

# Four Revolutionary Women

The stories of women who fought for Ireland during the revolutionary period are often overlooked by the national story of this period in both history books and dramatisations.



Elizabeth O'Farrell



Josie McGowan



Lily Mernin



Margaret Skinnider

Here are four Stories about women from the revolutionary period that tell the story from their view point.

During the Revolutionary Period, women undertook dangerous work transporting arms and explosives, sheltering republicans on the run, carrying key important military information to the frontline, providing safe houses, providing first aid during the fighting and acting as spies within the British establishment.

These are essential elements of any successful military struggle. Yet their roles were diminished because of their gender.

Often, in times of crisis, civil disturbance or change, gender roles are relaxed. In the Revolutionary Period from 1914-1923, women took part in all levels of military activity, as well as traditional nursing and cooking. During the Civil War in particular women were involved in fighting alongside men.

However, at the end of the Revolutionary period in 1924 attitudes changed. When military pensions were being allocated women were excluded, as they defined a soldier as a man. Traditional gender roles had reasserted themselves very quickly.

# Spot the difference



This is the photo of Padraig Pearse surrendering to General Lowe on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> April 1916

The photo on the left is the original image taken at 3:30pm when Padraig Pearse surrendered unconditionally to General Lowe in the company of Elizabeth O'Farrell at the corner of Great Britain Street and Moore Street. You can see Elizabeth's shoes and the base of her coat.

The Photo on the right was what was printed on 10<sup>th</sup> May in the *Daily Sketch* newspaper. Elizabeth O'Farrell has been removed from the picture. Padraig Pearse appears to stand alone.

## The Surrender

First the rebels hung a white flag on the building to protect Elizabeth O'Farrell as she walked out. She was also carrying a white flag and had a Red Cross on her white nurses uniform.

12:45pm, Elizabeth O'Farrell walked to the barrier. The British military ceased firing.

She was brought to General Lowe and relayed Pearse's message that he was ready to negotiate. Lowe sent her back with a written message that there would be no negotiations. It had to be an unconditional surrender. She was told to be back in 30 minutes with the answer or else the shooting would resume.

She returned to Pearse with the written message. He agreed to the surrender. Elizabeth returned to Lowe with Pearse's message. Lowe reminded her that the surrender was unconditional and told her to return with Pearse within 30 minutes, or else they would start shooting again.

3:30pm Elizabeth O'Farrell and Padraig Pearse returned and surrendered unconditionally. Pearse was taken away and the written surrender was prepared within 45 minutes.

# Josie McGowan died fighting for what she hope would be a better Ireland.



Josie McGowan was a spinner working in a textile factory. Along with her two brothers, she became involved in the Republican movement. Josie joined Cumann na mBan and fought with the Marrowbone Lane garrison in 1916. She was just 16 years old.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1918, Josie attended a Cumann na mBan protest in Foster Place, just off Dame Street in Dublin. The meeting was addressed by Helena Molony and Madeline Ffrench Mullen standing on a platform. Protests against the conscription of Irish men to the British Army were being held across Ireland. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, Lord French, alleged that these protests were the result of a 'German Plot' to undermine the British War effort. In response to the alleged 'German Plot', British forces arrested Constance Markievicz, Maud Gonne and Kathleen Clarke. The women were imprisoned in England. On that day, Josie and the other members of Cumann na mBan were in Foster Place to protest at the women's internment.

*Irish Women's Anti-Conscription Demonstration*



A procession of Dublin women marching yesterday to the City Hall, where they signed the Anti-Conscription pledge.

The Dublin Metropolitan Police, based in Dublin Castle, wanted to arrest Helena Molony and Madeline Ffrench Mullen. The police surrounded the women and forced their way through their way through the crowd, lashing out with their batons at anyone who stood in their way. Some of the women were arrested while trying to protect the speakers. Josie McGowan stood her ground in the face of the baton charge and received several blows to the head and body. She collapsed unconscious.

She was brought to the Cumann na mBan first aid station at Ticknock, in the Dublin Mountains where she died of her injuries a week later. Her death certificate shows her cause of death as pneumonia, in order to protect her family from the authorities attention. Her family were broken hearted and her father died a week later. They are both buried in Glasnevin Cemetery.

Josie was awarded the War of Independence medal decades after death for her contribution to the 1916 Easter Rising and campaign against conscription. Her medal has a 'Comhrac' bar, indicating that she was involved in active service. This bar has been traditionally reserved for men who fought in the revolutionary period.



# Lily Mernin, typist and spy

Lily Mernin worked in Dublin Castle as a typist. She was introduced to Michael Collins by her cousin Piaras Béaslaí and agreed to pass information from the army garrison office in Dublin Castle to the Irish Republican Army (IRA). She also helped identify members of the 'British' army and Auxiliaries to the Republicans.



In her statement to the Military Archives, she describes how she went about identifying the British officers:

' I met this man, whom I learned later was Tom Cullen, and went with him to a football match at Lansdowne Road. He asked me to point out to him and give him the names of any British military officers who frequented Dublin Castle and G.H.Q. I was able to point out a few military officers to him whom I knew.'

When I got to know the Auxiliaries better, I accompanied Frank Saurin (known then as Mr. Stanley) to various cafés where I identified for him some of the Auxiliaries whom I knew.

One of her most noted roles was in identifying British intelligence officers that were executed by the IRA on Bloody Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1920.

' Before the 21st November 1920, it was part of my normal duty to type the names and addresses of British agents who were accommodated at private addresses and living as ordinary citizens in the city. These lists were typed weekly and amended whenever an address was changed. I passed them on each week either to the address at Moynihan's, Clonliffe Rd. or to Piaras Beaslaoi. The typing of the lists ceased after the 21st November 1920.'

Lily was known within Republican circles as 'Little Gentleman' or 'Lt. G' to protect her identity and she was known to be cool under fire.

' Suspicion was thrown in my direction one morning when Miss Dunne entered the office and excitedly said that her brother had been missing and that she thought he was held by the I.R.A., that somebody in the office had given information to the I.R.A. concerning the conversation we had in the office about MacMahon and Peel, British agents, who were lodging in the same house with her in Mount Street. However, I found myself in a predicament, but I remained cool and calm and bluffed my way out of it and said: "Who could be a spy?" and put the blame on her brother for talking too much.'

# In 1923, women could fight but only men could be soldiers

The Army Pensions Act 1923, introduced military pensions to those that had fought and been wounded in the revolutionary period from 1914-1923.

The Act provided for a pension for people who had been members of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen army and other smaller units such as Fianna Eireann. It did not include Cumann na mBan.



Margaret Skinnider had been a member of the Irish Citizen Army in 1916 during the Easter Rising. She fought at St Stephen's Green and the College of Surgeons. She was described as an excellent markswoman. On Thursday the 27<sup>th</sup> April 1916, she was shot by British soldiers during the fighting. She sustained injuries to her spine and shoulder. She spent seven weeks in hospital recovering.

Margaret applied for a pension on the basis of her injuries during the Easter Rising. She was refused on the basis that the Army Pension Act 1923 was only available to men who had fought during those years.

Women's stance in relation to the Army Pensions Act 1923 influenced the later Military Service Pension Act 1934. Under this act, military pensions were made available to men and women equally.

This was the response to her application in 1924

Maighread Ní Scineadora,  
31 Slighe Uabherli,  
Baile Bocht,  
Baile Atha Cliath.

A Chara,

In reply to your letter of the 30<sup>th</sup> ultimo relative to your claim under the Army Pensions Act, 1923. I am directed to inform you that the Minister for Defence has been advised that the above mentioned Act is only applicable to soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense.

Mise,  
le meas,

Is this fair?

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