



Seven Women
of the
Labour Movement

Seven Women of the Labour Movement 1916

Written and researched by Sinéad McCoolle.

List of women of the Irish Citizen Army:

Garrison of the General Post Office:

Winifred Carney;

Garrison of St Stephen's Green/College of Surgeons:

Countess de Markievicz,
Mary Devereux (Mrs Allen),
Nellie Gifford (Mrs Donnelly),
Margaret Ryan (Mrs Dunne),
Bridget Gough;
Madeleine French Mullen,
Rosie Hackett,
Mrs Joyce,
Chris Caffery (Mrs Keeley),
Annie Kelly, Mary Hyland (Mrs Kelly),
Lily Kempson, Mrs Norgrove,
Kathleen Seerey (Mrs Redmond),
Margaret Skinnider;

City Hall Garrison:

Dr Kathleen Lynn,
Helena Molony,
Jennie Shanahan,
Miss Connolly (Mrs Barrett),
Bridget Brady,
Mollie O'Reilly (Mrs Corcoran),
Bridget Davis (Mrs Duffy),
Annie Norgrove (Mrs Grange),
Emily Norgrove, (Mrs Hanratty),
Bessie Lynch (Mrs Kelly);

Imperial Hotel Garrison:

Martha Walsh (Mrs Murphy).

[Source: RM Fox, *The History of the Irish Citizen Army*, James Duffy & Co Ltd, 1944.]

In 1900, as the new century dawned, large numbers of women were beginning to take part in active politics. They came from diverse backgrounds and united in common causes such as the rights of workers. These women were activists and workers at a time when it was both 'unladylike' and 'disreputable' for them to take part in politics. They suffered poverty, imprisonment, ill-health and, in some cases,

premature death because of their stance. In 1911 the Irish Women Workers' Union was established. James Connolly wrote: *"The militant women who without abandoning their fidelity to duty, are yet teaching their sisters to assert their rights, are re-establishing a sane and perfect balance that makes more possible a well ordered Irish nation"*

Inspired by the leadership of James Larkin and James Connolly strikes became more frequent until 1913 when over 20,000 workers took part in what became known as the *Lock Out*. It began in 1913 and continued until the early months of 1914. This brought more women in touch with the labour movement. Madeleine French Mullen, Countess de Markievicz and Fiona Plunkett were included amongst other women who were motivated by humanitarian instincts to assist those who were affected by the strike. They assisted in the soup kitchen and took part in food distribution in Connolly's Free Food Organisation set up for the strikers and their families.



In November 1913 the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) was formed as a workers' defence corps for the protection of the workers at strike meetings. Previous to this, police had been breaking up strike meetings - on 3 July 1913 a baton charge in O'Connell Street resulted in 300 people being injured.

By 1914 the Irish Citizen Army, then under the leadership of James Connolly, had become an 'Irish Revolutionary Army'. It was the first Irish Army to admit women to its ranks and give them equal status. According to James Connolly's daughter, Nora, her father constantly said '*that no movement was assured of success that had not women in it.*' Connolly also wrote '*Win the women to your cause and your cause is secure.*' When some of the men complained that the women's section would be an encumbrance in the event of an uprising James Connolly responded that if none of the men turned out, the fight would go on with the women. In the early months of 1916 the basement of Liberty Hall was turned into a munitions works with scores of women and girls working.

In RM Fox's words: *These civilian soldiers staked their lives for the dream of freedom. When men and women are ready to do this it is surely a sign that human freedom can never be crushed.* Members of the Irish Citizen Army produced the highest-ranking officers in the Rising; Countess de Markievicz (the only woman sentenced to death); Dr Kathleen Lynn; and the only woman wounded on active service - Margaret Skinnider.

James Connolly had written: '*of what use to such sufferers can be re-establishment of any form of Irish state if it does not embody the emancipation of womanhood.* His own beliefs are embodied in the words of the Proclamation of the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic:

“ The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally ... ”

In this document Thomas J Clarke, Thomas MacDonagh, PH Pearse, Sean MacDiarmada, Eamonn Ceannt and Joseph Plunkett, together James Connolly pledged that a national government would be representative of the whole people of Ireland and elected by the suffrage of all her men and women.

The Proclamation contains much of James Connolly's philosophy; linking nationalism with democracy, which he saw as the two sides of the one movement. The women he inspired continued to work for his ideals, although prevented from taking part in the governing of their country, Ireland, when independence was finally gained. They continued to work for Irishmen and Irishwomen in the labour movement, in trade unions, local government and for the improvement of the lives of their fellow countrymen and women in the areas of health, education and working for social justice for all.

1. Dr Kathleen Lynn

(1874-1955)

Chief Medical Officer, City Hall Garrison, 1916.

According to Dr Kathleen Lynn's biographer, Maria Mulholland, she was '*an unlikely candidate for revolutionary politics and even less so as an espouser of a united Irish Socialist Republic*'.



Kathleen Florence Lynn was born in Mullaghfarry, County Mayo, on 28 January 1874, the daughter of a Church of Ireland Rector, Robert Lynn. Her childhood was spent in Mayo and Longford. Kathleen was sent to school in Dublin, attending Alexandra College for girls. The school advocated the rights of women and introduced women to suffrage. Kathleen became an activist and joined groups that advocating Irish Women's Suffrage as well as becoming a member of the Local Government Association in 1903. She became a doctor when few women were in the profession.

She was described in her school magazine as 'one of the most gifted student doctors', winning the Barker Anatomical Prize from the Royal College of Surgeons, a distinction '*not hitherto achieved by a woman*.' Kathleen was awarded degrees in medicine, surgery and obstetrics from the Royal University in 1899, aged 25. She had interned in National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street (1897-1899), The Rotunda (1899) The Royal Victoria Eye and Ear (1902-1916) and the Richmond Lunatic Asylum. In 1909 she was made a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons.

It was Helena Molony who brought Dr Kathleen Lynn in touch with the national movement. At the time of the *Lock Out* of 1913, Kathleen became active in the relief efforts for workers and their families who had taken part in the strike and had been locked out by their employers. When the Irish Citizen Army was established for the protection of workers, she gave classes in first aid for members. She was appointed Chief Medical Officer with rank of the Captain but she did not take part in drilling.

During the Easter Rising Dr Kathleen Lynn was ordered to join the City Hall Garrison. When arrested, she described herself as '*a red cross doctor and a*

belligerent. When she told the arresting officer, she was a doctor, but also belonged to the Irish Citizen Army, it surprised him very much. After the Rising she was held under house arrest until August 1916. Dr Lynn remained active in politics after the Rising, joining Sinn Féin and taking part in the War of Independence. She opposed the Treaty of 1921 and, although elected to the Dáil, did not take her seat. By 1926 she withdrew from national politics but continued with her involvement in local politics. Her main preoccupation for the remainder of her life was St Ultan's Hospital (Teach Ultain), which she had founded in 1919 with the assistance of her friend Madeleine French Mullen. It was the first infant hospital in Dublin.

2. Countess de Markievicz 1868-1927.

Second in Command at the St Stephen's Green/College of Surgeons Garrison.



Constance Gore Booth of Sligo became the wife of a Polish Count and was officially known as Countess de Markievicz. Her contemporaries simply knew her as Madam. An artist and an actress, Countess de Markievicz came to the national, social and labour causes in her forties. In 1909 she wrote: *'A Free Ireland with no sex disabilities in her Constitution should be the motto of all Nationalist women ... the old idea that a woman can only serve her nation through her home is gone; so now in time; on you the responsibility rests.'*

The Countess joined a number of organisations such as the Daughters of Ireland, (Inghinidhe na hEireann) contributing to its paper *Bean na hEireann*. Together with Bulmer Hobson and others she founded a youth organisation for boys, Fianna Eireann. She rented a hall in Camden Street and a cottage in Sandyford, County Dublin, as places where the boys could train. She wrote a manual for them.

During the 1913 *Lock Out* Countess de Markievicz worked in the soup kitchen. Contemporaries recall her *'dressed in trousers and smoking cigarettes'* but her involvement was far more substantial, according to Sidney Gifford: *'she was working day and night collecting funds and serving meals in the food kitchen. Her home has become a sort of refugee camp for all those who had got into trouble with the police.'* Helena Molony described the Countess as *'working, as a man might have worked for the freedom of Ireland.'*

When the Irish Citizen Army was formed she immediately joined, contributing actively to the organisation. She was appointed an Honorary Treasurer. She took part during Easter Week as a member of the Irish Citizen Army. The plan was for the Countess to travel around the various outposts in Dr Lynn's car, but when she got to St Stephen's Green, she stayed there with Michael Mallin. Her rank was Staff Lieutenant and she became Second-in-Command in the garrison. As one of the leaders of the Rising, Countess de Markievicz was sentenced to death. This was

commuted to penal servitude for life because she was a woman. She was imprisoned until June 1917.

In the 1918 General Election she became the first female elected to the House of Commons. She refused to take her seat as she supported the Sinn Féin policy of abstentionism. She was appointed Minister of Labour in the First Dáil, 1919-1921, but spent much of this period in jail.

She opposed the Treaty and was imprisoned in Civil War. She was an abstentionist TD in 1923 and refused to take the oath of allegiance and thus did not enter the Dáil. Although a founder member of the Fianna Fáil party, she died in 1927 before they entered government.

3. Helena Molony

1884-1967

City Hall Garrison 1916.

It was Helena Molony, described as *'a clever and attractive girl with a tremendous power for making friends'*, who brought both Dr Kathleen Lynn and Countess de Markievicz into the labour movement.



Helena joined Maud Gonne's Daughters of Ireland (Inghinidhe na hEireann), a group of women activists brought together after they were prohibited from joining the all male nationalist organisations. It was Helena's idea to start a paper and she became Editor of *Bean na hEireann*: *'A women's paper, advocating militancy, separatism and feminism.'* Helena wrote the labour notes, later describing how she went to the Trades Hall to obtain information, as this predated the formation of a 'labour movement.' She also made contact with James Connolly, who was still in America, as they had common interests in nationalism and labour.

In 1913, the year of the *Lock Out* she addressed meetings and assisted at the soup kitchen in Liberty Hall. She later told how her time in Liberty Hall gave her an insight into social conditions prevailing in Dublin and she was consumed with *'an intense desire'* to end these conditions and *'replace them with a just social order.'*

In 1915 she became the Secretary of Irish Women Workers' Union. The office of the Union, at 29 Eden Quay, was the centre of activities and Helena knew all the men who would later form the Military Council, which planned the Rising.

At this point in her career was as an actress taking part in early productions in the Abbey Theatre. She acted in her last production two days before the Rising, which commenced at Easter 1916.

When Helena arrived at the GPO, on 24 April 1916, James Connolly assigned her to the City Hall Garrison. It was hoped that this garrison could take Dublin Castle. There were 16 men and 9 women in the garrison. Unable to take the Castle, Captain

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Sean Connolly, an employee of City Hall, was able to gain entry to that building instead.

Helena Molony was imprisoned for seven months. She told the authorities that the Irish Citizen Army had organised the Rising and would do so again. She was released from prison on Christmas Eve, 1916.

RM Fox's writes in his *Rebel Irishwomen* of Molony: '*The most valuable heritage of the Irish Labour movement to-day is the Connolly tradition, and if there is one person who embodies this more than any other, it is Helena Molony, for she worked side by side with Connolly to create it.*'

From 1917 Helena Molony worked as an organiser of the Irish Women Workers' Union. Still active in politics, she was a member of Sinn Féin, a courier during the War of Independence, and active in Civil War she opposed the new Irish Free State government.

In later years she was a member of the Trades and Labour Council and occupied a position of trust in the labour movement up until the 1960s.

4. Winnie Carney 1887-1943

The GPO Garrison 1916.



Maria Winifred Carney (known as Winnie) was born in Bangor, County Down, but moved when she was a child to the Falls Road in Belfast.

Trained as a secretary and shorthand typist, she became secretary to the Irish Textile Workers Union in 1912. In 1913 she was actively involved in fundraising for the locked-out Dublin workers. As a result of her involvement in trade unionism she came in contact with James Connolly, then living in Belfast. She became his personal secretary. According to her biographer, Helga Woggon, she was the person most intimately acquainted with Connolly's political ideas and plans.

She was in agreement with him that the Great War, which had commenced in 1914, was the correct time to stage a rebellion, even if it was only of symbolic value. She received a telegram on 14 April 1916 from Connolly telling her to come to Dublin immediately. Initially she was the only woman at the headquarters of the General Post Office and one of three women remaining when the garrison evacuated the burning building and relocated to Moore Street. She was arrested and held in Kilmainham, Mountjoy and Aylesbury Jails until Christmas, 1916.

Promoting a Workers' Republic she stood unsuccessfully for election in 1918. She stood as a candidate for Sinn Féin in the Central/East Victoria Division. As this was a Unionist area, she had no hope of victory. She wrote '*without agents, committee rooms, canvassers or vehicles ... it was amazing to me that 395 people went to the ballot box of their own initiative.*'

Her energies were always focused on labour and socialist activities. She was involved with the ITGWU; the Socialist Party of Ireland and in the 1920s she was an active member of the Labour Party in Northern Ireland (NILP).

She did not agree with the new Irish Free State government and was entirely opposed to partition. She never changed her ideals; she remained a nationalist and a socialist and committed to the ideals of James Connolly – a Workers' Republic.

Years of ill health meant that she was not active in politics in her latter years. She died in November 1943.

5. Nora Connolly O'Brien 1893-1981 Courier to the North, 1916 Rising.



Nora was the second daughter of James Connolly. In 1902 when she was eight Nora accompanied her father on a lecture tour in Scotland. Henceforth Nora was a devotee of her father's politics. When Nora reached her teens she began accompanying her father to his meetings in the US and became a business manager of his publication *The Harp*. In 1911 the Connolly family had moved to Belfast. In Belfast Nora was a founder member of the Young Republican Party, the girls' branch of the Fianna and a member of the Belfast Cumann na mBan.

Nora did not take part in the Rising as she was sent as a courier to the North, as she described she was one of '*a band of couriers sent to all parts of Ireland, trying to avert disaster, to countermand the countermand.*' She travelled to the North but she failed to persuade key activists there to join in the fight. Unsuccessful she made her way back to Dublin by train, by car and on foot. By the time she reached Dublin the fight was at an end. Her wounded father was in prison and days later he was executed for his part in the Rising.

After the Rising Nora managed to travel to the US on a false passport, there she gave a series of lectures on the Rising and later in 1918 had her account of the Rising as *The Unbroken Tradition*, published in New York.

Nora took part in the War of Independence. She opposed the Treaty and was imprisoned during the Civil War. In the 1930s Nora and her husband Seamus O'Brien ran a shop and lending library in Rialto. During this time Nora and Seamus worked at building up the Labour Party and the Irish Citizen Army. This proved difficult. They moved to Drimnagh and ran a small branch of the organisation there. In 1939 when the objective of a Workers' Republic was removed from the constitution of the party, she and her husband retired completely.

In her latter years she was a Senator. She was also a member of the Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Society. She continued to promote her father's writings and legacy. She wrote a number of book including *James Connolly Wrote for Today – Socialism* published in 1978 and *We Shall Rise Again*, which was published after her death in 1981.

6. Margaret Skinnider 1893-1971

St Stephen's Green/College of Surgeons Garrison 1916.



Margaret Skinnider was born to Irish parents in 1893, twelve miles from Glasgow. Her childhood summers were spent in County Monaghan. She wrote: '*Scotland is my home, but Ireland is my country.*' After school she trained as a teacher of Mathematics. She joined Cumann na mBan in Glasgow. She learned to shoot a rifle at a club that was organised to allow civilians assist 'with the defence of the Empire.' Margaret had other intentions. At Christmas 1915, the 23 old came to

Ireland and met with Countess de Markievicz who knew of her work in Glasgow Cumann na mBan. Margaret smuggled detonators for bombs in her hat. During this visit to Ireland she took part in a number of operations to obtain arms and explosives. During her visit to Ireland Thomas MacDonagh, (later executed in 1916), gave her a revolver, which was one of her prize possessions.

She was told of the plans for the Rising and came to Ireland on Holy Thursday, 1916. Countess de Markievicz had a uniform made for her. Margaret joined the Irish Citizen Army as a dispatch rider and she was a scout for the St Stephen's Green garrison. She was mentioned three times for bravery in the dispatches sent to the GPO. On the Wednesday she was wounded. She was hospitalised for 7 weeks. The doctors decided she was too ill to be imprisoned and she evaded arrest on her release from hospital. She even managed to obtain a special permit to leave Dublin and returned to Glasgow. In 1917 she went to the US where she lectured on the Rising. She also wrote her story there, published in New York in 1917 as *Doing my bit for Ireland*.

She returned to Ireland and would remain living in Ireland for the rest of her life. She was active during the War of Independence and Civil War (she opposed the Treaty). In 1922 she was paymaster General for the IRA. She was imprisoned and held in the North Dublin Union where she became Director of Training for the prisoners.

After her release from prison she worked as a teacher in the Sisters of Charity primary school in Kings Inn Street, a position that she retained until her retirement in

1961. She was a member of the National Teacher's Organisation, the INTO. She was a member of the central executive for many years. She was involved in a striking working committee. Following the return to work she was appointed to the salaries and the arbitration committee. She became President of the INTO in 1956. During her tenure as President she represented Ireland at the World Conference of the Organisation of the Teaching Professions in Manila, Philippines. She fought in particular for the rights of women - this agitation resulted in the introduction of common incremental salary scales for women and single men in 1949. She lived her last years in Glenageary, County Dublin. She died on 10 October 1971 and was buried in the Republican plot in Glasnevin Cemetery.

7. Madeline French Mullen

1880-1944.

St Stephen's Green/College of Surgeons Garrison.



Madeleine French Mullen was the eldest child of St Laurence French Mullen a Fleet Surgeon in the Royal Navy. She was born in Malta in 1880 when her father was stationed there. She came to live in Ireland when her father retired. She was greatly influenced by his profession and she spent her life caring for others. According to her life long friend, Kathleen Lynn she *'hated exploitation, want and greed. From her childhood she tried to play her part in every movement for the social welfare and betterment of people.'* Therefore it is not surprising that she was drawn into the labour movement, which endeavoured to bring about better social conditions in Ireland.

Madeleine was also an early member of the Daughters of Ireland (Inghinidhe na hEireann) the organisation founded by Maud Gonne in 1900. Madeleine wrote in their newspaper *Bean na hEireann*. She wrote a children's column under the pen names of 'Dectora' or 'M O'Callaghan'. She was active in the campaign to provide school dinners for children, which was started by the Daughters of Ireland.

Her humanitarian motivations meant that during the *Lock Out* of 1913 she was one of the staff of the soup kitchen in Liberty Hall. She joined the ranks of Cumann na mBan and later the Irish Citizen Army. She met Dr Kathleen Lynn at a lecture on first aid and their lifelong friendship began.

During the Easter Rising of 1916 Madeleine was part of the St Stephen's Green/College of Surgeons Garrison. As a Lieutenant Madeleine had fifteen women directly under her command during the fighting. Her duties included overseeing the commandeering of vehicles, removing civilians from the area, guarding the entrances to the Green and tending the wounded. During the fighting she was promoted to the rank of Sergeant.

She was arrested when the garrison surrendered on 30 April. She was first held in Kilmainham Jail and later transferred to Mountjoy Jail until she was released on 4 June 1916.

After the Rising she worked for the Connolly Co-Operative Society, which found work for those activists who were made unemployed by their participation in the fighting during Easter Week. Madeleine was a 'prime mover' in setting up the shirt factory in Liberty Hall, which was in operation for a short period of time.

Her life's work was to improve the conditions of the poor. She co-founded St Ultan's, the first infant hospital in Dublin, working tirelessly in its day to day running. In 1935 she became a founder member of the Joint Committee of Women's Societies and Social Workers. Committed to the welfare of people in the area of Ranelagh/Rathmines she served as an Urban District Councillor and was actively involved in the Ultan's Utility Society and the Charlemont Utility Society, that provided new homes for former tenement dwellers.

For further information see:

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