



Pittsburgh 1916 Easter Rising Committee, LLC
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Eirí Amach na Cásca (Part 4)

by Mike McCormack

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The following is abridged from Mr. McCormack's book, "The Road to Rebellion.

As the American-Irish and their Irish-American sons and daughters coalesced into a wage-earning community of Diaporadoes in support of Irish freedom, the rise of nationalist sympathy had already begun in Ireland with the formation of patriotic groups emboldened by the Gaelic Revival. Significantly, despite the subordinate status of women in the British Empire, Irish women began to take a substantial role in national affairs as members of the **Irish Literary Society** (1892) and the **Gaelic League** (1893). On Easter Sunday 1900, 15 women met in the **Celtic Literary Society** clubrooms to present a blackthorn stick to Arthur Griffith for defending the outspoken patriot, Maud Gonne, from a maligning editorial. The meeting turned to planning a '*Patriotic Children's Treat*' to reward children who would boycott the children's picnic in Phoenix Park planned to celebrate Queen Victoria's April visit. More than 50 women enlisted on the committee which funded and sponsored a historic event with 30,000 children parading to an alternate picnic punctuated by anti-British speeches. James Connolly called it '*the first political parade of the coming generation. It was a great sight to see the little rebels taking possession of the city, a sight more promising for the future of the country than any we can remember!*' The funds left over were used to start **Inghinidhe na hÉireann** (in-EEN-ie na HAIR-inn) or Daughters of Erin – with Maud as President, to encourage all things Irish and boycott all things British. Their feelings were expressed in their newspaper **Bean na h'Éireann** (woman of Ireland) edited by Helena Molony and advocating militancy, separatism and feminism. They also produced patriotic plays as part of a **National Theater Society** which had been founded by Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats in 1898.

On 25 November 1913, the **Irish Volunteers** were formed at Dublin's Rotunda to work for Irish independence. A few months later a group of women met in Wynn's Hotel, Dublin, to discuss forming an organization of women to work in conjunction with the Volunteers. On April 2, 1914, **Cumann na mBan** (Council of Women) was launched in the Pillar Room of the Mansion House. Branches were formed throughout the country and were directed by a Provisional Committee. The first group, named the **Ard Chraobh** (High Branch), held their meetings in Brunswick Street. They absorbed Inghinidhe and announced to detractors that they were not the handmaidens nor camp followers of the Volunteers – *we are their allies!* Their constitution stated they were to *advance the cause of Irish liberty, to organize Irishwomen in the furtherance of this object, to assist in arming and equipping a body of Irish men for the defense of Ireland and to form a fund for these purposes to be called 'The Defense of Ireland Fund.* The fund helped purchase the arms smuggled into Howth Harbor which members aided in hiding. Its recruits were white-collar workers, professional and working-class women. In September 1914, the Irish Volunteers split over John Redmond's appeal for its members to enlist in the British Army. The majority of Cumann na mBan members supported the 2,000 men who rejected this call and who retained the original name, the Irish Volunteers.



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On 24 April 1916, when the Military Council of the IRB launched the Easter Rising, it brought Cumann na mBan, along with the Irish Volunteers, Irish Citizen Army, Hibernian Rifles and Fianna Eireann into the 'Army of the Irish Republic'. Patrick Pearse was appointed overall Commandant-General and James Connolly Commandant of the Dublin Battalion. On the day of the Rising, Cumann na mBan members entered the General Post Office on O'Connell Street with their male compatriots. Winifred Carney arrived armed with both a Webley revolver and a typewriter. By nightfall, women insurgents were in all the rebel strongholds throughout the city except Boland's Mill and the South Dublin Union under Éamon de Valera and Eamonn Ceannt. The women worked as Red Cross nurses, couriers, procured rations, gathered intelligence on scouting expeditions, carried despatches and transferred arms and munitions between arms, dumps across the city and insurgent strongholds. Constance Markievicz, armed with a pistol, shot a policeman as they took control of St Stephen's Green. Later, along with other female fighters, she carried out sniper attacks on British troops in the city center. She suggested that they bomb the Shelbourne Hotel, but before they could, British troops entered the building by the Kildare street door. At dawn the British opened fire from the hotel on the Green forcing the Irish to retreat. Markievicz, Mary Hyland and Lily Kempson were part of a force of twelve who raided Trinity College and found fifty rifles; but by that time the Green garrison had retreated to the smaller, but stronger, College of Surgeons. Helena Moloney was among the soldiers who attacked Dublin Castle, where she worked with the wounded. A number of Cumann na mBan members died in the Rising.

At the time of surrender, Pearse insisted that the women leave the GPO saying, *“when the history of this fight will be written, the foremost page in the annals should be given to the women of Dublin who had taken their place in the fight for the establishment of the republic”*. He told them that their presence had inspired the men, *“whose heroism, wonderful though it was, paled before the devotion and duty of the women of Cumann na mBan”* and he prayed God would give them the strength to *“carry on the fight”*. Reluctantly they left except for Julia Grennan who cared for Joe Plunkett, Winifred Carney who tended the wounded James Connolly and Elizabeth O'Farrell who would accompany Pearse to his surrender and carry his cease fire order to the outlying posts. More than 70 women were arrested after the Rising and many of them were imprisoned in Kilmainham Jail; all but 12 had been released by 8 May 1916. The 12 remaining were released by July, 1917. Their release was not the end of their service, for they were to be a significant force in the coming War of Independence.

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