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## “We called ourselves the Irish Ladies’ distress committee”: Irish republican women in Britain, 1916–1923

Niamh Coffey

Department of History, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

### ABSTRACT

Irish Republican women in Britain formed a vital network which provided their counterparts in Ireland with weapons, intelligence, and shelter for when they travelled across the Irish Sea. Far from being auxiliary, these women were an essential part of republican operations and blurred the boundaries between the “male” IRA and the “female” Cumann na mBan. Yet strikingly, few historians have examined this network of female republican activism, despite the availability of digitised sources such as the Military Service Pension Collection. This article seeks to remedy this oversight by using this collection to examine the role of republican women in Britain, highlighting the overlapping nature of men and women’s activities, while also drawing attention to the unique circumstances of acting in a clandestine organisation within the country of the enemy.

### KEYWORDS

Republicanism; nationalism;  
women; gender; diaspora

### Introduction

On the evening of 28 April 1921, an unusual discovery was made at Dundee railway station. A consignment of eggs had been dispatched at the station, due to be taken by rail to Glasgow. Upon being packed onto the lorry, one of the railway employees reached his hand into a crate to pilfer an egg, but to his shock, found the outline of a rifle.<sup>1</sup> The police were promptly alerted, and arrests took place across the city over the next twenty-four hours. In total, four people were arrested and charged: Sean O’Doherty, a twenty-one-year-old insurance agent, James Kimmet, a twenty-two-year-old shipyard worker, James Devaney, a thirty-four-year-old hairdresser, and Lena McDonald, a twenty-one-year-old nurse.

The case was discussed in detail in the local and national press and became known as the “eggs in box case.”<sup>2</sup> The trial of the accused was held in the High Court in Edinburgh in August the same year. All three of the men were found guilty of charges relating to the possession of firearms and conspiracy against the state and were sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment and penal servitude. Lena McDonald, however, was acquitted of all charges, after claiming that she was unaware of the true contents of the box.<sup>3</sup> Upon arriving back in Dundee, she was greeted to a hero’s welcome, with members of the Dundee Sinn Fein Club waving banners and cheering as she disembarked from the train. An elderly woman even tried to hand her a glass of whisky, but it was spilled in all the

**CONTACT** Niamh Coffey  [niamh.coffey@strath.ac.uk](mailto:niamh.coffey@strath.ac.uk)

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merriment.<sup>4</sup> McDonald later stated in her application for a Military Service Pension in 1938, that she *had* in fact known the true nature of the box and was a regular transporter of arms to Glasgow during this period.

McDonald's pension application reveals that she contributed significantly to the gun-running efforts of the Scottish Brigade IRA. However, despite playing a significant role in Ireland's revolutionary struggle, republican women like Lena McDonald who were based outside of Ireland have been largely ignored by historians of this period, despite their pivotal role in the success of these operations. Those who have explored this area have largely characterised gunrunning, as well as other activities pursued by Irish women in Britain, as a male-only pursuit.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, most of the work that has been produced on women during this period has focused on leading figures such as Constance Markievicz, who represented the exception rather than the norm regarding their involvement in Irish republicanism.<sup>6</sup> As D.A.J. MacPherson has argued, "[...] by turning the gaze away from leading republican women [...] a broader repertoire of activism emerges."<sup>6</sup> In the context of the Revolutionary period, shifting the focus to include republican women who lived in Britain reveals a plethora of activities that ordinary women undertook whilst balancing careers and personal lives. Most of these women had very different socio-economic backgrounds to the leading female republicans and did not have access to the same connections and opportunities, as well as having the added difficulty of living in Britain "in the heart of enemy lines" as Gerard Noonan has aptly stated.<sup>7</sup>

Broadening the gaze of Irish women's activism in Britain also reveals a significant shift in the character and discourse surrounding their activity. Unlike previous moments in history where Irish women collaborated in nationalist movements, such as the Ladies' Land League of the 1880s, Irish women were not exclusively justifying their political activism in gendered terms. Instead, they viewed themselves as citizens, rather than concerned wives and mothers, actively fighting for a political cause. This was reflective of the suffrage campaign and the partial emancipation of women in the 1918 Representation of the People Act, as well as the inclusion of the equal rights of women as citizens in the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic, signed by the leaders of the Easter Rising.<sup>8</sup> McDonald's extensive involvement in the republican cause in Scotland reveals that a wider platform was available for Irish women's political involvement during this period, both in Ireland and throughout the diaspora. This is further reflected in the numerous applications for a military service pension made by women in the late 1930s, which reveal a major expansion in the roles Irish women were undertaking, despite the official labelling of women's groups like Cumann na mBan as auxiliary.

This article will use the activities of Lena McDonald to explore the experiences of republican women in Britain. It will argue that this was an important period for women, as the idea of citizenship was re-gendered to include them, and they were able to exercise their new rights as citizens in fighting for an independent Ireland. The guerrilla nature of the conflict also meant that their activities increasingly overlapped with men, and that they were also able to use their gender as an effective cover to ward off suspicion and further the republican cause. Overall, the experiences of women such as McDonald challenges the idea that republican women were mere "auxiliaries" to their male counterparts and highlights that republican activism did not stop short of Ireland's shores.<sup>9</sup>

## Women in the heart of enemy lines

Before delving into Lena McDonald's story, it is useful to consider the IRA in Britain more generally, and what has already been written on this subject. Despite the presence of a large Irish population and a geographical location with strategic importance during the Revolutionary period, many accounts of the Irish revolution accord little space to republicanism in Britain.<sup>10</sup> However, through gunrunning, intelligence gathering, and campaigns of violence, IRA units in Britain made a significant contribution to the IRA's campaign during the War of Independence and continued to do so on both sides during the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> There are no complete lists of IRA membership in Britain and figures vary from source to source, however, it can be estimated through the use of correspondence between units in Britain and GHQ, and nominal rolls collated in the years after this period, that at its peak, the IRA in Britain stood at approximately between 2,200 and 2,500 members, with membership in Scotland being slightly higher than that of England and Wales.<sup>12</sup> Although there has been debate on the extent to which their contributions made an impact, most historians tend to agree that Irish republicans in Britain provided an important network which provided their counterparts in Ireland with weapons, intelligence, and money.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Hart has argued, the contribution of the IRA in Britain should not be viewed as a mere "sideshow" to the main action on the Island of Ireland.<sup>14</sup>

Female republicans were vital to the success of this network. The vast majority were members of Cumann na mBan, however the centrality of gunrunning to the IRA in Britain meant that the divisions between the women's "auxiliary" organisation and the IRA could become increasingly blurred. The online release of the archives of the Military Service Pension Collection has helped to illuminate the activities of women in Britain during this period. These applications reveal that republican women in Britain contributed significantly to the cause of Irish independence through activities such as gunrunning, providing safe houses for arms and fellow republicans, aiding in prison breaks, as well as through more indirect methods such as fundraising through ceilidhs and whist dances. Yet despite this, very little has been written on the lives and experiences of these women.

The most detailed account of Irish republican women's activities in Britain to date has been produced by Mo Moulton. Their work *Ireland and the Irish in Interwar England* (2014) focuses in part on the contribution of the Irish in England during the Revolutionary period and goes into some detail on the contribution of women, primarily the members of Cumann na mBan. Moulton argues that the role of Cumann na mBan in England "tacked between the charitable and the martial" as women were both heavily involved in clandestine activities such as gunrunning and intelligence gathering, but also participated in humanitarian efforts to alleviate suffering in Ireland through fundraising and garment collecting.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted though that much of Moulton's work focuses on England, and specifically London, and that it was published before the online release of the Military Pensions Collection, therefore there is potential to broaden the geographical and numerical scope of their study.

However outside Moulton's work, there is very little analysis on the activities of republican women in Britain. This is symptomatic of a wider lack of interest in the role of the Irish in Britain during this period as well as the neglect of women in Irish political history. The few other works which have focused on republican activism in Britain have paid scarce attention to the women who were involved. Gerard Noonan's *The IRA in*

*Britain: in the Heart of Enemy Lines* (2014) offers an intricate analysis of the individual IRA companies in Britain from de Valera's prison escape in February 1919 to the arrest of anti-Treaty activists in March 1923. However, Noonan's main focus is on the men who were in charge of these companies, and only mentions the contribution of women or Cumann na mBan in passing. In a similar vein, Peter Hart's work on the IRA in Britain characterises the movement as a male affair and does not account for the women who were involved. For example, in his opening paragraph, he states that "the men of this British underground laboured in the shadows."<sup>16</sup> There is little discussion of republican women's contribution further in this article. John Belchem's otherwise in-depth study of the Liverpool Irish analyses the personalities of the Liverpool IRA company and the leadership changes within it, but other than paying lip service to the contributions of Cumann na mBan and the few women who were arrested in the aftermath of the Liverpool fires of 1920, he makes no mention of Scouse Irish women's contributions to the movement.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly, women like Lena McDonald, who contributed significantly to the republican movement but were based outside of Ireland, have been long overlooked in studies on this period. In part, this is because there have been few available sources about the lives of the everyday, working and middle-class women who were a part of this movement in comparison to their male counterparts, or the female leaders of the movement.

However, the online publication of the Military Service Pension Collection in 2014 has made research on this area possible. The collection contains applications for Military Service Pensions, which were originally issued by the Irish Free State government from 1924 onwards, and to date, it is the most detailed archive charting women's involvement in the Revolutionary period.<sup>18</sup> Originally, the pensions were issued under the Military Service Pensions Act of 1924, which provided pensions to persons who "rendered active service" in Óglaigh na hÉireann, the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen Army, Fianna Éireann, or the Hibernian Rifles during the week of the Easter Rising, and from April 1920 to July 1921, who "served in the National Forces or Defence Forces of Saorstát Éireann at any time subsequent from the 1 July 1922 and to the 1 October 1923."<sup>19</sup> A board of assessors was established in order to determine whether an application in question rendered "active service," and the amount of pension payable to a person depended on their rank, with a sum of £5 per year of service and per grade awarded.

Originally, women were excluded from the Act, however an amendment in 1934 allowed for the inclusion of Cumann na mBan, essentially opening the way for women applicants. As of March 2021, nearly 10,720 individual pension files have been released online, of which 3,758 relate to women.<sup>20</sup> Of these, there are fifty-seven which relate to women who either lived in or were based in Britain from 1916 to 1923, including Lena McDonald. These applications provide valuable insight into the activities of these women and highlight the interconnectedness of the republican movement in Britain.

### **Egg boxes, guns, and famous faces: Lena McDonald's story**

Lena McDonald's application provides a window into the lives of republican women in Britain during this period. Her application was made in 1938, although it took nearly four years for it to be approved and paid, and she was only granted a grade E, the lowest rank which was saved mostly for female republicans and dependents.<sup>21</sup>

McDonald grew up in the city of Dundee and trained professionally as a nurse, alongside her older sister, Catherine. Although it is not stated in her application, McDonald was third generation Irish, and was heavily influenced by her maternal grandmother.<sup>22</sup> She became involved in republican activity as early as 1918, when she began purchasing revolvers from pawn shops with the help of her mother. She smuggled the weapons she acquired to Glasgow, and sometime between 1918 and 1919 she became a member of the Dundee Company IRA. This was somewhat unusual, as most of the female applicants in this sample were members of the women's organisation Cumann na mBan, including McDonald's own sister. However, women joining the IRA in Britain was not entirely unheard of, for example, Agnes Winifred O'Boyle, whose London home was a major arms dump during this period, was part of GHQ munitions.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Bridget "Mother" Flanagan from Glasgow was attached to the headquarters of the IRA Scottish Brigade, and her home was often used for meetings and to store ammunition.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the importance of gunrunning operations and the clandestine nature of the Irish republican movement in Britain meant that gendered divisions were not as clear cut as their counterparts in Ireland.

From 1919 until her arrest in 1921, McDonald became extremely active in the movement. She continued to go to Glasgow twice weekly to deposit arms at various dumps. In her application, she stated that she smuggled the weapons she transported in Gladstone bags, golf bags, and of course, egg boxes.<sup>25</sup> In 1920, she had been involved in an attempted prison break at Perth Prison, and her home on Brook Street became the unofficial headquarters for IRA activities in Dundee. One of her references, Sean Healy, a purchasing agent for Cork No. 1 Brigade IRA, stated that the shop McDonald's family owned was "strewn" with rifles, and recalled one occasion where there was an IRA meeting and police came knocking on her door as the light had been left on and they knew it to be a lock-up shop.<sup>26</sup> Healy stated that she was known for her hospitality, and during this period, she housed numerous republican men evading imprisonment. She also hosted Constance Markievicz when she visited the city in 1923 and remained in contact with her, visiting her at her home in Dublin later that year to smuggle revolvers during the Civil War, working for the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War.<sup>27</sup>

Her references further attest to her commitment to the cause. Joseph Booker, who was a member of B Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Scottish IRA based in Glasgow, attested to her reliability and use of her home as a dump. He stated that she "zealously guarded" the safety of the weapons that were put in her care and made sure that they reached their destinations.<sup>28</sup> He also attested to the hospitality of her home, which was used on "many occasions" for men over from Ireland on "work of national importance."<sup>29</sup> The Officer in Command of the Dundee Company IRA, Father John Fahy, also wrote a reference for McDonald. Fahy asserted that McDonald "procured more arms [...] than any other member of the IRA in Scotland," adding that this was the "primary object" of their Brigade to highlight the significance of McDonald's contribution to the movement.<sup>30</sup>

The pension application also gives an insight into McDonald's life after this period. McDonald continued to move in republican circles after the end of the Civil War in May 1923 and she remained in close contact with other members of the movement. In 1926, she hosted Eamon de Valera and Sean T. O'Kelly when they visited Dundee as part of a speaking tour of Scotland.

Later in the 1940s, when McDonald and her family endured financial hardship, they moved to Ireland and lived with her old Captain, Father John Fahy, in his parish of Loughrea, Galway. Indeed, in Father Fahy's reference for McDonald, he cryptically states that "pensions should be awarded not according to the position of the applicant's name on the waiting list, but according to the applicant's record during the fight for independence and present necessity," before continuing to state that the McDonald family "had lost much financially" and were "continually being harassed by Scotland Yard."<sup>31</sup> By the time of the fiftieth anniversary commemoration of the Easter Rising in 1916, McDonald and her sister had moved to the USA, after living at numerous addresses in Belfast, Dublin and Birmingham. The McDonald sisters were flown over to Dublin as guests of honour for commemorations in Dublin and were awarded service medals for their contributions.<sup>32</sup>

McDonald's application reflects her extensive involvement and dedication to the Irish republican movement in Scotland. Her references attest to her unwavering commitment, and her involvement in the "eggs in box" case, as well as the other daring pursuits listed in her application, highlight the risks she was willing to take to further the movement. Indeed, her involvement and the effects it had on her later life reveal that her activities in the Irish Revolutionary period had a defining impact.

### A network of republican women

One of the most striking aspects of McDonald's application is that it highlights the presence of a covert, interwoven network of republican activists that stretched across Britain and the Irish Sea. Despite the statements made by Fahy and Booker attesting to her exceptional performance in procuring arms individually, her application highlights that she was no lone operator, but acted within intricately connected circles across Scotland. Indeed, to truly understand McDonald's experiences, it is necessary to put her application in the context of the wider republican movement in Britain. Across Britain, there were women who took part in activities such as gunrunning, prison breaks and providing safe houses for the republican cause. However, like McDonald, their contribution has been overlooked in the literature on this period.

As I have already established, out of the 3,758 pension applications made by women which have been released online, fifty-seven were made by republican women who were based in Britain during the Revolutionary period. In addition to this, three members of London branches of Cumann na mBan made oral testimonies for the Bureau of Military History in 1947. However, the actual figure of women involved in republican activities was probably higher than this, given that not all the pension applications have been released, and not all women involved in the movement applied for one. These applications also reflect the most active women, who committed a large portion of their time to the cause. There were certainly many more women who supported the republican movement through more indirect ways without being involved in organisations such as Cumann na mBan or the IRA. As Mo Moulton has argued, most Irish people living in Britain during this time who were sympathetic to the republican cause contributed in "less dramatic ways" than gunrunning or aiding in prison breaks, and instead participated through contributing to funds supporting prisoners, donating to the White Cross or participating in public meetings, although the line between legality and illegality could be "fuzzy."<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the pension applications provide a useful insight into the activities of Irish women in Britain involved in the republican movement. Like McDonald, most of these women lived in cities with large Irish populations. The majority of applicants in this sample hailed from large centres of Irish settlement such as Liverpool and London, with further large groups in Manchester and Glasgow. However, the applications show that there were also active women in areas with smaller Irish populations, such as Jarrow in northeast of England, and South Wales. McDonald was the only woman in this sample to hail from Dundee, however considering the involvement of her sister in Cumann na mBan, as well as Dundee's large Irish population, it is unlikely that she was the only active woman in her hometown.

The applications also reveal that like McDonald, most republican women in Britain were young, single and semi-professional, although there is also a strong presence of widows in the sample. Their occupations included teachers, nurses, secretaries, and shop owners, to name a few. Some were Irish born, but many were second or even third generation Irish, and it was not unusual for them to have family members who were also involved in the movement. In this sample, there were two sets of sisters (excluding McDonald and her sister): the Browne sisters of Liverpool, Sheila and Kathleen (whose married name was O'Sullivan), and the Anglim sisters of London, Winifred and Elizabeth (whose married name was Bateman). In addition to this the profiles of these women were similar to their male counterparts, and many of the women in the sample had male family members who were also active within the movement.<sup>34</sup> For example, Agnes Winifred O'Boyle, who was a member of the IRA in London, was a sister of the Carr brothers Denis and John Joseph, who were heavily involved with GHQ Munitions and the transportation of arms to Ireland. Elizabeth Kerr's family from Liverpool were all heavily involved in the city's IRA Company. Her husband, Neil, was the Officer in Command until his imprisonment in 1920. He used his job as a foreman for the Cunard Shipping Company in the procurement and transportation of weapons, and in her pension application, she stated that "his duties were mine," highlighting the overlapping nature of the activities of male and female republicans in Britain. Her three sons, Thomas, Patrick, and Neill Jr. were also involved in the movement in various ways, and the latter was killed in an accident while moving explosives in September 1920.<sup>35</sup>

By far the most common activity among this group of women was gunrunning.<sup>36</sup> This reflects the main objective of IRA companies in Britain, as Britain was the main source of weapons procured overseas during this period.<sup>37</sup> Nearly every applicant stated that they were involved with the transportation, procurement, or storage of arms in some capacity, yet historians have characterised this activity as an exclusively male pursuit, placing heavy emphasis on the male figures in charge of purchasing.<sup>38</sup> Women in Britain actively smuggled weapons, which they obtained from pawn shops, demobbed soldiers, or larger shipments from places like the USA. This was usually an individual undertaking for reasons of security: Sorcha Nic Diarmada of the London branch of Cumann na mBan, stated in her oral testimony for the Military Bureau of History, that the women who undertook this activity were "very cautious" and "never confided in one another," while Agnes Winifred O'Boyle, whose home was one of the largest arms dumps in London, was instructed by GHQ Munitions not to join Cumann na mBan due to the highly secretive nature of arms activities.<sup>39</sup> While most women transported arms to safe houses in their local areas, it was not unheard of for women to smuggle weapons to Ireland. For example, Sorcha Nic



Diarmada mBan recalled that a fellow republican woman, Grace O'Sullivan, brought "the accoutrements" for a "wireless apparatus" to Dublin shortly before the Easter Rising in 1916, and was unable to sit nor sleep for the duration of the crossing from Holyhead.<sup>40</sup> Mary Gogarty, also of Cumann na mBan in London, stated in her pension application that she carried arms to Ireland multiple times in 1920 and 1921, mainly to Tipperary and Dublin, on the instructions of Art O'Brien, who was head of the Gaelic League in Britain.<sup>41</sup> Like O'Boyle, Gogarty was instructed to remove herself from Cumann na mBan to avert suspicion from her activities.<sup>42</sup>

Although numerous women took part in the actual smuggling of weapons, it was more common for them to use their homes or businesses as arms dumps for weapons. Nearly every woman in this sample stated that they stored guns and ammunition, amongst other weapons, as proof of their active service during the Revolutionary period. Most of these weapons were stored in their homes in preparation for transportation to Ireland. However, some of the items stored in these women's homes were used for attacks in Britain as well. For instance, in the run up to the Liverpool Fires of November 1920, members of the Liverpool and St. Helen's Cumann na mBan branches stored gelignite and paraffin in their homes, which were subsequently used in the attacks.<sup>43</sup>

The homes of these women also acted as safe houses for republican men over from Ireland on "business trips," recently released prisoners, and republicans on the run. McDonald alone opened her doors to purchasing agent D.P. Walshe, battalion commander Eamon Mooney, and Constance Markievicz while they were in Dundee for business purposes and speaking tours respectively.<sup>44</sup> Mary Healy of Manchester attested to housing Eamon de Valera after his escape from Lincoln Prison in February 1919 and aided him in his departure for the USA.<sup>45</sup> Mary Egan, a member of the London Cumann na mBan, was renowned in the capital for her hospitality towards recently released republican prisoners and men on the run. In her pension application, Bill Ahern, who was a member of the North London unit of the IRA, stated that "the utmost confidence was placed in her discretion and she was used as a connecting link between men arriving and those in charge."<sup>46</sup> The safe houses provided by these women acted as vital points of contact for the vast republican network that stretched across Britain, providing essential spaces for meetings and points of cover for covert operations. Using their houses as safe spaces connected these women to the various republican groups in Britain and the wider movement, highlighting the interconnected nature of the movement and blurred the boundaries between the public and private worlds of republican politics.

### The guise of femininity

The official labelling of Cumann na mBan as an auxiliary organisation highlighted that despite republican women's increasing conceptualisation of themselves as citizens with a right to exercise their role in politics, some nineteenth century gendered ideals prevailed. However, the pension applications and oral testimonies reveal that republican women in Britain were able to use gendered preconceptions to their advantage, in an attempt to ensure that republican activities remained concealed from the authorities. For example, in her witness statement for the Military Bureau of History, Sorcha Nic Diarmada stated that the London branches of Cumann na mBan would call themselves the "Irish Ladies' Distress Committee" when hiring venues for their meetings so that they could



carry out their meetings without attracting suspicion from the authorities.<sup>47</sup> Nic Diarmada argued that the guise of the “Distress Committee” enabled Cumann na mBan to pursue their activities without arousing suspicion, reflecting an flexible attitude towards Irish women’s political activity in Britain.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Mary Casey from Jarrow recalled accompanying members of the IRA on “errands of destruction” such as burning haystacks and cutting down telegraph poles.<sup>49</sup> Gilbert F. Barrington of the IRA in the North of England recalled the usefulness of women like Casey accompanying IRA officers on raids and sabotage operations, stating in his oral testimony for the Military Bureau of History: “had the men gone alone [on the raids] they would have attracted attention, but with their escorts it appeared to all and sundry that they were courting couples.”<sup>50</sup> Annie Curran of Liverpool further supports this, as she stated that she and her fellow Cumann na mBan members would often accompany male IRA members on raids in order to provide cover, ready to intercept and take any weapons away from the scene if the authorities arrived.<sup>51</sup> Sheila Browne recalled one of the ways she transported weapons was by disguising them in prams as she walked to the various arms dumps across Liverpool, while Christina Caffrey-Keeley of Glasgow stated that she would take her infant child with her while transporting arms to Ireland as she seemed less suspicious, hiding behind the guise of motherhood to conceal her activities.<sup>52</sup>

The testimonies of other women in the sample also support the idea that republican women were able to use gendered ideals to their advantage in concealing the true nature of their activities. Many of the women stated “visiting prisoners” as evidence of their active service, elaborating that they would visit republican inmates under the guise of feminine concern to carry secret messages, among other contraband, into the prison walls. The most renowned instance of this was Kathleen Talty and Mary Healy’s involvement in Eamon de Valera’s escape from Lincoln prison. Talty and Healy were members of Cumann na mBan in Manchester, and were regular visitors to republican men in Strangeways, Knutsford, Frongoch and Lincoln prisons. In January 1920, the women were instructed to bake a fruit cake containing a key which had been made from a candle wax impression de Valera had made from a lock on a prison gate, as well as nail files to help aid in the escape attempt.<sup>53</sup> The two women later met de Valera and the other escaped convicts, providing them with army uniforms.<sup>54</sup>

As well as these covert operations, women also took part in demonstrations in support of republican prisoners. The London branches of Cumann na mBan staged large protests outside of Wormwood Scrubs and Brixton prisons in support of republican prisoners on hunger strike, including Lord Mayor of Cork Terence MacSwiney, who died in Brixton prison in October 1920. Women kept vigil outside Brixton prison during the final weeks of his hunger strike, and when he died they lined the streets of London as his coffin passed through. Several women in this sample accompanied the coffin to Holyhead, including Sheila Browne, where there was a scuffle over plans to take the body directly to Cork.<sup>55</sup>

The protests of republican women and their roles in fundraising and garment collecting highlights that there was a philanthropic element to their participation in the movement. This drew on a long tradition of middle class Irish and British women’s involvement in philanthropic activities throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> However, unlike their predecessors, these women did not try to justify their activities through the language of humanitarianism and the natural extension of the private sphere.<sup>57</sup> These women were politically active during a time where some women had been enfranchised under the

1918 Representation of the People Act, and the inclusion of the “suffrages of all [Ireland’s] men and women” in the 1916 Proclamation of the Irish Republic undoubtedly influenced these women’s views of themselves as political citizens.

The pension applications and oral testimonies further attest to the fact that these women viewed themselves as citizens, acting on behalf of their political convictions, as opposed to humanitarian concern, reflecting that there was a wider platform for women’s involvement in Irish political and military activities during this period. As Mo Moulton has argued, these women “blurred the boundary” between the public and the private through their involvement in fundraising for an underground militia, gunrunning, and providing safe houses, and were not mere political hostesses.<sup>58</sup> Despite women’s involvement being officially consigned to the auxiliary organisation Cumann na mBan, the applications highlight that there was a significant overlap of activities between the women’s organisation and the IRA, reflecting that roles were not always limited according to gendered ideals. The pension applications and witness statements of both republican women and men in Britain highlight that the various male and female organisations were in constant communication with each other, and that there were instances of women joining the supposedly male only IRA, like in the case of Lena McDonald. Republican men viewed their female counterparts with respect and admiration and fought on their behalf if their applications were unsuccessful. For example, members of the Manchester Company IRA intervened on behalf of Kathleen Talty when her application was rejected, eventually leading to her receiving a hearing in front of the Advisory Committee.<sup>59</sup> The applications and interviews also hint at a level of frustration among these women that they were restricted by gender and location and could not do more to aid the republican cause. Sorcha Nic Diarmada explained that there was a split in the London branches of Cumann na mBan because a faction of women wanted to drill and march openly in military uniform, like Cumann na mBan in Ireland, and were frustrated that they had to “masquerade” as the distress committee.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, when there was a delay in getting her pension approved, Mary McPhillips (nee Fullerton) wrote to the pension board “as you will see I am a woman (tho I did serve my country as any citizen would do),” underlining that her gender did not prevent her from taking an active role during this period.<sup>61</sup>

## Consequences

The women who made these applications and shared their testimonies were frank about the risks that came with being part of an underground militant movement in the country of the enemy. In recent years, much has been written about the psychological effects of the Revolutionary period on Irish women, and scholars have shed light on issues such as sexual violence and intimidation towards women from both the IRA and British forces.<sup>62</sup> However, much like the underground activities of republican women in Britain, the psychological and emotional impact of their experiences have also been neglected. As Marie Coleman has emphasised in her work on the pension service archives, the applications made by republicans do not only illuminate their activities during the Revolutionary period, but they are also useful because they offer us a glimpse into their lives after this period, and the emotions and reflections on their involvement.<sup>63</sup>

There is evidence that the pressure of being in an underground militant movement took its toll on many of these women. Elizabeth Kerr of Liverpool wrote that she spent “many restless nights” waiting for the arrival of weapons at her house, while many women reported that being shadowed by the police was a common occurrence. The pension board assessor who took Annie McCaughey’s sworn statement stated that she was “on the verge of tears” recalling her activities during her interview, while Marie McGaleagly of Glasgow stated she suffered from a nervous breakdown in the summer of 1923 while her husband was on hunger strike in prison.<sup>64</sup> This impact could also be physical: Rose Ann Duffy, who was arrested for attempted gunrunning at Ardrossan Harbour in 1918, stated that she developed TB while she was in prison, and that her chest had caused her problems “ever since,” while Mary Egan applied for a disability pension on the grounds that the ill treatment she received during her time in prison resulted in her contracting chronic bronchitis, emphysema, chronic osteo-arthritis in her right knee and hip, and piles.<sup>65</sup>

Furthermore, these republican women lived amongst British people, who were often hostile to their activities. Local and national newspapers during this period gives an indication of British attitudes towards republicanism, highlighting that these women lived in a country where they were tolerated at best, and viewed as a danger to civil society at worst. The “Sinn Féin menace” was a persistent description in British articles on republican activities on both sides of the Irish Sea, and the movement was often likened to a disease in the way that support rapidly grew after the 1916 Easter Rising.<sup>66</sup> The newspaper columns reserved its harshest criticisms for the movement’s leaders, however descriptions of republicans in Britain could be more nuanced. Owing to the young age and professional status of the men involved in the republican movement in Britain, it was not uncommon for the media to characterise them as having been led astray. For example, Sean O’Doherty, who was on trial alongside Lena McDonald, was described by the *Dundee Courier* as having been swept up by “mistaken patriotism” which “so many young Irishmen in Ireland and this country had succumbed to”; similarly, during a trial of sixteen Glasgow based Irish republicans in March 1921 (which included one woman, Jean Gillespie, who also applied for a pension), the judge stated in relation to the sentencing that “it was a bad habit of their fellow Irish countrymen that they talked blood and thunder as easily as Scotsmen would discuss a plate of sandwiches and a glass of beer.”<sup>67</sup>

The portrayal of female republicans was somewhat similar. Although the pension applications and oral testimonies reveal that women’s involvement in the movement in Britain was not unusual, the British media sensationalised it to a certain extent. For instance, in the cases of Lena McDonald and Jean Gillespie, newspapers reporting on their cases tended to single these two women out, possibly because they were the only women on trial among a group of men. Headlines for Gillespie’s trial, which was alongside fifteen other republican men, was often referenced to as the trial of “the red-headed girl,” despite the fact that her crime was significantly less than those alongside her.<sup>68</sup>

Although the involvement of women in the movement was certainly viewed with intrigue, gender did not prevent the press from condemnation, and served to reinforce existing hostilities towards Irish communities in Britain. Upon her acquittal, Lena McDonald stated that after following her trial in the press, her neighbours told her that they thought she should have been executed, while Jean Gillespie’s furniture shop suffered financially after her trial and imprisonment.

Many of the women stated that there were repercussions from wider society as a result of their involvement in the movement. Kathleen Talty and Margaret Sexton, both of the St. Brigid's Cumann na mBan in Manchester, stated that their political activities prevented them from being promoted in their jobs as school teachers, while Mary English, who had a sweet shop in Everton which was used as an arms dump, stated that she was ostracised from the local community after her arrest, and eventually had to leave Liverpool.<sup>69</sup> Elizabeth Bateman (nee Anglim) of Cumann na mBan in London also stated that she lost her job as a typist as a result of her involvement in the movement, highlighting that there was a material as well as psychological cost to being active in this movement in Britain.<sup>70</sup> Some women even became isolated from their own republican circles, such as the Browne sisters in Liverpool. Despite the charges being dropped against them for their involvement in the Liverpool Fires of November 1920, the IRA leadership in the city instructed them to no longer take part in militant republican activities and to limit their participation in the movement to attending fundraising events for fear of getting caught again.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

By exploring Lena McDonald and the "eggs in box case," this article has highlighted the important contributions of an interwoven network of republican women in Britain during the Irish Revolutionary period. The pension files and witness statements of these women reveal that they were willing to risk their livelihoods in Britain, their professional careers, and even face imprisonment, for the republican cause. Their prominent role in the procurement of arms and gunrunning, which has widely been recognised as the IRA in Britain's main contribution to the republican cause during this period, underlines their importance to the movement and challenges the idea that they were merely auxiliary.

This article has also explored the role that gender played within this movement. The pension applications and witness statements reflect that the roles of men and women increasingly overlapped in the movement, highlighting that women carried out activities which have been characterised as a male only pursuit, such as gunrunning, raids, and sabotage. Indeed, their actions reveal a flexible attitude concerning gender, combining a readiness to use gendered assumptions to their advantage, as in the case of the "Irish Ladies' Distress Committee," alongside the belief that they were acting politically as citizens, rather than out of humanitarian concern, marking a departure from previous Irish nationalist campaigns involving women. In this vein, republican women in Britain reflected the attitudes and actions of their counterparts in Ireland. At the higher levels of the movement, women such as Margaret Pearse and Mary MacSwiney used their statuses as the female relatives of deceased republican men to push their political agendas, while more "ordinary" republican women acted as couriers and intelligence gatherers for the movement.

It has also considered the environmental circumstances of these women, who lived in the country of the enemy among communities who were unsupportive at best, and hostile at worst, towards Irish republicanism. Although they were far from the main stage of violence in Ireland, these women faced serious consequences for their roles in aiding a movement which was fighting against the country in which they lived. These consequences could be economic, in the form of losing or being denied employment, as

well as social, in the form of ostracism from the wider community. They could also be long term, as the physical and mental toll of being active in a clandestine movement impacted many of these women years after their involvement had ceased.

By broadening the gaze and examining the lives of Irish women in Britain, the interconnectedness of these communities is highlighted, as many of these women's paths crossed through their involvement in the movement. In addition to this, examining the activities of these women highlights issues that are not as apparent when studying their counterparts on the Island of Ireland, such as the psychological impact of living in the heart of enemy lines and repercussions from wider British society for their actions. Their actions serve to underline that the Irish Revolution was not contained within Ireland itself but stretched across the Irish Sea and throughout the diaspora. The ongoing digitisation of the Military Service Pension Collection ensures that this article has only scratched the surface of the contributions and experiences of these women and paves the way for future studies to come.

## Notes

1. *Dundee Courier*, April 30, 1921; *Dundee Courier*, May 2, 1921.
2. *Dundee Courier*, August 9, 1921; *Dundee Courier*, August 12, 1921.
3. *Dundee Courier*, August 9, 1921.
4. *Dundee Courier*, August 12, 1921.
5. See Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*; Hart, "Operations abroad", 71–102.
6. MacPherson, *Women and the Irish Nation*, 3.
7. Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*, 4.
8. Moulton, "'You have Votes and Power'", 179–204.
9. Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 248.
10. Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*, 4.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 50–2.
13. See Patterson, "The Activities of Irish Republican Physical Force Organisations in Scotland"; Hart, "Operations Abroad"; Tormey, "Scotland's Easter Rising Veterans and the Irish Revolution", 271–302.
14. Hart, "Operations abroad", 71.
15. Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish in Interwar England*, 125.
16. See note above 14, 102.
17. Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse*, 263–97.
18. Coleman, "Compensating Irish Female Revolutionaries", 916.
19. Military Service Pension Act (1924).
20. Irish Military Archives. Accessed March 2, 2021. <https://www.militaryarchives.ie/en/collections/online-collections/military-service-pensions-collection-1916-1923/release-history/november-2020-release>
21. Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF56964, Lena McDonald.
22. King, *Undiscovered Dundee*, 244.
23. MSPC, MSP34REF57567, Agnes Winifred O'Boyle.
24. MSPC, MSP34REF55614, Bridget Flanagan.
25. MSPC, Lena McDonald.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*

31. See note above 25.
32. *The Irish Press*, April 10, 1966.
33. Moulton, *Ireland and the Irish*, 125.
34. Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*, 72–5.
35. MSPC, MSP34REF3967, Elizabeth Kerr.
36. Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*, 86–97.
37. *Ibid.*, 84.
38. See Noonan, *The IRA in Britain*; Hart, “Operations Abroad”; Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse*; Patterson, “The Activities of Irish Republican Physical Force Organisations in Scotland”, 39–59.
39. Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 945, Sorcha Nic Diarmada (May 1954); MSPC, MSP34REF57567, Agnes Winifred O’Boyle.
40. BMHWS, Sorcha Nic Diarmada.
41. MSPC, MSP34REF58165, Mary Gogarty.
42. *Ibid.*
43. See MSPC MSPREF3425102, Mary English; MSPC, MSPREF3491808, Sheila Browne; MSPC, MSPREF3439076, Mary Geraldine Darby; MSPC, MSPREF34 Kathleen O’Sullivan.
44. See note above 25.
45. MSPC, MSPREF343967, Elizabeth Kerr; MSPC, MSPREF3419467, Mary Healy.
46. MSPC, MSPREF55889, Mary Egan.
47. See note above 40.
48. *Ibid.*
49. MSPC, MSP34REF17327, Mary Casey.
50. Bureau of Military History Witness Statement, No. 773, Gilbert F. Barrington (December 1952).
51. MSPC, MSP34REF64362, Annie Curran.
52. MSPC, MSPREF3491808, Sheila Browne; MSPC, MSP34REF9970, Christina Caffrey-Keeley.
53. Military Service Pension Collection, MSP34REF50666, Kathleen Talty; MSPC, MSP34REF19467, Mary Healy; Bureau of Military History, BWS274, Liam McMahan.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Cheltenham Chronical*, October 30, 1920.
56. See Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*; Moulton, “You have votes and power:”, 192.
57. Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 1–7.
58. Moulton, “You have votes and power:”, 200.
59. MSPC, Kathleen Talty.
60. Bureau of Military History Witness Statement 945, Sorcha Nic Diarmada.
61. MSPC, MSP34REF61656, Mary McPhillips.
62. See Connolly, *Women and the Irish Revolution*; Clark, “Violence against women in the Irish Civil War”, 75–90; Aiken, “The women who had been straining every nerve”.
63. See note above 18, 918.
64. MSPC, MSP34REF23384, Annie McCaughey; MSPC, MSPREF3458062, Marie McGaleagly.
65. MSPC, Rose Ann Duffy; MSPC Mary Egan.
66. See *Dundee Courier*, October 21, 1917.
67. *Dundee Courier*, August 9, 1921; *Dundee Courier*, March 21, 1921; MSPC, MSP34REF783, Jean Gillespie.
68. See *Dundee Courier*, March 15, 1921; *Daily Mail*, March 15, 1921.
69. MSPC, Kathleen Talty; MSPC, MSP34REF59330, Margaret Sexton; Military Service Pension Collection, MSPREF3425102, Mary English.
70. MSPC, MSP34REF61788, Elizabeth Sabina Bateman.
71. MSPC, MSPREF3491808, Sheila Browne.

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