



# HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

## Standing together: Cumann na mBan in Athlone



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During the Irish War of Independence, 1919-1921, Cumann na mBan played an important role in Athlone, as it did across Ireland.

Founded in 1914, Cumann na mBan (the Women's Council) operated as an auxiliary force to the Irish Republican Army and its members gathered intelligence, carried dispatches and provided safehouses for the IRA.

### The same old fight

Cumann na mBan tended to be strongest in regions where the IRA was also strong. In Westmeath, this meant that Cumann na mBan was most active in the area around Athlone.

In many instances, members of Cumann na mBan had brothers who were prominent members of the local IRA. For example, Mary Claffey (later Fanning) of Castledaly was an organiser for Cumann na mBan and two of her siblings were members of the Athlone Brigade's flying column.

As with the local IRA, in which a core of members drove brigade activities such as the flying column, Cumann na mBan in the Athlone area relied on a relatively small group of active members, some of whom we will discuss below.

During 1919, local Cumann na mBan branches devoted much of their energy to fundraising with newspapers reporting on a range of activities from social events to selling flags. Such efforts were often disrupted by the Crown forces. For example, Daisy Mulvihill from Coosan, was charged before the Athlone Petty Sessions in June 1919 for selling flags 'to aid a fund promoted by the Cumann na mBan Executive for the starving population of Europe'. (The charges, of selling items without a permit, were later dismissed.)

Cumann na mBan also played a prominent role in local political events such as Laurence Ginnell's visit to Athlone in 1919, as well as during a visit to the town by a delegation of Irish-American politicians that same

year. Bridget Reynolds, as 'President of Cumann na mBan' in Athlone, provided speeches on both occasions, telling Ginnell that 'As our forefather stood on the old bridge that the Sassanagh and tyrant could not pass, it is with you that we, the women of Coosan, stand in the same old fight ...'

### An illegal organisation

Such public demonstrations and speeches became illegal after November 1919 when Cumann na mBan was banned (as were the Volunteers, Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League), although local members took part in subsequent public demonstrations, such as those in support of incarcerated republicans during April 1920. During the remainder of the War of Independence, Cumann na mBan members were forced to work mostly in secret, particularly from summer 1920 as the violence intensified.

In Westmeath, Reynolds and others engaged in dispatch carrying, the provision of medical care and intelligence work. Unfortunately, many of the details of Cumann na mBan's work were never recorded, particularly with regard to intelligence gathering. David Daly, an IRA officer from Moate, stated that intelligence work in the county was done 'verbally' since 'records were a dangerous thing to keep'.

This makes it difficult to quantify the extent to which Cumann na mBan doubled as an intelligence service although according to many later accounts – witness statements, pension files and newspaper articles – it was one of the local IRA's few successful sources of intelligence. Cumann na mBan members were routinely tasked with ferrying documents between IRA battalions.

For example, Brighid O'Mullane, an organiser for Cumann na mBan between 1917 and 1921, recalled creating 'a secret line of communications' between Athlone and Dublin. She described how Cumann na mBan members in Athlone would bring information to the 'nearest Cumann na mBan Company Captain', who passed the information to a higher officer in the organisation. That person would then 'take over control of the messages and ensure their safe and secret despatch to Dublin'.

Patrick Lennon, a member of the



Members of Cumann na mBan protesting outside Dublin's Mountjoy Prison in July 1921. The organisation played an important role in Athlone during the War of Independence

IRA's Athlone Brigade, named Nellie Galvin, Cissie Tully and a Miss Connolly – all members of Cumann na mBan's Summerhill branch – as particularly important to the IRA in the Athlone area: 'They often carried dispatches for us and were able to get through hold-ups and cordons of the enemy.' Mary Halligan, of Carricknaughton near Athlone, was another who took on this role.

According to Mary's obituary in the *Westmeath Independent* in 1954, she 'was a most active member' of Cumann na mBan, who 'risked her life on many occasions carrying dispatches.' At times, Cumann na mBan members were deployed as scouts and Bridget Reynolds later stated that, in October 1920, she helped IRA volunteers escape capture by the Crown forces after local units attacked a British army patrol boat on the Shannon.

Annie O'Connor (later Dowling), noted for her skills as an organiser, was someone whom the Athlone Brigade relied upon to gather intelligence, transport weapons and scout enemy forces. Such work involved substantial risk and Agnes

Shortall, a well-known local member of Cumann na mBan from Drumraney, later described going 'on the run' for six months in 1921, a period during which, she believed, her health was permanently damaged. As part of her duties, Shortall often transported dispatches from the Athlone Brigade to Dublin.

### Safe houses

Cumann na mBan also aided the IRA by providing safe houses and medical care. Mary Halligan, apart from carrying dispatches, provided 'shelter for those on the run in her home where they were ever sure of a welcome and safe harbour from the enemy'. In Coosan, Bridget Reynolds' family provided the same function for the IRA. Another safe house was provided in Tang by Mary McLoughlin (later Mary McLoughlin Coughlan).

Mary joined the Tang branch of Cumann na mBan in early 1921, subsequently attending first aid lectures and raising funds. Until the Truce in July 1921, her house was frequently used by IRA volunteers for whom she provided food and first aid, stored weapons and carried

dispatches. She would later become captain of the Tang branch.

Mary McLoughlin's training in first aid was common to members of Cumann na mBan. In Athlone, Eilis O'Brien, a member of the local Red Cross, provided medical care to IRA volunteers as did Bridget Reynolds. Among Reynolds' most notable patients was George Adamson after he had been badly wounded in a confrontation with Black and Tans. Many women, who were not necessarily prominent members of Cumann na mBan, provided care and first aid to IRA volunteers.

Eileen Walsh (later Murphy), for example, had played an important role in Athlone and Mullingar before the Easter Rising, carrying dispatches from Dublin. However, she got married a few months later, after which she was 'mostly taken up with the affairs of my family and house'.

In the years after 1916, she continued to help 'the National movement without being an active member of Cumann na mBan.' There were, undoubtedly, many others who kept a similarly low profile and whose contributions went unrecorded.

