Subverting the Empire: Irish Nationalists and British Intelligence, 1916-1922

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This paper has two sections. The first is an overview of women’s participation in the 1916 rising and aftermath, and a case study of Kathleen Daly Clarke, widow of Proclamation signatory Tom Clarke, who played a crucial role in maintaining republicanism after the Easter Rising. The second is a very brief tour through intelligence dossiers Dublin Castle collected on Irish women in the years between the Easter Rising and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. These dossiers indicate a tremendous official ignorance of the part that women played in undermining British government in Ireland.

Intelligence reports generated by Dublin Castle indicate that the British were aware that women took an active role in subversive activities in Ireland. Officers greatly underestimated the scope and extent of women’s roles, however: of the approximately 440 individuals under surveillance between the late nineteenth century and 1922, only thirty were women. Dublin Castle was especially concerned with civil servants who belonged to, or were associated with those who belonged to, nationalist organizations.

One such organization was Cumann na mBan, formed in 1914 by a group of women whose husbands, brothers, or fathers were already involved in the Irish Volunteers. The founding members conceptualized their organization as an extension of women’s traditional roles as homemakers and caretakers. Their most important goal was raising money to provide uniforms and arms for the Irish Volunteers, though the organization did offer lectures, first aid classes, signaling and shooting practice, and instructions on how to clean and load rifles and small arms. They were more radical than the Irish Volunteers: there were no constitutional undertones in Cumann na mBan as there had been in the Volunteers before the group split.
About ninety women participated in the Easter Rising, two-thirds as members of Cumann na mBan, and the remainder as soldiers in the Irish Citizen’s Army.\(^1\) Seventy seven of the 3000 prisoners were women, and two women were killed in action.\(^2\) Women of Cumann na mBan were present at every republican garrison of Dublin during Easter Week, with the exception of the one that Eamon De Valera commanded at Boland’s Mill.

After the Rising, Cumann na mBan flourished: there were 63 branches in October of 1914, 100 in 1917, 600 in 1918, and nearly 800 by 1921.\(^3\) The membership suffered a gradual loss beginning in the mid-1920s, however, after the establishment of the Free State. Many left to join Eamon de Valera’s new party, Fianna Fáil, and as the IRA’s activities gradually shifted to England, Cumann na mBan disbanded completely.\(^4\)

The intelligence dossiers on subversive women date primarily from 1917 and after. This suggests that British officials were caught off-guard by the extent of women’s participation in the Rising. Newspapers, such as *The Times* and the *Freeman’s Journal*, devoted very little space to the Rising, and even less to women’s participation in it. Both papers, however, report that women were armed insurgents as well as nurses and messengers.

*The Times*’s correspondent saw that:

> There are a conspicuous number of women fighting with the rebels, and some have been shot and some captured. I saw a number of women marching into Dublin on Sunday last. Some of them had naval revolvers strapped round them. They were wearing the dark green uniform similar to that of the male insurgents and slouch hats. . . . I believe they have had training with the men, for they do not lack a certain discipline and organization. There have been cases of military officers being shot from behind by women.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 119, 95, 131, 156.

\(^4\) Ibid.

\(^5\) *The Times*, 1May 1916.
The *Freeman’s Journal* described the “very prominent part taken [in the Rebellion] by Irish women and girls.” Women saw combat, possessing a “cool and reckless courage, unsurpassed by any man.” They also served as snipers and guards, relieving tired Irish Volunteers, and women “were in the firing line from the first to the last day of the rebellion.”

Republican leaders deliberately used the British government’s blindness to women’s activities in the months leading up to Easter 1916. They selected Kathleen Clarke as custodian of its plans and names of secondary and tertiary leaders throughout the country in case the entire Military Council of the IRB should be arrested. Furthermore, within a week of the Rising, she created the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund with money that Tom Clarke had entrusted to her. The organization was staffed primarily by women of Cumann na mBan.

Clarke thought Irish women preserved both the momentum of republicanism and order in the country. The IRB’s decision to entrust to her its decisions and the names of leaders throughout the country was critical to her success. “It was to my mind great foresight on the part of the IRB to have done this, as I was in a position after the Rising, when even all the key men whose names I had were arrested, of knowing where to take hold and keep things going until the general release of the prisoners.” Clarke credits the women of Cumann na mBan with maintaining order in the country after the Rising: “the action of Cumann na mBan in Dublin and all over the country, when they took up the care and maintenance of the dependents of those dead or imprisoned . . . did more to steady the country than anything else.” Clarke realized that without the efforts of the women of Cumann na mBan, the Rising would have been for nothing. She told them that “There is plenty of work to be done. . . . Our men are nearly all in prison,

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6 *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 May 1916.
7 Clarke, *Revolutionary Woman*, 61.
some are dead, and it is up to us to carry on their work, as well as caring for their dependents. . .

Let us show our enemy what the women can do.”

What the women did, and what “the enemy” noticed and recorded, were different. There is no dossier on Kathleen Clarke, for example. She managed successfully to operate under official radar. The government certainly understood that Cumann na mBann was a dangerous organization, and after 1916, membership in Sinn Féin, Cumann na mBann, and the Irish Volunteers was enough to cost civil servants their jobs. In November 1917, Sergeant Ahern of the Dublin Metropolitan Police reported that Dorothy Delaney, her sister, and members of Cumann na mBan marched at the funeral of Thomas Ashe, and Delaney “wore a large black band on her arm.”

She regularly held Sinn Féin meetings in her home, she wore Sinn Féin colors, and according to Sgt. Ahern, “there is no doubt whatever, but she holds very strong political views.” Written on the margin by an unknown person is the statement, “This is hardly the type of lady to be employed by a gov’t department!”

Associations alone, especially for women, were sufficient to arouse official suspicion. H. B. Lenthall, an official in Nenagh, had reservations about Mary Ryan, a clerk in the district. She first came to the attention of the authorities in December 1917. Within a matter of days, an Inspector reported that “the local Sinn Féin leaders appear to derive much pleasure from her company.” The Secretary of the GPO in Dublin stated that he believed Ryan to be a Sinn Féiner “on intimate terms with the leaders of the movement in [Nenagh].” Ryan had not said

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8 Ibid., 133.
9 PRO CO 904/198/102, 13 November 1917.
10 PRO CO 904/198/102, 13 November 1917.
11 PRO CO 904/198/102, 13 November 1917.
12 PRO CO 904/214/391, 24 December 1917.
13 PRO CO 904/214/391, 10 January 1918.
anything to indicate a misuse of her position or shown hostility to the police, but Lenthall, who had frequent occasion to use the post office where she was employed, stated:

“I myself have noticed the intimate relations that appear to exist between the girl clerks in the P. O. here and the Sinn Féiners in the town. . . . I have not the least doubt that any information contained in telegrams etc. is passed on to the Sinn Féiners. Miss Ryan has never, as far as I know, shown any incivility to members of the Police, but I do not trust her or any of the other girls in the Post Office.”

Marie O’Kelly lost her job because of the politics of her friends and family. She was not a member of any group, but, according to Sergeant John Casey of the RIC in County Galway, “Her brother Rev. Fr. O’Kelly with whom she lives is an advanced Sinn Féiner, and it is only natural to expect that Miss O’Kelly would become imbued with some of his Sinn Féin sentiments.” When the Bishop of Galway inquired into the reasons for her dismissal, he was told, “Miss O’Kelly’s associates in Galway were of such disloyal tone as to satisfy the Government that her further employment in the Public Service was not desirable.”

Hannah Creedon similarly lost her job. She was employed at the telephone exchange in Mallow and first came to attention of the authorities in 1920 because of her associations. Unlike the women described above, however, the police could document her disloyal behavior. Alerted by “information given confidentially by a colleague of Miss Creedon,” police became aware that Creedon was abusing her position to provide police intelligence to her friends. Creedon “was in the habit of listening on the Telephone Trunk Service when calls to or from the Police were in progress, and . . . on the termination of the conversations Miss Creedon often called up persons in Cork and Dublin with whom she held conversations in Irish.”

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14 PRO CO 904/214/391, 2 January 1918; emphasis in original.
15 PRO CO 904/211/338, 9 October 1918; emphasis in original.
16 PRO CO 904/211/338, 9 November 1918.
17 PRO CO 904/197/82, 9 April 1920.
18 PRO CO 904/197/82, 9 April 1920.
Women were likely to be observed as part of a crowd heckling police officers or participating in a mass demonstration. Eileen Barry and Mary Noonan, national school teachers, were reported to have worn Sinn Féin flags on their bicycles and scolded a soldier’s wife. The same informant, Sergeant Patrick Kennedy, also said the two women shouted and jeered at police during prosecutions of Sinn Féin suspects in Limerick in July 1917. Kennedy reported that Noonan “belongs to an ill bred family but nothing is known of her character previous to the month of April last.” Barry’s character was similarly poor, as she demonstrated “by hooting and shouting at the police as they left the court.” She was a member of a crowd which sang Sinn Féin songs and “seemed to enjoy the proceedings immensely.” Kennedy backtracked a bit a few weeks later, saying “I could not distinguish the voice of Miss Barry or Miss Noonan from the other women in the crowd as there were two or three hundred of them there” and the matter was dropped.

Both men and women had a responsibility to Ireland, and, since men were unable to participate in rebuilding republicanism, Clarke considered it the women’s responsibility to maintain the momentum of the movement. Women could, and should, be active participants in the creation of an independent Ireland. Participation and responsibility transcended gender in Kathleen Clarke’s mind. Dublin Castle’s intelligence reports, however, indicate a relative ignorance of the extent of women’s activities in the aftermath of the 1916 Rising. Dublin Castle was most concerned to police the activities of civil servants, and in doing so neglected the very real contributions women made to nationalism.

19 PRO CO 904/193/7, 1 August 1917.
20 PRO CO 904/193/7, 1 August 1917; emphasis in original.
21 PRO CO 904/193/7, 1 August 1917.
22 PRO CO 904/193/7, 14 August 1917; 31 December 1917.