

## **Women and the Easter Rising**

Katherine Patricia Dalvano

Academy of the Holy Angels

The Easter Rising was a pivotal event in Irish history that was supported by both Irishmen and Irishwomen alike. Although relatively unknown, women involvement was steady and strong as they pledged support to this cause. In fact, it is believed that "Irishwomen did their work with a cool and reckless courage, unsurpassed by any man from the first to the last day of the Rebellion" (McCoole). Women's roles in the preparation and realization of the Easter Rising were incredibly significant and females were active in gathering firearms, in various areas of combat, and in informing the world of the events that occurred during this time.

The Easter Rising of 1916 occurred throughout April 24<sup>th</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup>. Supporters of the rising, specifically male and female members of radical groups such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood and Cumann na mBan, hoped to form the Irish Republic and become independent from British rule. The Rising occurred during World War I, as the Irish believed that Britain would be weakened from battle (History.com Staff) yet this assumption was incorrect as British repressed the Rising through the use of troops, artillery, and naval gunboats (Dorney). Although the Easter Rising was not largely successful, as over 2,000 individuals were wounded or killed and all sixteen leaders were executed (History.com Staff), this event was influential in that it strengthened the movement towards Irish independence through the formation of the Irish Republic in 1919 and the commencement of the Irish War of Independence (Dorney).

Yet, before the events of the Easter Rising could occur, substantial preparation was necessary. Of the three hundred women participating in the Easter Rising (Kelly) many were crucial members in the effort to arm rebels with ammunition and firearms. Women abandoned stereotypes that confined them to roles of wives and mothers as, according to Countess Markievicz, "the idea that a woman can only serve her nation through her home [was] gone" (McCoole) and aided the Rising efforts.

Among the women crucial to the preparation phase of the Rising, were Helena Moloney, Molly Osgood, and Margaret Skinnider. Moloney, an actress, was involved in the organization of her theater troop into a military division and she smuggled weapons into Ireland. On one particular instance, for example, she placed firearms, from London, into her suitcase and narrowly escaped detection when a British Army recruit carried her bags for her (Kelly). Osgood was involved in financing the purchase of 1,500 rifles and 49,000 rounds of ammunition which were shipped to the Irish via the Germans. Osgood and her husband were among those who delivered the weapons to German ships and purposefully misinformed the British of the shipment (Kelly). Lastly, Skinnider, a woman who held several roles in the Rising, collected, transported, and distributed explosives from Scotland to Dublin. She was highly dedicated to her role and mission and even concealed explosives in her hat (Kelly). Apart from these individuals, many women and girls worked in the basement of Liberty Hall in Dublin gathering weapons, ammunition, and equipment for the Rising (McCoole). The work of these women was highly valuable and important to the execution of the Easter Rising; without their courage and dedication to the cause, the events of 1916 would not have ensued. Apart from preparations, women were highly involved in the realization of the Easter Rising. They were active in many areas, several of which were previously considered strictly men's roles, such as dispatching messages, treating the wounded, and battling the British. Of the Irishwomen involved in these fields, several are noteworthy. In terms of dispatchers, this position was undertaken by Elizabeth O'Farrell and Winifred Carney with Margaret Skinnider appearing as a deliverer of messages and scouting information. Specifically, O'Farrell delivered instruction to rebel bases outside of Dublin (Murphy), Carney became known as "The Typist with the Webley" and wrote orders from the Easter Rising Headquarters at the General Post Office ("The Forgotten Role"), and Skinnider was a bicycle messenger and scout for the region surrounding St. Stephen's Green (Kelly). Furthermore, several women were nurses and doctors providing care for the wounded rebels during the Rising. One woman, in particular, Dr. Kathleen Lynn, was especially important as she was the Chief Medical

Officer in the Irish Citizen Army, one of the main rebel groups fighting in the Rising, and a Red Cross doctor as well (McCoole). As a doctor, she aided to decrease the number of rebel casualties. In regards to combat roles, women fought the British as snipers, officers, and executors of bombings. Once again, Margaret Skinnider was an influential woman for she was the rebel's sniper and also managed the bombing at a location known as Shelbourne Hotel (Kelly). Apart from Skinnider, Rose McNamara was the commanding officer of the female detachment at the Marrowbone Lane Distillery ("The Forgotten Role") and Countess Markievicz, one of the most prominent and influential members of the Rising, served as Second-in-Command at St. Stephen's Green (McCoole). As an Officer of the Rising, Markievicz made important decisions and was legally allowed to carry weapons (Murphy). Women performed incredibly important, yet dangerous, combat roles in the Easter Rising.

Finally, the realization of the Easter Rising was also affected and made possible through the work of Irishwomen in reporting the events. Although all that occurred and all members involved are not fully known, women did write books recounting their involvement and the events of the Rising as well as traveled to countries, specifically the United States, to raise awareness of the Irish struggle against the British. For example, Margaret Skinnider published her story called "Doing My Bit for Ireland" and traveled to the United States where she lectured and attempted to gain support for the Irish (McCoole). Additionally, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington also traveled to the United States in an attempt to appeal to President Wilson the right of Ireland to establish itself as an independent state with a governing body (Collins). The efforts of these women were aimed at establishing the Easter Rising as an important event that should not be overlooked.

Although the women who participated in the Easter Rising were highly criticized at the time ("The Forgotten Role"), I applaud these women for their actions. In my opinion, they displayed incredible bravery, determination, and selflessness. Their efforts could not be shaken, although many were imprisoned and some sentenced to death ("The Forgotten Role"), and their refusal to abandon

their cause is very inspiring. As a woman, I am proud of the actions of these females, especially because they challenged their domestic roles and demanded change in Ireland. I believe that the Irishwomen's participation in this event is a success for women across all cultures and countries, in my opinion, the Easter Rising serves as a reminder that women are capable of all they set their minds to and are not limited due to their gender. This event illustrates that women are independent and strong.

Women were instrumental in the preparation and realization of the Easter Rising of 1916 through their roles in a variety of areas such as gathering ammunition, participating in battle, and recounting the events that occurred. Their efforts were truly remarkable and should be looked upon with praise.