

Women of the Rising



Cumann na mBan members were often the unsung heroes of the Rising. County archivist **Grainne Doran** looks at some of the Wexford women who took part

THE Cumann na mBan organisation (the Irishwomen's Council) disbanded for a time after the Easter Rising, but started to harness support and membership grew towards the end of 1917.

Members participated in propagandist activities in helping to raise funds for prisoners' dependants and were also involved in collecting and hiding arms and ammunition.

The inaugural meeting of the organisation took place on April 2, 1914 in Wynn's Hotel, Dublin.

Established in response to the political climate of the time, its aims included the advance of the cause of Irish liberty and the provision of assistance in arming and equipping a body of Irishmen for the defence of Ireland.

The Irish Volunteers had been founded in Dublin the previous November as a direct response to the formation of the mobilisation of Ulster unionist opposition to Home Rule in the form of the Ulster Volunteers. A branch of the Irish Volunteers was established in Enniscorthy in December 1913 and thereafter throughout the county. The Volunteer units trained, drilled and studied to acquire military knowledge in preparation for an armed rising.

Cumann na mBan membership was open to women of Irish birth or descent to 'advance the cause of Irish liberty'. A local branch was founded in Enniscorthy in 1914 by Mrs Jennie Wyse Power and Maire Moran, and it is claimed that this first meeting boasted 100 members. A branch was established in Ferns the following year.

Although a distinctly separate organisation from the Irish Volunteers and seen by some as an independent body, it served as an auxiliary to the Volunteers in 1916, summed up by Min Ryan's observation in her witness statement, that 'the fact of the matter was that our activities consisted of service to the Volunteers'.

The formative years of the Cumann na mBan organisation in the county are sparsely documented, and the main reliance is on information given in witness statements by members.

It would appear that in the lead up to the Rising, the main activities included the organisation of first aid lectures and drill instruction in addition to making first aid outfits and bandages, gathering and storing arms for the Volunteers, carrying dispatches, and fundraising activities.

Some Cumann na mBan members carried dispatches around the country for the various Volunteer battalions as it was believed that the RIC and the British army would not search women so readily.

Michael O'Hanrahan's sister Eily arrived in Enniscorthy on Holy Thursday with a written order from Pearse to Seamus Doyle containing instructions and a call to arms - an order which was countermanded by Eoin McNeill within the hour.

Another dispatch from Pearse was brought to Seamus Doyle by Jenny Wyse Power on Easter Monday stating that the Rising was to happen. Maire Deegan from Brideswell, near Askamore was a member of the central branch of Cumann na mBan. On Easter Monday, she cycled to Dublin from Brideswell with a dispatch which she had hidden in her hair.

THE town of Enniscorthy was taken over by the Volunteers on Thursday, April 27, 1916 when the rebels marched with weapons from Keegan's house under the command of Peter Paul Galligan and established their HQ in the Athenaeum, declaring a Republic.

The tricolour was hoisted over the building by Cumann na mBan members Una Brennan, Marion Stokes and Gretta Comerford and a salute was given by a firing party under Galligan's command. An emergency hospital and a kitchen were set up in the Athenaeum by Cumann na mBan under the command of Mary White and Una Brennan.

The duties of the women during Easter Week were varied as outlined in some of the pension application files (Military Archives, Dublin) - attending the wounded; cooking; management of supplies; making beds for Volunteers; carrying and delivering dispatches; making stretchers and bandages; arranging hospital beds; manufacture of munitions; making bandages and first aid outfits; carrying arms and ammunition.



County Wexford members of Cumann na mBan at first aid training.

Margaret-Ann White, Cumann na mBan member, Wexford town. Reproduced by kind permission of Veronica White. All images from the 1916 collection at Wexford County Archive.

Rising

They were also active in commandeering food and supplies from local businesses while some of the food preparation was undertaken in the private houses of some Cumann na mBan members. Sighle Moran's house was used as a rest centre and Mrs de Lacy's house was used as an outpost and food depot.

It is very difficult to gauge the number of Cumann na mBan members who were actively involved during Easter Week 1916 in Enniscorthy, and research is still very much in the formative stages.

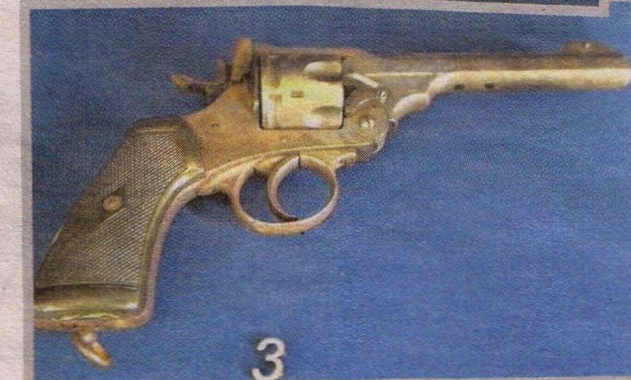
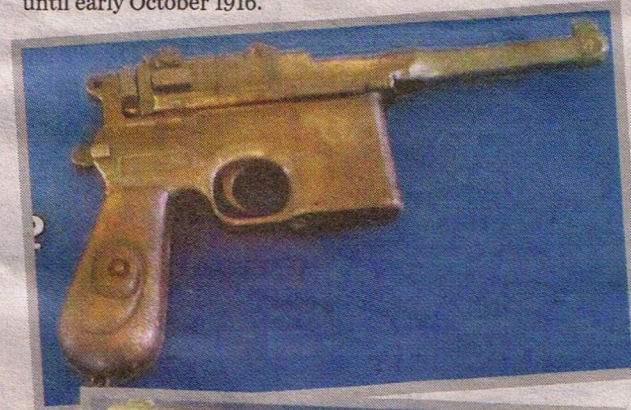
One member, Elizabeth O'Brien (nee Cullen) claims that there were about 70 or 80 other women working in the Athenaeum while she was there during Easter Week. A total of 33 women who claimed to have participated in the Rising in Enniscorthy were awarded military service pensions in 1934, while six other women were refused. It should be noted that women that were not affiliated to any particular organisation also helped out during Easter week, and remain undocumented as a result.

Maire Fitzpatrick (nee Moran), in her witness statement, mentions the involvement of her entire family in the struggle for national independence, including her three sisters, Sighle, Biddy and Kathleen who were active Cumann na mBan members.

Other family contributions included Ellen and Teresa Keegan, and Min, Kate, Nell and Phyllis Ryan. The military pensions' files are invaluable in identifying some of the rank and file members of Cumann na mBan who might otherwise have gone unrecorded.

In the aftermath of the surrender of the Volunteers and their subsequent arrest in early May 1916, the majority of Cumann na mBan members avoided imprisonment.

Two prominent members however were arrested and detained - Kathleen Browne, from Rathronan Castle and Nell Ryan, from Tomcoole, Taghmon were imprisoned in Waterford Jail and subsequently detained in Richmond Barracks, Kilmainham Jail and Mountjoy prison. Kathleen was released in early June 1916 while Nell was deported to Lewes Prison in June and wasn't released until early October 1916.



These pistols are among the Wexford Cumann na mBan weaponry that survives (from top): a Mauser used in 1916; a Spanish Astra; and a Webley & Scott revolver.