

Irish Nationalist Women 1900-1918

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W. B. Yeats's famous poem, 'Easter 1916', is an ambivalent celebration of the new pantheon of heroes created when, through the means of a failed nationalist rebellion in Dublin, 'a terrible beauty is born'. The final lines commemorate four men ('MacDonagh and MacBride / and Connolly and Pearse'), but much of the poem's emotional heft come from its treatment of two unnamed but instantly recognizable women: Constance Markievicz and Maud Gonne. Yeats laments that Markievicz, who was second in command at St. Stephen's Green during the rebellion, had spent 'her nights in argument / until her voice grew shrill', while the reference to his beloved Maud Gonne is through the 'bitter wrong' done to her by her husband, John MacBride. Historians of this period have often followed Yeats's lead. Although women such as Gonne and Markievicz are too compelling and too obviously central to be ignored, when it comes time to 'write it out in verse' or analyze historical cause and effect, the men are alone at center stage.

In *Irish Nationalist Women 1900–1918*, Senia Pašeta prioritizes the women, and in so doing puts forward re-interpretations of some of the most crucial developments of this era in Irish nationalist history. The Proclamation of the Irish Republic issued in 1916 asserted the full equality of men and women. The subsequent Irish state's failure to achieve that goal has been often documented (and lamented). Pašeta explains how this extraordinary statement came to be in the document at all, two years before Irish and British women were granted the vote and in the context of a nationalist movement not particularly known for its feminism. This is a compelling and beautifully written volume that does full justice to a remarkable generation of activists, demonstrating, in the process, how much 'women's history' has to tell us about key social and political questions.

Irish Nationalist Women thoroughly discusses all of the main suffrage and nationalist organizations, including the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Inghinidhe na hÉireann, the Irish National Aid Association and Volunteer Dependants' Fund, and, of course, Cumann na mBan. But individual women rather than organizations drive this story. Pašeta follows the careers of leading women such as Maud Gonne, Constance Markievicz, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Helena Molony, and Jennie Wyse Power, plus a full cast of supporting characters, through shifting alliances, changing ideologies, and tumultuous events. These women also participated in mixed-sex organizations, and Pašeta follows them there, too, providing a rich

picture of the larger scenes in which nationalism and feminism were developed in Ireland.

The events of early 20th-century Ireland have been remembered and commemorated in numerous forms: indeed, certain events, such as the 1916 rebellion, were designed to become foundational myths. Pašeta embraces this deep archive of contemporary and retrospective accounts, illustrating in particular what a treasure trove the Bureau of Military History witness statements are for historians of women. Now available digitally, these testimonies require careful handling, but they provide unparalleled access to the memories and reflections of politically engaged women. Pašeta is above all attentive to mythologizing. She wades through multiple accounts of key moments, gleaning valuable information about individual preoccupations and the evolution of different strains of nationalist memory along the way. Cumann na mBan, often remembered as a purely republican organization, was far more ideologically diverse at its founding than later memories would allow, for example. Its founding has been put at different dates in late 1913 and early 1914 and described in strikingly different ways by different women, some of whom only joined the organization after 1916. Pašeta guides the reader through this welter of memory: the women who joined after 1916, for example, saw the organization as essentially republican and hence emphasized the role of advanced nationalist women in their accounts. She also teases out the key tensions revealed by contradictions in accounts. Was Cumann na mBan, for example, the unofficial female auxiliary to the Volunteers, or did they occupy some other position? Pašeta avoids offering an easy answer here, instead letting the wealth of source material serve as testimony to the importance of this fraught question. Cumann na mBan served different functions at different moments, and its shape changed depending on the perspective of the observer; it was a mutable organization formed in an unstable context, and we should not seek to oversimplify its complex reality. The approach is repeated throughout *Irish Nationalist Women*, and the result is a deeply researched, authoritative account.

Pašeta casts an equally appraising eye over the assumptions that have grown up in the historiography. The story of female activism in the early 20th century is often told in a somewhat defeatist way: despite the great achievement of winning the vote, women in Ireland (and elsewhere, of course) did not ultimately remake the gender hierarchies of their societies. In the Irish case particularly, the Irish state's deepening gender conservatism and conflicts between female activists have dominated the historiographical landscape. *Irish Nationalist Women* revises this standard story in several important ways.

Should Irish nationalist feminists prioritize independence for Ireland or votes for women? This was a central question of the era, but Pašeta convincingly argues that its divisiveness has been overstated. In the 1980s, Margaret Ward's landmark *Unmanageable Revolutionaries* (1) and work by Beth McKillen portrayed an irreconcilable conflict between nationalism and the women's suffrage movement, with both men and women divided over whether women's emancipation should be postponed while Irish independence was pursued. More recent work, by Louise Ryan, Cliona Murphy, Maria Luddy, and others, has, Pašeta acknowledges, done much to move the debate beyond this somewhat reductive question. In particular, they have brought to light the complexity of both feminism and nationalism in this era, highlighting the fact that Irish feminism encompassed many serious issues beyond the national question. But it remains the case that nationalism dominates the study of early twentieth century Irish history, a trend that is only likely to intensify as we move into the 'decade of centenaries'.

Pašeta grapples head-on with the intersection of nationalism and feminism, and what she finds is that the network of solidarity built by female activists was nearly always stronger than either dogma. *Irish Nationalist Women* patiently builds up evidence of women's relationships over time and across many sorts of division. The Ladies' Dinner Committee, for example, an effort to feed Dublin schoolchildren, brought together women from the Irish Women's Franchise League and Inghinidhe na hÉireann, despite the strong words exchanged between the two organizations over whether to subordinate women's emancipation to national liberation. Such co-operation was reprised on a larger scale from 1918 on issues of public health. Moreover, Pašeta argues convincingly that participation in the women's suffrage movement had helped to politicize republican women, 'notwithstanding the very public but also rather misleading quarrels which had occurred between them' (p. 228). All this is a welcome corrective to the tired trope of competition and in-

fighting in female relationships; it is also a reminder of the need to balance analysis of rhetoric with attention to social relationships and organizational history.

Feminist movements throughout the 20th century have been characterized by a tension between seeking full equality with men, on the one hand, and emphasizing the specific, even essentialist, value of women and femininity, on the other. Although not necessarily in conflict, the two frameworks can point in different directions: in early 20th-century terms, should women's suffrage be a step toward an egalitarian politics, or a mode of inserting a feminine, maternal sensibility into the public sphere? *Irish Nationalist Women* is notable for its nuanced, sympathetic treatment of women espousing views across this spectrum. Characteristically, Pašeta refuses to dismiss food preparation, nursing, and the care of children as lesser tasks merely because they are so thoroughly identified with women, then and now. Maud Gonne, for example, viewed the 'nurturing and teaching of children ... as important activities in their own right and not merely as the means to a more radical end', as scholars such as Karen Steele have suggested (p. 115).

At times there's almost an air of debunking. The uprising that began on Easter Monday 1916 involved militant nationalist men and women, who seized locations around Dublin and held them against British forces for a brief, destructive week. Pašeta sharply challenges the entrenched notion that women had to force their way into participation in the famous revolt and that, once there, their participation was nothing more than a rehearsal of standard gender roles. Instead, Pašeta documents a range of roles undertaken by women, from acquiring and preparing food to running messages across the city, and finds little bitterness at being excluded from the business of shooting itself. They were welcomed at nearly all rebel locations (Markievicz, famously, as a leader at St. Stephen's Green): de Valera's rejection of women at Boland's Mill was exceptional rather than typical. Simply through their presence, the women of 1916 challenged gender norms that would have confined them to the home, and Pašeta makes an impassioned case not to overlook this radicalism simply because of the paucity of female combatants. Here again she emphasizes the importance of food provision, a crucial task for any military force and particularly one trying to hold besieged positions. The lack of preparations made in this connection before the Rising 'suggests not that such considerations were trivial but that the rebels' plans were seriously and fundamentally deficient and, perhaps, that they did not in fact expect to hold out for long at all' (p. 179). Taking women's work and women's words seriously can lead to new insights about even much-studied military engagements, Pašeta suggests.

Irish Nationalist Women restores the decisive role of women to other important episodes in early 20th-century Irish history. Because of his fame, Yeats often overshadows the story of the founding of an Irish national theater. That story is retold here with the Inghinidhe at the center, which is a revelation. The complex play of politics, propaganda, publicity, and art in this volatile scene is captured vividly, and this chapter especially is likely to be very useful to literary scholars as well as historians.

Even more revelatory is Pašeta's account of the fall of the Irish Parliamentary Party. Not only did the party 'discourage interested women, it positively set out to alienate them' (p. 64). Women were kept to strictly subordinate roles in the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a religious organization aligned with the Parliamentary Party and its constitutional nationalist approach. Nearly all Irish branches of the United Irish League were closed to women (though the British branches were more open). Irish suffragettes pushed the party to take action on women's suffrage. In a highly publicized confrontation, all but two women (guests of the mayor) were forcibly excluded from the party's annual convention in April 1912. And even pro-suffrage Irish MPs voted against suffrage at Westminster when it seemed to imperil the party's strategy to pass a Home Rule Bill. This stance compounded the problem created by the party's decision not to cultivate the organization of women, as nearly all other major parties in the United Kingdom were doing at this time. This unusual reluctance came home to roost in 1918, when the party was woefully behind both Unionists and Sinn Féin in terms of seeking the female vote. Clearly, the decline of the Irish Parliamentary Party had many causes, but its refusal to cultivate a female base must now be included in any discussion of its demise.

Irish Nationalist Women ends in 1918, with the eclipse of the Irish Parliamentary Party by Sinn Féin and the winning of the vote for women over 30. Acknowledging that this departs from standard Irish periodization,

Pašeta argues that these years nevertheless constitute ‘a period in which women built the foundations for the liberation of their sex and their country, and in which their investment in this project appeared to have paid dividends before disillusionment rapidly set in’ (p. 16). Irish nationalist women certainly had plenty of reason for disillusionment after 1918, as the brief epilogue outlines. Most notable is the 1937 constitution, drafted under de Valera, which seemed to undo the Proclamation’s commitment to equality and institute instead a conservative gender essentialism that contributed to pushing women out of paid employment as well as out of politics. Was 1900–18 really a golden age, then, not to be repeated for decades at least? What would Pašeta’s methodology yield if applied systematically to post-1918 Irish women’s political activity? Irish Nationalist Women has opened a rich field of inquiry, and one worth pursuing into the less celebrated terrain of post-independence Ireland.

Notes

1. Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (London, 1989). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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