

ON THE BRINK

The Politics of Conflict 1914-1916 Project

FOCUS STORIES

LOCAL WOMEN

Suffragettes

While the question of Home Rule threatened the outbreak of the civil war during 1914, the suffragette movement had also become increasingly militant. The suffragettes had adopted a campaign of vandalism, arson and bombing throughout Ulster. Abbeylands House, Whiteabbey was targeted by militant suffragettes when the building was burned down in April 1914.

For many women, the Home Rule question took priority over women's rights. Plus, although Redmond and Carson held opposing positions on Home Rule, they had much in common. Both had conservative convictions, supported the British Empire and opposed women's suffrage.

Cumann na mBan

Also during April 1914, a group of Irish women formed an organisation to assist the Irish Volunteers. The new organisation was called Cumann na mBan (Women's League). With the founding of Cumann na mBan, Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) which was established in 1900 by Maud Gonne, dissolved and merged into the new nationalist group. When finalising strategies for the Easter Rising, it was decided to integrate women from Cumann na mBan into the planned rebellion.

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Ella Young

Ella Young was born in 1867, in Fenagh, Ahoghill, Ballymena, to a Presbyterian family. From the age of three, Ella and family moved several times, but in her teenage years, they settled in Rathmines, Dublin.

After graduating from the Royal University of Ireland in 1898, Ella joined the Theosophical Society where she met the poets WB Yeats and George Russell, who were also members of the Irish Literary Revival. She became involved in their work, putting old Irish tales into print and staging them. In 1903, she learned to speak Irish. She joined Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland), and taught the language to young boys and girls, along with Irish literature and mythology. Ella's friend Maud Gonne a strong supporter of Irish Independence, had founded this organisation in 1900.

Ella also developed a close friendship with Patrick Pearse, a member of the Gaelic League. He widely promoted Ireland's ancient heritage as a means of restoring a strong cultural and nationalist identity to the people of Ireland. Pearse became convinced that the only way to secure Irish Independence was by armed insurrection and Ella supported him. In 1914, with the founding of Cumann na mBan, Ella became an enthusiastic member, she hid Irish Volunteer guns in house in preparation for rebellion, but took no part in the rising itself.

During the Civil War of the early 1920s, Ella supported the anti-treaty republicans and was interned. She emigrated to America in 1925, where she became very established in literacy circles, giving lectures, writing and publishing folklore and poetry books inspired by Irish mythology.



Ella Young in Gaelic revival costume, worn during pageants and theatre performances which celebrated characters from Irish mythology.
Courtesy of Pearse Museum

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The Role of Women During the War

Women's contribution to the war effort has largely been undervalued compared to their male counterparts. Local women became heavily involved in nursing, including women who had joined UVF nursing units prior to the outbreak of war. Local women were also recruited into jobs within factories vacated by men who left home to fight. Additionally, local women were instrumental in the raising of funds for soldiers and their families. The Portrush branch of the Irish Women's Association to Aid Irish Regiments and Prisoners of War asked locals householders to pay a penny a week to pay for boxes of goods to be sent to Prisoners of War. In Ballymena, Mary Alice Young, of Galgorm Castle, President of the local branch of the Soldiers' and Sailor' Families Association (SSFA) appealed for hand-knitted socks for the Royal Irish Rifles.

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Catherine Anne Sweetenham Trench

Born in 1877, Catherine was the daughter of Sir Thomas Lecky, Greystone Hall Limavady. In 1905 she married Frederick Charles Bloomfield Trench. Trench, born in Portarlinton, King's County (now County Laois), was first commissioned into the Londonderry Artillery in 1899. During the Home Rule Crisis, Captain Trench with J C B Proctor, helped form the Limavady Ulster Volunteer Force.

At the outbreak of World War One, Trench was commissioned as Captain into the 10th Service Battalion, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers (Derry volunteers), becoming Major early 1915. From the beginning of the War, Mrs Trench was organising and raising funds for comforts for soldiers, especially the Derrys.

In 1915 Trench was court martialled, but awaiting the outcome, he disappeared. He had gone to London and enlisted as a private in the 14th (City of London) Battalion (London Scottish) under the name of Bloomfield from Tipperary. On 25th May 1916, 5746 Private FC Bloomfield eventually went to France. He was reported missing, believed killed in action, on 1st July 1916. His body was never recovered.

Mrs Trench continued to support the 10th Battalion. She also started a fund for the dependents of soldiers and another for Prisoners of War. During this time she sought information as to whether her husband was dead or taken prisoner. After the War she was involved with the Soldiers Pensions Committee. To honour Mrs Trench who had worked so hard to raise funds to support local soldiers with the local Prisoners of War Fund. In 1920, she would be invested as a Member, Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) for her services. Significantly, Mrs Trench was the first woman to be awarded in this way; women and civilians were not eligible before the war.

*'...Mid many cares and sorrow great,
When mourning sore a loving mate
Who fell a victim to the hate
Of German pride
Your efforts never did abate
For Britain's side...'*

'by "the Dungiven Poet" on occasion of Mrs Trench being awarded the honour (MBE) for her great services to our soldiers.'



Mrs Trench with returning Prisoners of War at Alexander Hall Limavady
Courtesy of private collection

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LOCAL WOMEN

Dr Anne Louise McIlroy

Anne Louise McIlroy was born in Ballycastle in 1874, the oldest of four daughters. Her father Dr J McIlroy, a medical practitioner and Justice of the Peace, educated his four daughters to a very high standard for the late 19th century. Anne Louise graduated in 1898 becoming the first woman in Glasgow to earn a Doctorate in Medicine. She was then the first female gynaecological surgeon at the Royal Infirmary Glasgow.

In 1921 she became the first female full professor at a University— Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the London School of Medicine for Women. Her accomplished sister Jane graduated from Glasgow University in 1904, became an ophthalmic surgeon and conducted neurological research 1911.

At the outbreak of World War One, Dr McIlroy and other female medical graduates offered their services to the government. An earlier graduate of medicine, and founder of the Scottish Women's Suffragette Federation, Dr Elsie Inglis, rejected by the War Office, was inspired to start a hospital of 'our own', with influential supporters. The Scottish Women's Hospital

Foreign Service, as part of the Suffrage response to the War and set up with the aim of using all female staff to care for the Allied wounded, became known for its surgical brilliancy and administrative efficiency on three fronts during the War. In 1915 Dr McIlroy went to France with the Girton and Newnham Unit financed by two Cambridge Women's Colleges. After 6 months work at Troyes, the French military authorities sent the camp hospital to Serbia and then to Salonika in Greece.

Her unit in Salonika was one of the few voluntary hospitals to accompany an expeditionary force. Working under canvas and at a time before antibiotics were widely available, she wrote home:

'we are hoping to (teach) the French the enormous advantages of the open air and sunlight for septic wounds. Our results have been simply extraordinary, no antiseptics at all.'

Hygiene standards in the tented hospital were such that inspectors remarked on the lack of flies at the height of summer in Greece. In recognition of her services she was awarded the French Croix de Guerre avec Palme in 1916, French Médaille des Epidémies, Serbian Order of St Sava and the Serbian Red Cross. In 1920 she was appointed to the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) and a Dame in 1929 for her services to midwifery.



Portrait of Dr McIlroy in uniform
Courtesy of Glasgow City Archives

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Sister Mary Agnes McGinnis

Mary Agnes McGinnis, known as Molly was born in January 1880 near Ballykelly. She was the fifth child of Patrick and Roseanna McGinnis. After leaving school, Molly trained at the City of Dublin Nursing Institute for three years. When war broke out, Molly was a St John's Ambulance Nurse, she enlisted on the 18th March 1915 and served in the VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) Hospital at Horncastle until June 1915. From there she travelled to Newton Abbot VAD Hospital in Devon until January 1916, before being posted with the rank of Sister in February of that year to St Johns Ambulance Brigade Hospital at Etaples, France. During the month of May 1918, the hospital at Etaples and surrounding area suffered sustained bomb raids. On the night of 31st May 1918, the hospital was hit and many were killed and injured. Sister McGinnis was awarded the Military Medal, the highest civilian honour available, for her bravery under fire and her conduct to rescue and safeguard her fellow nurses and patients. During World War One, of the 114,000 Military Medals awarded, only 147 were awarded to women.



Portrait photograph of Molly McGinnis in uniform wearing her Military Medal.
Courtesy of the Henderson family.