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FEMINIST POLITICAL THOUGHT AND ACTIVISM IN REVOLUTIONARY IRELAND, *c.* 1880–1918

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ABSTRACT. Feminist thought and activism was a feature of Irish political life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because the women's suffrage campaign coincided with and was at times influenced by wider debates on the national question, it has often been understood almost entirely in relation to Irish nationalism and unionism, and usually in the specific context of acute political crisis such as the third Home Rule. The Irish suffrage movement should instead be understood both in terms of wider political developments and in particular Irish contexts. This paper surveys aspects of feminist political culture with a particular emphasis on the way that nationalist Irish women articulated and negotiated their involvement in the women's suffrage movement. It argues that the relationship between the two was both more nuanced and dynamic than has been allowed, and that opposition to women's activism should be understood in structural and cultural terms as well as in broadly political ones. The relationship should also be understood in longer historical terms than is usual as it also evolved in the context of broader political and social shifts and campaigns, some of which predated the third Home Rule crisis.

There was no single body of feminist thought in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. Neither should we expect there to have been, given how broad feminism was and how likely Irish women were to be motivated by a range of political ideas well beyond their feminist concerns. For many of the activists at the heart of the Irish Revolution, male and female, this was a period of multi-faceted political and cultural activity. It was, according to the actress and nationalist, Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, who thrived in Dublin's nationalist *demi-monde*, an era of 'innumerable little clubs and societies, of diverse moments, aimed at the establishment of a new order'.[1] Activists dedicated to one cause alone were a rare species: most were extraordinarily busy and deeply involved in a range of organisations and programmes as well as working, studying and often bringing up families. Feminist activists were no exception as they too

[1] Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years: Recollections of Maire Nic Shiubhlaigh's Story of the Irish National Theatre as Told to Edward Kenny* (Dublin, 1955), 3.

threw themselves into supporting a variety of political, cultural and social causes.

This paper is primarily concerned with the question of how nationalist women articulated and negotiated their feminist ideas and activism during the revolutionary period, with an emphasis on women's suffrage as a manifestation of feminist political thought and action. While remaining a very under-researched area, a historiographical consensus on the way that feminism and nationalism interacted in revolutionary Ireland emerged in the 1980s and was, until relatively recently, largely unchallenged. Spearheaded by the research of Beth McKillen and Margaret Ward, it set the tone of most subsequent analysis of the relationship between nationalism and feminism.[2] Ward's pioneering research explored the barriers to women's involvement in male and mixed sex nationalist organisation in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. She argued that the 'contradictions' between feminism and nationalism were at times overwhelming for the women involved,[3] and concluded that an overriding 'emotional and ideological identification with nationalism' was an important factor in preventing politically active women from developing a broader form of liberation, and that this identification 'ultimately dissipated their radical potential'.[4]

McKillen addressed related questions, arguing that 'the feminist cause in Ireland' had been deeply damaged by constitutional and, in particular, separatist nationalism before 1916.[5] Her argument was based on three fundamental premises: that male (and female) separatists failed to support suffrage 'because of their belief that women's emancipation had to be deferred until Irish independence was won';[6] that divisions between feminists over prioritising women's suffrage over Irish nationalism weakened the women's movement; and that the Easter Rising, and the Proclamation of Independence which guaranteed equal rights for all Irish citizens, changed this dynamic fundamentally.

Underlying both positions was the idea that 'nationalist groups in Ireland were profoundly conservative on issues relating to gender equality'.[7] Although both Ward and McKillen identified individuals

[2] Beth McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and Nationalist Separatism, 1914–23', *Eire-Ireland*, 17 (1982), 52–67; Beth McKillen, 'Irish Feminism and Nationalist Separatism, 1914–23, *Eire-Ireland*, 17 (1982), 74–90; Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism* (1989).

[3] Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, 3.

[4] *Ibid.*, 248.

[5] McKillen, 'Irish Feminism', 74.

[6] *Ibid.*, 62.

[7] Maria Luddy, 'Women and Politics', in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, ed. Angela Bourke, Andrew Carpenter and Seamus Deane (5 vols., Cork, 1991–2002), V, 71.

and organisations which proved to be exceptions to this premise, this idea nonetheless informed most subsequent analysis of Irish women's involvement in and contribution to feminist and nationalist activism in modern Ireland. This has had a number of historiographical consequences. Our understanding of the dynamics of the Irish suffrage movement itself has been affected, but so too has our understanding of aspects of Irish nationalism in the revolutionary period and beyond. The often dynamic, sometimes fraught and almost always flexible relationship it enjoyed with feminism has been all too often reduced to a series of mutually exclusive positions which inevitably led to quarrels, most of them coinciding with political flashpoints such as the debate over the third Home Rule Bill.

Unsurprisingly, the reality was far more nuanced and depended as much on changing political circumstances as it did on the particular ideological convictions of individual nationalists. Antipathy towards women's activism was neither universal nor perpetual, and it was based on specific experiences and contexts at least as much as it was based on unmitigated prejudice. Attitudes to suffragism must be seen in structural as well as cultural terms. They must also be seen in longer historical terms than is usually the case. The development of women's political activism in Ireland was clearly affected by the national question, but it also evolved in the context of broader political and social shifts and campaigns, some of which predated the third Home Rule crisis.

Irish nationalism and Irish feminism were diverse and complex movements, both of which consisted of a number of political and social agendas and networks of adherents. The borders of each were elastic. While this made cooperation possible, it did not always make it straightforward. When, for example, the fate of both Home Rule and women's suffrage was largely dependent on Irish votes in the House of Commons in 1912, women's suffrage was pushed to the back of the political queue, sometimes aggressively. Yet, while nationalism could and did constrain feminist activism at times, it could also make possible new forms of political expression for women, and it could even strengthen feminist arguments. Constitutional nationalists recognised this implicitly when they frequently linked the national demand with women's suffrage. As one campaigner argued, the 'two analogous movements, like all those making for human freedom, ought, of course, to advance together'.[8] Their ideological and intellectual linking was for many feminist nationalists both logical and irrefutable.

Strikingly, while many of their nationalist colleagues did not always agree, very few of their organisations were institutionally hostile to feminism's most public manifestation, women's suffrage. The exception

[8] *Freeman's Journal*, 10 Apr. 1912.

to this general rule was the Irish Parliamentary Party, one of Ireland's longest established nationalist organisations. Though radical in British constitutional terms, the Irish Party represented the more respectable face of Irish nationalism as it was dedicated to the peaceful implementation of Home Rule by constitutional means and, in its later phase, to a parliamentary alliance with the Liberal Party. It had little interest in women members though it did, as the pro-suffrage nationalist MP William Redmond complained bitterly, happily accept their money. Criticising anti-suffragist MPs who spoke in a 'lordly way of women' from the Commons' benches, he accused them in 1911 of, 'metaphorically speaking', going down on their knees and begging help from them during election campaigns.[9]

Such criticism was not unusual in high political circles across the UK where women were similarly blocked from the major public institutions of government, while also asked to give generously to the Liberal and Conservative Parties. But, while all the major political parties in the UK adapted to changing circumstances by accepting female members or, at the very least, by sanctioning women's associations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Irish Party alone refused to do so. This was to cost it dearly, especially during the election campaign of 1918 by which time, as its more perceptive critics argued, franchise reform had become the Party's 'winding sheet'.[10]

As has long been recognised by British political historians, legislative changes, especially the Corrupt Practices Act of 1883, ushered in a new period of women's political engagement in the UK. Women had been active in national and local politics before this time, but their work as canvassers and organisers and in party administration and publicity became more prominent, recognised and indispensable from the 1880s.[11] These shifts were reflected in the extraordinary spread and success of the Primrose League from 1883, and of the Women's Liberal Federation from 1886. Both organisations were active in Ireland and played an important role in politicising Irish women, though their impact and reach has not been studied. The Primrose League in particular developed a lively and influential network, which reached a peak of at least thirty-five branches, some of which boasted many hundreds and even thousands of members.[12] The organisation itself was ruled by an exclusively male Grand Council, but women probably took on most of the responsibilities of the local

[9] Parliamentary Franchise (Women) Bill, HC Deb., 11 July 1910, vol. 19, col. 123.

[10] *Irish Independent*, 16 July 1917.

[11] Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2009), 28–42; Jon Lawrence, *Electing our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford, 2009), 84–5.

[12] Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880–1935* (Oxford, 1985), 25–7, 90; Primrose League, Roll of Habitations, MSS Primrose League Adds. 5, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

branches.[13] They canvassed, fund-raised, engaged in propaganda and spoke from public platforms; Primrose League work thus serving as an important apprenticeship for the women who subsequently became involved in new varieties of unionism.

At the same time, women's influence in formal unionist circles expanded. They were excluded from the upper echelons of the Irish Unionist Alliance (IUA) but worked effectively through their network of associated ladies' committees which expanded to twenty-eight branches by 1912.[14] Their influence grew as women became more integral to the unionist machine: by 1900, women could enjoy all the privileges of membership of the IUA 'except election to the General Council or Executive Committee';[15] by 1905, they were sitting on county committees, and the remaining restrictions on their membership were removed from the constitution.[16] The establishment in 1911 of Ireland's largest women's political organisation, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council was, therefore, much more than a reaction to the extraordinary circumstances produced by the third Home Rule crisis. It was the product of the active involvement of women in unionist politics for more than thirty years and, indirectly, it was a reflection of the expansion of women's political activism more generally, especially in the suffrage movement.

There was no equivalent in constitutional nationalist Ireland despite the fact that the majority of the Irish population was Catholic and nationalist, and that nationalist Ireland had a long and successful history of mobilising impressively large swathes of the population. Some nationalist strategists had recognised the potential impact of women's groups. The Irish National League, for example, had vowed to organise ladies' branches in 1889, hoping that nationalist women would 'fight the Primrose Leaguers on their own ground', but nothing seemed to have come of this.[17] This failure to organise women was to have a profound impact on the development of feminism and suffragism, and on constitutional politics more generally.

Why did the Irish Party fail to accommodate women members and so to adapt to what was, by the early twentieth century, a British political norm? It was certainly true, as Diane Urquhart has suggested, that the Irish Party's secure hold on nationalist Ireland meant that it did

[13] Philippe Vervaecke, 'The Primrose League and Women's Suffrage, 1883–1918', in Myriam Boussahba-Bravard, *Suffrage outside Suffragism: Women's Vote in Britain, 1880–1914* (New York, 2007), 182–3.

[14] Irish Unionist Alliance, *Notes from Ireland*, no. 9, vol. 21, 1 Sept. 1912, 98.

[15] Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI), D989/c/3/62, Irish Unionist Alliance, *Annual Report for 1901* (Dublin, 1902), 26.

[16] PRONI, Irish Unionist Alliance, *Annual Report for 1905–06* (Dublin, 1906), 5, 60.

[17] *Nation*, 5 Oct. 1889.

not need to cultivate women's support.[18] Its dominance of nationalist Ireland was such that there was next to no chance of its failing to secure votes and thus parliamentary seats. The same point could, however, be made about the Unionist Party which could likewise count on the votes of its adherents but did not stand in the way of activist women. One might also look to the condition of the Irish Party itself, especially before the First World War. The idea that the Party was in terminal decline, riven by dissent, haemorrhaging financial and moral support and increasingly out of touch with modern Ireland is a well-established theme.[19] Its failure to incorporate women might be viewed in the same context as its alleged failure to promote young parliamentarians and cultural revivalism. But recent studies by James McConnel and Michael Wheatley have challenged these views, suggesting instead that the Party was in fact functioning well, its members and supporters generally united behind its leader, John Redmond, and willing to follow his lead.[20]

The social context in which the Party organised must also be considered. The Irish Parliamentary Party depended on Catholic votes and Catholic money. Necessarily mindful of its relationship with the church and aware of the potential consequences of challenging it too publicly, it was unlikely to depart from Catholic social teaching about gender roles. There was no agreed Catholic position on a woman's role, let alone on women's suffrage, but the Catholic hierarchy was socially conservative. It was suspicious of progressive ideas about higher education and careers for women and it would remain mistrustful of their forays into political activism well into the twentieth century.[21] It is telling that although the Catholic Women's Suffrage Society was founded in England in 1911, an Irish branch was not formed until 1915.[22] The Irish founders did so in order to combat the notion that 'in a Catholic country' the Protestant dominance of existing suffrage societies 'is enough to make people say that the majority of Irishwomen do not want the vote'.[23] It is equally striking that an explicitly nationalist suffrage organisation was never founded in Ireland. The Catholic Women's Suffrage Society came closest as all of its most prominent members were constitutional nationalists, but the organisation remained strictly non-party. By contrast,

[18] Diane Urquhart, *Women in Ulster Politics, 1890–1940* (Dublin, 2000), 100.

[19] James McConnel, *The Irish Parliamentary Party and the Third Home Rule Crisis* (Dublin, 2013), 14–22; Michael Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party: Provincial Ireland, 1910–1916* (Oxford, 2005), 3–7.

[20] McConnel, *Irish Parliamentary Party*, 23–7.

[21] Senia Pašeta, 'Another Class? Women and Higher Education in Ireland, 1870–1909', in *Politics, Society and the Middle Class in Modern Ireland*, ed. Fintan Lane (Basingstoke, 2010), 181–90.

[22] *Catholic Suffragist*, vol. 1, no. 3, 15 Mar. 1915.

[23] *Irish Catholic*, 27 Feb. 1915.

branches of the (Anglican) Church League of Women's Suffrage were founded in all of Ireland's major cities and prominent clerics including the bishop of Limerick lined up to support the cause.[24] The Conservative and Unionist Suffrage Association likewise developed a network of branches across the country. It appears that despite being in a clear majority in Ireland, Catholic and nationalist women were the least likely to organise on explicitly confessional or political lines.

There were obvious cultural and structural reasons for this as Catholic Ireland presented fewer opportunities to women for social and political engagement than Protestant Ireland. This was partly because of the emphasis within Protestant denominations on the personal responsibility of individuals to undertake practical and godly work in the world. It was also due to the enormous expansion in Ireland of Catholic orders, especially nuns, whose work in teaching, nursing and other caring positions impeded the development of lay Catholic women's organisations.[25] This in turn limited their opportunity to earn the kind of valuable experience in lobbying, organising and fund-raising that their unionist contemporaries developed through the Primrose League and the Irish Unionist Alliance.

Yet, despite these restrictions, an appetite for political involvement clearly existed among nationalist women. From 1800, they had been involved in fund-raising, negotiating 'political bribes' and turning out to campaign for favoured electoral candidates.[26] Although they could not vote, they could exert a private influence on their enfranchised male relatives, a phenomenon acknowledged by at least some hopeful candidates.[27] Their participation in more public forms of political engagement grew steadily and by the middle of the century, female involvement in Ireland's rich culture of political rioting and disorder in particular had reached new heights.[28] The combination of parliamentary agitation and, sometimes, intense periods of direct political action which characterised the Irish Party from the early 1880s, proved to be especially conducive to women's activism.

Their political engagement reached a peak during the Land War, 1879–82. Although they were excluded from the more formal political work of the Land League, women could become members; some were imprisoned as activists while others became active fund-raisers through their work in ladies' branches of the Prisoners' Aid Society and the Political Prisoners'

[24] *Church League of Women's Suffrage*, June 1913, no. 18.
[25] Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge, 1995), 5.
[26] Theodore Hoppen, *Elections, Politics, and Society in Ireland, 1832–1885* (Oxford, 1984), 406.
[27] *Ibid.*
[28] *Ibid.*, 407.

Sustentation Fund.[29] More striking and innovative was the Ladies' Land League. Founded in 1880, this organisation was, in the words of one early member, 'the first national organisation of Irishwomen' to have been organised for and by women.[30] The establishment of the Ladies' Land League was a radical and risky step. This was well understood by the male leadership of the Land League as it was founded despite the express displeasure of most leading male Land Leaguers, including Charles Stewart Parnell himself.[31] He, John Dillon and Patrick Egan feared that the Land League would 'invite ridicule in appearing to put women forward in places of danger'; leading Land Leaguer, Andrew Kettle, also subsequently admitted that he too had been dubious about the wisdom of exposing women 'to such a rough and tumble business as an agrarian combination'.[32] This is hardly surprising for the Ladies' Land League took women's political activism to a virtually unprecedented level of organisation, public exposure and impact in the United Kingdom. Despite some reservations, the women's League was sanctioned by the male leadership. Its creation signalled a new era in women's politics.

It is difficult to know precisely what the male organisers expected the women to do. The Ladies' League was established in anticipation of the wholesale arrest of the male leadership, but the women's leader, Anna Parnell, complained that the exact nature of the women's work and the context in which they were to undertake it were unclear and that this led to instability from the outset.[33] The evident confusion around the women's remit was destabilising but the women were nonetheless efficient and determined. By July 1881, they had founded 420 branches across Ireland and were providing relief for about 3,000 evicted people.[34] They did the same work as the men they had replaced. Like their male colleagues, they were harassed by police, they were publicly condemned by 'certain church dignitaries', and at least thirteen served prison sentences on account of their work with the Land League.[35] They initiated and oversaw the building of more than 200 huts, which would house evicted tenants, and they took on the publication of *United Ireland* after the arrest of

[29]Janet K. TeBrake, 'Women in Revolt: The Land League Years', *Irish Historical Studies*, 28 (1992), 66–8. See also, for example, *Nation*, 26 Nov. 1881, 24 Dec. 1881, 11 Mar. 1882, 25 Mar. 1882, 10 June 1882 and 12 Aug. 1882.

[30]Jennie Wyse Power, text of a lecture on the Ladies' Land league, Captured Document 193, Bureau of Military History, Dublin, S. 222.

[31]Andrew J. Kettle, *Material for Victory: The Memoirs of Andrew J. Kettle*, ed. Laurence J. Kettle (Dublin, 1958), 48; Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland* (London and New York, 1904), 299.

[32]Davitt, *Fall of Feudalism*, 299; Kettle, *Material for Victory*, 48.

[33]Dana Hearne, 'Introduction' to Anna Parnell, *The Tale of a Great Sham* (Dublin, 1986), 24.

[34]Jane McL. Côté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell: Ireland's Patriot Sisters* (1991), 190.

[35]Jennie Wyse Power, Ladies' Land League lecture.

its entire staff.[36] According to Michael Davitt, the women 'kept the organisation alive' while the leaders of the Land League were incarcerated in Kilmainham.[37]

Their usefulness to the League and its tolerance of the women ended when the Land League changed political course and the women's organisation 'disobeyed' direct instructions from the leadership, attempting instead to direct the policy of the Land League against Charles Stewart Parnell's wishes.[38] A bitter feud developed between the factions before the women finally managed to extricate themselves from the Land League. The result was the complete estrangement of Anna Parnell from the political life of her country, the minimisation of the Ladies' Land League in the national story and an abiding suspicion of 'women politicals'. Margaret Ward has argued that 'the backlash against women's participation in the campaign for tenant rights foreshadowed their exclusion from the task of nation building'.[39] Suspicion of the Ladies' League may indeed help to explain why, as I have argued elsewhere, no nationalist equivalent of the Primrose League was formed in Ireland and why some Irish Party men remained implacably opposed to women's political involvement well into the twentieth century.[40] Having been pioneers in formally mobilising women, the Irish Party swiftly and determinedly retreated when the women veered off course.

The legacy of the Ladies' Land League was, therefore, paradoxical: its radicalism and independence of thought mitigated against women's nationalist organisation, while at the same time, it acted as a vital spur for radical nationalist women. This is not to suggest that the women who were active in the Ladies' Land League were typical or even unequivocally feminist as there is no question that they were exceptionally politically active and unusually visible by any contemporary standards. Nonetheless, their impact was real and it did influence the way that subsequent generations of nationalist men and women regarded women's political activism. Anna Parnell herself believed that the characterisation of the Ladies' League as fanatical and extreme had been deliberately cultivated by Davitt's *Fall of Feudalism*, published in 1904.[41] She maintained that the

[36] McL. Côté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell*, 202–3; Jennie Wyse Power, Ladies' Land League lecture.

[37] D. B. Cashman, *The Life of Michael Davitt, Founder of the National Land League* (1882), 233.

[38] Parnell, *Great Sham*, 117–18; McL. Côté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell*, 216.

[39] Margaret Ward, 'The Ladies' Land League and the Irish Land War 1881/82: Defining the Relationship between Women and Nation', in *Gendered Nations: Nationalism and Gender Order in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ida Bloom, Karen Hageman and Catherine Hall (Oxford, 2000), 229.

[40] Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 2013), 32.

[41] Anna Parnell letter in *Peasant*, 5 Oct. 1907, unpaginated; McL. Côté, *Fanny and Anna Parnell*, 237–8.

women's League had been utterly misrepresented and that women had 'next to no influence in Ireland'.[42]

Parnell *may* have exaggerated somewhat, but she was not alone in her assessment of the threat posed to the nationalist establishment by the women's refusal to follow orders. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, whose own father and uncle had been imprisoned as Land Leaguers with Parnell, spoke wistfully of 'the glorious days of the Ladies' Land League', in her 1909 condemnation of constitutional nationalist Ireland's refusal to integrate women into the movement.[43] She maintained that the Irish Party had been profoundly weakened when 'the fine enthusiasm, the generous spirit of cooperation revealed by those noble-hearted women' had been 'diverted' and 'repressed'. More presciently, she argued that:

> with the death of the women's organization, there being no effort by a further reorganization to maintain for Ireland the fine reserve forces so called up, either in a new league under new conditions, or (better still) by encouraging women to enter and strengthen the ranks of the male branches, women lost touch with Parliamentarianism and have not since regained it. Since then, as I have already shown, their energies and enthusiasm have been turned to other channels, their force is expended in directions indifferent to or hostile to Parliamentarianism . . . but it will be a matter of wonderment to the future historian of Ireland to note the silence imposed on Irishwomen from the early eighties down to the dawn of the twentieth century.[44]

Sheehy Skeffington was uniquely qualified to comment on this. The daughter of an MP, and a staunch nationalist and feminist herself, she experienced first-hand the absolute refusal of the Irish Party to open its doors to women. She led a group of women, which attempted to force its way into the United Irish League (UIL), the Party's constituency organisation, in the early twentieth century. Founded in 1898, the UIL expanded rapidly: by the end of 1909, it had at least 193 branches and more than 24,000 members.[45] Its membership was open to 'all Irish Nationalists alike, without any distinction of class or creed'.[46] It did not spell out its policy on sex, but it is clear that the recruitment of women was not a priority. Some individual women's branches were founded, but they were rarities, especially in Ireland. Press reports suggest that ladies' branches were formed in Westmeath, Belfast and Louth;[47] the Louth organisers predicted that more would follow, but this did not come to pass.[48] The very few ladies' branches that did exist in Ireland were evidently so badly

[42] *Peasant*, 26 Oct. 1910.

[43] Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'Women in the National Movement', Sheehy Skeffington papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 22,266.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party*, 44–5.

[46] United Irish League, *Objects, Constitution and Rules*, no date.

[47] *Donegal News*, 14 May 1904; *Connacht Tribune*, 26 Feb. 1910; *Westmeath Examiner*, 25 Sept. 1909.

[48] *Anglo-Celt*, 28 Aug. 1909.

organised or impoverished that only two managed to pay their £3 annual subscription to the United Irish League over the entire 1905–18 period.[49] UIL organisers attempted to stimulate both membership and branch formation, but they did not appear to target potential women members.[50] The result was the lack of a women's organisation, which was available to fund-raise, campaign and register potential voters. Some of this work was taken up by the republican Cumman na mBan from 1914, which managed to attract around 19,800 women by early 1919.[51] The Ulster Women's Unionist Council, by contrast, built up an estimated membership of between 115,000 and 200,000 members in the same period.

Strikingly, British branches of the UIL were more responsive to women than their Irish counterparts. Ladies' branches of the British UIL were formed from at least 1906, and some divisions hosted mixed memberships. By 1907, at least thirteen ladies' branches in England and Scotland were active and women had begun to attend annual general meetings of the United Irish League of Great Britain as representatives of their branches.[52] The executive council of the United Irish League of Great Britain urged at its 1918 Convention that more ladies' branches should be formed in order to 'advise the Irish women's vote in the best interests of the Irish cause'.[53] Prominent nationalists including Alice Stopford Green and Sophie Bryant took the lead in the London Ladies' Branch, while Ireland produced no such equivalents and no evidence that the recruitment of women was desirable, let alone a priority.

The partial exception to this rule was the Young Ireland Branch (YIB) of the United Irish League, the most progressive branch of the UIL in Ireland.[54] The YIB's own rules explicitly decreed that potential members should not be disqualified by sex, class or creed,[55] but a number of women members were less than satisfied with the organisation. They were in a difficult positon, however, because they were loath to antagonise their YIB colleagues, let alone the wider Irish Party which, some nationalist feminists believed, might be persuaded to adopt women's suffrage.

Those Irish suffragists who remained loyal to the Irish Party had good reason to be so as a good deal of support for women's suffrage existed among nationalist MPs. Mary Sheehy Kettle argued in 1910 that at

[49] These were a Belfast Ladies' branch in 1905–6 and a county Westmeath branch in 1909–10: Minute Book of the Directory of the United Irish League, 147 and 372, National Library of Ireland, MS 708.

[50] Wheatley, *Nationalism and the Irish Party*, 46.

[51] Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork, 2007), 108, 112–13.

[52] United Irish League of Great Britain, *Annual Reports and Reports of Proceedings at Annual Conventions, 1906–1909* (no date).

[53] *Freeman's Journal*, 10 Aug. 1918.

[54] Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 68–9.

[55] *Rules of the Young Ireland Branch of the United Irish League* (Dublin, *c.* 1905), v.

least three-quarters of the Irish Party was sympathetic to the cause.[56] Her husband, a liberal nationalist MP, claimed in the following year that there was 'no substantial opposition' in the Irish Party to women's suffrage.[57] The Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), a militant organisation co-founded by Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, declared itself to be 'not dissatisfied' with the attitude of individual Irish Party MPs.[58] Their optimism was well founded. Although Party leader John Redmond remained implacably opposed to women's suffrage, both in principle and for strategic reasons, his fellow-MPs were permitted to vote freely on any suffrage bill and many – including his own brother – had become outspoken supporters of the cause. Philip Snowden claimed in 1912 that the Irish nationalist MPs had 'contributed a larger share of votes in favour of woman suffrage' than any other party except the Labour Party, and the IWFL's own calculations support this claim.[59] The Franchise League and its nationalist allies deliberately developed parallels between suffrage and Irish nationalism, arguing, for example, that 'the principles of self-government and self-reliance which vitalise the nationalist movement are identical with the basic principles of the women's suffrage movement. The spirit of Liberty is one and indivisible.'[60]

The problem remained, however, that while the idea that women's suffrage was intimately linked with Irish nationalism was supported by a large number of MPs, none were prepared to give the two demands equal billing when they were forced to prioritise. Even those who had vocally and strongly supported women's suffrage and had lobbied for change among their fellow-MPs turned their backs on the suffrage movement when it refused to put Home Rule before women's suffrage. When Irish MPs, even those once strongly pro-suffrage, voted under the direction of a whip against a series of franchise bills and amendments in 1912 and 1913, largely to ensure that the Home Rule Bill could pass through the parliament with minimal distraction, some of their feminist supporters abandoned any hope of a meaningful relationship between women's suffrage and the Irish Party. When around seventy suffragists marched on the UIL's Convention in 1912 to protest against this apparent abandonment of the suffrage cause, they were met by violence and hostility, mainly from UIL stewards, and even well-known constitutional nationalist women were

[56] *Votes for Women*, 3: 139 (4 Nov. 1910), 67.
[57] *Irish Times*, 18 Oct. 1911.
[58] *Freeman's Journal*, 16 July 1910.
[59] Lists of Irish MPs' attitudes on the woman suffrage question, reprinted from the Sheehy Skeffington papers in Cliona Murphy, *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York and London, 1989), 221–4. See also Constance Rover, *Women's Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914* (1967), 155.
[60] Letter from Francis Sheehy Skeffington to *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Mar. 1912.

prevented from entering.[61] Bitter public debates, family splits and the IWFL members' decision to smash UIL windows in 1913 destroyed what remained of a relationship between the IWFL and the Irish Party.[62]

Nationalist suffragists, even those who remained broadly loyal to the Party, developed an increasingly hostile critique of it, some questioning its definition of nationalism itself. 'Just as', one critic argued, 'the English Suffragists had to teach the Liberal Party and the Liberal Government the meaning of Liberalism, so will Irish Suffragists have to teach the Irish Party and their henchmen the essence of Nationalism.'[63] The 'essence of nationalism' was for many of these women located in Ireland's radical nationalist past and in a tradition which found its true expression in the Irish militant suffrage movement. They emphasised Ireland's tradition of political protest and stepped up their attempts to link it with their own.[64] Margaret Cousins of the IWFL, for example, argued that 'the whole recent militant movement' owed its inspiration to 'Charles Stewart Parnell and his policy of obstruction'.[65] Redmond's Party, they maintained, had betrayed this legacy. Reflecting on the imprisonment of Irish suffragettes, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington reminded John Redmond that 'there is a stronger and purer Nationalism in Mountjoy Prison at this moment than any of Mr Redmond's followers can boast'.[66]

While much of Redmondite nationalist Ireland appeared to disagree with the IWFL, advanced nationalists were often more sympathetic. As the Party actively turned women away, a number of new and vibrant organisations accepted their money and their membership happily. The most important of these 'other channels' as Sheehy Skeffington had termed them, were Sinn Fein and the Gaelic League, though a host of cultural organisations had opened their doors to women from the late nineteenth century. Cultural revivalism, especially in its politicised iterations, provided a particularly powerful platform for feminist nationalist women. It recognised women's power as domestic managers, educators, mothers and political activists. It provided thousands of nationalist women with practical and intellectual political education, and it allowed them to mix with like-minded collaborators.

The new cultural and political clubs and societies which sprang up in the late nineteenth century contributed to the 'new nationalism', a broad swathe of political and cultural organisations which largely operated

[61] *Votes for Women*, 5: 217 (3 May 1912), 482 and 491.

[62] Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 69–90; *Report of the Executive Committee of the Irish Women's Franchise League for 1913* (Dublin, 1914), 5.

[63] *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Mar. 1912.

[64] *Ibid.*, 10 Apr. 1912.

[65] *Ibid.*, 22 Apr. 1912.

[66] *Irish Citizen*, July 1912; Leeann Lane, *Rosamund Jacob: Third Person Singular* (Dublin, 2010), 54.

outside the structures and remit of the Irish Party and in which female involvement was generally tolerated at the very least, openly encouraged at best. The men and women at its heart often described it as 'the movement', testifying to the excitement of this new phase of nationalist agitation.[67] The new nationalism was built on fresh ideas and new political impulses, but it also owed its development to older forms of political organisation, including the Ladies' Land League.

The radical republican women who organised as Inghinidhe na hÉireann from 1900 and Cumann na mBan from 1914 explicitly linked their own organisations to the Ladies' League, portraying themselves as its successors.[68] But the Ladies' League also served as a bridge between the Land War and cultural nationalism by setting in train a number of initiatives which expanded opportunities for nationalist women. They did so by, for example, politicising children through the Children's Land League, where boys and girls met weekly to learn about Irish history and culture.[69] Inghinidhe na hÉireann subsequently enthusiastically took up this crusade in the early twentieth century.[70]

A number of Ladies' Land Leaguers also turned to cultural activism including through the pioneering Southwark Junior Irish Literary Club and the 'Irish Fireside Club'. The Fireside Club became the most popular nationalist forum for children in nineteenth-century Ireland with a membership of around 25,000 by 1889.[71] Other members, such as Ellen O'Leary, became professional writers and editors in their own right and played a vital role in the admission of women into key literary societies including the Pan-Celtic Society, the National Literary Society and the Contemporary Club.[72] Such organisations served a vital role in providing intellectual and social outlets for the growing number of women who were eager to become more involved in the cultural and political life of their country. From its foundation in 1893, the Gaelic League became the most important of the many societies which accepted women members and made available to them invaluable training in organisation, education and politicisation. Although often romanticised, the notion that, as Jennie Wyse Power argued, the League 'rejected the false sex and class distinctions which were the result of English influence'

[67] Nic Shiubhlaigh, *Splendid Years*, 3–4.

[68] Cumann na mBan, *The Volunteers, the Women, and the Nation* (Dublin, 1914), National Library of Ireland, 161 (26), 1–2.

[69] *Nation*, 1 Oct. 1881.

[70] Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 36–7; Ríona Nic Congáil, 'Young Ireland and the Nation: Nationalist Children's Culture in the Late Nineteenth Century, *Éire-Ireland*, 46 (2011), 52.

[71] Nic Congáil, 'Young Ireland', 56–7.

[72] National Literary Society Minute Book, 24 May 1892 and 20 Oct. 1892, National Library of Ireland, MS 645; Mary Macken, 'W. B. Yeats, John O'Leary and the Contemporary Club', *Studies*, 28 (1939), 137–9.

was important for women of her generation. So too was the fact that it was 'the first Irish national society which accepted women as members on the same terms as men'.[73]

It would be incorrect to argue that the Gaelic League provided a direct route into the more openly advanced nationalist Sinn Fein, but there is no doubt that many women members experienced the League as a kind of stepping stone to republican politics.[74] It would be equally incorrect to argue that Sinn Fein provided an unambiguously natural home for feminist women. But it was well in advance of the Irish Party in its opening of membership and executive positions to both sexes equally and in debating and supporting women's suffrage. Even the perennially distrustful Hanna Sheehy Skeffington admitted this.[75] One of the most striking, though little commented upon, features of the 'new nationalism' was its generally tolerant view on women's suffrage in particular. This was down to several factors including its appeal to middle-class, young and often urban members, as well its links to avant-garde literary and artistic circles. Unlike the Party, such societies rarely organised around the church, the pub or occupational and rural interests. More importantly, they rarely organised men and women separately.

Though lively, Ireland's radical nationalist and feminist circles were small and clannish. Activists tended to know one another well and to move in similar networks; this encouraged cooperation as well as loyalty. While the Irish Party seemed to be invincible, these political mavericks had little traction within nationalist Ireland. But, as the Party began to flounder under the stresses of unionist resistance to Home Rule, the Great War and the Easter Rising, radical ideas became less unthinkable and some of those on the margins of Irish political life moved closer to its centre. It was in this climate that nationalist women became more than merely symbolically or marginally important and came to play a vital role in the destruction of the Party which had rejected them.

Republican women including Maud Gonne rejoiced in the part they had played in the beginnings of openly hostility between the 'decaying' parliamentary movement and the rising Sinn Fein movement.[76] Hanna Sheehy Skeffington resigned in 1912 from the UIL in disgust at the Party's 'treachery' over women's suffrage.[77] Her friend, Patricia Hoey, resigned from the secretaryship of the Irish Parliament Branch of the UIL in the

[73] Jennie Wyse Power, 'The Political Influence of Women in Modern Ireland', in *The Voice of Ireland: A Survey of the Race and Nation from All Angles*, ed. W. G. Fitz-Gerald (Dublin, 1924), 158–61.

[74] Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 24–6.

[75] *Bean na hÉireann*, no. 13, Apr. 1909, 6.

[76] Bureau of Military History, Dublin, Witness Statement 317: Maud Gonne MacBride.

[77] *Votes for Women*, 5: 435 (12 Apr. 1912), 438–40; Sheehy Skeffington papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 41,201/7.

same year.[78] She saw the Party's refusal to back women's suffrage as a personal insult and a repudiation of the very soul of Irish nationalism:

> There is a hard and even a bitter fight before us for many of us are fighting against our personal friends and lifelong associations – but with courage, determination and unity we can and we shall win. The Irish Parliamentary Party have betrayed us . . . So comrades let us forward in unison. We are not only working for women's suffrage but for the holy Cause of Ireland. The Irish Party are asking Home Rule for a section of Ireland – we are asking it for the whole of Ireland.[79]

Hoey would soon became active in Cumann na mBan and Sinn Fein.

Sheehy Skeffington and Hoey were exceptional in prioritising women's suffrage over Home Rule in 1912, but they would join the majority of women when they cast their votes in 1918. The reduced status of the Irish Party and its few women supporters was clear during the conscription crisis of 1917–18 when republican women largely swept aside the efforts of Home Rule women to coordinate opposition.[80] The extraordinary mobilisation of women through Sinn Fein and Cumann na mBan during the election campaigns of 1918 was utterly unmatched by their constitutional counterparts. The Party managed to win only 6 of the 105 available seats that year. The near annihilation of the Irish Party at that election could not have been possible without the voluntary work of female canvassers, lobbyists and election agents. Neither could it have happened without their votes as about 36 per cent of the new electorate was female, and women were in fact in the majority in some constituencies.[81]

Some republican feminists revelled in this extraordinary reversal in electoral fortunes. In late 1917, many of them gathered to chastise the Irish Party at two fiery public meetings at which the forthcoming Representation of the People Bill was discussed. Some argued that the Irish Party had attempted to secure the exclusion of Ireland from the new Franchise Bill, emphasising the Party's 'hostile' attitude towards women. This, they maintained, would cost it votes and contribute to its downfall at the next election.[82] Patricia Hoey, who was present at that meeting, argued that the Irish Party's lack of sympathy for women's suffrage was

[78] *Irish Citizen*, 8 June 1912.

[79] Patricia Hoey to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Sheehy Skeffington papers, National Library of Ireland, no date, MS 22,663(iv).

[80] Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women*, 242–6.

[81] John Coakley, 'The Election that Made the First Dáil', in *The Creation of the Dáil: A Volume of Essays from the Thomas Davis Lectures*, ed. Brian Farrell (Dublin, 1994), 35. They constituted about 40 per cent of the electorate in Dublin, 39 per cent in Belfast and just over 39 per cent in Cork; *Freeman's Journal*, 26 Nov. 1918.

[82] *Irish Independent*, 16 July 1917.

'instigated by the knowledge that the women would never follow their lead'.[83]

The Party's position on the enlarged franchise was much more complicated than these critics suggested, but there is no question that its failure to support women's suffrage and to cultivate a women's association was very harmful. While unionist and Sinn Fein women mobilised, canvassed and organised on behalf of their candidates, the Irish Party had no such support network to fall back on. Instead, its candidates faced an open campaign of feminist opposition from women who persisted in reminding it that 'women were more than lunatics and imbeciles; they were citizens of Ireland, and they had tenacious memories'.[84] Jennie Wyse Power concluded that the 'dying Parliamentary Party learned to its cost' that the woman voter had become a force to be reckoned with, and it is difficult to disagree with her assessment.[85] Irish women did not uniformly abandon the Party in 1918, but they clearly contributed to its comprehensive electoral defeat. The Party had created this situation by alienating politically active women over women's suffrage and, more catastrophically, by failing to tolerate, let alone welcome, women's participation in its constituency organisations and wider political machinery. Having pioneered women's political mobilisation in the late nineteenth century, its refusal to repeat the experiment in the early twentieth century helped to pave its path to political oblivion.

[83] *Ibid.*
[84] *Irish Independent*, 10 Dec. 1918.
[85] Wyse Power, 'The Political Influence of Women', 160.

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