this event in her memoir, stating that it “caused quite a sensation,”<sup>101</sup> and it could be speculated that her removal of Queen Victoria's portrait was at least in part inspired by the actions of her uncle forty years earlier.

The enduring impact of her family's revolutionary influence is also stated far more explicitly by Clarke at the end of her memoir. Reflecting on her decision to leave the Fianna Fáil political party in 1941, she writes of her fear of succumbing to “the desire, when one has reached place and position of power and consequence, to hold it at any cost, as I have seen colleagues whom I thought were incorruptible do.”<sup>102</sup> She states that she chose to leave the party rather than risk being similarly corrupted, explaining that, had she “yielded to such temptations I would not dare face my husband in the next world, where I hope to meet him, nor would I dare be untrue to the lessons learned from parents, uncle, aunt and grandmother, to be true to Ireland, first, last and all the time, no matter what the cost.”<sup>103</sup>

### *Revolutionary Awakening: Máire Comerford*

Unlike the other women who grew up in families connected to or sympathetic with Irish nationalism, Máire Comerford describes her own family as “essentially West British”<sup>104</sup> and “Castle Catholic.”<sup>105</sup> Therefore, her ‘revolutionary awakenings’ come largely in a different form

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<sup>100</sup> Clarke, 15.

<sup>101</sup> Clarke, 29.

<sup>102</sup> Clarke, 311.

<sup>103</sup> Clarke, 311.

<sup>104</sup> ‘West British’ (also ‘West Briton’ or ‘West Brit’) is a derogatory term applied to Irish people who favor British, more specifically English, culture, ideas and rule over Irish.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Castle Catholics’ were Catholics from wealthy backgrounds who were supportive of and integrated to the British administration in Dublin Castle. Comerford herself defines the term as those who “favoured, and fattened on, the British regime in Ireland” (Comerford, 38)

and at a later age.

The pivotal moments of revolutionary awakening for Comerford come immediately at the end of her schooling and her narration of these memories have the essence of a *Bildungsroman*, recounting her development “from childhood to maturity, to the point at which the protagonist recognizes his or her place and role in the world.”<sup>106</sup>

Comerford's schoolteacher read from the newspaper to her history class and she describes how this created a romantic captivation with the trappings of royalty and empire:

I drank in every eloquent word of the description of the ceremonial, of the robes worn by the peers, and the gowns and the tiaras, the jewels that adorned the peeresses; the royal coach, the pink horses and the King and Queen: the ambassadors, representatives of the dominions and far-flung colonies of the Empire, on which the sun did not then set.<sup>107</sup>

Comerford was clearly deeply moved by these descriptions, calling it her "most vivid memory" and saying that "the senior girls in the class thrilled to all this, as I must have done too, or I would not have remembered it all my life since." However, like Skinnider's scornful view of her "school histories," Comerford sees the British history taught to her at school as flawed and inaccurate.

She follows this with a story of visiting the British parliament on leaving school. There is some sense of her later disapproval of this parliament, as she recalls sitting alone in the "Ladies' Gallery" and observes the thick grating installed to "prevent the suffragettes from throwing leaflets, or perhaps even throwing themselves, into the Chamber." However, her childhood admiration is clear as she describes waiting to watch the debate: “I was an ex-schoolgirl now, glowing with a sense of the history of this impressive place. It was with the most elated anticipation of the moment when I would behold the parliament that I peeped down through the haze.”<sup>108</sup>

The admiration instilled by her schooling and her childish sense of wonder are quickly shattered. She describes the British politicians as dull and apathetic as she says that "the seats were not full and those who sat were either sleeping, or, if awake, rustling papers" and that "The MP [member of parliament] who was addressing the house had very little life in him; anything in

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<sup>106</sup> Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003), 39.

<sup>107</sup> Comerford, 24.

<sup>108</sup> Comerford, 25.

the nature of a cheer was coming from the Irish benches.”<sup>109</sup> Comerford is shocked and baffled at the conduct of the MPs in the chamber:

It took me some time to understand why someone was nearly always saying ‘baa baa’... What they were really saying, in the peculiar way they pronounce their own language, was ‘bar, bar’. This apparently was a method whereby the members indicated their boredom, or worse, at the proceedings.<sup>110</sup>

Her description here inverts a colonial narrative. British writings frequently derided the languages and accents of their colonial subjects as peculiar and incomprehensible in contrast to English spoken in 'Received Pronunciation' (RP), the prestige English dialect, a feature of this being its non-rhoticism; the deletion of an 'r' after a vowel. However, Comerford contrasts this 'prestige' dialect to her own rhotic dialect, and it is the English themselves who she presents as pronouncing their own language in a "peculiar" way that is difficult to comprehend. Comerford portrays her experience at the parliament as a crucial turning point in her move towards Irish nationalism as she describes the conclusions she came to and reinforces them as still aligning with her views many years later: “It was never again possible for me to think that any British government would ever rule Ireland for Ireland’s good – or any part of Ireland either...nothing that happened subsequently was to mitigate my disillusionment with the British parliament.”<sup>111</sup>

Her visit to and disillusionment with the British parliament is followed by an account of a visit to the theatre to watch a production of *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*.<sup>112</sup>

In emphasizing how soon this came after her visit to parliament, “within a night or two”, Comerford depicts her childhood enthusiasm for the royalty and grandeur of the British Empire as being replaced by a new enthusiasm that would remain throughout her adult life as “that night opened a new world to me.”<sup>113</sup>

Comerford positions the play as having a significant impact, not only on her but on other young people who saw it and, reflecting years later, she speculates on which “men and women who would soon take part in the Irish revolution” may have been among the audience and

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<sup>109</sup> Comerford, 25.

<sup>110</sup> Comerford, 25-6.

<sup>111</sup> Comerford, 26.

<sup>112</sup> *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* was written by William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory in 1902. Cathleen Ní Houlihan is a female personification of Ireland, also known as the *Sean Bhean Bhocht* (Poor Old Woman) and is depicted as an old woman who calls on Irish men to fight for her 'four green fields', representing the four provinces of Ireland. In Yeats and Gregory's play, Ní Houlihan calls on Michael Gillane to join the 1798 rebellion and he abandons his marriage to join it. Ní Houlihan is then transformed into a young woman with 'the walk of a queen', rejuvenated by Michael's sacrifice.

<sup>113</sup> Comerford, 26.

similarly affected by the nationalist play:

Alas, that Yeats regretted writing *Cathleen Ní Houlihan*,<sup>114</sup> for he need never have been under any illusion as to its effect on the young people who saw it! ... Roger Casement might have been there, perhaps with the historian Alice Stopford Green, or Art O'Brien, future representative in London of the First Dáil Éireann; ... How many were at that time as much strangers to one another as they all were to me, who had never even heard their names?<sup>115</sup>

She also gives credit to the actresses who portrayed Ní Houlihan for their contribution to the play's impact: "But neither did a great poet and writer ever have actors to interpret his work who were so involved personally as the women and girls of Inghinidhe na hÉireann<sup>116</sup> – Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, Máire T. Quinn, Sara Allgood and the incomparable Maud Gonne."<sup>117</sup>

Its impact on Comerford herself is clear and she presents it as a turning point as she states that "as I left the Court Theatre I knew my fate was sealed, my course in life was settled. I wanted to win back the Four Green Fields."<sup>118</sup>

Unlike the other women who were active participants in the Rising, Comerford was an observer to it and it was in its aftermath that she became involved in the nationalist movement. Therefore, for Comerford, the Rising itself was a key moment of revolutionary awakening.

Comerford found herself in the midst of the rebellion quite by accident while staying with a relative in Dublin, first learning of the Rising while attempting to return home, a journey hampered by blockades and her limited knowledge of the city. Whilst her presence at the scene of the Rising was unintentional, she then actively chooses to engage with the rebels. Having come to a road that she knew, she describes hesitating before foregoing returning home and instead crossing the road to Stephen's Green which was being held by a group of rebels, including Margaret Skinnider.

This decision becomes a significant moment of revolutionary awakening as she speaks to the sentry outside the green:

Unnecessarily, I asked what was happening. 'We are rising to free Ireland,' he told me. 'But I thought that was all settled,' said I. 'Home Rule will not satisfy us now. The Republic is proclaimed,' he replied.

I stood there, glued to the railing while the young Volunteer took up the thread of Ireland's history – from the Bridge of Athlone, Sarsfield, the broken Treaty of Limerick and the Wild Geese; he brought me to the

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<sup>114</sup> Yeats would later write a poem *Man and the Echo* (1938) in which he laments past mistakes and questions 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?'

<sup>115</sup> Comerford, 27.

<sup>116</sup> Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) was a women's nationalist organization founded in 1900 and later absorbed into Cumann na mBan.

<sup>117</sup> Comerford, 26-7.

<sup>118</sup> Comerford, 27.



United Irishmen, the Young Irelanders, the Famine, the Fenians, and the rebels of the hour, of which band he was one.<sup>119</sup>

Her sense of being ‘glued’ to the railing demonstrates the depth of her interest and enthusiasm for the history she was being told, reminiscent of Clarke’s memories of being “entranced” and “rapt” by the stories of her Aunt Lollie. While Comerford had been moving more and more towards nationalist ideas, it seems that this was the moment that cemented for her the supposed futility of Home Rule and tied the present-day struggle to the struggles across Irish history.

Her eagerness to be immersed in the Rising is clear when her cousin forbade her to leave the house. She circumvented this by insisting that she would have to attend mass but quips: “Mass could be anywhere, said I to myself,” and for the next few days, she “always ‘went to mass’ far enough”<sup>120</sup> to see the tricolor flag flying at the College of Surgeons.

Comerford also engages with and challenges the common historical view that the reaction to the Rising was triggered by the executions. In Comerford’s view

it was not death but the call to freedom, and the new illustration of its meaning, which captured us; a flag on a pole, a proclamation that spoke the truth, and men deciding themselves how best to die, if die they must.<sup>121</sup>

Here, in a similar vein to Connolly’s portrayal of Bachelor’s Walk, she extrapolates her revolutionary awakening to the entirety of her generation. The symbolism of seeing the tricolor flying was meaningful to her and now she imagines the whole of Ireland being equally as ‘captured’ by seeing “a flag on a pole.” While this is perhaps overly broad and a projection of her feelings onto others, creating, as is seen on multiple occasions in the memoirs, a hegemonic presentation of the views of ‘the Irish people,’ her challenge to the historians’ claims of the origins of the move towards armed revolution in Ireland is significant. Comerford argues that the ‘revolutionary awakening’ that the Rising sparked in her and others of her generation, was not born of vengeance or anger toward the executions, rather she asserts that the Proclamation was the centerpoint of the awakening as it offered “something new” in its assertion of Ireland’s sovereignty and promise to “cherish all the children of the nation equally.”<sup>122</sup>

While, as I have argued here, revolutionary awakenings are multiple and build on each other;

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<sup>119</sup> Comerford, 55.

<sup>120</sup> Comerford, 56.

<sup>121</sup> Comerford, 61.

<sup>122</sup> Comerford, 61.

Comerford's reaction to the Rising, for example, would surely have been different if not for the 'awakenings' which preceded it, Comerford clearly positions the Rising as an especially seismic event.

She recalls discussing civilians murdered by British troops on her return to her home in Gorey, Wexford and the reactions of those she was speaking with: "There was, I recall, absolute fury when I mentioned this, and the group split up as if I had exploded a bomb among them. These people were not accustomed to have the British blamed – ever, or for anything."<sup>123</sup> While Comerford describes what happened as a "British atrocity," one woman, Lady Errington, "started to shriek, 'They should all be hanged, they should all be hanged. Shooting is too good for them.' She was not, of course, referring to British soldiers, but to Irish rebels."<sup>124</sup>

This gulf in perspective prompts Comerford to observe that, "for me, as for so many others, the old world was shattered, former acquaintances turned into strangers, even into enemies; delicious new friendships began to form."<sup>125</sup> The Rising, she says, had a profound impact, not only on the trajectory of the country as a whole, but also on individuals and their lives. The Rising is, for Comerford, perhaps the most definitive and complete of her revolutionary awakenings. As much as her sympathies may have already moved towards nationalism, in the wake of the Rising the 'old world' is 'shattered', there is no potential for changing her mind as the 'old world' she previously inhabited can no longer exist following her experience of the Rising.

### **5.2 Isn't this a good end?**

Describing her last meeting with her father, Nora Connolly recalls her parents' final conversation, after her mother heard that her husband was to be executed:

My mother broke down, laid her head on his bed and sobbed heartbreakingly. My father patted her head and said, "Don't cry, Lillie, you'll unman me." "But your beautiful life, James," my mother sobbed. "Your beautiful life." "Well, Lillie," he said. "Hasn't it been a full life, and isn't this a good end?" My mother still wept.<sup>126</sup>

This conversation reveals some of the conflicting beliefs and emotions surrounding death and martyrdom. The idea of being martyred for Ireland has long been a powerful one in Republican

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<sup>123</sup> Comerford, 59.

<sup>124</sup> Comerford, 59-60.

<sup>125</sup> Comerford, 60.

<sup>126</sup> Connolly, 184.

tradition. Songs such as *God Save Ireland*, romanticize the concept, declaring:

*Whether on the scaffold high  
Or the battlefield we die  
Oh what matter when for Erin dear we fall.*<sup>127</sup>

The implication being that dying for Ireland should replace the grief of death and loss with pride and honor, and one which Connolly exudes as he says that his dying for Ireland is “a good end.” However Lillie, facing her husband’s death, is not comforted by its circumstances. Further, Connolly genders Lillie’s emotion as he says that she’ll “unman” him, suggesting that her weeping may drive him to tears, an expression of emotion that is considered feminine and inappropriate for a man going to a ‘glorious’ death.

Kathleen Clarke, meanwhile, recalls her husband begging her not to allow his death to overshadow the lives of their three sons but to “train them to follow in my footsteps.”<sup>128</sup> Like James, Tom presents his death as good and honorable, not something which should cause his children grief but which should inspire them to take up the fight for freedom. Although Clarke later recounts her desire to give her children “their father's message, not to grieve for him, but to glory in what he had done, and to follow in his footsteps,”<sup>129</sup> she tells Tom that this is a vain ideal, and that the death of their father, honorable or otherwise, would irrevocably impact them:

I said I would do my best to carry out his wishes, but his death would shadow their lives no matter what I did, and I thought it was a hard road he had picked for them to follow in his footsteps; children did not always carry out their parents’ wishes.<sup>130</sup>

The concept of heroic martyrdom is given even more weight by its strong association with religion. That the Rising occurred at Easter, originally intended to be Easter Sunday, is no accident. The poignant religious symbolism in equating the resurrection of Christ to the hoped-for resurrection of Ireland was a significant element of what FX Martin called the “artistic vision”<sup>131</sup> of the revolt. Martyrdom is itself closely connected to religious ideas. The Catholic Litany of the Saints is heavily populated by Christian martyrs, venerated for their commitment to their faith, even in the face of death. This is directly paralleled by Republican martyrs’ persistent commitment to Ireland. Connolly later recalls being visited by Father Aloysius, who informed

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<sup>127</sup> Luke Kelly, *God Save Ireland*, YouTube, November 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwHQSpfQMOs>.

<sup>128</sup> Clarke, 137.

<sup>129</sup> Clarke, 154.

<sup>130</sup> Clarke, 137-8.

<sup>131</sup> F. X. Martin, “1916: Myth, Fact, and Mystery,” *Studia Hibernica*, no. 7 (1967): 7–126,

her of her father's last moments:

I said to him, 'Will you pray for the men who are about to shoot you,' and he said, 'I will say a prayer for all brave men who do their duty.' . . . His prayer was, 'Forgive them for they know not what they do.'<sup>132</sup>

These final words are a direct and deliberate quotation of the final words of Jesus as recounted in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."<sup>133</sup> By attributing these words to him, Connolly elevates her father and his death beyond even the status of a saintly martyr, transforming him into a Christ-like figure whose sacrifice for Ireland is equated with the Christian belief of Christ's sacrifice for mankind.

While particularly poignant in the memoirs of Clarke and Connolly, who had close relatives executed after the Rising, all four memoirs depict their reactions to the executions as complex and ambivalent, combining grief, anger, pride, and a galvanization to continue the fight.

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I don't know how I'm going to live without you.

I wish the British would put a bullet in me too.

He faced death

with a clear and happy conscience,

"Freedom will come.

With this belief, we die happy."

A baby was coming to us

but he did not know.

The soldier locked the door

of what seemed to be my husband's tomb.

The sound of that key in that lock

has haunted me.

"Such madness, such foolishness!

Here was one of their women,

and look what she had to go through.

Did they never think of that?"

I wanted to dash the mug of tea

in their faces.

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<https://www.jstor.org/stable/20495867>, 9.

<sup>132</sup> Connolly, 190.

<sup>133</sup> Luke 23:34, King James Version.

I pictured my husband falling down  
after the volley had fired.  
Not dead, suffering tortures  
left to die  
by degrees,  
knowing the ferocity of the British  
towards us.  
If I could cry it would ease me.  
I could not.

I was in great pain.  
My baby was dead  
and I hoped soon to be.

Lifted through clouds  
arranged like feathers on a bird  
a chorus of men were shouting joyfully  
“Here she comes!”  
Then there was silence.

“We can’t send her back,  
it is too cruel.”  
“She must.  
She has work we left her to do.”  
And back I was.

A more disgusted creature  
never arrived on this earth.  
I cried for the first time  
since the executions.  
Cried with sheer disappointment  
that I was not dead.

I gave up trying to take  
the easy way out.  
Other risings had left  
only despair.

I would work to give England  
a very different reaction  
to their savagery.

Continue the fight for freedom  
and not let it end  
with the Rising.<sup>134</sup>

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Clarke melds her intense, private grief of a woman mourning her beloved husband with the nationalist ideal of a martyred revolutionary.

She claims to be "not normally a believer in dreams," but her relationship with Tom is bookended by them. She recalls a dream she had shortly before their first meeting in 1898. This took place on Good Friday in a Jesuit church, lending the dream an explicit air of a spiritual, prophetic experience. She describes seeing a man she had never seen before and says that "when I met Tom Clarke my dream came vividly before me. Apart from the colour of his hair, he was the man in my dream, yet I had never seen a picture or photograph of him."<sup>135</sup>

Some weeks following his execution, Clarke suffered a miscarriage leading to a near-death experience. She expresses a desire for death, saying that "my baby was dead and I hoped soon to be" and "I thought I was going to join Tom and was very happy about it." She describes being "lifted up, through clouds" and hearing "a great shout, like men's voices. They sounded joyous to me."<sup>136</sup> Again, her dream or out of body experience is steeped in spiritual significance in its implication of visiting heaven.

She then recalls seeing Tom and Seán MacDermott:

Seán said, 'She must go back, Tom, she must.' Tom said, 'God, Seán, we can't send her back, it is too cruel' and Seán said, 'You know, Tom, she must go back. She has to do the work we left her to do.' On both their faces there was a look of intense sadness. I wanted to say I would not go back, but I was unable to speak. Their faces disappeared, and I felt myself being slowly surely pushed down through the clouds of feathers...And back I was, and a more disgusted creature never arrived on this earth. But now I knew what I had to do, and gave up trying to take the easy way out. I just had to take up my burden and carry it as well as I could.<sup>137</sup>

Clarke's recollections of this spiritual, otherworldly experience also demonstrate her ambivalent reaction to Tom's execution. She is conflicted by her opposing senses of self as a

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<sup>134</sup> Words taken from *Revolutionary Woman*.

<sup>135</sup> Clarke, 31.

<sup>136</sup> Clarke, 161.

wife, and her consequent grief and desire to be with her husband even in death, and as a revolutionary and the duty she feels to "do the work [they] left her to do." Her portrayal of Tom in this experience displays parallel ambivalent feelings, portraying him as finding it "too cruel" for her to live without him but, ultimately, resigned to the fact that she must live to continue the national fight in his absence. Thus, her image of Tom also inhabits dual roles, both that of her husband and that of a martyr in the nationalist tradition, in whose memory she would "work to give England a very different reaction to their savagery than they had got after other risings and bids for freedom."<sup>138</sup>

She then grounds this ambivalence again in 'reality', following her "strange experience": "I cried for the first time since the executions, cried with sheer disappointment that I was not dead. A few days afterwards I was sitting up in bed, dealing with correspondence and the lists of those to be looked after by the Dependants Fund."<sup>139</sup>

Here, she juxtaposes a profound, emotional expression of grief and desire for death with a clinical description of taking on the work that was left to her.

Clarke attributes a similar ambivalence to others around her. Her mother, she says, was deeply grieved by the loss of her only son, Clarke's brother, Ned Daly. However, despite this "she thanked God for one thing, that he had died for Ireland, not like many other Irish mothers' sons who died fighting for England."<sup>140</sup> Similarly, her uncle John felt grief at the deaths of Tom and Ned but still "he gloried in what they had done and how they had died."<sup>141</sup>

Perhaps even more stark in the contrasts of grief and pride, is her description of the sisters of Micheál O'Hanrahan whom she describes as being shocked and horrified on learning of his execution. Eileen O'Hanrahan screamed when she was told that her brother was to die and "went down in a dead faint as soon as she was outside the cell." Despite this powerful display of grief, when Clarke recounts being told soon after by a soldier that he commended their courage but thought it was not in good cause, she portrays herself, her sisters and the O'Hanrahan sisters as speaking with "one voice" as they tell him: "It's our country's cause, and could not be better."<sup>142</sup> This sharp shift from grief to pride also reflects Clarke's repeated assertions of the importance of

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<sup>137</sup> Clarke, 161-2.

<sup>138</sup> Clarke, 145.

<sup>139</sup> Clarke, 142.

<sup>140</sup> Clarke, 154.

<sup>141</sup> Clarke, 155.

remaining stoic in front of the British as she insists that she must “keep a brave front to the enemy, and not let them see me broken, no matter how I suffered.”<sup>143</sup>

Connolly was doubtlessly also grieved over the prospect of her father's death. However, the only indication she gives of this in her memoir is to note that she was crying during their last meeting, prompting her father to tell her, "Don't cry, Nora, there is nothing to cry about."<sup>144</sup> She does not dwell on her own emotional response to his execution, focusing instead on her mother's grief. This she describes in intense terms. Her mother did not merely cry as she did but "wailed" and "sobbed heartbreakingly" and, when they had to leave his cell was "nearly overcome" and could not be moved. On returning home, Connolly describes her mother as "watching for the dawn, moaning all the while. I thought her heart would break and that she would die too."<sup>145</sup>

This is in stark contrast to Connolly's presentation of her own response. When the time of his dawn execution was past, she does not describe any feelings of grief but simply states that when "we knew that my father was dead, I opened the stiff piece of paper he had given me, and read to my mother, my brother and sisters the Last Statement of my father."<sup>146</sup>

The purpose of her memoir as propaganda may explain the lack of reflection on her own emotions. Like many of the women who worked to convey their experiences of the Rising and executions in its aftermath, she sought to strike a balance between constructing the executions as a site of grief and outrage and of honor and pride in the men dying for the cause of Ireland. Presenting her mother as the grieving widow while performing her own self, as a member of the younger generation who would take up the fight, as largely removed from this grief and rather committed to continuing what the Rising had started, allows for the conveying of both elements of response to the Rising.

Connolly's later memoir, written in 1981 in the context of the then ongoing Troubles in Northern Ireland, deals a little more with her emotion as she presents a short poem she wrote conveying her sadness at her father's death. However, here she presents her response to the execution in even more definite terms as continuing the fight. She connects her crying not to her father's imminent execution, but rather to her own feeling that she had "done nothing,

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<sup>142</sup> Clarke, 151.

<sup>143</sup> Clarke, 134.

<sup>144</sup> Connolly, 185.

<sup>145</sup> Connolly, 187.

<sup>146</sup> Connolly, 187.



nothing,"<sup>147</sup> during the Rising, and attributes last words to her father that are absent in the 1918 memoir; "We shall rise again."<sup>148</sup> These words feature prominently in her 1981 memoir, she uses them to conclude her poem, to end the text, and they give the memoir its title. Therefore, their absence from her earlier accounts is conspicuous. They are strong words of continuing the fight and there seems little reason she should have chosen to omit them from her 1918 recollections, or indeed from the account of this last meeting she gave to the Bureau of Military History in 1949<sup>149</sup> or in an RTÉ interview in 1965<sup>150</sup> in which they are also absent.

While it is, of course, impossible to know the exact content of this conversation, it seems highly unlikely that Connolly would have forgotten these words until more than sixty years after the fact of have actively chosen to exclude them from her earlier accounts. "We shall rise again" is certainly believable as something James Connolly would have said. It is in keeping with his own philosophy and the content of his final statement, which is reproduced with no changes in both memoirs and in Connolly's Bureau of Military History statement, as well as of Irish Republicanism as a whole with its idea of the 'unbroken tradition' in which every generation rises up against British rule. Without the earlier accounts of 1918, 1949 and 1965 to cast doubt on it, it would certainly be conceivable that these were James Connolly's final words to his daughter.

Composing the memoir in 1981, Connolly would have known that she was nearing the end of her life and likely wouldn't see the resolution of the ongoing conflict, indeed she died aged 87 in June 1981, before the memoir's publication. Additionally, she was recounting events in a very different context that she had been in 1918, one which had seen numerous defeats for the Republic envisioned by her father, especially in the North.

What seems far more likely then, is that the final words she attributes to James Connolly were fabricated and that she felt that Irish Republicans in the 1980s, facing opposition not only from the British but increasingly from the twenty-six counties, needed a stronger and more definitive call to arms from their long-dead spiritual leader. A call that was perhaps not accurate to his final words to her, but accurate to what she believed to be his intent.

This discrepancy highlights a significant issue inherent in working with memoirs. They

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<sup>147</sup> Connolly O'Brien, *We Shall Rise Again*, 31.

<sup>148</sup> Connolly O'Brien, *We Shall Rise Again*, 33.

<sup>149</sup> Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement #286, Nora Connolly O'Brien, 1949.

<sup>150</sup> "Portraits 1916 Nora Connolly O'Brien," RTÉ Archives, October 30, 1965, <https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1993-easter-1916/portraits-1916/793171-portraits-1916-nora-connolly-obrien/>.

frequently recount events to which the writer is the only, or only living, witness and it can therefore be difficult or impossible to establish the accuracy of their claims, particularly in instances such as this where they contradict even themselves.

However, working from the assumption that this quote is fabricated and its implication that Connolly cared less about reporting direct fact than about the impact of her words on her readers, we can ask does this discredit Connolly or lessen the value of her writing? Perhaps we cannot read Connolly's accounts as an exact recreation of this conversation, in as much as a written record can ever be, but even if we cannot take this account, or any contained within the memoirs, as indisputable historical fact, they nonetheless provide something of great value.

As noted by Clarke when she stated that she "must write the truth as I know it"<sup>151</sup> and even more definitely by Comerford when she acknowledged that her "memoir is not history per se; it is merely my own narrative and my personal reconstruction of what happened,"<sup>152</sup> memoir may not reveal definitive fact, but it does provide significant insight into the writers and the times in which they write. Connolly's construction of her final conversation with her father may not offer indisputable fact on its content or even on her own emotional response to his death. What it does reveal, however, especially when considered with her later writing, is what she hoped the response to the executions to be and what response she hoped to induce in her readers. Forgoing a discussion of her own emotions to present her father's last statement and later assigning the words "we shall rise again," with the conspicuous use of the term "rise" and its inevitable connection to the Rising itself, to the impactful place of his final words, clearly demonstrates the memory of James Connolly that his daughter wished to construct and pass onto future generations.

Unlike the other three women, Comerford didn't personally know any of the executed men. Therefore, her memoir deals little with personal grief. However, she does recall a conversation with her cousin, Charlotte Dease, who did know many of the leaders, which gave her some insight into this dimension. Dease was not in support of the Rising, Comerford describes her as having "at the same time, affection and profound disapproval"<sup>153</sup> for the participants. This connection, second hand though it was, gave Comerford some sense of grief for their impending

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<sup>151</sup> Clarke, 8.

<sup>152</sup> Comerford, 290.

<sup>153</sup> Comerford, 56.

deaths as she says that "Pearses, McDonaghs, Plunketts became individuals to me, starting from what she told me about them in that moment of sadness and, for her, parting."<sup>154</sup> Comerford also portrays a sense of anger at the way the leaders were treated, as she describes them being "buried with contumely, un-coffined, out of a truck into a hole in the corner of a barracks yard."<sup>155</sup>

Meanwhile, the primary emotions that Skinnider expresses in response to the executions are of shock and horror. She insists that the Irish forces had obeyed the rules of war and their imprisoned leaders should, therefore, be treated as prisoners as war. Whatever her opinions of British brutality, she recalls shock at hearing of the executions, stating that she "did not dream"<sup>156</sup> and "could not get it through [her] head"<sup>157</sup> that the British would kill prisoners of war. Her grief is clear as she laments that "all my reports were of death; nothing but death!"<sup>158</sup> and, on hearing of Mallin's execution, she tells that she "remembered how, when I was so ill at the College of Surgeons, he had been gentle with me."<sup>159</sup> Skinnider was especially affected by receiving visits from relatives of the executed men, as she writes that "it is not the same thing to read of executions and sentences in the press and to hear of them from the lips of friends."<sup>160</sup>

However, Skinnider's grief is accompanied by a sense of pride and hope for the future. When she was visited by Michael Mallin's widow, Agnes, she describes her as "exalted" and says of all the female relatives that "you would have thought they had been greatly honored, that their dignity was equal to bearing it."<sup>161</sup> Her summary of the news that she received as she lay recovering in hospital makes clear that, despite her shock and grief at the executions, she has confidence that they will inspire further acts of rebellion as she concludes:

Stories of heroism and stories of disaster followed one another, each strengthening my belief that the courage and honor of the heroic days of Ireland were still alive in our hearts. Perhaps it is for this we should love our enemies: when they cleave with their swords the heart of a brave man, they lay bare the truth of life.<sup>162</sup>

Clarke expresses a similar observation of the female relatives as she describes feeling sorry for the women who did not know the fates of 'their men' but says "yet I did not hear one

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<sup>154</sup> Comerford, 56-7.

<sup>155</sup> Comerford, 61.

<sup>156</sup> Skinnider, 157.

<sup>157</sup> Skinnider, 159.

<sup>158</sup> Skinnider, 160.

<sup>159</sup> Skinnider, 162.

<sup>160</sup> Skinnider, 164.

<sup>161</sup> Skinnider, 163.

<sup>162</sup> Skinnider, 169.

complaint. They were proud of their men, and they were women to be proud of.”<sup>163</sup> She gives similar praise to the response of Cumann na mBan to the executions, as they arranged masses in memory of the dead and braved the threat of violent reprisals to “[demonstrate] to the British that they were solidly behind their men...they were women any country would be proud of, and their courage and steadfastness were marvellous.”<sup>164</sup>

Skinnider notes the impacts of this shock at the executions on those around her. The nurses at the hospital, she states, differed in whether they sympathized with the Rising but "all of them felt the horror of the executions."<sup>165</sup> Later, she describes the spirit in Dublin as "bitter," an emotion that she ascribes to the difference in response to the Rising compared to the Boer War. Following the three year-long Boer War, she argues, only one man was executed, whereas "after *our* rising sixteen men had been put to death [emphasis in original]."<sup>166</sup> She strongly connects this "bitterness" to rising support for Republicanism, stating that "almost every one on the streets was wearing republican colors" and that "the feeling of bitterness was not vague, but the direct result of fully understanding what had happened."<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, the significant consequences that she assigns to this bitterness, which she hopes will lead to further revolution, are made abundantly clear as she concludes her narrative with the recollection that "last November [1916] I paid another visit to Dublin. The bitterness had increased."<sup>168</sup>

Skinnider assigns the cause of much of the "bitterness" she saw in Dublin to the executions, and this is a widely accepted interpretation. The general explanation of the rise of support for the Republican movement following the Rising is indeed public outcry in response to the executions. Ferriter argues that these "long drawn-out executions...did much to change public opinion,"<sup>169</sup> while Robert Kee notes that this understanding of the effects of the executions was already present as they were ongoing, on both the British and the Irish sides, although also noting that this direct cause and effect is an oversimplification of events.<sup>170</sup> However, Comerford challenges this common view. She was well aware of its general acceptance but contends "that these historians are mistaken. It was not death but the call to freedom, and the new illustration of

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<sup>163</sup> Clarke, 154.

<sup>164</sup> Clarke, 163.

<sup>165</sup> Skinnider, 170.

<sup>166</sup> Skinnider, 201.

<sup>167</sup> Skinnider, 201-2.

<sup>168</sup> Skinnider, 207.

<sup>169</sup> Ferriter, *A Nation and not a Rabble*, 162.

its meaning, which captured us; a flag on a pole, a proclamation that spoke the truth, and men deciding themselves how best to die, if die they must.”<sup>171</sup> Comerford was herself of the number that became involved in the Nationalist movement following the Rising and likely desired to elevate her own motivations and those of others like her beyond simple anger at the executions, focusing rather on idealism and patriotism.

Notably, she assigns a great deal of significance for the galvanization to continue the fight not specifically to the Rising or the executions, but to the first commemoration which occurred a year later. This commemoration at Easter 1917 was largely organized and conducted by women of the ICA. During this commemoration, replicas of the proclamation were posted around Dublin, a Volunteer flew the tricolor from the roof of the GPO, while Helena Molony, Jinny Shanahan, Rosie Hackett and Brigid Davis barricaded themselves in Liberty Hall, flying a banner proclaiming 'James Connolly Murdered May 12 1916'<sup>172</sup>

Comerford recalls both reading of the commemoration in the newspaper and later interviewing some of its participants, including Molony, who told her that hearing about Irish soldiers fighting in Flanders inspired her to “do it all over again.”<sup>173</sup> Comerford assigns this commemoration paramount significance. Their actions in 1917 “lifted the sacrifice of 1916 clear from sorrow and defeat” and, as a result of the commemorations, “tragedy was superseded by resurrection.”<sup>174</sup>

Brundage contends that the role that women of 1798 took on of constructing and transmitting nationalist memory was one which “in the final analysis, proved to be more important for the long-term fortunes of the republican project”<sup>175</sup> and Comerford attributes a similar gravity to the actions of the women following the Rising. Their propaganda efforts, like the commemoration, in its immediate aftermath secured the memory of the deaths and cemented the image of the executed men as martyrs, an act which, like that of the women of '98, allowed them to become revolutionary idols to inspire further rebellion. It was the men of 1916 who died, but it was the women who ensured that they died for Ireland.

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<sup>170</sup> Robert Kee, *The Green Flag*, 573-4

<sup>171</sup> Comerford, 61.

<sup>172</sup> Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 220-1; Comerford, 65.

<sup>173</sup> Comerford, 67.

<sup>174</sup> Comerford, 67.

### 5.3 Ireland Over All

At least three songs are titled “Ireland over all.” One published in the *Irish Volunteer* in 1915 calls for the Irish to “Bring her back her ancient glories / Ireland, Ireland, over all!”<sup>176</sup> another by executed 1916 leader Éamonn Ceannt and posthumously published in his memory begins “Ireland, Ireland, ‘fore the wide world / Ireland, Ireland over all”<sup>177</sup>,” while the most well-known, a 1974 song by the Wolfe Tones from their album “Till Ireland a Nation,” bears the refrain “Ireland first, and Ireland last, and Ireland over all.”<sup>178</sup>

This call to put “Ireland over all,” reflects a common nationalist sentiment of valuing the nation over all else and being willing to sacrifice any and all things in its name. These songs are addressed to, respectively “Sons of Ireland,” “Irishmen,” and “boys” with the obvious implication being that it is only Irish men who are called upon and expected to sacrifice for Ireland and win its freedom. Nevertheless, this is a sentiment reflected throughout the memoirs as all four women reject the idea that it is only men who can and do sacrifice for their country or hold Ireland to take precedence over all else.

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Scotland  
is my home,  
but Ireland  
my country.

It is our country's cause  
and could not  
be better.

At the hospital  
one of the nurses shook her head,  
and said:

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<sup>175</sup> David Brundage, “Matilda Tone”, 98.

<sup>176</sup> Bráthair Riaghla, “Ireland, Ireland over All,” *The Irish Volunteer*, December 18, 1915, Military Archives, [https://www.militaryarchives.ie/ma/ma/datafiles/pdf/1914.12.05%20-1916.04.22%20Vol%2002%20No%2001%20to%20Vol%2002%20No%2072%20The%20Irish%20Volunteer\\_453.pdf](https://www.militaryarchives.ie/ma/ma/datafiles/pdf/1914.12.05%20-1916.04.22%20Vol%2002%20No%2001%20to%20Vol%2002%20No%2072%20The%20Irish%20Volunteer_453.pdf)

<sup>177</sup> “Galway's Decade of Commemoration: An Overview,” August 26, 2019, <https://www.galwaydecadeofcommemoration.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/IRLOverAll-ITMA.pdf>.

<sup>178</sup> The Wolfe Tones, *Ireland over All*, YouTube, June 16, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHw69-Ecyco&ab\\_channel=TheWolfeTones-Topic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHw69-Ecyco&ab_channel=TheWolfeTones-Topic).

"Your opinions  
and your accent  
don't go together."

I was wedged beside  
a splendidly tall,  
immensely powerful  
and devout  
young woman,  
We were all saying the rosary but  
she was rotating as  
she watched the plane.  
I heard her prayer tangle  
with her imprecation:  
'Holy Mary,  
Mother of God –  
oh! May you fall down, you devil!  
May you fall down in the canal  
where you won't hurt anybody –  
and pray for us sinners now  
and at the moment of our death,  
amen.'

"Are those the little things  
with which you fight the Zeppelins?"  
This remark  
hurt his feelings.  
He was not British,  
he informed me,  
but a good Redmondite.  
How embarrassed he was  
when I asked him if  
he liked arresting Irish  
who had shown their love of Ireland  
by being willing  
to die for her

Wexford out  
and the West awake!  
East and West  
the men are fighting  
for Ireland.  
For Ireland, Agna!  
O, aren't you glad  
to be alive!

Wives  
or widows  
were learning hard lessons, which,  
too often, are the consequences  
of wars of resistance.  
It was in their blood  
and tradition  
to suffer in the causes of  
freedom.  
Mothers would face hardship  
if only we could together  
win our present battle.  
The thought that they were rearing  
the first generation  
of children  
who would live their lives in a  
free country  
was enough to support  
the mothers.

The men and women  
were under military orders.  
They were no longer  
a volunteer organization,  
they were  
a nation's army.  
Their fathers and mothers,  
their wives and children,



their sisters and brothers,  
and their sweethearts knew  
that from that day forth  
their lives were no longer  
their own,  
but belonged  
to Ireland.

Everyone engaged in the work  
for freedom at that time  
had scares  
every day of the week.  
We learned to take chances  
without turning a hair.

We could use our bicycles  
and get away before  
the bomb  
exploded,  
that is,  
if we were quick enough.  
At any rate,  
it was worth trying,  
whatever  
the risk.

Risks like this  
have to be taken,  
when one is preparing  
a revolution.  
It is all  
in the way  
of war.

Lessons learned from  
parents,  
uncle,

aunt and  
grandmother,  
to be true  
to Ireland,  
first,  
last and  
all the time,  
no matter what  
the cost.<sup>179</sup>

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A stark example of the emphasis placed on valuing Ireland over all is found in Clarke's description of Tom's reaction to the birth of their second child, also called Tom, in 1908. Tom, she says, was delighted at having "another son...for a free Ireland."<sup>180</sup> However, Litton adds an extract from a letter Tom wrote to Clarke in which he does express delight, but at the prospect of the child being named for him. He also expresses his love for his wife saying, "I have had a few chunks of good luck in my day & the best share of it I ever got was when I got Katty Daly."<sup>181</sup> Other letters from the time express similar sentiments. In his first letter after the birth, he writes of his fear that she may not make it through childbirth and how, when he heard that she was okay, he dropped everything to cry. He closes the letter saying, "kiss the little stranger over & over again for me - love to him & to Daly - my heart to yourself my own dear girl."<sup>182</sup> In these letters, the delight he expresses is not nationally motivated, but deeply personal and familial.

It is quite likely that Tom had expressed both 'delights,' but Clarke's choice to emphasize his happiness at having 'another son for Ireland' over his more personal expression of love for his wife and child is a significant one. It furthers the portrayal she creates of her husband as a man for whom Ireland is paramount and everything else is eclipsed by love of country and, moreover, demonstrates how highly she valued this quality.

However, Clarke's memoir also reveals the comparative difficulty women could face in adhering to this principle. Clarke was the only one of the four women to have children, and

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<sup>179</sup> Words taken from *Doing My Bit for Ireland, On Dangerous Ground, Revolutionary Woman, and Unbroken Tradition*.

<sup>180</sup> Clarke, 51.

<sup>181</sup> Letter from Tom Clarke to Kathleen Clarke, quoted in Clarke, 52.

<sup>182</sup> National Library of Ireland, Letter from Tom Clarke to Kathleen Clarke regarding the birth of their second son, March 1908, Tom Clarke and Kathleen Clarke Papers, 1890-1972, MS 49,51/6/14

Comerford notes the significant benefit of not having a family as a revolutionary, while also presenting her own life as merely a small sacrifice:

I was not involved in the sense of having anything to lose except, perhaps, my own life or liberty. It was not my woman's lot to have those nearest to me killed, imprisoned, with or without trial, 'on their keeping', or away with the trenchcoated, disciplined guerrilla units of the IRA. No home was burned over my head. No children in my care depended on income or wages, which a soldier of Ireland or a prisoner had ceased to earn, or a worker left high and dry following the destruction of a creamery or factory.<sup>183</sup>

Clarke, on the other hand, was deeply impacted by the need to care for her children. Leading up to the Rising, she recalls being "torn" between her commitments to a Cumann na mBan lecture and her fear of leaving her children alone. It is easy to speculate that Tom Clarke, much as he loved his children, did not face the same conflicts between national duty and childcare. However, Clarke recalls that she ultimately decided to attend the lecture and the description she gives of her conversation with her sons firmly constructs this as valuing Ireland over all as she speaks in terms of their respective duties to Ireland:

'Now, boys,' I said, 'My duty to Ireland tonight is to go and make this lecture a success, and your duty to Ireland is to stay in bed until I return... Will you promise to do your duty to Ireland?' They all promised most solemnly. When I arrived home some hours later I found they had kept their word. I was very proud of them and hugged them and gave them a lovely supper.<sup>184</sup>

Later, in 1918 when the 'German Plot'<sup>185</sup> arrests were in full swing, Clarke was advised by Michael Collins to go on the run as many men had done. Her own health and her doubt that she was on the list for arrest were factors in her decision not to take this advice, but another significant factor was that she "would find it difficult to go on the run with three young children."<sup>186</sup> Clarke was, in fact, arrested and imprisoned at Holloway Jail in England, and her status as a mother again made this experience especially difficult. Her children were not left with their mother, as would have been the case for many male prisoners, and she became sick with the worry of not knowing what had happened to them.

Despite these additional difficulties, Clarke continually presents herself as committed to the principle of Ireland over all. When she was arrested, despite the anguish she felt at leaving her children, she emphasizes that her final conversation with them before leaving focused not on the sorrow of separation but on nationalism and how they should behave before their enemies, as she

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<sup>183</sup> Comerford, 183.

<sup>184</sup> Clarke, 72.

<sup>185</sup> The 'German Plot' was an allegation in 1918 of conspiracy between members of Sinn Féin and the German Empire.

<sup>186</sup> Clarke, 195.

tells them:

that I was being arrested by the British who had murdered their father and uncle... 'Now,' I said to the three boys, 'when I say goodbye to you in the presence of these men who are arresting me, there must be no tears. Remember, these men are our country's enemy, and you are the sons of a patriot and martyr.'<sup>187</sup>

She also relates a speech she made during the Treaty debates, in which she weaponizes gender stereotypes, shaming the manhood of those in favor of the Treaty in comparison to her own commitment to Ireland and to republican ideals as she declares that

I heard big, strong military men say here that they would vote for this Treaty, which necessarily means taking an Oath of Allegiance, and I tell these men there is not power enough to force me, nor eloquence enough to influence me in the whole British Empire into taking that Oath, though I am only a frail scrap of humanity.<sup>188</sup>

At the conclusion of her memoir, which ends with her leaving the Fianna Fáil party in 1941, she returns to her revolutionary awakenings, further cementing their enduring importance throughout her life, as she professes that she would not “dare be untrue to the lessons learned from parents, uncle, aunt and grandmother, to be true to Ireland, first, last and all the time, no matter what the cost.”<sup>189</sup>

The emphasis they place on putting the cause of Ireland above all else frequently manifests itself in ways that are quite callous, as this cause is elevated above the feelings and concerns of others. Following the Rising, Clarke recalls her need to hide money that she held for the Dependents' Fund from British raiders. She decided to give the money to an old lady who happened to be visiting her at the time of the raid, and she describes the woman as “frightened” and “so terrified at the thought that she was quite helpless.”<sup>190</sup> Clarke recounts that she “had to bully her into consenting,” clearly viewing the need to hide the money as overriding the woman's fear. Meanwhile, during the Rising, Connolly stayed at a farm in County Tyrone. Raids were carried out on the farm and the young woman who lived there was clearly rattled and concerned by what happened, Connolly quotes her as saying that “you've ruined this farm with your capers. The men are unsettled, my two brothers are in hiding, and not a thing being done on the farm.”<sup>191</sup>

The woman's distress is understandable. Supporting Republican ideas in principle is one thing, but holding Ireland over all when the reality of war threatens the security of her home and

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<sup>187</sup> Clarke, 196

<sup>188</sup> Clarke, 261.

<sup>189</sup> Clarke, 311.

<sup>190</sup> Clarke, 121-2.

<sup>191</sup> Connolly, 125.

livelihood is a much heavier ask. However, Connolly, who was already angered by what she saw as the woman's foolish comportment during the raid and, even more so, by the discovery that she had brought a message to Dublin that men in the North were unprepared to fight, has no sympathy for her perspective. She paints this woman as a traitor to the Republican cause and derides her as “the woman who had no soul but for a farm.”<sup>192</sup>

The women repeatedly emphasize the importance of a willingness to risk any consequences in the pursuit of Ireland's freedom. Skinnider recalls being part of an operation to obtain explosives and the fear she felt when she came close to being discovered by a policeman. However, despite her acknowledgement of her fear, she presents an image of herself as willing to endure any consequences as she declares that “risks like this have to be taken...it is all in the way of war.”<sup>193</sup>

Similarly, she notes that simply publishing her memoir in the context of 1917 brought risks, however she firmly presents her duty to Ireland and her position of disseminating the memory of the Rising as paramount and worthwhile: “that is the sort of risk which we who love Ireland must run, if we are to bring to the knowledge of the world the truth of that heroic attempt last spring to free Ireland.”<sup>194</sup>

Furthermore, Skinnider was badly injured during the Rising and acknowledges being in great pain. However, in her memoir she performs a clear role of steadfast patriot and soldier as she emphasizes her refusal to be taken to hospital and her satisfaction at remaining with her garrison despite her condition. She does not describe fear or sadness as a result of her injuries, although they were serious and would affect her for the rest of her life. But, in order to remove the bullets, that had to cut away her uniform. Skinnider states that she “cried over that,”<sup>195</sup> thus elevating the value of this symbol of Ireland and her place in its armed rebellion over that of her own health and life.

Clarke also was willing to run risks. She expresses a very similar sentiment to Skinnider when recalling being almost caught transporting gold for the IRA during the War of Independence stating that “it was a hair-raising experience, but everyone engaged in the work for freedom at that time had scares every day of the week. We learned to take chances without

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<sup>192</sup> Connolly, 126.

<sup>193</sup> Skinnider, 51.

<sup>194</sup> Skinnider, vii.

<sup>195</sup> Skinnider, 148.

turning a hair.”<sup>196</sup> During the visit of King George in 1911, she hung a poster at her shop baring the message "Damn your concessions, England, we want our country." She describes an angry crowd gathering, one of whom removed the poster. Though she recalls being scared of “not knowing from one minute to the next but that the angry crowd would wreck the shop,”<sup>197</sup> she says that she replaced it and confronted the crowd. This act is similar to one Clarke recounts of her sister, Agnes, in 1920. The Black and Tans had hung a poster at her bakery which she then removed despite their threats. This act is given even greater significance as Clarke places it immediately after a description of a brutal attack on Agnes by other Black and Tans a few months before. They had dragged her by her hair, which they then shore off and, after she removed one of their masks, Clarke says that “he took her hand, with which she had pulled the mask off, and cut it in two between the two middle fingers, right to the wrist, with the razor.”<sup>198</sup> By recounting Agnes’s continued opposition to the Black and Tans after her experience of this violent assault, Clarke clearly desires to create a definitive image of her sister as courageous and steadfast in her beliefs, whatever the consequences may be.

Later, immediately following the Rising, she passed imprisoned Irish soldiers while being driven by British officers along with Arthur Griffith. She jumped up to wave to the soldiers and recalls Griffith's horror at her actions: “Griffith caught a hold of me and pulled me down. 'My God,' he said, 'Are you mad? You will be shot before you know where you are.' 'I don't care,' I said, 'I am not going to pass our men without a salute.’”<sup>199</sup> Like Skinnider, she clearly presents herself as valuing even symbolic devotion to Ireland over any risk her actions may bare.

Following this salute, she recalls the British officer saying, “Short shrift those fellows will get.” This officer was, in fact, Irish; Clarke says that he was "the son of a Dublin doctor I knew." However, his position in the British establishment is enough to make him 'British' in Clarke's eyes and she responds, "they will die for their country, a thing you will never do with that coat on your back, ""<sup>200</sup> before relaying, with no emotion, that this officer was later killed in the First World War.

This complex entanglement of British and Irish identity and what it truly means to be Irish

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<sup>196</sup> Clarke, 235.

<sup>197</sup> Clarke, 58.

<sup>198</sup> Clarke, 247.

<sup>199</sup> Clarke, 127.

<sup>200</sup> Clarke, 127.

frequently recurs.

Clarke returns to this question of Irish identity in often complex and layered ways, most notably in her account of a conversation with the matron at Holloway prison. The matron is herself Irish, according to Clarke she describes herself as belonging “to the North of Ireland, but I have lived most of my life in England.”<sup>201</sup> However, just like the officer, as the matron in an English prison, to Clarke she and other prison employees are a representation of England, her country’s enemy. Explaining her hostility to these prison officials in contrast to the friendliness of Markievicz and Gonne, Clarke says:

I am Irish, purely Irish, and as such, knowing my country's history, how can I be other than hostile to my country's only enemy, England?...The other two ladies are different in this way, that they are of English descent, born in Ireland, and they belong to what we call there the Ascendancy, or English element. They have many English relatives and friends, whom they think highly of. They have identified themselves with our struggle for freedom from the conviction that our cause is a just cause, and they have worked and suffered with us in that cause, but naturally they cannot feel the same hostility to England as I do.<sup>202</sup>

Here, Clarke establishes something of a ‘hierarchy’ of Irishness. She describes herself as ‘purely Irish’ in opposition to the position of Markievicz and Gonne who, while she does not fully reject their Irishness, are ‘of English descent’ and, therefore, not ‘purely’ Irish. This is compounded in her description of them as identifying with ‘our struggle’ and working and suffering ‘with us.’ She accepts their work and suffering for Irish nationalism but does not see them as entirely belonging to the ‘in-group’ of Irish. They are, if not *not* Irish, at least in some way *less* Irish than Clarke herself.

In this conversation, Clarke ties her own Irishness both to an essentialist idea of kinship and heritage, saying that her hostility to England “is there in my blood,”<sup>203</sup> but also to the importance of history and memory, as she further ties this hostility to “knowing my country's history.”

Skinnider also addresses these issues of Irish identity and commitment to Ireland, likely questions that were especially significant to her having been raised in Scotland. She draws a clear distinction between living in Scotland and her sense of Irish identity, stating that “Scotland is my home and Ireland my country”<sup>204</sup> and later noting that she could “pass anywhere for a

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<sup>201</sup> Clarke, 218.

<sup>202</sup> Clarke, 218.

<sup>203</sup> Clarke, 219.

<sup>204</sup> Skinnider, 3.

Scotch girl,”<sup>205</sup> therefore explicitly rejecting a Scottish identity. She also recalls a nurse, having heard her thoughts on the Rising, remarking that “your opinions and your accent don’t go together.”<sup>206</sup> She identifies these tensions of identity as existing among other Irish emigrants in Scotland, saying that in Glasgow “the spirit [of Irish nationalism] among the younger generation is perhaps more intense because we are a little to one side and thus afraid of becoming outsiders.”<sup>207</sup>

She recalls a seventeen-year-old boy, also from Scotland, “whose parents, though Irish, wanted him to volunteer in the service of the empire.”<sup>208</sup> Her addition of ‘though Irish’ clearly identifies this sentiment as, to Skinnider’s mind, somehow abnormal and antithetical to Irishness, although numerous Irish men did serve in the British army during the First World War. The boy’s refusal to follow his parents’ wishes is clearly admired by Skinnider and she states that he told them “his life belonged to Ireland. He went over to fight at the time of the rising, and served a year in prison afterward.”<sup>209</sup>

Many other young Irish men fled Great Britain to escape the draft and both Skinnider and Connolly praise them. Connolly recalls her Cumann na mBan branch preparing hampers to send to these men, whom they called “refugees,” to support them while Skinnider defends their honor against the British government’s accusation of them being ‘slackers’ arguing that they were, in fact, “drilling and practising at the target, or making ammunition for a cause they believed in and for which they were ready to die.”<sup>210</sup> The way Skinnider frames the connections of this boy and his parents to Ireland, clearly demonstrates that she views a willingness to fight and sacrifice for Ireland as the principal marker of Irish identity. Though raised in Glasgow, this boy is presented as being perhaps more Irish due to his fighting and being imprisoned for Ireland’s freedom in contrast to his parents who betray this ideal.

However, she also notes that, even those in the British army retained a sense of Irish identity. When meeting two men, a father and son, who were serving in the War while she was in hospital, she questioned if they had sung *Rule Britannia*, but says that “they were indignant at the

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<sup>205</sup> Skinnider, 130.

<sup>206</sup> Skinnider, 194.

<sup>207</sup> Skinnider, 64.

<sup>208</sup> Skinnider, 64.

<sup>209</sup> Skinnider, 64.

<sup>210</sup> Skinnider, 65.



idea. They might be wearing khaki, they said, but they never yet had sung "Rule, Britannia."<sup>211</sup> Skinnider alleges that three female relatives of these men had been friendly towards the British soldiers but had then been deliberately shot by them. Skinnider recalls that seeing this induced a sharp change of allegiance in these men:

When the day came for them to return to the front, the father wanted to desert, dangerous as that would be, while the son was eager to go back to the trenches. "This time," he said to me, "we'll not be killing Germans!" When rumors came later of a mutiny in the Irish regiment, I wondered to myself if these two men were at the bottom of it.<sup>212</sup>

Comerford also considers the idea of Irish men fighting for the British army, identifying numerous influencing factors and noting that "there were many examples of men of my acquaintance with tangled military careers"<sup>213</sup>. She also laments that her brother was "was gentle, generous, brave and quiet, and he turned his back on Ireland. The British army caught him young,"<sup>214</sup> and considers that many young men were swept up by the supposed war aims and John Redmond's declaration that Irishmen should fight anywhere in defense of freedom. However, she says that their faith in these aims was betrayed as "Redmond died in his bed and they in mud and misery."<sup>215</sup> Both Comerford and Skinnider present the British as the old motif of 'Perfidious Albion,' backstabbing and two-faced, deceiving Irishmen into betraying their country, but with the chance that they will return on seeing the true colors of the army they are fighting for.

A key element of establishing Irish identity in the early twentieth century was the Gaelic Revival, the promotion of a wide range of elements of Irish culture, including literary traditions, mythology, sport and language. Irish is the autochthonous language of Ireland and remained the primary language of the island into the early 19th century. Following this, it experienced a sharp decline due to the effects of *An Górrta Mór* (the Great Hunger) or the Famine, which led to the deaths or emigration of millions of Irish people, many of them Irish speakers; the promotion of English as the language of status and commerce, and the exclusion or devaluing of the language in education.

While the Central Statistics Office recorded in 2016 that 39.8% of the population of the Republic reported that they could speak Irish, the number who used it on a daily basis outside of

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<sup>211</sup> Skinnider, 174.

<sup>212</sup> Skinnider, 174.

<sup>213</sup> Comerford, 42.

<sup>214</sup> Comerford, 44.

the education system was significantly lower, less than 1% of those who could speak it.<sup>216</sup>

Nevertheless, Irish remains widely thought of as a significant marker of Irish identity and there have been campaigns for greater use and protection of the language. These have occurred both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland, where 2022 campaigns pushed for an Irish Language act, which was eventually passed in a diluted form as the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, utilizing Irish language slogans such as *Acht Anois* (an act now) and *Dearg le Fearg* (red with anger) in their protests.<sup>217</sup>

Campaigns to revitalize the Irish language are far from a new phenomenon. In the late 19th century, the Gaelic League (today known as Conradh na Gaelige) was established as a key part of the wider Gaelic Revival to promote the language. Though the league saw itself as non-political, it attracted many Nationalists, who saw the revival of Irish, a distinct marker of Irish identity separate from English, as an important part of the nationalist movement. A well-known saying in Irish language activism, *Tír gan teanga, tír gan anam* (a country without a language, a country without a soul), is attributed to Rising leader Pádraig Pearse and there are numerous allusions in the memoirs to the perceived importance of Irish to the construction of Irish identity.

A key way in which Irish has been used is in naming, both of organizations and of individuals. This is something which continues today with the three biggest parties in Dáil Éireann (the Irish Parliament) bearing Irish names: Fianna Fáil (Warriors of Ireland), Fine Gael (Family of the Gael), and Sinn Féin (We ourselves).

A nationalist organization for young Irish boys, intended as a nationalist alternative to Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts, was given the name *Na Fianna Éireann* (The Soldiers of Ireland). *Fianna* were bands of warriors in Gaelic Ireland, most notably associated with the Fianna or Fenian cycle of Irish mythology and the mythological hero Fionn mac Cumhaill. This is the origin of the term 'Fenian', referring to members of the IRB and Fenian Brotherhood, but also often applied to Republicans in general, and still in some use today as a pejorative term for Irish Catholics, particularly in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Additionally, the *Fianna* gives its

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<sup>215</sup> Comerford, 45.

<sup>216</sup> Central Statistics Office, "Irish Language and the Gaeltacht - CSO - Central Statistics Office," www.cso.ie (CSO, July 11, 2018), <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp10esil/p10esil/ilg/>.

<sup>217</sup> Michael Jackson, "Thousands Set to Take Part in an Lá Dearg March in Belfast," Belfast Media, May 21, 2022, <https://belfastmedia.com/an-la-dearg-march>.

name not only to *Na Fianna Éireann*, but also to the aforementioned political party *Fianna Fáil* and to the opening line of the Irish national anthem, *Sinne Fianna Fáil* (We are warriors of Ireland).

Therefore, it is a term with a loaded history and implication and Skinnider describes the symbolic significance of this name, saying that Markievicz "finally came to believe that to succeed, the spirit of old Ireland must be invoked. So the organization was given the historic Gaelic name, *Fianna*, with its flavor of romance and patriotic tradition."<sup>218</sup> Here, Skinnider makes clear the importance of a name that was seen to connect the organization to the roots of ancient Irish language, culture, and mythology.

Skinnider herself, while known as Margaret, also used the Irish form of her name *Maighréad Ní Scineadóra* in various symbolically significant ways. She signs her memoir with this name, using not only the Irish form of her name but also *cló Gaelach* (Gaelic type), the typeface historically used for writing Irish but now confined largely to decorative usage. She also signed her name to her 1924 pension application and correspondence concerning it as *Maighréad Ní Scineadóra* in *cló Gaelach*, in addition to using the Irish language salutation and valediction common in official correspondence of *a chara/chairde* and *mise le meas*.<sup>219</sup>

Styling herself as Maighréad rather than Margaret in these places represents an active adoption and reinforcement of an Irish identity. In applying for a military pension and in recording her memoirs of the Rising, Skinnider's status as 'Irish' is crucial for her acceptance in these roles and the use of an Irish name strengthens her claim to an Irish identity.

Skinnider was one of many in the Republican movement to adopt an Irish language name. Another of these was Máire Comerford. Máire was born Mary and generally known as such, but also used the Irish form of her given name. In her preface to the memoir the editor, Hilary Dully notes that "this Mary/Máire identity is central to understanding her political awakening and subsequent lifelong Republicanism. As such, throughout the memoir she is occasionally Mary, but more often Máire."<sup>220</sup> This elevation of an Irish over an English name demonstrates the symbolic importance of the Irish language in constructing 'Máire' as an Irish Nationalist.

Comerford also notes this same process of name change among others she knew. She recalls

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<sup>218</sup> Skinnider, 56.

<sup>219</sup> Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF19910 (Margaret Skinnider), Military Archives, Dublin.

<sup>220</sup> Dully, preface to *On Dangerous Ground*, viii.

that her mother had known 'Johnny Etchingam' when he was a child but, as he too embraced the nationalist movement, “the Johnny Etchingam of those far-off days had now become Seán Etchingam.”<sup>221</sup> Additionally, Gobnait Ní Bhrudair was born the Honourable Albinia Broderick into an aristocratic British family. However, as she became increasingly involved in the Gaelic Revival and Nationalist movement, Comerford says that she “discarded her title – except on occasions when it might be useful for propaganda purposes – and wished to be known in the Irish form, Gobnait Ní Bruadair[sic].”<sup>222</sup> For Ní Bhrudair, the adoption of an Irish name represents a powerful rejection of her family's past and embracing of an entirely new, Irish identity.

Names hold enormous significance as markers of personal identity and, across many cultures, the bestowing or changing of a name is associated with important cultural or religious milestones. In the Catholic tradition, a name is given at baptism and an additional name is taken on Confirmation, symbolizing the adoption into the church and of a Catholic identity. By analogy to this, Mary, Margaret, Albinia, and Johnny can be seen as using the Irish language to express their dedication to Ireland and to be symbolically 'baptized' into the Nationalist movement through becoming Máire, Maighréad, Gobnait, and Seán.

#### **5.4 Soldiers are we?**

In *Beyond the Band of Brothers*, Megan Mackenzie explores the combat exclusion policy that barred women from serving in combat roles in the US Armed Forces until 2013. Mackenzie argues that this policy of exclusion arose not from an assessment of women's capabilities to effectively fill these roles, but rather from a myth of “the band of brothers” which paints combat as the ultimate performance of masculinity and views women's participation as a threat which can weaken and ‘feminize’ the military. Excluding women from combat is therefore founded on the “understanding that women were not natural soldiers, were physically inferior to men, and would ruin the bonds necessary for combat missions.”<sup>223</sup>

While Mackenzie's analysis of this myth is focused on the US military, it is far from unique in this respect, and a recent report into the Irish Defence Forces by the Independent Review

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<sup>221</sup> Comerford, 48.

<sup>222</sup> Comerford, 79.

Group – Defence (IRG-DF) clearly indicates that this myth and the gendering of combat roles is a present issue in the modern Irish military. The report was triggered in 2021 by a group of Irish veterans known as the “Women of Honor,” who raised serious allegations of abuse and harassment within the Defence Forces, beginning a Twitter campaign under the hashtag #IrishMilitaryMeToo and pushing for an inquiry.<sup>224</sup> The report is extensive and damning regarding many areas of the Defence Forces, ultimately concluding that it is not a safe working environment for either men or women, and highlights many gendered issues within the Irish military which closely parallel the Band of Brothers myth proposed by Mackenzie.

The report alleges that, at best, the Defence Forces “barely tolerates” women and that “gender and particular hypermasculinities are strong organising forces in the culture.”<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, the IRG-DF strongly echo Mackenzie’s arguments when they conclude that “females are not considered soldiers, not because of their lack of capabilities to do the work of soldiering, but because the definition of a soldier in the Defence Forces is masculine.”<sup>226</sup>

As well as reflecting Mackenzie’s assertions, this conclusion also has strong echoes of a statement made by the Army Pensions Department almost a century ago. In 1925, Margaret Skinnider applied for a military pension on the basis of the wounds she received in the Rising. While she was eventually awarded a pension in 1938, her application was initially rejected on the basis that the Army Pensions Act, 1923 “is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense.”<sup>227</sup>

The stark symmetry of the IRG-DF’s statement in 2023 and that of the Army Pensions Department in 1925 elucidates the potent and enduring association between the category of ‘soldier’ and masculinity. The issue of the correlation of ‘soldier’ and ‘male’ is also pertinent to Ireland as the first line of the national anthem declares “*Sinne Fianna Fáil*,<sup>228</sup> *atá faoi gheall ag*

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<sup>223</sup> Megan Mackenzie, *Band of Brothers*, 16.

<sup>224</sup> Women of Honour, Twitter Post, 19th January 2022, 10:32pm, Accessed 13th April 2023, <https://twitter.com/WomenOfHonour/status/1483915168291688458>

<sup>225</sup> Independent Review Group - Defence (IRG-DF), *Report of the Independent Review Group on Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces*, 28th March 2023, <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4eb09-report-of-the-independent-review-group-on-dignity-and-equality-issues-in-the-defence-forces/>, 16.

<sup>226</sup> IRG-DF, *Dignity and Equality issues in the Defence Forces*, 42.

<sup>227</sup> Letter from Army Pensions Department to Margaret Skinnider, April 2nd, 1925, Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF19910 (Margaret Skinnider), Military Archives, Dublin.

<sup>228</sup> The more accurate translation of this line is “we are soldiers of Fál,” a poetic name for Ireland. However, the original English version of the song uses the line “Soldiers are we”.

*Éirinn,*” or in English “*Soldiers are we, whose lives are pledged to Ireland.*” The purpose of a national anthem is to provoke national unity and represent the citizens of a nation, but if, as the IRG-DF and Army Pensions Department have said, ‘soldier’ is understood as masculine this raises the question of whether and to what extent this national symbol includes those who do not identify with the label of ‘masculine.’ However, this is a correlation challenged by women’s Easter Rising memoirs.

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*Soldiers are we*

Cumann na mBan

was part of the defence forces  
of the Republic.

There was very little Republican work,  
military or civilian,  
we did not partake in.

*Whose lives are pledged to Ireland!*

The pain  
the weariness and  
the hunger  
of our bodies  
went unnoticed.  
We swung along  
as best we could  
trying to keep to  
the beat  
of a march.

*Some have come from a land beyond the wave,*

We had the same right  
to risk our lives  
as the men;  
in the constitution  
of the Irish Republic  
women were on an equality  
with men.

*Sworn to be free! No more our ancient sireland*

PH Pearse said that  
if it were not  
for the women  
the fight could not have lasted  
so long.

*Shall shelter the despot and the slave!*

I said that I didn't want  
to dress wounds  
till I had a chance  
to make some

*To-night we'll man the bearna booighill,*

My sister Madge decided  
that if the British military  
came to raid the house  
she would defend it.  
Her arms consisted of  
one Howth gun  
one rifle and  
two revolvers.

*In Erin's cause come woe or weal,*

Our duty to Ireland  
and to our executed leaders  
was to close our ranks  
forget our failures  
and get to work.

*'Mid cannon's roar or rifle's peal,*

O aren't you glad to be alive!  
We used to read  
about the men  
who fought for Ireland  
and dream about them.  
Now we'll be amongst

the men and women  
who are fighting in Dublin.  
We'll be able to do something  
for Ireland.

*Seo libh canaig amhrán na bhfiann.*<sup>229</sup>

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In her biography of Margaret Skinnider, Mary McAuliffe analyzes the two outfits worn by Skinnider during the Rising: “a gray dress and hat” which she wore while she rode with her despatches and a “green moleskin uniform” worn while she was part of the firing squad in the College of Surgeons. McAuliffe considers these changing outfits in terms of gender, concluding that “her constant changing of clothes for the different roles she played in the Rising indicates an understanding of the gendered roles expected of men and women” and that “she was evidently conscious that being a soldier was only possible when clothed in male attire.”<sup>230</sup>

While there is an inevitable gendered implication inherent in Skinnider’s switching from a dress to a military uniform and she was surely aware of this, framing these outfits purely in terms of gender neglects another, perhaps more significant, distinction between them. Skinnider herself does not gender her clothes, never referring to her uniform in masculine terms nor to the dress she wore while bicycling in feminine ones. Rather, the distinction she draws between the two outfits is military and civilian.

Throughout her text, Skinnider demonstrates a desire to show that the Irish forces were a legitimate army. She refers frequently to the “rules of war” and seeks to demonstrate their adherence to them. In the section McAuliffe refers to where Skinnider says that she could not shoot soldiers in the clothes she wore as a despatch rider, she does not equate this restriction to the femininity of her dress but instead states that “I was not in uniform, however, and had had orders not to shoot except thus clothed and so a member of the Republican Army.”<sup>231</sup> A core principle in the rules of warfare is that of the distinction between combatant and civilian, enshrined as early as 1899 in the Hague Convention which states that belligerents must “have a

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<sup>229</sup> Words taken from *Doing My Bit for Ireland, On Dangerous Ground, Revolutionary Woman, and Unbroken Tradition* and lyrics to *Soldiers are We*, as printed by Skinnider in *Doing my Bit for Ireland*. The final line is taken from the official, Irish language national anthem. In English: “*We’ll chant a soldier’s song*”

<sup>230</sup> Mary McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider*, 30-1.

<sup>231</sup> Skinnider, 125.



fixed distinctive emblem recognizable at a distance.”<sup>232</sup>

Therefore, her need to wear military uniform while engaging as a combatant goes deeper than a desire to legitimize herself in masculine dress, rather she is concerned with legitimizing the Irish forces as a true, recognizable army; as she observes, “the work of war can only be done by those who wear its dress.”<sup>233</sup>

Furthermore, in her earlier recollection of going out with the Fianna boys, she does refer to herself as dressing as a boy, calling the Fianna uniform “a boy’s suit” and the full page picture of her in a suit and tie that follows is captioned “Margaret Skinnider (wearing boy’s clothes).”<sup>234</sup> This demonstrates that she is fully aware of the possibility of gender masquerade through dress and is happy to describe her actions in these terms. In fact, she often seems to take delight in her performances of gender. Therefore, the fact that she never refers to her uniform in masculine terms or describes herself as dressing as a man or boy while wearing it suggests a definite, and perhaps deliberate, de-gendering of this outfit.

In her own recollections of the revolutionary period, Mary Perloz recalls: “That time we did not think about sex or anything else. We were all soldiers and I was only bothered about what I could do for Kate Houlihan [Ireland]”<sup>235</sup> and Skinnider seems to be of a similar opinion. As she recalls stating to Mallin, “in the constitution of the Irish Republic, women were on an equality with men”<sup>236</sup> and had an equal right to fight and risk their lives for their country. Given this, it seems that she didn’t view her green uniform as ‘male’ or ‘masculine.’ When she donned it, she did not see herself as dressing as a man but as a soldier, an identity which, like Perloz, she places apart from and above gender; for Skinnider, in the throes of revolution, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are inconsequential, fighting for Ireland is all that matters.

While Margaret Skinnider was the only one to engage in direct combat in the Rising, Clarke and Connolly present themselves no less as soldiers, and suggest it was circumstance and not gender that prevented them from taking up arms.

When Connolly was told by Volunteers that they hoped she would be the first aid detail for

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<sup>232</sup> Convention (II) with Respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land, The Hague, 29 July 1899, accessed April 13, 2023, <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/150-110007?OpenDocument>.

<sup>233</sup> Skinnider, 144.

<sup>234</sup> Skinnider, 20-1.

<sup>235</sup> Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement #246, Mary/Marie Perloz, 3.

<sup>236</sup> Skinnider, 143.

their company, she recalls declaring that “I didn't want to dress wounds till I had a chance to make some: at this they laughed and promised me that I would get all the chance I wanted.”<sup>237</sup> However, the demobilization of the men in the North prevented this chance. While attempting to reach Dublin, Connolly presents a clear sense of her enthusiasm and desire to be involved in the fight. When they hear that there has been fighting in Wexford, she exclaims:

Wexford out and the West awake! East and West the men are fighting for Ireland. For Ireland, Agna! O, aren't you glad to be alive! We used to read about the men who fought for Ireland and dream about them, and now, in a couple of hours we'll be amongst the men and women who are fighting in Dublin. We'll be able to do something for Ireland.<sup>238</sup>

She frames her and Agna's enthusiasm as powerful enough to overcome the physical difficulties of walking such a long distance, insisting that “the pain, the weariness and the hunger of our bodies went unnoticed” and directly evokes the image of soldiers as she describes them as “trying to keep to the beat of a march.”<sup>239</sup>

The clear implication of the way that Connolly frames her memory of the Rising is that it was the sheer bad luck of the demobilization order and her delay in reaching Dublin, and not her gender, desire, or capability, which prevented her from being an armed combatant in the Rising.

Also affected by Eoin MacNeill's demobilization orders was Kathleen Clarke. After they derailed the plans to begin the Rising on Easter Sunday, Tom Clarke and two other men, Tommy O'Connor and Seán McGarry, spent the night at the Clarkes' home and planned their response in case the British raided the house. Clarke recalls these plans and makes it clear that she was a part of them. She performs a clear sense of herself as a soldier on par with the men, as willing and able as they were to fight and die for her country as she says:

They decided that if there was a raid on the house, and any attempt to take them prisoner, they would not surrender. They were to fight and die rather than that. I had a pistol and knew how to use it, and if necessary meant to take a hand...We were to fire at each man as he came in, and it was to be a fight to the finish.<sup>240</sup>

She also relates that she was not the only woman ready and able to take up arms in the fight. Just after the Rising, she recalls her sister Madge being “wild to get a blow at the British.”<sup>241</sup> Madge planned to defend her home in Limerick against a possible raid armed with “one Howth gun, one rifle and two revolvers.” Clarke considered her sister “mad” for this plan, considering

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<sup>237</sup> Connolly, 88.

<sup>238</sup> Connolly, 164.

<sup>239</sup> Connolly, 154.

<sup>240</sup> Clarke, 110-11.

that the potential consequences, such as the possible destruction of their house and bakery, to not be worth her resistance and not helpful to Ireland. However, despite her reproach of Madge's intentions she presents herself as ready to take up the fight, again evoking the idea of military dedication to comrades, as she recalls telling her sister, "I am in total disagreement with you, but of course if you persist in going on, I shall stand in with you, even though I think it madness."<sup>242</sup>

Before the Rising, Clarke was instructed on the role which she was to play, which was to support the dependents of the men who were fighting. Therefore, during the conflict in Easter Week, Clarke remained at home and did not engage in combat. That a woman was chosen for this important, but non-combatant role is clearly no accident and a product of gendered expectations and assumptions, however, Clarke never attributes her lack of combat engagement to her gender, arguing that the reason for her not being involved in the fighting was the crucial importance of her task of caring for the dependents. She gives no suggestion that she was not taking up arms due to a lack of willingness or ability or that she was given the work that she was on account of being a woman. Instead, she frames the issue of her role in the Rising in explicitly militaristic terms, of duty, orders, and sacrificing her own desires for the good of her country.

The concepts of 'orders' and 'duty' are recurring terms in the memoirs. Clarke, asked to stay longer in Limerick to bring a message back to Dublin, responds "I thought I should obey orders,"<sup>243</sup> and she refers frequently to her orders when describing her longing to go to her husband during Easter Week. She describes begging Tom to allow her to go with them, but being told that she "was to carry out my orders"<sup>244</sup> and later says "I ached to join them all there, and to be near my husband, but hesitated, fearing that by disobeying orders I would only add to their worries."<sup>245</sup> Ultimately, Clarke concludes that she was right to follow her orders and not go to Tom at the GPO because it allowed her to fulfill her duty of caring for the dependents following the surrender.

Following the Rising and the executions, Clarke again evokes the concept of duty and frames Cumann na mBan as soldiers with important work to do as she recalls telling the women that "our duty to Ireland and to our executed leaders was to close our ranks, forget our failures and

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<sup>241</sup> Clarke, 155.

<sup>242</sup> Clarke, 155.

<sup>243</sup> Clarke, 103

<sup>244</sup> Clarke, 112.

<sup>245</sup> Clarke, 119.

get to work.”<sup>246</sup>

While Comerford was an observer to the Rising and became involved in Cumann na mBan in its aftermath, she makes her view of Cumann na mBan’s work in the Rising and subsequent conflicts clear. While accepting some of the criticisms leveled at the organization by feminists such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington who “held us to be poor feminists – worse in fact, as being servile to the men,” she defends Cumann na mBan and clearly positions them as soldiers as she says that “Cumann na mBan was part of the defence forces of the Republic. There was very little Republican work, military or civilian, we did not partake in.”<sup>247</sup>

Meanwhile, Connolly depicts the Rising preparations being carried out by the Citizen Army and describes both the men and women as being equally “under military orders. They were no longer a volunteer organization, they were a nation's army.”<sup>248</sup> Later, when instructing the Cumann na mBan girls to return to Belfast, Connolly calls on her military rank for her authority, recalling that “they did not want to go from me, but I said I was speaking to them as their officer and they should obey.”<sup>249</sup>

Clarke also recalls the action of Cumann na mBan in the wake of the Rising, who had masses said for the dead men followed by protests against the executions. The British threatened to shoot down participants if these protests were not ceased and she recalls a conversation with Sorcha MacMahon about how they should respond to this threat:

Miss MacMahon came to me to know what they should do. The priests had advised them to abandon the meetings, but they would not consent until they knew what I thought about it. I told her to tell them I agreed with the priests; to be shot down now would not advance our objective one bit, although I doubted if the British would go so far when the meetings were held by women. I told her to point out to them that they had demonstrated to the British that they were solidly behind their men, and of greater importance, I believed, was that the reports of the meetings had helped to steady the country. The meetings were abandoned with reluctance.<sup>250</sup>

Clarke does not use explicitly military language or describe herself in terms of a leader or commander, however there is striking significance in the women's deference to her instruction. They had already received the advice of the priests, who have traditionally had an enormous level of authority and influence, but they refuse to consent to what the priests have advised without first consulting with Clarke. Their valuing of Clarke's opinion over that of religious

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<sup>246</sup> Clarke, 170

<sup>247</sup> Comerford, 89.

<sup>248</sup> Connolly, 98.

<sup>249</sup> Connolly, 106.

<sup>250</sup> Clarke, 162-3

leaders, following her instruction even though reluctant, and the clear implication of their willingness to face the threat of being "shot down" had she willed it, clearly elevates her to a position analogous to a military commander whose direction is respected and obeyed.

Her advice is also reminiscent of a military commander. Similarly to her arguments against Madge's plans to defend her home, she does not reject the idea of violence or death in pursuit of their aims, but rather pragmatically assesses whether that violence and death will be of use to their cause. She also greatly praises the women involved, presenting them as brave and honorable as she says, "they were mostly Cumann na mBan, and were afraid of nothing. They were women any country would be proud of, and their courage and steadfastness were marvellous."<sup>251</sup>

The assumption that women are not soldiers is necessarily accompanied by a parallel assumption that men *are* soldiers. Pádraig Pearse is doubtlessly, along with James Connolly, one of the first names associated with the Rising. Perhaps its most enduring image is that of Pearse reading the Proclamation of the Republic on the steps of the GPO; an event still recreated by a member of the Irish Defence Forces every Easter as part of the official Rising commemorations. Notably, the role of reading the Proclamation was undertaken by a female member of the Defence Forces, Captain Marie Carrigy, for the first time in 2021. Imagery of Pearse predominantly features him in the green military uniform of the Volunteers and his popular perception in the public consciousness is certainly that of a soldier who fought and died for Ireland.

News from the GPO was brought to Kathleen Clarke on Easter Monday by Sorcha McMahon, and she recalls being told that Pearse was "getting in the way of those trying to get things in order" prompting Tom Clarke to call for someone to find him an office and "set him down to write." This, according to Clarke, was done and Pearse "sat writing most of the week, and brought out a paper called 'The War News.'"<sup>252</sup>

Additionally, in a statement to the Bureau of Military History, Min Ryan recalls that "the headquarters people were not doing any fighting in the G.P.O. They were watching things." And that Pearse "sat out there in the front on one of the high stools, and people would come and talk

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<sup>251</sup> Clarke, 163.

<sup>252</sup> Clarke, 113-4

to him.”<sup>253</sup> This assessment of Pearse’s activity in the Rising led historian Diarmaid Ferriter to conclude that “the nominal commander-in-chief, Patrick Pearse, was shooting nothing except the breeze.”<sup>254</sup> Ferriter directly contrasts this assessment of Pearse’s position in the Rising with that of Helena Molony who he says “found herself in the battle zone” while preparing food.

While Pearse’s intellectual and propaganda contributions to 1916 were unquestionably significant, there is little suggestion that he played a role of an ‘active combatant’ during the conflict. Functionally, his contributions to the Rising parallel those of many women and were essentially ‘supportive’ of those directly participating in the fighting. However, Pearse’s participation is rarely described as ‘auxiliary,’ ‘subsidiary’ or any of the other terms frequently used to devalue the work of women and his status as ‘soldier’ is, at least in the public imagination, largely unquestioned.

While even women like Margaret Skinnider, who did take up arms and participate in direct violence, struggled to receive recognition as soldiers, men like Pearse whose contributions were essentially no less ‘supportive’ than those of many women, had little trouble being viewed as such. This phenomenon demonstrates that the parameters of the role of ‘soldier’ were less defined by the specifics of the work being done. Rather, the boundaries of who is considered a soldier were often delineated by the fact that ‘soldier’ was, and, as the recent report into the Defence Forces shows, in many respects still is, “generally understood in the masculine sense.”

At numerous times throughout their memoirs, Clarke, Comerford, Connolly, and Skinnider perform their selves definitively as soldiers: fulfilling their duties, following their orders, and dedicating themselves to their country above all else. Reading these accounts does not just challenge popular perceptions of the extent of women’s involvement in the Rising. Rather, it poses crucial challenges to deeper and more fundamental societal perceptions such as who is considered a soldier, what it means to be a soldier, and what work is valued in times of conflict.

### **5.5 Sisters in Arms**

Mackenzie argues that the US military’s exclusion of women from combat roles was not based on any data or evidence of women's ability or inability to perform these roles. Rather, it

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<sup>253</sup> Bureau of Military History, Witness Statement #399, Mary Mulcahy (Min Ryan), 17.

<sup>254</sup> Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble*, 159.

was upheld by a general feeling of women not belonging and by the myth of "the Band of Brothers" which "casts the nonsexual, brotherly love, male bonding, and feelings of trust, pride, honor, and loyalty between men as mysterious, indescribable, and **exceptional** [emphasis in original]."255 Therefore, she argues, women's exclusion was based on the idea that they would disrupt and be unable to form the close bonds that often occur within the military.

The concept of the military as 'brothers in arms' has a long history and is by no means exclusive to the US; Mackenzie draws the name of the myth from Shakespeare's 16th century play *Henry V*, where he inspires his men to fight with the words "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; / For he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother."256

This myth of the exceptionality of male bonding in battle is challenged by the depictions in the four memoirs of the close bonds forged between women during conflict.

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The old world

was shattered,

former acquaintances

turned into strangers,

even into enemies;

delicious new friendships

began to form.

When granny got to know

that I had met Con

she was in tears

again.

"That awful woman

leading young girls

to their destruction"

The Earl of Middleton

had a sister

who had formed

her own opinions

of current affairs.

Albinia had discarded her title

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<sup>255</sup> Megan Mackenzie, *Beyond the Band of Brothers*, 16.

<sup>256</sup> William Shakespeare, "Henry V," in *Arden Shakespeare Third Series Complete Works*, ed. Ann Thompson et al.

– except on occasions  
when it might be useful  
for propaganda purposes –  
and wished to be known  
in the Irish form,  
Gobnait Ní Bruadair.  
As the thirty years  
of our friendship  
went past,  
we were thrown together  
in prison  
(after she was shot and captured),  
on committees,  
by firesides and  
in public places.  
Viscount French  
his office door  
his club door  
his back door and  
his main door at home  
were all closed against  
his sister,  
Mrs Charlotte Despard,  
When she wanted to talk  
to him about  
the wrongs that  
were being inflicted  
on India and  
on Ireland.  
Her friend and companion  
in excursions  
all over Ireland  
was Maud Gonne MacBride  
These women  
were no armchair critics



of the administration  
With enormous valour  
and devotion  
they carried their protests  
to the scene of  
every British atrocity,  
killing, burning,  
sacking or pogrom  
from Cork to Belfast.<sup>257</sup>

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While the other three women came from Nationalist families, Máire Comerford's 'castle Catholic' family were largely unionist and the Rising triggered the breakdown of her family relationships due to political divisions as she recalls they “became divided and we could no longer discuss national affairs; conversation between us became difficult.”<sup>258</sup>

Comerford uses her own experience of family divisions to then introduce others which occurred in the wake of the Rising. Notably, these divisions occurred between Unionist brothers and their Nationalist sisters, such as Gonnait Ní Bhrudair (Albinia Brodrick) and her brother William Brodrick, Earl of Middleton, and Charlotte Despard and her brother Viscount John French.

This phenomenon may give rise to the chapter title of "Sisters", however she also discusses the relationships that formed between republican women who worked together for nationalist causes, such as the friendship between Charlotte Despard and Maud Gonne and her own emergent friendships with Nationalist women such as Gonnait Ní Bhrudair and Constance Markievicz, suggesting that they became as 'sisters'.

She recalls her grandmother's anger on discovering that she had met with Constance Markievicz as she writes, “When granny got to know that I had met Con she was in tears again and wrote a letter to Mother about that ‘awful woman leading young girls to their destruction.’”<sup>259</sup> Throughout her memoir, she refers to Constance Markievicz variously as ‘the Countess’ and as ‘Con’, and it is significant that here she calls her ‘Con.’ Though they had only just met at the time of which she is writing, this use of a familiar nickname evokes the sense of a

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<sup>257</sup> Words taken from *On Dangerous Ground*.

<sup>258</sup> Comerford, 77.

<sup>259</sup> Comerford, 77.

close relationship that would develop between them.

Comerford experienced the Rising as a pivotal, watershed moment and divides her life and relationships into the "old world" before the Rising, which she describes as "shattered, former acquaintances turned into strangers, even into enemies", and a new, post-Rising world in which "delicious new friendships began to form."<sup>260</sup> In juxtaposing the collapse of biological family relations and the close friendships between nationalist women, Comerford suggests that these fractured familial relationships were replaced by the close bonds formed within female friendships.

While the other women did not experience the same rupturing of their family relationships, the bonds they formed with other women in the Rising and its aftermath are prominent in their memoirs.

Connolly's main female companion was her biological younger sister, Agna. While they had, of course, a close relationship before the conflict, the importance of their companionship and support for each other during the Rising is clear throughout Connolly's memoir. Following the demobilization in the North, the two decide to get to Dublin to join in the fighting there. The lack of transport leads them to undertake a walk of approximately 85 km from Dundalk to Dublin and Connolly records how they helped each other to keep their spirits up on the journey, claiming that:

We really did not feel tired. As a matter of fact, we were anxious to have as many adventures and experiences as possible to tell our father when we reached Dublin...As we went along the road to Drogheda our conversation consisted mainly of —"Wait till we tell Papa this—" or, "What will Papa say to that—" and, "Won't he laugh when we tell him —," so we whiled away the time, fixing firmly in our minds the most amusing parts of our journey.<sup>261</sup>

Aside from Agna, Connolly also recalls her close bond with and dedication to the young women that she had worked with in the Northern Division of Cumann na mBan. When her father asked if she would be with him in Dublin in the Rising, she tells him that she "would rather stay with the Northern division; that I thought I had better stay with the girls with whom I had been working."<sup>262</sup>

The central female relationship presented in Skinnider's memoir is with Constance Markievicz. In her first introduction to 'Madame,' she describes her as "the most patriotic and

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<sup>260</sup> Comerford, 60.

<sup>261</sup> Connolly, 148-9.

<sup>262</sup> Connolly, 84.

revolutionary woman in all Ireland”<sup>263</sup> and this sense of reverence and admiration for her is carried throughout the text. She attributes to her not only exceptional military skill and revolutionary fervor, but also tremendous kindness, recalling that a young boy in Na Fianna Éireann was going blind and Markievicz “determined that he should have a livelihood, and spent hours of her crowded days in teaching him the words and music of all the best patriotic songs and ballads.”<sup>264</sup> Skinnider also references her fine moral character when describing the uniform Markievicz had made for her, claiming that “With her usual generosity, she had mine made of better material than her own.”<sup>265</sup>

When Skinnider is badly injured during the Rising, Markievicz’s friendship and support is highly praised. Skinnider describes her support as taking two forms, while Markievicz moves easily between the ‘feminine’ role of nursing and comforting Skinnider through her injury to a more ‘masculine’ one as soldier and avenger. While the bullets were being removed, Skinnider says that “all the while Madam held my hand”<sup>266</sup> and claims to have little fear, even at the worst of her suffering, as “Madam is a natural nurse. Among her friends she was noted for her desire to care for them if they fell ill... Thus I was in good hands.”<sup>267</sup> Simultaneously, Markievicz’s support for her friend also takes a darker, violent tone as she seeks to ‘avenge’ her shooting:

Soon after I was brought in, the Countess and Councilor Partridge disappeared. When she returned to me, she said very quietly: "You are avenged, my dear." It seems they had gone out to where Fred Ryan lay, and Partridge, to attract the fire of the soldiers across the street in the Sinn Fein Bank, had stooped over the dead boy to lift him. There were only two soldiers and they both fired. That gave Madam a chance to sight them. She fired twice and killed both.<sup>268</sup>

In her article on *Doing My Bit for Ireland*, Lisa Weihman argues that Skinnider’s admiration for Markievicz is romantic and homoerotic. Although this is certainly possible, if not probable and, as Weihman notes, “given the social conservatism of Irish society in general and militant nationalism specifically, she would hardly be more direct,”<sup>269</sup> Weihman often seems to draw overly broad conclusions about this. She claims that “the roots of Skinnider’s nationalism are unknown,” although following this with an account of what Skinnider at least attributes her nationalism to, and suggests that Skinnider’s desire to fight was motivated by her feelings

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<sup>263</sup> Skinnider, 9.

<sup>264</sup> Skinnider, 19-20.

<sup>265</sup> Skinnider, 134.

<sup>266</sup> Skinnider, 148.

<sup>267</sup> Skinnider, 150.

<sup>268</sup> Skinnider, 149-50.

towards Markievicz, arguing that, “in key moments, in fact, the writer’s priority appears to be fighting for her beloved heroine, more than fighting for Ireland, suggesting that she finds an outlet for repressed desire in her violent nationalism that imitates that of her mentor.”<sup>270</sup>

However, Skinnider’s involvement in the revolutionary movement began before she met Markievicz and continued long after the Rising. After Seán Ó Faolain wrote a biography of Markievicz attributing her involvement in the nationalist and labor movements to being “caught up” by men like James Connolly or James Larkin, Helena Molony wrote a letter with a scathing criticism of this conclusion:

It is a curious thing that men seem to be unable to believe that any woman can embrace an ideal - accept it intellectually, feel it as a profound emotion, and then calmly decide to make a vocation of working for its realisation. They give themselves endless pains to prove that every serious thing a woman does (outside nursing babies or washing pots) is the result of being in love with some man or looking for excitement, or limelight, or indulging their vanity. You do not seem to have escaped from the limitations of your sex.<sup>271</sup>

Attributing Skinnider’s revolutionary ideals to being the result of ‘being in love with some woman’ seems no more accurate than Ó Faolain’s criticisms of Markievicz and reducing the lifelong work and commitment that Skinnider made towards revolutionary movements to solely a product of sexual desire detracts from earnestness of and long-standing commitment to her beliefs.

Whatever the nature of Skinnider’s feelings towards Markievicz, there is certainly evidence of a number of lesbian relationships formed between women involved in the nationalist movement. Skinnider herself had a long-term relationship with Nora O’Keefe and it is widely accepted that Elizabeth O’Farrell and Julia Grennan as well as Dr Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine French-Mullen were romantic partners. Though more on the fringes of the nationalist movement, another lesbian couple, Markievicz’s sister Eva Gore-Booth and her partner Esther Roper, also made significant contributions.

In the immediate aftermath of the Rising, Clarke was assisted in managing the Dependents’ Fund by Sorcha MacMahon, who had acted as a courier during the Rising and brought Clarke messages from the GPO. Clarke heaps heavy praise on MacMahon, highlighting the numerous sacrifices she made for this work including giving up her job and postponing her marriage. The importance of the relationship developed between the two is clear as Clarke says, “I don’t know

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<sup>269</sup> Weihman, 240.

<sup>270</sup> Weihman, 238.

what I would have done without her,”<sup>272</sup> while the trust and respect that MacMahon had for Clarke was clear as she was the one to come to her to ask her advice on the issue of ending the after mass meetings.

Clarke was imprisoned in Holloway Jail as a result of the 1918 ‘German Plot’ along with Constance Markievicz and Maud Gonne. Her memories of this period reflect on the sometimes difficult and contentious but nonetheless important relationships which developed between these three “rebel Irish women.”

Clarke frequently paints a less than flattering picture of Markievicz, considering her at times pretentious, overbearing and condescending. Their relationship began badly as she was irritated by Markievicz’s questioning “such a quiet, insignificant person”<sup>273</sup> being arrested, a question Clarke attributes to her being worried by being imprisoned alongside such an “insignificant person,” while never questioning the arrest of Gonne, who was in France throughout the Rising. She also describes Markievicz as at “pains to make me aware of the social gulf between us,” though she insists she was merely amused by Markievicz and Gonne’s discussions of status, and as having “a certain amount of patronage in her tone and manner, and that I was not prepared to take from anybody.”<sup>274</sup>

Furthermore, Markievicz and Gonne were not on good terms at the beginning and Clarke describes her frustration at listening to each vent about the other: “Both ladies would come in to my cell and unload their grievances on me separately... Maeve [Maud] was this and that, Connie was that and this. When one came in, the other went out. I had to listen and sympathise with each of them; it became quite a strain.”<sup>275</sup>

Gonne was the first to be released, with Clarke describing her as “kind, gentle and very courteous; she had very charming manners. I missed her, but was glad she was out of it.”<sup>276</sup> Following this, Clarke recalls troubles with Markievicz quarreling with her, attempting to “kick her to heel” but “when she found she was not successful I became 'dear Kathleen' to her instead of 'Mrs Clarke'. She then made efforts to get me to call her Connie, but Madame Markievicz she

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<sup>271</sup> Helena Molony, BHM, WS#391. 63-4

<sup>272</sup> Clarke, 160.

<sup>273</sup> Clarke, 209.

<sup>274</sup> Clarke, 209.

<sup>275</sup> Clarke, 210.

<sup>276</sup> Clarke, 211.

has always remained to me.”<sup>277</sup>

This refusal to call her “Connie” suggests an enduring remoteness and Clarke’s image of Markievicz is frequently unflattering, and one which often contrasts sharply to the one constructed in the other three memoirs. However, Clarke refers to both women as her friends and repeatedly makes light of this quarreling. She suggests that the effects of prison worsened it, saying that in prison “people are inclined to be irritable over trifles not worth bothering about normally,”<sup>278</sup> and that “these quarrels, if one could call them such, were only occasional. We tried to make life as pleasant as possible for each other.”<sup>279</sup> Further, she says “though we quarrelled occasionally, I was fond of her; she had some very fine qualities.”<sup>280</sup>

In her later memoir, *We Shall Rise Again*, Nora Connolly observes that reading prisoners' books showed that they all had "one or two funny things to say about what happened, even in the midst of their suffering." She regards these “little stories and funny things” as giving “a bit of humanity to it. This can help to make you feel part of the struggle.”<sup>281</sup>

Clarke follows the convention Connolly noted for prisoners' books, as she relates some of the day-to-day amusements of prison life. She praises Markievicz's artistic talents, recalling that she had painted a caricature of Clarke threading a needle which she describes as “very funny and very clever”<sup>282</sup> and an occasion on which Markievicz stole a report book from the wardress and they “had great fun reading it...According to her report, I ate nothing, Madame ate everything, and ate all day.”<sup>283</sup> She also recounts playing a joke on Markievicz:

She was always looking for flavouring, and one day I brought her something on a plate saying, 'Madame, this might flavour your stew.' 'Oh thank you, darling Kathleen, you are an angel.' She was very shortsighted, and she was just about to put the thing in the stew when I remarked that it might make it a bit soapy. She looked closer, to discover that I had given her a bit of soap! Then she told me I was a little devil.<sup>284</sup>

These small anecdotes demonstrate that, for all of Clarke's criticism of and irritation with Gonne and Markievicz, a spirit of comradeship and friendship did develop between the three women during their imprisonment, and this is one which continued in the years after.

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<sup>277</sup> Clarke, 212.

<sup>278</sup> Clarke, 212.

<sup>279</sup> Clarke, 214.

<sup>280</sup> Clarke, 224.

<sup>281</sup> Connolly O’Brien, *We Shall Rise Again*, 4.

<sup>282</sup> Clarke, 213.

<sup>283</sup> Clarke, 214.

<sup>284</sup> Clarke, 212.

Furthermore, on her release, Clarke stayed in London with Markievicz's sister, Eva Gore-Booth, who she describes as “the essence of kindness to me, though I was a perfect stranger to her, but as a friend of her sister that she loved she thought she could never do enough for me.”<sup>285</sup> This memory demonstrates that it was not just connections between immediate comrades working or imprisoned together that were fostered between women. Rather the relationships that were built expanded into wider networks of friends and support throughout Ireland and beyond.

Clarke was released from prison three weeks before Markievicz, and she recalls sadness and concern for her, knowing that she would struggle to be alone. and relates that “it was a great pleasure to hear of her release.”<sup>286</sup>

This fondness and concern was reciprocated, at Clarke recalls Markievicz's concern over her health. While Clarke describes her as “a nuisance to me over it” and suggested she was just looking for “an occupation or thrills,”<sup>287</sup> Markievicz's concerns seem to have been genuine and well-intentioned. Clarke recalls one occasion while Markievicz was living with her in Dublin when she was coughing up blood. Markievicz insisted that Clarke “was to come in at once and go to bed, and she would get a doctor.”<sup>288</sup> Clarke was again irritated by her “fussing,” insisting that “it was nothing,” and she should “mind her own business” although she acknowledges that Markievicz was meaning to be kind and admits that she was herself “a bit worried, as the blood had been coming all the morning.”<sup>289</sup> Markievicz left without argument, but a few hours later Dr Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine ffrench-Mullen arrived at her house. Lynn and ffrench-Mullen were both members of the Irish Citizen Army and had also participated in the Rising. Clarke relates their actions as they arrived:

They caught me by the arms, marched me into the house and up to my bedroom, undressed me and put me to bed, completely ignoring my protests. They then put packs of ice on my chest and left me that way, warning me not to move hand or foot until they came again. I was kept that way for days. I asked for an explanation of their action in swooping down on me the way they did. They told me that when Madame had left the garden that morning without arguing with me, she had gone straight to Dr Lynn and asked her to come out and see me at once, as she thought I looked very ill.<sup>290</sup>

While Clarke was irritated by their fussing and heavy-handedness, and later reiterates that

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<sup>285</sup> Clarke, 219.

<sup>286</sup> Clarke, 219.

<sup>287</sup> Clarke, 206.

<sup>288</sup> Clarke, 225.

<sup>289</sup> Clarke, 225.

<sup>290</sup> Clarke, 225-6.

she “thought Madame was making a fuss about nothing,”<sup>291</sup> her recollections of the actions of Markievicz, Lynn and French-Mullen demonstrate their lasting close bonds and a sincere concern for Clarke's wellbeing and desire to care for her.

This multitude of different female relationships depicted in the memoirs pose a significant challenge to the myth of the ‘Band of Brothers’ as they demonstrate that masculine bonding in conflict is by no means exceptional. While relationships, as any personal relationships, can at times be strained or tense, all four women demonstrate the importance of the relationships that developed between Irish nationalist women and that shared experience of conflict, imprisonment and work for a cause can generate equally strong, enduring and significant bonds among female comrades as their male counterparts.

### **5.6 *Ní Saoirse go Saoirse na mBan***

*Ní saoirse go saoirse na mban* (no freedom until women’s freedom) is a phrase associated with Irish women’s movements, notably in the 2018 ‘Repeal the 8th’ movement which successfully campaigned to legalize the provision of abortion in Ireland and which utilized the phrase on signs and artwork.<sup>292</sup>

The four women describe themselves as nationalists. While this is occasionally in opposition to feminism, more commonly they present nationalist and feminist ideals and goals as not only compatible but, in fact, contingent on one other. Nationalism and feminism are frequently framed as two mutually exclusive and opposing ideologies. Nationalism is presented as masculine, patriarchal, and fraternal and as an inevitable obstacle for the progression of feminist ideals.<sup>293</sup>

Nevertheless, many women revolutionaries have embraced both nationalist and feminist aspirations and, furthermore, have presented them as inextricably connected. Addressing an audience of young, Irish women in 1909, Constance Markievicz declared that “the first step on the road to freedom is to realise ourselves as Irishwomen – not only as Irish or merely as women,

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<sup>291</sup> Clarke, 226.

<sup>292</sup> Louis Strange, “*Ní Saoirse go Saoirse na mBan*: Gender and the Irish Language in the Linguistic Landscape of Ireland’s 2018 Abortion Referendum,” *Language in Society* 52 (February 2, 2022): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0047404521001214>.

<sup>293</sup> Strange, “*Ní Saoirse go Saoirse*”; Louise Ryan, “Traditions and Double Moral Standards: The Irish Suffragists’ Critique of Nationalism,” *Women’s History Review* 4, no. 4 (December 1, 1995): 487–503, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612029500200095>.



but as Irishwomen doubly enslaved, and with a double battle to fight.”<sup>294</sup>

In calling for women to fight a “double battle,” Markievicz explicitly unites the nationalist and feminist causes and suggest that they must rather be fought simultaneously and, moreover, that one is unachievable without the other. Maryann Gialanella Valiulis has argued that Inghinidhe na hÉireann (the Daughters of Ireland), an organization which was later absorbed into Cumann na mBan, made an important contribution to this line of thought as “it challenged the traditional definition of nationalist women by imagining a community in which feminism and nationalism neither conflicted nor competed, but rather co-existed in harmony.”<sup>295</sup>

The fusion of nationalism and feminism was by no means as straightforward or inevitable as Markievicz alluded. One cause or the other was, inevitably, prioritized and some tension existed between those who sought national freedom first and foremost and those who held women’s suffrage as the preeminent goal. Nevertheless, many Irish women continued to straddle the sometimes uneasy border between both nationalism and feminism, and the four autobiographies that are the focus of this thesis demonstrate an ideal that could be called ‘Nationalist feminism.’ While their primary preoccupation is national liberation, they repeatedly demonstrate a commitment to feminist ideals and a conviction that these ideals can be achieved only in a free Ireland.

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P H Pearse said  
that if it were not  
for the women,  
the fight could not have lasted so long,  
and that when the history  
of that week  
came to be written,  
the highest honour and credit  
should be given  
to the women,  
whose bravery,

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<sup>294</sup> Constance Markievicz, *Bean na hÉireann*, July 1909, quoted in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, “The Politics of Gender in the Irish Free State, 1922–1937,” *Women’s History Review* 20, no. 4 (September 2011): 569–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2011.599612>.

<sup>295</sup> Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality: Women, Power and Gender Ideology in the Irish Free State, 1922-1937* (Dublin; Chicago: Four Courts Press, 2019), 16.

heroism and  
devotion  
in the face of danger  
surpassed that of the women  
of Limerick in the days  
of Sarsfield.

In the constitution  
of the Irish Republic,  
women were on an equality  
with men.  
For the first time in history,  
indeed,  
a constitution had been written  
that incorporated  
the principle  
of equal suffrage.

Anna Rahilly,  
Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and  
Helena Molony  
head the women's roll of honour  
in the first years  
after the Rising,  
when they did more than most  
to tip the scales.  
In this period Irish women had  
the only chance  
they ever had  
to be important  
in the leadership  
of the nation.  
It lasted from the death  
of Pearse and Tom Clarke  
to the release  
of Michael Collins.

There were those who worked  
easily and naturally  
with women,  
in full trust  
and confidence:  
and then there were  
the 'mystery men'  
who only wanted us  
to do what we were told  
and ask no questions.  
But even the IRB depended on  
Cumann na mBan.  
They were only  
being childish.

It is my firm conviction  
that the public welfare can never be judged,  
or good decisions arrived at,  
except from the standpoint  
of an equal partnership  
between the sexes.  
Unfortunately,  
Cumann na mBan also  
allowed itself to be pushed aside  
when the time came to implement  
the ideals for which  
we had been fighting.

But why,  
oh why  
did Cumann na mBan  
let down the feminist cause  
when the war was over?  
It never occurred to me  
to doubt  
that the Republican government,  
when we put it in power,

would do justice  
to both sexes equally  
and, of course,  
to all of the people.

I had noticed that the present leaders  
were not over-eager  
to put women into places  
of honour or power,  
even though they had earned  
the right to both  
as well as the men had,  
having responded to  
every call made upon them  
throughout the struggle  
for freedom.

My luck was out in Dublin,  
I was not re-elected.  
I was in the same boat  
as the other women TDs  
who voted against the Treaty,  
Countess Markievicz,  
Mrs O'Callaghan,  
Miss Mary MacSwiney,  
Dr Ada English and  
Mrs Pearse.  
Well, we all paid  
for our temerity  
in voting as we did.  
We were all women  
who had worked  
and suffered  
for the freedom  
of our country.

Recognition of a British King

had hitherto been imposed on us  
by force,  
It was unthinkable  
that we should now  
accept him  
voluntarily.  
I wondered  
what had become  
of our rebels.

Things which they had condemned  
as wrong  
for W T Cosgrave's government to do  
became right  
for them.  
I had understood  
(perhaps foolishly)  
that the things which they,  
as the opposition,  
claimed were wrong  
would remain wrong.  
Instead, most of the things  
they had condemned,  
they adopted.

It is extraordinary  
the change that comes over men,  
or most men,  
when they get a little taste  
of power;  
they seem to become  
so intolerant.<sup>296</sup>

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The Proclamation read on the steps of the GPO in 1916, declared:

The Irish Republic is entitled to, and hereby claims, the allegiance of every Irishman and Irishwoman. The

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<sup>296</sup> Words from *Revolutionary Woman, Doing My Bit for Ireland and On Dangerous Ground*.

Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien Government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.<sup>297</sup>

This image of the Irish Republic, consisting of the entirety of Ireland, completely free from British rule, and guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities to all, including women, was in the minds of many of those who fought for this Republic in the years following the Rising. For many women who fought in the Rising, the Proclamation, with its address to “Irishmen and Irishwomen,” guarantee of universal suffrage, and promise to cherish “all the children of the nation equally,” was seen as a transformative document that assured not only national freedom, but also women’s freedom. Skinnider articulates this view when she declares that “in the constitution of the Irish Republic, women were on an equality with men. For the first time in history, indeed, a constitution had been written that incorporated the principle of equal suffrage.”<sup>298</sup>

However, the independence that was achieved following the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty was seen by some as a betrayal of this Republic. The key controversies which led to civil war were the status of the Irish Free State as a dominion of the British empire and the partition of the country. The status of women in the Free State, and its comparison to the status envisioned by many republican women based on the Proclamation, was, however, also a point of contention.

Valiulis argues that participating in the Rising and choosing to risk their lives led to women becoming radicalized and having “a growing sense of equality.” The unarmed nature of most women’s participation was, Valiulis contends, of little significance as “it is one thing to make sandwiches in the privacy of your own home; it is quite another to do it in a burning building.”<sup>299</sup> She argues that women who participated in the Rising and subsequent conflicts frequently attached great significance to the ideals of Easter Week and to the Proclamation which “promised equality in a society which exuded inequality,”<sup>300</sup> a stance which Ward concurs with as she says that the Proclamation and the equality it promised “was a watershed moment for those women who had worked for decades for a freedom that went beyond a simple break with

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<sup>297</sup> Copy of ‘The Proclamation of the Republic’, 1916, National Library of Ireland, Joseph McGarrity Papers, MS 17,544/4/14.

<sup>298</sup> Skinnider, 143.

<sup>299</sup> Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality*, 25.

<sup>300</sup> Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality*, 42.

British rule.”<sup>301</sup>

The equal status of women promised by the Proclamation did not, however, translate to the Free State. Many prominent women, including all six female TDs sitting in the Second Dáil, were anti-Treaty and they were frequently lambasted by their male colleagues who characterized their opposition as based on emotion and grief over their dead male relatives rather than on political principals or ideals. This was, Valiulis observes, then “expanded and applied to all women who were anti-Treaty and used as an excuse to keep all women out of the public sphere and in the home.”<sup>302</sup>

Clarke alludes to some of this rhetoric against women in the public sphere as she reflects on her choice to keep quiet about her influence in a policy change when her sisters condemned it. This was not, she says, for fear of criticism but rather to protect de Valera as “some time before, he had been sneered at as being under petticoat government, that Miss MacSwiney was running him. I did not want that sneer repeated, with just a change of petticoat.”<sup>303</sup>

The narrative around women during the Treaty debates and Civil War was frequently vitriolic, painting women as hysterical “furies” and all but blaming them for the war.<sup>304</sup> A result of this was what Valiulis calls “the triumph of domesticity,” a growing narrative among both pro- and anti-Treaty men that women “polluted the public sphere and needed to be returned to the home.”<sup>305</sup> Valiulis argues that this narrative of women in the Civil War led to a combining of patriarchal, women-blaming language with that of nationalism and contributed to the conservatism that would come to dominate Irish politics in the 20th century.

Mary McAuliffe has characterized those who became the key figures of Irish politics in the Free State and beyond as “the most conservative of revolutionaries.”<sup>306</sup> Focused on constructing a stable state, Ireland followed the often observed pattern of gender roles, disrupted and expanded in times of conflict and upheaval, being restricted and fervently enforced in the name of establishing normalcy in peace time. Furthermore, the Free State government aligned itself with the Catholic church which gained a growing power and influence in civil society and further

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<sup>301</sup> Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 391.

<sup>302</sup> Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality*, 42.

<sup>303</sup> Clarke, 288.

<sup>304</sup> Louise Ryan, “‘Furies’ and ‘Die-Hards’: Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Gender & History* 11, no. 2 (July 1999): 256–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00142>.

<sup>305</sup> Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, *The Making of Inequality*, 45.

<sup>306</sup> Mary McAuliffe, *Margaret Skinnider*, 78.

cemented these conservative, patriarchal values.

The early years of the Free State saw increasing limitations of women's rights, including the restriction of their right to serve on juries in 1924 and the Conditions of Employment Act 1936 which limited their rights to employment. These acts were hotly contested by many women including Clarke, whose arguments regarding the Conditions of Employment Bill raise an interesting image of her opinion of feminism and nationalism. Debating the Bill in the Dáil in 1935, she objected to criticism of her opposition as 'feminist' declaring that, while she had always been sympathetic to the feminist movement, she was "a Nationalist first" and clarified her argument saying:

My objection to this is on national grounds— not on the grounds of feminism. I base it on the fundamental objects laid down in the 1916 Proclamation. That proclamation gave to every citizen equal rights and equal opportunities, and it seems to me that if you legislate against one section of the community, if you are going to curtail them in the way they are to earn their living, where are the equal opportunities provided for in that proclamation? I cannot see where they are.<sup>307</sup>

In response to a further argument about "men minding the babies and keeping house" she declared:

My answer to that is that if men could do that job as well and as successfully as women, I do not see why they should not do it. It is most important work for the nation, though rather sneered at by men, because on that work depends what the individuals who will comprise the future nation are going to be. I do not think it would detract from their dignity in any way if they will do it as well as women.<sup>308</sup>

Clarke's positions and arguments regarding this bill could quite rightly be described as feminist in nature. Therefore, it is very telling that she rejected this characterization and chose instead to frame her arguments in nationalist terms. While this could in part have been motivated by a desire to legitimize her arguments in the eyes of male colleagues hostile to feminism, it also appears that she considered Nationalist thought to be inherently inclusive of these positions.

Clarke's opposition to the 1937 Constitution, recounted in her memoir, was similarly motivated primarily by Republican rather than feminist sentiments. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington had, in an inverse of Clarke, supported the Republican movement but was, first and foremost, a feminist and suffragette. She objected to the Constitution on the grounds of its curtailing of women's rights. Writing in *Prison Bars*, a monthly newspaper of the Women's Prisoners Defence League, in July 1937, she criticized both the Constitution and de Valera, tying her

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<sup>307</sup> Kathleen Clarke, Seanad Éireann debate - Wednesday, 11 Dec 1935, Vol. 20 No. 18, Conditions of Employment Bill, 1935-Committee, Houses of the Oireachtas, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/1935-12-11/11/>

<sup>308</sup> Kathleen Clarke, Seanad Éireann debate - Wednesday, 11 Dec 1935



condemnations firmly to the Rising. She argued that the Proclamation, which she considered the first Constitution, guaranteed “citizenship for women and equal rights and equal opportunities” while the 1937 Constitution contained “fascist proposals endangering [women’s] livelihood, cutting away their rights as human beings.” Highlighting then Taoiseach<sup>309</sup> de Valera’s position as the only one of the Rising commanders to refuse to allow women in his garrison, she accused him of having “a mawkish distrust of women” and of refusing “to restore 1916 Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for women.”<sup>310</sup>

Having heard Sheehy Skeffington's criticisms, Clarke determined to write her criticisms along the same lines. While she certainly doesn't seem to disagree with any of Sheehy Skeffington's feminist based criticism, the reason she gives for writing on these lines is not grounded in feminism so much as a desire to make her general opposition to the Constitution known but in a way that “would do less harm than the one [she] had intended to write.”<sup>311</sup>

Furthermore, objecting to being asked to withdraw from the Senate election in 1928 on the grounds that the Fianna Fáil party would not support two women, Clarke again framed her objection to this “very strange” and “very unfair” request on nationalist lines and referred directly to 1916:

I could see no reason for the Party refusing to support two women, when women had played such a big part in the fight for freedom. P H Pearse...said that if it were not for the women, the fight could not have lasted so long, and that when the history of that week came to be written, the highest honour and credit should be given to the women, whose bravery, heroism and devotion in the face of danger surpassed that of the women of Limerick in the days of Sarsfield.<sup>312</sup>

Her general dissatisfaction with the state of Irish politics and with the actions of de Valera in particular is also apparent in her recollection of an occasion in which she convinced de Valera not to resign from Fianna Fáil. Reflecting on this, Clarke concludes, “perhaps I gave him the line he was seeking, and if I could have seen into the future I would have let him go back to his teaching.”<sup>313</sup>

In 2016, the Countess Markievicz School published a collection of essays entitled *A Century of Progress? Irish Women Reflect*. These essays cover a wide array of historical and

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<sup>309</sup> The head of government in Ireland.

<sup>310</sup> Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *Prison Bars*, July 1937. Reprinted in Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner Her Memoirs and Political Writings* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2017), 341-2.

<sup>311</sup> Clarke, 302.

<sup>312</sup> Clarke, 292.

<sup>313</sup> Clarke, 264.

contemporary gender issues in Ireland ranging from the impacts of the Constitution to the legacy of the Magdalen Laundries to the experience of migrant domestic workers. In these essays, Irish women reflect on the “uneven progress - and lack of progress - that has been made in the hundred years since the Rising.”<sup>314</sup>

In her contribution to the volume, Marie O’Connor discusses the history of the practice of symphysiotomy in Ireland, which occurred predominantly in the 1940s-1960s but continued into the 1980s. Symphysiotomy is a highly controversial obstetric surgery, discouraged as early as 1799 in Paris, which involves cutting the pubic symphysis, the joint which connects the pelvic bones and allows them to spread in childbirth, in cases of obstructed labor. As O’Connor, explains, this procedure is fraught with risks: “Mothers frequently died from their genital wounds. Those who survived often suffered from walking difficulties and urinary incontinence, and many babies died.”<sup>315</sup> These operations were typically carried out without the consent or knowledge of the patient and O’Connor, herself a survivor of this surgery, describes the procedure viscerally, saying that women were “set upon by hospital staff, their legs splayed in stirrups, and operated upon, wide awake and often screaming.”<sup>316</sup>

The UN Human Rights Committee found in 2014 that “the practice of symphysiotomy constituted torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, and involuntary medical experimentation.”<sup>317</sup> However, the Irish state has continually ignored the Committee’s findings. While a compensation scheme was established, it was extremely restrictive, and attempts by survivors to seek justice have been repeatedly blocked.<sup>318</sup>

O’Connor highlights that the use of symphysiotomies in Ireland, as well as continued issues of “a wider culture of violence and mistreatment in maternity care,”<sup>319</sup> were deeply linked to the conservative, Catholic values that emerged in what Comerford terms the “counter revolution”

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<sup>314</sup> Catherine McGuinness, forward to Máire Meagher and Alan Hayes, eds., *A Century of Progress?: Irish Women Reflect* (Baldoyle, Dublin, Ireland: Arlen House, 2016), 11.

<sup>315</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” in Máire Meagher and Alan Hayes, *A Century of Progress?*, 162.

<sup>316</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” 166.

<sup>317</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” 169.

<sup>318</sup> Liz Dunphy, “Focus on Redress: Symphysiotomy, the ‘Mass Medical Experiment’ That Butchered Young Women,” *Irish Examiner*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/spotlight/arid-40324274.html>.

<sup>319</sup> Survivors of Symphysiotomy, “Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women: Mistreatment and Violence against Women In

Reproductive Healthcare during Childbirth,” United Nations Human Rights, 2019, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/SR/ReproductiveHealthCare/SurvivorsSymphysiotomy.pdf>

during the establishment of the Free State. This practice was not based on medical considerations, it was already outdated in favor of Cesarean sections, which were the norm in the 1930s. Rather, it was driven by religious convictions. The number of Cesarean sections that can be performed is limited and, therefore, women who underwent them may seek birth control or sterilization to prevent further pregnancies. Catholic teachings against contraception, which was illegal until 1980 in Ireland, led doctors to be hostile to Cesarean sections and to seek alternatives. “The real harvest,” one doctor insisted, “of symphysiotomy is reaped in subsequent deliveries.”<sup>320</sup>

O’Connor opens and closes her essay by considering what Constance Markievicz would have thought of the practice, arguing that she would have thought it “an exercise in male medical power over women’s childbearing, a product of patriarchy overlaid with misogyny, of clericalism interleaved with colonialism.”<sup>321</sup> She goes on to conclude, referring to enduring issues of consent and mistreatment in Irish obstetrics, that “one hundred years after the 1916 Rising, women’s lack of agency over where, how and with whom to give birth is greater than ever.”<sup>322</sup>

O’Connor’s presentation of symphysiotomies demonstrates how profoundly it, like many other gender-based issues, was influenced by the conservative and Catholic values enshrined in the early years of independence. Furthermore, her consideration of the controversy within the context of the Rising’s centenary and one of the women who participated it, highlights the far-reaching impacts of the period. In the concluding essay in the volume, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, granddaughter of Hanna, describes the Rising as a “tragedy,” not only due to the death of her grandfather and others during it, but also as she questions “what kind of a nation would we have should those leaders have survived? To my mind, almost certainly, women would have played a stronger role in shaping and running the emerging state.”<sup>323</sup>

The practice of symphysiotomies was far from the only scandal in Ireland in which the Catholic church was implicated. Others, such as the even more prominent and widespread Magdalen Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes, were also sites of often horrific abuse

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<sup>320</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” 167.

<sup>321</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” 175.

<sup>322</sup> Marie O’Connor, “Bodily Harm,” 175.

<sup>323</sup> Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, “Women’s Status in Ireland: Where are we 100 Years on?,” in Máire Meagher and Alan Hayes, *A Century of Progress?*, 392.

sanctioned by both state and church and, again, driven fundamentally by Catholic ideas of sexual morality.

While de Valera's attempts to enshrine the Catholic church as the state religion in the 1937 Constitution were shot down, the church was granted a "special position" and Joseph Lee argues that constitutional bans on divorce and contraception demonstrate "that the State considered it a duty to impose specifically Catholic doctrine on all citizens, irrespective of their personal convictions."<sup>324</sup>

Comerford's memoir reveals a deep dissatisfaction with the direction of religion in post-independence Ireland. Throughout her memoir, she refers often to Father Sweetman, a Benedictine monk who ran a Wexford school, Mount St. Benedict, at which Comerford worked. She heaps heavy praise on Sweetman, calling him "a man to whom the image of God in man was ever present" and considered him the most important among the group of clergy, both Catholic and non-Catholic, "who were ready to apply rather than conceal basic Christian principles in confrontation with the world." However, reflecting on these clergymen, she bitterly observes that "I know of none who survived the 1920s in Ireland."<sup>325</sup>

When Skinnider declares in her memoir in 1917 that, as a result of the Proclamation, "women were on an equality with men,"<sup>326</sup> it seems erroneous to describe her as hopeful about the potential future of women in an independent Ireland. Rather, she is certain that their equal status was already guaranteed and that all that was necessary to achieve it was the overthrow of British rule. The actions of Michael Mallin likely cemented this in her mind, as she used this as her argument against his reluctance to let a woman carry out a bombing attack on the Hotel Sherborne. While this bombing was never carried out due to her injuries, her argument prevailed and Mallin sanctioned her plan.

Connolly does not make a similar declaration regarding women's position in the coming Republic. However, her presentation of women throughout her memoir suggests that she held a similar view to Skinnider, that equality was already guaranteed. She frequently recounts the actions of women such as in her description of James Connolly's preparation for a raid on Liberty Hall during which he was accompanied by three women: Connolly, Constance

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<sup>324</sup> Joseph Lee, *Ireland, 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 203.

<sup>325</sup> Comerford, 74.

Markievicz, and Helena Molony. James's first response is to tell his daughter to "stay here, I'll need you," before tasking her with filling out mobilization orders for the Citizen Army.

Markievicz then expressed concern that she had no pistol with her:

"Never mind, Madame," said my father. "We'll give you one."  
"Give it to me now," she said. "So my mind will be easy."  
She was given a large Mauser pistol.<sup>327</sup>

After this, he tells Markievicz that they'll be ready for the police and Connolly recalls seeing "my father with his carbine laid along [the counter]; beside him Madame, and outside the counter was Miss Moloney [sic] taking the safety catch from off her automatic."<sup>328</sup> She later remarks that it was lucky for the Inspector that he chose not to begin a fight as "there were the best of shots present, with less than ten paces between him and them."<sup>329</sup>

The descriptions Connolly provides in this recollection of women taking up arms and, indeed, being extremely competent with them presents a definite challenge to the understanding of gender roles. However, Connolly presents it matter-of-factly, suggesting that the actions of Molony and Markievicz are nothing remarkable or out of the ordinary. Furthermore, it demonstrates James Connolly's comfortable attitude to working with and arming women. There are numerous other instances in which she adopts a similar matter-of-fact tone when describing women's actions which defy gender norms suggesting that, perhaps due to the influence of her father and of the women around her, the idea that women should be included on the same lines as men was unquestionable to her.

This is further suggested in her description of the inception of the Irish Volunteers whom she says, "invited the men and women of Ireland to join the Irish Volunteers, and pledge themselves "to maintain and secure the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland."<sup>330</sup>

This appears at first to be a factual inaccuracy. The Volunteers was and remained an all-male organization and the women who attended the inaugural meeting at Rotunda Rink in 1913 which Connolly describes were seated in a separate gallery. However, the Volunteers did specify that they envisaged work for women to do, albeit it in vague terms and certainly on the fringes of the movement. Cal McCarthy observed that many women later saw the women's gallery as "more of

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<sup>326</sup> Skinnder, 143.

<sup>327</sup> Connolly, 31.

<sup>328</sup> Connolly, 31.

<sup>329</sup> Connolly, 34.

<sup>330</sup> Connolly, xiv.

a gesture of inclusivity than an attempt at segregation” as many of the men were left standing outside the doors. Furthermore, Connolly is not alone in having a curious interpretation of this meeting, as McCarthy also relates that MJ Rafferty wrote that she “joined Cumann na mBan at the “Rink” in 1913.”<sup>331</sup> Cumann na mBan was not founded until 1914, however McCarthy argues that the fact Rafferty came to see having her name taken by Con Colbert at this meeting “as her initiation into Cumann na mBan, does suggest that the women present at Rotunda Rink were not entirely excluded from proceedings.”<sup>332</sup>

Connolly’s depiction of the all-male Volunteers inviting both men and women to join, suggests that she took a similar view of the Rotunda Rink meeting as Rafferty, interpreting their words on women not as vague lip-service but rather an active intent of inclusion of women in the nationalist fight.

Comerford expresses a similar conviction to Skinnider as she says that “it never occurred to me to doubt that the Republican government, when we put it in power, would do justice to both sexes equally and, of course, to all of the people.”<sup>333</sup>

However, Comerford, writing many decades later, had seen the direction being taken by the Ireland that emerged from the revolution. She reflects repeatedly throughout her memoir on issues of youth and aging, often presenting the young Máire of whom she writes as naive and idealistic regarding some of the political matters of the day. Describing the gathering of anti-Treaty forces in the Four Courts, she asserts that “we were all too young, too involved in the job in hand, to realize that as we reached the next and the next age groups, we too would fall apart,”<sup>334</sup> and recalls how “it was impossible for youth, my age group then” to think that Ireland’s request to be considered at the Peace Conference could be refused “when we believed that tyranny had been roundly defeated by great and generous powers like the USA, fighting for small nations. The experienced older men told us we were fools.”<sup>335</sup>

On another occasion she reflects on her harsh judgment of Daniel O’Connell and his “failure to get more than he did”:

I remember being so critical of the great man that I evaded the old servant and guide when he extended his

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<sup>331</sup> University College Dublin Archives, Eithne Coyle O’Donnell Papers, P61/4, quoted in Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (The Collins Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>332</sup> Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan*, 11.

<sup>333</sup> Comerford, 90.

<sup>334</sup> Comerford, 258.

<sup>335</sup> Comerford, 101-2.

hand towards the Liberator's chair, inviting me to sit for a moment in it. The feeling of detached superiority, as one who now knows better...is something I have seen on other young faces since, when they discuss the failures of our generation.<sup>336</sup>

Comerford's concern for the direction of the emergent Irish state, the "failures" of her generation and her perception of the betrayal of Easter Week is, like Clarke's, firmly rooted in her Republican beliefs. However, she repeatedly also demonstrates feminist sentiments and a concern for women's position in society.

Comerford acknowledges the transitory nature of the opening up of gender roles during conflict. Writing of the "women's role of honour" following the Rising, she says that "in this period Irish women had the only chance they ever had to be important in the leadership of the nation. It lasted from the death of Pearse and Tom Clarke to the release of Michael Collins from internment at Christmas 1916."<sup>337</sup> Clarke makes a similar observation regarding her work in the aftermath of the Rising as she recalls that the release of the Rising prisoners by December 1916 "concluded my direction of affairs along one line; the released men were ready to take up the work."<sup>338</sup>

While she does not express any annoyance at this fact, Clarke does demonstrate a concern for the inclusion of women in leadership positions. She was delighted by Markievicz's 1918 election as a Member of Parliament, not specifically for Markievicz but for what it meant for women: "at last, I thought, women are going to get recognition."<sup>339</sup> When Markievicz was later made Minister for Labour in 1919, Clarke was surprised "as I had noticed that the present leaders were not over-eager to put women into places of honour or power, even though they had earned the right to both as well as the men had, having responded to every call made upon them throughout the struggle for freedom."<sup>340</sup> Markievicz had, Clarke says, had to "bully them" to get the position, while she also indignantly notes that "with all the sacrifices women have made for freedom in this country, only one woman other than Madame Markievicz has been selected for honours by the Government. That was Mrs James [Josephine] MacNeill, who had been a member of Cumann na mBan."<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Comerford, 82.

<sup>337</sup> Comerford, 64.

<sup>338</sup> Clarke, 184.

<sup>339</sup> Clarke, 215.

<sup>340</sup> Clarke, 226.

<sup>341</sup> Clarke, 226-7.

Comerford resolutely states her feminist beliefs, saying that, “it is my firm conviction that the public welfare can never be judged, or good decisions arrived at, except from the standpoint of an equal partnership between the sexes.”<sup>342</sup> However, this is not a partnership that she has seen in the emergent Irish state. She laments the fact that Cumann na mBan “let down the feminist cause”<sup>343</sup> and “allowed itself to be pushed aside when the time came to implement the ideals for which we had been fighting,”<sup>344</sup> demonstrating that Comerford held gender equality to be among the ideals she fought for, but was one which was not implemented in the Free State. “I feel sorry,” she says, “that we let the women of Ireland down. God knows they had been steadfast.”<sup>345</sup>

## **6. Conclusion**

*A Century of Progress?* is introduced by *A Noble Call to the Irish People* from Constance Markievicz and Rosie Hackett, a written record of a short performance by Ann Louise Gilligan and Katherine Zappone taking on the roles of Hackett and Markievicz. In introducing the stories of these two women, Gilligan states:

Now, as you all know, story is above all rooted in memory. Memories of times past. But story also flowers, the best stories, into images of the possible, which call us, in our time, to reflect on how we live.<sup>346</sup>

The stories told in the four memoirs contain all the issues inherent in personal narratives. Memories cannot be extracted fully-formed and transmitted to paper, but are rather constructed and how much may be misrepresented or distorted either by deliberate intent or by failures of memory we can never know.

However, as this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, they, nonetheless, provide something of great value.

Throughout their memoirs, the writers are cognizant of their positions in defining and constructing the memory of the Rising and its participants. Popular narratives which center the executed men create an image of the Rising as a single event of blood sacrifice to secure freedom

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<sup>342</sup> Comerford, 35.

<sup>343</sup> Comerford, 90.

<sup>344</sup> Comerford, 35.

<sup>345</sup> Comerford, 90.

<sup>346</sup> Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan, “A Noble Call to the Irish People from Constance Markievicz and Rosie Hackett,” in Hayes and Meagher, *A Century of Progress?*, 28.



for Ireland. Reading the narratives of those who remained however, demonstrate that the meanings connected to the Rising developed and evolved over the following months and years. These meanings were often more multifaceted than the simple 'freedom for Ireland,' being firmly connected to a particular image of Irish freedom, and could go beyond even that, as the memoirs demonstrate the Rising to be held as a crucial moment not only in the history of the fight for Ireland's freedom, but also for women's freedom.

In conclusion, I hope that a key contribution of this thesis is in demonstrating the enormous value in reading memoirs and personal narratives such as those of Connolly, Clarke, Comerford, and Skinnider. While they may not be "history per se" and should be read critically, they can greatly enrich our understanding of history. In particular, reading the narratives of women, often engaged in activities outside of traditional, direct combat, can broaden both our understanding of the Rising and our ideas of what it means to be part of a revolution and what work is valued in times of conflict. In constructing and transmitting their memories, they offer us a window, imperfect though it may be, into their ideas, their values, and the worlds they inhabit.

The narratives the four women construct are Gilligan's "images of the possible" or Hershatter's "good-enough stories," stories that may not provide us with definitive, indisputable answers but ones which can lead us to challenge dominant narratives, not only of the Rising itself, but also of the multitude of issues addressed by the writers such as gender, conflict, nationalism and Irishness. In this way, reading these memoirs not only provides historical benefit, but can raise questions that remain relevant today.

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