Cumann na mBan: Navigating Feminism and Nationalism in Early 20th century Ireland

The socio-political history of Ireland in the early twentieth century is a tumultuous and complex maze of political and cultural factions and organizations, varying nationalist and feminist beliefs and ideals, and a majority opposition to British rule, with the goal of obtaining liberty through an Irish Free State. The role of nationalist women during this time period, was for decades, unknown and oftentimes completely ignored in historical research of the era, up until the past fifty years. In my research, I would like to explore how the members of Cumann na mBan, a women’s nationalist paramilitary organization, navigated the tensions between feminism and nationalism in early 20th century Ireland. In addition, why did the group ultimately choose to initially focus more on nationalist objectives rather than feminine ones? I would also like to focus on how the feminist ideals of some of the Cumann na mBan members fueled their nationalist views and how it shaped the groups’ role in Irish society. How did these feminist beliefs encourage their nationalistic views and vice versa? What did feminists who were not members of Cumann na mBan think about these women who were putting aside their feminist agenda in terms of nationalism? While I think that feminism and nationalism are two separate political movements, each one had to impact members differently, ultimately affecting the groups vision and purpose, as a whole. Not only are these questions imperative to Irish history in general, but they are essential to the story and cause of Irish nationalism, the
creation of the Irish Free State and the many women’s movements that followed, or were taking shape at the same time, worldwide.

Formed in 1914 as a women’s paramilitary organization, considered by some as an auxiliary group to the Irish Volunteer Army, Cumann na mBan’s stated purposes were to advance the cause of Irish liberty, to organize Irishwomen in the furtherance of this objective, to form a Defence of Ireland fund to raise funds for purchasing arms for Irishmen to use in the defence of Ireland.”¹ The members carried with them strong ideals, both nationalist and feminist, which impacted their individual political interests and decisions. Margaret Ward mentions, “Many Cumann na mBan members had also been leading suffragists, but in other organizations” before joining Cumann na mBan. ² While initially organized as a woman’s group that would help assist the Irish Volunteer Army in raising funds to procure weapons, their role in the nationalist movement became much more prominent over time as the nationalist movement progressed. Cal McCarthy points out that their initial agenda was “a little conservative for many of the feminists who may have sought to further their own agenda through membership of the new organization.”³ Their assimilation into the Irish Republican Army during the Easter Rising of 1916, along with the assistance they provided was imperative to the Republican cause. In the midst of the political upheaval following the Rising, many Republican men were imprisoned, murdered, or in hiding, being of little service to their cause. The women of Cumann na mBan organized fundraising activities such as concerts to help in

¹ Cal McCarthy. Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution, 2nd Ed. (Cork: Collins Press, 2007), 18
³ McCarthy, Cumann na mBan, 17.
buying arms for Republicans, trained in first aid, smuggled arms and reported on movements of the enemy, collect scrap for creating bombs, couriered messages through enemy territory, and provided food and shelter for “men on the run” as reported by Mollie Cunningham in her witness statement collected by the Bureau of Military History in 1951⁴.

Most, if not all, historiography on nationalist women, including those involved in Cumann na mBan, in Ireland during the early 20th century is relatively new. Margaret Ward’s 1989 groundbreaking book, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, laid the historiographical groundwork for other historians interested in researching Irish nationalist women.⁵ Ward points out for the first time that women faced another dimension of hardship when joining the ranks of a particular movement, whether it be feminist or nationalist or a combination of both if they were members of Cumann na mBan, citing “the determined struggles that were waged by women on their own behalf, both by women within the nationalist movement and by those critical feminists who remained on the outside.”⁶ Ward’s work is important, not only because it is the first of its kind to really focus on women and their role in the nationalist movement, but also because she understands and explains the division between feminist and nationalist women, as a result of women’s participation in the nationalist cause. In Senia Paseta’s dissertation turned book, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900-1918*, she focuses on the topic of feminism and what it meant for women to be political during this time.

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⁶ Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 3
period and how their roles in nationalist groups were often subordinate to those of men. In addition to Paseta’s work, Beth McKillen’s journal articles, also focus on the feminist-nationalist movement and the effects each ideology had on the other. Other notable research includes collections of biographies and oral histories by Sinead McCoole and Liz Gilis, which give us insight into the everyday women often forgotten in this struggle for nationalism, feminism and independence. Without these, we would only have insight into prominent figures in the nationalist movement, such as Constance Markievicz and Maud Gonne. Ann Matthews also provides a comprehensive study of nationalist women’s organizations, in her book Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922, from the Ladies Land League through Cumann na mBan, focusing on their role in politics and the contributions they made to their respective causes. In 2007, Cal McCarthy was the first author to focus solely on Cumann na mBan as an independent organization, his work being considered the most comprehensive to date on the group.

Historians have devoted a great amount of time and research to women involved in the cause for Irish nationalism, but most have overlooked the women of Cumann na mBan and the political tensions members were forced to navigate when forming a new nationalist organization. While all mention Cumann na mBan and their obvious involvement in the feminist and nationalist movements, none of them exclusively focus on this group and the

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conflicting ideologies held by many of its members. In my research, I would like to focus on how the women of Cumann na mBan were able to put aside their strong individual beliefs and successfully navigate the tension between their feminist and nationalist ideologies in order to become a strong, united front for the nationalist movement in Ireland in the early 20th century.

I plan use primary witness statements from members Cumann na mBan and the Irish Republican Army as the main source of information for my research. Provided by the Irish Bureau of Military History, these statements are imperative to the goings on of both nationalist men and women of the time. These statements also offer insight into how women actually felt and handled the delicate balance and tension between feminist and nationalist views. In her witness statement, Maeve MacGarry talks candidly of the heavy involvement her mother had, first in the suffragette movement and then the nationalist movement, both of which Maeve herself was also active in.13 These firsthand accounts are imperative to understanding the role these women played in both the feminist and nationalist movements of the time. In addition, the use of Republican newspapers such as the *Irish Independent*, *Irish Volunteer* and *An Phoblacht*, as well as suffragist papers such as the *Irish Citizen* and *Bean na hÉireann*, will be helpful in providing insight into the nationalist and feminist movements during these years. Oral histories collected by Sinead McCoole, memoirs, biographies and additional primary and secondary sources, will also be useful in helping me further investigate my research questions.

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My research, focusing on how the women of Cumann na mBan navigated internal tension dealing with feminism and nationalism within the organization, will attempt to shed light on the plight of women’s nationalist organizations worldwide. Women who support nationalist causes are, often, forced to push aside their feminist agenda to support male-dominated nationalist movements in the hope that their feminist ideals will be realized once nationalism is achieved. How were the women of Cumann na mBan able to successfully do this without cause complete collapse of their organization? How were they able to use their nationalist platform to later push their feminist agenda upon male members of the nationalist movement? They faced many obstacles, particularly from women outside of Cumann na mBan who felt that their group was nothing but a subordinate to the entirely male Irish Volunteer Army. My research will attempt to answer these questions dealing not only with the women of Cumann na mBan, but with the hope of also shedding insight into the inner workings of other women’s nationalist organizations of the past and present.

While historians have made great strides in recent years in researching, documenting and bringing to life the role the women of Cumann na mBan played in the changing Irish socio-political climate in the early 20th century, my research will focus on how they dealt with internal nationalist and feminist tension and were able to persevere to help successfully further both of these movements. Using witness statements, memoirs, biographies, newspapers from the period and other primary and secondary sources, I feel I will be able to properly document how the women of Cumann na mBan were able to hold onto their strong individual ideologies while still working together to further both the feminist and nationalist movements in Ireland during the early 20th century.
Bibliography

**Primary Sources**


*Bean na hEireann*, 1908-1911.


**Secondary Sources**


