

CUMANN NA MBAN IN WESTPORT 1915-1923

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Over the years this journal has carried articles on the organisations that made up the Irish revolutionary movement between 1915-1924. Several items have covered the activities of the Irish Volunteers (the IRA after 1919) and the boys' organisation, Fianna Eireann, the Irish National Boy Scouts. The activities of the women's organisation, Cumann na mBan, locally, has been neglected, and this article is an attempt to rectify that anomaly.

Cumann na mBan was founded in Dublin on 2 April 1914. It was originally formed as an auxiliary to complement the Irish Volunteers. The organisation flourished and spread to most locations where the Irish Volunteers had been established.¹ The first mention of Cumann na mBan in Westport was when they marched as a unit in The Manchester Martyrs Commemoration parade through the town with the Irish Volunteers and Fianna Eireann in November 1915. They had now established themselves in the revolutionary movement in the town, and thereafter became an essential ally in the oncoming fight for freedom and separation from the British Empire.

The women of the local Westport branch took lessons in medical first aid; various types of signalling, foot drill, etc, but were mostly engaged in raising finance for an arms fund for the Volunteers. Concerts in the town hall raised a considerable amount of money at the time. A concert was actually organised for Easter Monday 1916 by the local branch, unaware of the fateful events in Dublin as the Rising progressed.

In the week after the 1916 Rising, the local ladies organised food and clothes parcels for the men that had been arrested and were being held at Westport RIC barracks prior to their internment in Britain. Several concerts were held to gather funds for cases of hardship among the families of the imprisoned men.

After the general release of the men from imprisonment, there was new momentum in the freedom fight. People were being arrested for drilling; singing 'sedition' songs and organising anti-British movements. Like their compatriots,

¹ Editor's note – One of the founders of Cumann na mBan was Elizabeth (Bessie) Bloxham from Westport Demesne. She was its National Organiser and set up branches all over the country.

See Bloxham, Elizabeth: The Rising and My Dismissal in Cathair na Mart 33 (2016).

Cumann na mBan was expanding and gaining influence amongst the populace. Westport was organised as a local district centre now, having branches at Westport, Aughagower, Carrowkenedy, Newport, Glenhest, Tiernaur, Killawalla, Shramore, Brockagh, Castlebar, Islandeady and Murrisk/Lecanvey. The president of the Westport District was Tessie Moane of Carrabawn, Westport.

Westport branch had a membership of 65 at the time of the Truce 11 July 1921. The following were enrolled:

Bradley Bridget	Gill A. Maria	Malone Sarah
Breheny Bridie	Gill Mary Ann	McGing Nora
Breheny May	Gill Nellie	McHale Nurse
Conway Anne	Gillivan Julia	McKenna Mary
Conway Nora	Heneghan Nora	McLoughlin Maude
Creagh Mrs. T.	Heneghan Terry	McLoughlin K.
Doris Sabina	Hughes C.	Moane Tessie
Duffy Annie	Hughes Delia	Ring Mary
Duffy Katie	Jackson Miss	Ring Rena
Dwyer Josie	Joyce Bridie	Sheridan Mrs. B.
Fitzgerald Susan	Joyce Mary J.	Staunton Tessie
Gallagher Agnes	Keane Mary A.	Swift Tessie
Gallagher Agnes	Kelly Ciss	Toole Katie
Gallagher K.	Kelly Nora	Walsh Babs
Gallagher Kathleen	Killoran Nurse	Walsh Bridget
Gallagher Nora	King Mrs.	Walsh Bridie
Gavin Aggie	Kitterick Mary B.	Walsh Bridie
Gavin K.	Lavelle Mrs.	Walsh Elizabeth
Gavin R.	Malone Maggie	Walsh Kate
Gibbons Delia	Malone Mary	Walsh Mrs.
Gibbons Mary S.	Malone Nellie	Walsh Nurse
Giblin K.	Malone Rose	

Westport District Council

In 1934 a new amended Military Pension Act was introduced. Committees of former Cumann na mBan branches were set up in order to make definitive lists of those who were members from 1915-1924. Westport was given the authority to organise most of the old West Mayo Brigade IRA area. The three people supervising this task were President, Mrs. Tessie O'Brien, (formerly Tessie Moane) but now married and living in Cork. Lilly Knight,² Secretary, former Adjutant of the Aughagower Branch, and Mrs. Hughes of Westport, and former Treasurer of that branch. There were fourteen former branches in the Westport District Council and these in turn organised local committees.

Newport; Mrs M. Kilroy. Mrs. Tilly McDonnell.

Kilmeena; Annie Browne, B. Geraghty.

Brockagh; Bridget Kelly, Nora Corcoran.

Glenhest; Mrs. W. Rowland, Miss B. Cusack, Maggie Agnes Kelly.

Tiernaur; B. McCormack, Mrs. Tilly McDonnell

Shramore; Mrs. K. Noone, Mrs. McHale (nee Chambers)

Aughagower; Mrs. Sheridan, Lilly Knight.

Westport; Mrs. O'Brien, Anne Conway.

Carrowkennedy; Mrs. Maria Tunney, Catherine O'Malley.

Killawalla; Mrs. P. McGlynn, Mrs. P. Bourke.

Murrisk/Lecanvey; Nora Bradley, B. Mortimer.

Tourmakeady; Margaret Costelloe, Mrs. Rabbett.

Islandeady; Mary Ellen Staunton, Katie Jordan.

Castlebar; Annie Mary Staunton, Mrs. B. Morahan.

Strength

The strength of Westport District Council at the time of the Truce, 11 July 1921 was **579** members. For the Civil War period the strength stood at **484** members. Newport **48** members, Kilmeena **16**, Brockagh **27**, Glenhest **61**, Tiernaur **32**, Shramore **34**, Aughagower **53**, Westport **65**, Killawalla **69**, Murrisk/Lecanvey **11**, Tourmakeady **30**, Islandeady **20**, Castlebar **60**, Carrowkennedy **58**.

² Editor's note – Lilly Knight was the sister of Margaret (Meg) Connery who was prominent in the Irish Women's Franchise League. Micheál Casey has written an article about Meg Connery for the next issue of this Journal.

Activity

The guerrilla-type campaign waged by the IRA between 1919-1923 could not have been sustained without the help and cooperation of Cumann na mBan. The Army (IRA) operated in small mobile active service units that traversed the countryside seeking to engage, or evade, enemy forces that were gaining in strength daily. These mobile columns were constantly moving about in the brigade area and were living off the people. It was not unusual for a column of men to call on a village, or townland, seeking food and places to rest. They would usually call on an area where there was strong support for the independence movement and would have sent a messenger ahead to prepare the ground. Families would volunteer to house and feed the men, and this is where the Cumann na mBan women came into the picture. Extra food would be cooked, wet clothes dried, socks would be mended, etc. As the men rested, women would stay alert for the RIC and Military. The women were entrusted to carry important messages, or to bring arms and ammunition to further places. There are many cases of the women acting as nurses to wounded or war-exhausted men. This does not mean that the enemy treated the women with kid gloves. There are many accounts of women being physically assaulted by the RIC and military.

The Treaty and Civil War

Cumann na mBan, as an organisation, rejected the terms of the Anglo/Irish Treaty and stayed faithful to their vision of an Irish Republic. An average of 83% of the members stayed true to the principles of the Cumann na mBan constitution. Those who opposed the new institutions soon found themselves interned by the Free State government in Kilmainham Prison, and later at the North Dublin Union and various places of detention about the country. They endured long terms of hunger strikes and solitary confinement for upholding their principles in 1922/23. Like the released men of the IRA, Cumann na mBan members emigrated by the thousand, never to return. Cumann na mBan, as an organisation, was not recognised in the 1924 Military Pension Scheme and consequently members were denied any pensions for services rendered from 1915-1923.

The pension application of Agnes Gallagher, Westport

Agnes Gallagher lived at Bridge Street, Westport. She belonged to an old Fenian family and was a cousin to the MacBrides, Gills and Hawkshaws in the town. Agnes lived with her sister and ran a musical academy for children from her home. She was amongst the first to join Cumann na mBan in Westport in 1915 and became very prominent in the organisation. In 1935 she applied to the Pension Board for a Military Service Pension. Her application became controversial, as she was claiming for a rank in Cumann na mBan that could not be verified easily. She appeared to be at odds with those who were representing the organisation on the Westport District Council later in 1935.

According to her pension submission, Agnes Gallagher claimed to have been the main organiser of fund-raising concerts for the Irish Volunteers and Fianna Eireann in Westport. She joined in 1915 and soon was elected Captain of the branch. Her home was at Bridge Street and soon it became a calling-house for the other revolutionary organisations locally. In 1916 an IRB meeting was held at her home, attended by Arthur Griffith, Michael Kilroy, Tom Derrig, Ned Moane and others. There was constant coming and going at her home. Agnes also organised a concert for Easter Monday night at the Town Hall, unaware of the oncoming momentous events. The concert was actually in progress when word came through of the rising in Dublin. In the following weeks Cumann na mBan was very busy organising financial aid for the dependents of the men that were being imprisoned in Britain. Again, Agnes used her many musical connections in organising musical fund-raisers.

The prisoners were all released by Christmas 1916 and a great reorganising momentum then followed. Outlying areas such as Aughagower, Cushlough, Kilmeena, etc. were recruiting the girls and women in their areas, and their first port of call in Westport was always Agnes Gallagher's home, as they sought literature and information on the organisation. In 1918 Tessie Moane, the local president of Cumann na mBan in Westport, migrated to Cork city when she got married. Agnes Gallagher now assumed the leadership in the Westport branch of the organisation, a position she claimed she held until the ending of the civil war.

The First Dáil Eireann met on January 1919 and officially the Anglo/Irish War had begun. Cumann na mBan played its part and threw its weight behind Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers. (Now known as the IRA from this time) Sinn Féin set up Arbitration Courts nationally and in Westport these were held in the town hall. Agnes Gallagher allowed her home to be used as an office for the courts and this attracted the attention of the RIC that had now been augmented by the shabbily dressed new recruits, known as the Black and Tans. Later, the Auxiliary RIC arrived in Westport and wanted to take over her home as a billet. This was the cause of Agnes's music academy closing and her only source of income was lost to her. Owing to this intimidation Agnes decided to leave the town for a period. She went to the islands where she stayed with her relations, the Gills. Not one to be idle, Agnes started to organise the women there into Cumann na mBan volunteers. On returning from the islands Agnes was again busy running despatches and organising clothes and food for the men of the ASU's that kept to the hills around the town.

The Anglo/Irish Truce came in July 1921 and this was a great relief to all. Cumann na mBan organised concerts and dances again in the town hall, and even invited the local Auxiliaries from 'E' Company to attend. The Treaty negotiations soon

showed that the Republic was going to be a diluted version of what had been fought for. Cracks were showing in Sinn Féin and the IRA, but Cumann na mBan stood steady, and when the final results were made known the organisation rejected what was on offer.

The Civil War came and soon Agnes found that she was in conflict with former republican comrades in the town. The Free State forces that landed from the sea on 24 July 1922 took Westport easily. This force soon moved on but left a garrison at Westport Town Hall. Agnes now became the main courier for IRA despatches in the Westport area and had to make several visits to Dublin with important information. The future president of the Republic, Sean T. O'Kelly, was her contact in the city. She also knew some of the local men that had joined the new Free State Army and who showed a willingness to sell arms and ammunition to her. Nine Lee Enfield rifles disappeared from the town hall and made their way to Agnes's custody. She also purchased rifle ammunition at £2 per 1000 rounds from the same source. The West Mayo Brigade ASU was billeted at Lanmore in September 1922 and Agnes brought much of the acquired material there to the men.

In the earlier years of the national struggle Agnes had been very friendly with Joe Ruddy, and they had been members of the local Sinn Féin Cumann then. Now, in November 1922, they were on opposite sides of the political fence. He was the O/C of the Free State garrison and she was leader of Cumann na mBan in Westport. However, they were still on talking terms and civil to each other. In a conversation with Joe Ruddy on 23 November she ascertained that on the following day he was going to lead an attack on Newport where the IRA was reported to be congregating for an important 4th Western Divisional meeting. Was it a tip-off from Ruddy, or a case of indiscretion and loose talk? Whatever, Agnes decided to act. That evening, under cover of darkness, she proceeded to Newport on foot. Getting as far as Kilmeena, she encountered some Free State soldiers at a bridge. They heard her as she took a short cut across a stream and they fired some shots at her. She eventually made it to the home of the Feehans at Rossow and the message was then taken to Newport. Agnes was almost sixty years of age at this time. The attack on Newport came the next day by a massive FSA force with artillery, resulting in at least five FSA deaths, including Joe Ruddy, and the capture of Michael Kilroy, General of the Western Command of the IRA.

Agnes was eventually arrested in February 1923 and moved to several prisons before ending up in Kilmainham Prison where most of the Cumann na mBan prisoners were being held. Later, they were forcibly and brutally moved to the old North Dublin Union at Grangegorman. Agnes endured two hunger strikes there and this left her eyesight impaired for the rest of her life. She was released in September 1923 and returned home to Westport.

In 1934 the government introduced a new Military Pension Act, which included Cumann na mBan. Agnes applied for a pension in 1935 and it took seven years, until 1942, for it to be granted. She got all her former comrades in the national struggle to vouch for her, and a long list of people such as Michael Kilroy, TD, Minister Tom Derrig, TD, Joe Baker, Broddy Malone, Ned Moane TD and others gave letters endorsing her application. She was finally awarded a Grade E pension recognising her services from April 1919 to September 1923. She later claimed under the Disability Act for loss of eyesight, but this was turned down. Agnes received £17-10-0 per annum as a pension in 1942. She died in 1946 aged eighty-six years of age.

Bibliography

All information in this article was taken from the Cumann na mBan rolls which are held at the Bureau of Military History, Dublin. Agnes Gallagher's pension information, MSP34 Ref 3344, is to be found at the Military Service Pension application site at the same source.

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