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Chapter two

“A light in the path to us women of today”

Constance Markievicz’s forgotten heroines of the past



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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to study how Constance Markievicz used the stories of Irish heroines to advocate gender equality and encourage women to take an active part in the struggle for Irish independence as well as their own emancipation in the years leading up to the Easter Rising and its aftermath. Using articles, drawings, and caricatures by Markievicz, I wish to show how she addressed the issues of womanhood and nationhood and provided role models for a new generation of advanced nationalists including herself. Going against the representation of Ireland as a nation of fathers and sons only and recovering female efforts in the 1798 rising, she claimed the right for Irish women to become political actors and revolutionaries.

Keywords: Ireland, Twentieth century, Nationalism, Feminism, Revolution, Markievicz

IN an article published in December 2018 in the *Irish Times*, Lauren Arrington, author of Markievicz’s latest biography *Revolutionary Lives: Constance and Casimir Markievicz*, summed up the countess’s life saying she “devoted herself to fighting for Irish freedom, women’s rights and the poor”, adding later that throughout her life “her rhetoric may have changed, but the underpinning ideas were constant”.¹ Arrington’s article corrects simplistic depictions of Countess Markievicz as revolutionary heroine or anti-Treaty hysteric. In this paper I intend to study articles, drawings and caricatures by Constance Markievicz published in the wake of, during and in the aftermath of the revolutionary

1. Lauren Arrington, “Constance Markievicz, the divisive revolutionary heroine”, *The Irish Times*, 10 December 2018 (<https://www.irishtimes.com/1.3710763>).

period (1913-1923) that addressed the issues of womanhood and nationhood in Ireland.

In the 1890s while studying art at the Slade School in London, Constance Markievicz – then Gore-Booth – had been involved in the struggle for women’s suffrage.² Back in Ireland, she was elected as president of the North Sligo Women’s Suffrage Association in 1896. Studying at the Académie Julian in Paris, she met her husband Casimir Markievicz, a Polish count. After their marriage, she moved to Dublin with him in 1903. There she became the member of various artistic and literary circles and met the leading figures of the Gaelic League. In 1908 she became politically active by joining Sinn Féin and Inghinidhe na hÉireann, a woman’s revolutionary movement founded by Maud Gonne. Radical from the start of her political career, in 1909 Markievicz co-founded with Bulmer Hobson Na Fianna Éireann, a paramilitary nationalist organisation that instructed young men to use firearms. Some of these youths tried to eject her and Helena Molony from the first meeting organised on the grounds that this was a physical force organisation and that there was no place for women.³ Despite widespread opposition to the involvement of women in the national struggle,⁴ Markievicz is known for taking part in the fighting dressed in her Irish Citizen Army uniform during the 1916 Easter Rising.⁵ She became a leading figure in Irish republicanism but she very early had a divisive legacy. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington reacted strongly to Éamon de Valera’s speech at the unveiling of a bust of Constance Markievicz in Saint Stephen’s Green in July 1932, excoriating him for painting “the image of a chocolate-box heroine”.⁶ In her witness statement to the Bureau of Military History, Helena Molony expressed concerns that Markievicz was “in great danger of being misunderstood” following the publication of her biography by Séan Ó Faoláin in 1934.⁷ Her whole political career illustrates the extreme reactions that she inspired, between fascination for her

2. Eva Gore-Booth met British suffragist Esther Roper in 1896. Both Eva and Constance became involved in founding a local branch of the Irish Women’s Suffrage and Local Government Association. See Sonja Tiernan, *Eva Gore-Booth: An Image of Such Politics*, Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2012, p. 28-44. For the links between the sisters’ activism and their suffrage politics, see Lauren Arrington, “Liberté, égalité, sororité: the poetics of suffrage in the work of Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz”, *Irish Women’s Writing 1878-1922*, Anna Pilz & Whitney Standlee (Eds.), Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2016, p. 209-226.
3. Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish Rebellion*, London, Penguin, p. 21-22.
4. Pašeta shows however that, contrary to the Irish Parliamentary Party, Sinn Féin supported women’s suffrage and opened its executive positions to women. See Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women 1900-1918*, Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., 2013 ([doi:10.1017/CBO9781107256316](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107256316)), p. 105.
5. Joseph MacKenna, *Guerilla Warfare in the Irish War of Independence 1919-1921*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2014, p. 112.
6. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, “Constance Markievicz – What She Stood For”, *An Phoblacht*, 16 July 1932.
7. Helena Molony, BMH.WS0391, p. 53.

idealism and her radical politics and rejection of her militancy in a judgemental way.⁸

Moving within this mixed legacy, I would like to study how Markievicz used the stories of Irish heroines to advocate gender equality and encourage women to take an active part in the national struggle. Trying to provide role models for a new generation of advanced nationalist women in the years leading up to the Easter Rising and in its aftermath, Markievicz wrote from a different perspective than the authorised one and dispelled the romance surrounding the involvement of women in the 1798 rising, thus acting against Jacques Rancière's idea of "consensus" as being "the reduction of the various 'peoples' into a single people identical with the count of a population and its parts, of the interests of a global community and its parts".⁹ Markievicz championed women's militancy, questioning the representation of Ireland as "a nation of fathers and sons",¹⁰ rendering visible what had previously been invisible,¹¹ i.e. women's involvement in the struggle for Irish freedom.

Markievicz linked the cause of Ireland and the cause of gender equality from her first public speeches and publications. She began writing for *Bean na hÉireann* (Woman of Ireland), the nationalist woman's periodical founded by Helena Molony in 1908. The monthly developed as a platform for women wishing to participate in the struggle for Irish freedom but also in the feminist and socialist movements:¹² "advocating militancy, separatism and feminism".¹³ Looking back on the paper that she founded, Helena Molony said: "It was a funny hotch-potch of blood and thunder, high-thinking and homemade bread".¹⁴ For these women, "the time had come when the point of view of women on the many aspects of Social and National life, had to be expressed definitely". They also considered Griffith's Sinn Féin was too moderate and wished "a complete separation from England" and the "achievement of National Freedom by the force of arms if necessary".¹⁵ Markievicz's monthly column, "The Woman With a Garden", ran from February 1909 to March 1910. Some critics have noted how in this column Markievicz shifted from insurgency to

8. For developments on this idea, see Lauren Arrington, *Revolutionary Lives: Constance and Casimir Markievicz*, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 2015 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc776nf>), p. 265-266 and Karen Steele, *Women, Press and Politics during the Irish Revival*, Syracuse, Syracuse U.P., 2007, p. 201-202.
9. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Cambridge/Malden, Polity, 2009, p. 115.
10. Declan Kiberd, "Fathers and Sons", *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London, Vintage, 1996.
11. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and intro. Stephen Corcoran, London, Bloomsbury, p. 37-39.
12. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 110.
13. Helena Molony as quoted by R.M., Fox, *Rebel Irishwomen*, Dublin, Talbot, 1935, p. 121.
14. Helena Molony, BMH.WS0391, p. 10. Pašeta remarks that after a while the monthly had become exclusively radical and the fashion advice and the cookery notes had disappeared. See Pašeta, *op. cit.*, p. 98-99; See also Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
15. Helena Molony, BMH. WS0391, p. 7-8.

domesticity in a sometimes-disarming way and how she used the allegory of the garden as an opportunity for a radical message.¹⁶ Karen Steele considers Markievicz's gardening column as innovative in so far as it "allegorically described how readers could resist domesticity *and* imperialism through that most visible icon of the Ascendancy class, the garden".¹⁷ Using a pen name inspired by Irish mythology, Armid,¹⁸ Markievicz sought, through her gardening advice, to enlist women to the cause of insurgency and advocate for their greater representation in the nationalist movement. Using a parodying and outrageous tone, Markievicz seems to have avoided censorship by playing with hidden meanings and subversive messages.

The gardening column was organized in two parts with an introduction drawing parallels with Irish or European politics while the second part gave seemingly harmless gardening advice. The garden thus became the occasion to teach the readers lessons in history and economics. In November 1909, Markievicz reminded the readers of "the importance of buying Irish-grown roses", as "cheap foreign roses are more liable to disease, smaller and altogether less satisfactory than their Irish-grown sisters".¹⁹ That practical advice is close to the political advice from Sinn Féin and the buy Irish campaigns. Markievicz used the month the column was published in together with the seasonal plants as opportunities to draw political and historical parallels with the Irish or European past and present. A December hurricane "tells us of that wild Christmas Eve long ago, when Red Hugh and the two other lads, slipped down the Castle wall to face the bitter gale and the blinding snow that lay between them and the work they had to do for Ireland",²⁰ while the oak tree reminds Markievicz of "Ireland's sister in misfortune, Poland, of which it is the emblem".²¹ Many columns used stories from the Irish past to inspire present-day women to actively engage in the struggle for freedom.

As *Bean na hÉireann* was becoming more and more militant, the articles linked to domesticity gradually disappeared to give way to "clear thinking on more important national issues".²² It became clear with the publication of "Physical Force" in September and October 1909 that the editors of the journal encouraged women to join the men in an armed revolution.²³ Markievicz's gardening column was retained by the editors,

16. See Kiberd, *op. cit.*, p. 399, C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society 1880-1935*, Hampstead, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 42-43,

17. See Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

18. In Irish mythology, Airmid was one of the Tuatha Dé Danann. She was the goddess of healing and herbs.

19. Armid, "The Woman with a Garden", *Bean na hÉireann*, November 1909, p. 7.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

22. Helena Molony, *Bean na hÉireann*, November 1909, p. 3.

23. "Physical Force", *Bean na hÉireann*, September 1909, p. 3-5 and October 1909, p. 3-4.

pointing at its radical potential. In October 1909, Markievicz suggested that political activism required hard work and sacrifice:

I thought that Ireland – like the garden – lies sleeping and resting, recouping her vital powers for the struggle that will come, and how it is our duty to till and to dig and do all that which lies in our power to aid the tender plant of nationality in its struggle for existence, and to protect and arm it in the fight that is before it against the cruel frosts, the cold winds and bitter blight of English rule and occupation that has laid it broken and withered on the ground for so long.²⁴

The passage clearly addresses women and their traditional activities with the use of gendered language like “the tender plant of nationality”. But to this is juxtaposed a call to “arm [Ireland] in the fight [...] against [...] the bitter blight of English rule” that renders this gardening advice radical and subversive.

In June 1909, Markievicz even made a parallel between crushing slugs and fighting Ireland’s enemies:

It is very unpleasant work killing slugs and snails, but let us not be daunted. A good nationalist should look upon slugs in a garden much in the same way as she looks on the English in Ireland, and only regret that she cannot crush the nation’s enemies with the same ease that she can the garden’s, with just one tread of her fairy foot.²⁵

While still using gendered language (“fairy foot”), the column makes very clear how grim the war can be with the use of graphic images. Column after column, Markievicz made female militancy more acceptable and tried to accustom the readers to the perspective of women taking arms in an armed insurrection. In July 1909, she reminded the readers of the sacrifices that the cause of Ireland made necessary, making a parallel between the red roses she admired in the garden and the blood shed during the 1798 rebellion: “the petals of Roisin Dubh lay as red and as strange then on the green hillsides of Wexford – scattered a crimson shedding over the land from little Arklow to the shore of Lough Foyle, from the sea-bounds of the Atlantic to among the dusty streets of Dublin”.²⁶ Yet she considered that the blood of Ireland’s martyrs “shall not have been shed in vain” and women should engage in militant activity and challenge the idea that they should be excluded from the fight.²⁷

24. Armid, “The Woman With a Garden”, *Bean na hÉireann*, October 1909, p. 12.

25. Armid, “The Woman With a Garden”, *Bean na hÉireann*, June 1909, p. 11.

26. Amid, “The Woman With a Garden”, *Bean na hÉireann*, July 1909, p. 12.

27. Benton shows that the republican ethic excluded women “from the arms-bearing citizenry” and “placed them as members of the private household which the male citizen must protect”. See Sarah Benton, “Women Disarmed: The Militarization of Politics in Ireland 1913-1923”,

While giving them gardening advice, Markievicz metaphorically encouraged women to engage in different militant activities either in broad daylight or covertly: “You must creep about in the dusk, with a lamp, and catch [slugs] in the act; or make traps by placing little heaps of bran near the plants”,²⁸ and do whatever was necessary for them to qualify for citizenship.²⁹

Writing at a time when feminist activists were far from encouraging women to take arms, Markievicz tried to link nationalism and feminism, considering that women were the victims of a double bind: colonial and patriarchal domination.³⁰ This echoed James Connolly’s anti-imperialism and his perception that socialism and feminism were indivisible. For both Connolly and Markievicz the inequalities produced by the system were reproduced within the family.³¹

Markievicz made this clear in a lecture entitled “Women, Ideals and the Nation” that she delivered to the Students’ National Literary Society in Dublin in 1909 and that was partly reproduced in *Bean na hÉireann* in November 1909. In this lecture she addressed “the rising young women of Ireland”,³² encouraging them to take arms in the fight both for Irish freedom and their own emancipation. Opposing the “chains” weighing down women in the old world to the “fresh ideas, fresh energies” brought by this new generation she was addressing, Markievicz explicitly called them to arms:

Arm yourselves with weapons to fight your nation’s cause. Arm your souls with noble and free ideas. Arm your minds with the histories and memories of your country and her martyrs, her language, and a knowledge of her arts, and her industries. And if in your day the call should come for your body to arm, do not shirk that either.³³

These lines show Markievicz believed in women’s intellectual qualities, asking them to prepare for the struggle to come through physical training but also intellectual reflection and historical study. Her view of

Feminist Review, 50 (The Irish Issue: The British Question), Summer 1995, p. 148-172 (doi:10.2307/1395497), p. 161.

28. Armid, “The Woman With a Garden”, *Bean na hÉireann*, June 1909, p. 10-11.

29. Sarah Benton argues that “the readiness to bear arms for the state was the qualification *par excellence* for citizenship”. The men of Ireland were expected to “make the republic”. See Sarah Benton, art. cit., p. 155.

30. Markievicz, “To Miss Nora Cassidy”, *Bean na hÉireann*, June 1909, p. 14.

31. Maria-Daniaela Dick, Kirsty Lusk & Willy Maley, “‘The Agitator’s Wife’ (1894): the story behind James Connolly’s lost play?”, *Irish Studies Review*, 27(1), 2019, p. 1-21 (doi:10.1080/09670882.2018.1558473), p. 10.

32. Constance Markievicz, *A Call to the Women of Ireland*, Dublin, Fergus O’Connor, 1918, p. 3. Parts of the lecture were reproduced in *Bean na hÉireann* in April 1909 and then it was published under the title *Women, Ideals and the Nation* by Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Dublin, The Tower Press, 1909) and re-published by Cuman na mBan in 1918.

33. Markievicz, *A Call*, op. cit. p. 16.

militancy was therefore much more encompassing than just the readiness to use physical force³⁴ and she considered women to be an asset in the fashioning of the new Irish nation: “Women, from having till very recently stood so far removed from all politics, should be able to formulate a much clearer and more incisive view of the political situation than men”.³⁵

To encourage women to enlist, Markievicz provided examples and role models for her audience by describing in a gender-neutral vocabulary how women in Russia and Poland “work as comrades, shoulder to shoulder with their men”³⁶ to overthrow tyrannical and unjust governments. The example of Poland – that Markievicz also used in her *Bean na hÉireann* column “The Woman With a Garden” in November 1909 – allowed her to put the Irish situation in a larger European context and to build “the international solidarity of a nationalist sisterhood”. Poland could indeed prove to be a powerful example for Irishwomen in their attempt to resist British oppression, especially after the Polish revolution in 1905 and as Poland’s resistance to Russian rule was growing.³⁷

By evoking “the magnificent legacy of Maeve, Fleas, Macha and their other great fighting ancestors”³⁸ and the role of women fighting during the 1798 rising or contributing to the *Nation* newspaper in the 1840s, Markievicz presented Irishwomen as having a revolutionary spirit inherited from powerful historical women but also lesser-known revolutionary women. All the women she mentioned found ways of expressing themselves in the public sphere, fighting for Ireland’s freedom in different contexts, either rhetorically or physically. Markievicz also regretted the lack of involvement of women who “have been content to remain at home quietly, and leave all the fighting and striving to the men”,³⁹ insisting several times on the idea that even if women were enslaved, they should find individual ways of fighting for their nation. Markievicz thus rejected the idea that women could only serve their country in the domestic sphere. She also blamed the women who brought up their daughters in “English ways” for “allowing the Irish situation to deteriorate” and acknowledging the perception of British culture as superior.⁴⁰

She closely linked nationalism and feminism, dismissing both the nationalism that did not support gender equality, “Fix your minds on the ideal of Ireland free, with her women enjoying the full rights of citizenship

34. See Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

35. Markievicz, *A Call*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

37. Anita Stepien, “Ireland’s Sister in Misfortune, Poland?: Polish Militant Suffrage and its Echoes in Ireland”, *Polish and Irish Struggles for Self-Determination: Living Near Dragons*, Galia Chimiak & Bozeana Cierlik (Eds.), Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars, 2020, p. 91-112, p. 94, p. 109.

38. Markievicz, *A Call*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

in their own nation”,⁴¹ and the suffrage societies that failed to promote national freedom: “A Free Ireland with No Sex Disabilities in her constitution should be the motto of all Nationalist women”.⁴² Markievicz called women for active participation using a lot of imperative forms and her emphasis on some words was marked with capital letters in the pamphlet that was published after the lecture was given. Moving beyond abstract rhetoric, she provided examples of militancy that could link nationalism and feminism:

If the women of Ireland would organize the movement for buying Irish goods more, they might do a great deal to help their country. If they would make it the fashion to dress in Irish clothes, feed on Irish food – in this as in everything, LIVE REALLY IRISH LIVES, they would be doing something great, and don't let our clever Irish colleens rest content with doing this individually, but let them go out and speak publicly about it, form leagues, of which “No English Goods” is the war-cry. Let them talk and talk, publicly and privately, never minding how they bore people – till not even one of the peasants in the wilds of Galway but has heard and approved of the movement.⁴³

This paragraph encourages women to gather and express their ideas in the public sphere. It also gives practical advice on the boycott of foreign goods, following Sinn Féin's economic policy, in the context of projected laws that Markievicz identifies as detrimental to Ireland, the Liberals' Land Tax and the Conservatives' Tariff Reform.⁴⁴ *Bean na hÉireann*, in which Markievicz's lecture was printed, only advertised Irish manufacturers and their products to encourage the Irish economy. For Markievicz, it was clear that if women contributed to the liberation of their nation, by taking arms or by other means, they would take in charge their own destiny.

In *Women, Ideals and the Nation*, Markievicz only shortly mentioned the Gaelic past with its great fighting heroines and its magnificent legacy. She came back to this glorious past in a speech given at a meeting of the Irish Women's Franchise League on 12 October 1915 that was printed in the *Irish Citizen* under the title “The Future of Irish Women” on 23 October 1915, underlining the fact the women of her times were the victims of oppression.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

Ancient Ireland bred warrior women, and women played a heroic part in those days. Today we are in danger of being civilized by men out of existence. What distinguished Ireland chiefly of old was the number of women who held their own against the world, who owned no allegiance to any man, who were super-women.⁴⁵

She went on to lament the disappearance of those “great fighting women”, considering the suffragettes as the only heiresses of that “spirit”. Contrary to what cultural nationalists like Maud Gonne would do, Markievicz did not wish to encourage women’s participation in the movement for the preservation of Gaelic culture only⁴⁶ but rather to foster their militancy by giving them examples of women who took arms. In the article, the idea that women were silenced or discarded by men because of their militancy is tackled with the example of the groundbreaking Ladies Land League (1880-81) that took over the activities of the Land League while its main leaders were imprisoned, was asked to disband and badly treated as soon as the men were released.⁴⁷ Analyzing this episode, Markievicz declared that the women had not been given credit for their achievements and had even been written out of history because they “started to do the militant things the men only threatened and talked of”. Focusing on the representation of women in the Irish poetic tradition, she further criticized the attitude of male nationalists who objectified women thus denying them the right to active participation in the national struggle. She dismissed Thomas Moore⁴⁸ whose poetry gave “a very low idea of woman to worship”, that of a passive and submissive being: “she is very like the lap dog which, when it meets a larger animal, rolls over on its back, turns up its toes and looks pathetic”. Broadening her criticism, she included the members of Cumman na mBan who “are there chiefly to collect funds for the men to spend”, adding that they “demoralize women, set them up in different camps, and deprive them of all initiative and independence”. Markievicz rather advised women to move away from the traditional representations and the secondary role ascribed to them: “dress suitably in short skirts and strong boots, leave your jewels and gold wands in the bank and buy a revolver”. She suggested women should trust themselves and move out of the domestic space. For her imminent war would “help to do this by shaking women out of old grooves and forcing responsibilities on them”.

In this speech that demanded more active involvement from women, Markievicz briefly alluded to the participation of women in the

45. Constance Markievicz, “The Future of Irishwomen”, *Irish Citizen*, 23 October 1915.

46. Maud Gonne, “Maedh”, *United Irishman*, 5 October 1901.

47. See Margaret Ward, “Gendering the Union: Imperial Feminism and the Ladies’ Land League”, *Women’s History Review*, 10(1), 2001, p. 71-92 (doi:10.1080/09612020100200279).

48. Thomas Moore was the author of *Irish Melodies* and one of the founders of the *Nation* nationalist newspaper.

1798 rebellion, only saying that “little is known of them” but “their roles seem to have been passive”. The “women of ‘98” had indeed essentially been depicted through their relationships with the men, as United Irish widows – Mathilda Tone, wife of Theobald Wolfe Tone, Pamela, wife of Edward Fitzgerald and Sarah Curran, lover of Robert Emmet. Markievicz regretted the lack of inspiration they could provide, dismissing “weak Sarah Curran, who drifted to madness on Emmet’s death, and married one of his bitter foes” and therefore accepting the received representation of these women.⁴⁹ Yet, from November 1915, just a few weeks later, she published in the *Irish Citizen* a five-part historical column dedicated to them and entitled “The Women of ‘98”.⁵⁰ As the title suggests, Markievicz not only perpetuated the masculine heroic tradition of 1798 but recovered and re-appropriated the female revolutionary efforts in the rising, writing “stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities”, in other words writing “ghost stories” to quote Avery Gordon.⁵¹

The beginning of the first article alludes to the recovery task that Markievicz undertook as she thought it would have been difficult to “gather sufficient material among the histories and memoirs” while the last one argues that her “trouble has been to know what to select, compress or leave out”.⁵² Markievicz thus hinted at the fact that the stories of female involvement in 1798 may have been intentionally left out: “but all through the record of the struggle for independence allusions to deeds done by women and girls drift, giving us an idea of the place taken by the women of Ireland in the national struggle” and later “we get glimpses of them through the smoke of their burning homesteads, and the dust and din of the battlefields”.⁵³ For Caulfield, the use of words like “allusions”, “drift”, “idea” and “glimpses” suggest female efforts were overshadowed in a conservative social context. Markievicz also made a parallel between the social conservatism of the eighteenth century and that of her own times, insisting on the suffering of women, even if she chose to explicitly blame the Penal Laws rather than the gender norms that discarded female militancy.⁵⁴

Tracing the history of female involvement in the 1798 rising, Markievicz provided an alternative national narrative giving women a

49. Nineteenth-century writers such as Thomas Moore and R. R. Madden had indeed depicted the involvement of the United Irishwomen as stemming entirely from the men and suggesting they were not engaged in the republican cause.

50. Constance Markievicz, “The Women of ‘98”, *Irish Citizen*, 6 November 1915, “The Women of Ninety-Eight”, *Irish Citizen*, 13 November 1915, 20 November 1915, 27 November, 4 December 1915.

51. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis, Minnesota U.P., 2008, p. 17.

52. Markievicz, “The Women of ‘98”, *op. cit.*, 6 November 1915 and 4 December 1915.

53. *Ibid.*, 6 November 1915.

54. Mary Caulfield, “Whenever the Tale of ‘98 is Told: Constance Markievicz, the National Memory and The Women of Ninety-Eight”, *Ireland, Memory and the Historical Imagination*, Mary Caulfield (Ed.), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 87-100, p. 89-90.

place in this nationalist and republican landmark, and thus trying to legitimize women's participation in the national struggle as a whole, past and present. In this counter-narrative, she assumed the role of a story-teller, to revise the traditional male-dominated account and tell the "tales" of ordinary women who chose roles that she described as either "passive" or "active", wishing their stories "[would] be remembered in song and history whenever the tale of '98 is told".⁵⁵ In a dramatic tone, she uncovered efforts by women who were either lesser-known heroines and activists like Molly Weston, Mary Doyle, Betsy Grey and Mary McCracken, or were ordinary women who chose to have supportive roles as nurses or messengers. Markievicz considered Molly Weston who joined the insurgents at Tara dressed in a green uniform or Betsy Grey who was shot during the Ulster Rebellion to be of "heroic greatness". All the stories she told describe the sufferings and heroism of these women who provide role models for female activism, implying there could be many different forms of militancy and talents to emulate: "a light in the path to us women of today".⁵⁶ Markievicz celebrated both active and passive resistance writing for instance: "one way in which the women of '98 were able to do good service to their country was by carrying, by word of mouth, messages too dangerous to be trusted to paper and ink".⁵⁷ She thus endeavoured to "redefine revolution and the role of the revolutionary to include women as political actors".⁵⁸ Markievicz's "Women of '98" provide both a nationalist and a feminist approach to '98, constructing a women's national narrative and striving to incorporate it in collective memory, to act against the process of female exclusion from the national struggle. A few years later, after some women took part in the Easter Rising⁵⁹ and the War of Independence, Markievicz remarked that as many women were brought in political activity and the public sphere because of the national struggle, the social conservatism of Irish life started being questioned in a more pressing way, much to the dismay of a part of the political actors. When debating in the Dáil on 2 March 1922 on "Irishwomen and the Franchise", Markievicz alluded to Arthur Griffith's concern that votes for women would benefit the anti-treaty side and underlined the fact that some "men of the IRA" were ready to "turn down the girls who stood by the men in the days of the fight for freedom". She blamed the Treatyites for not doing "justice to these young women and young girls who took a man's part in

55. Markievicz, "The Women of '98", *op. cit.*, 6 November 1915.

56. *Ibid.*, 16 November 1915.

57. *Ibid.*, 4 December 1915.

58. Kristine Byron, "The Woman with a Garden (and a Gun): Constance Markievicz", *Irish Studies: Geographies and Genders*, Marti D. Lee and Ed Madden (Eds.), Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2008 p. 81–91, p. 83.

59. Margaret Ward estimates that around 90 women took part in the Rising while Ruth Tallion gives 180 names. Over 70 women were arrested. See Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, Dublin, Pluto, 1989 (1995: [doi:10.2307/j.ctt18mbdpc](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt18mbdpc)) and Ruth Tallion, *When History was Made: The Women of 1916*, Belfast, Beyond the Pale, 1996.



Fig. 1: Constance Markievicz, “Midnight Assassins”, 1922 (PD 3062 TX, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

the Terror”, excoriating men like Joseph MacGrath who had no respect for the women who fought “in men’s clothing”.⁶⁰

Markievicz’s rhetoric seems to have changed with time and was sometimes described as inconsistent. Yet she went on representing Republican women as popular heroines ready to sacrifice for the cause like the “women of ’98”, contradicting the received image of women during the revolutionary period. If her earlier work clearly rejected the exclusively domestic role of women, Arrington argues that she could also fall into more conventional gender roles and play up to certain stereotypes if she considered it necessary.⁶¹ Many of her best-known caricatures and drawings published in the Civil War period emphasized the brutality of Free State forces by seemingly representing women as victims or passive figures.⁶² This is the case of “Midnight Assassins. Raid on Mrs. De Valera” (1922) in which Mrs. De Valera is represented in a night gown with her six children surrounded by Free State officers holding her at gun point (Fig. 1). If the brutality of Free State forces is represented through the attack on a woman and her children at night, Mrs. De Valera appears rather stoic and almost unaffected by the attack on her family. Such a situation could be relatively

60. The debate over women’s franchise includes a heated moment between Joseph MacGrath and Constance Markievicz over the women who took part in the fighting in men’s clothing and the inconsistency of women in general: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/1922-03-02/23/#spk_227 (last accessed 10 September 2020).

61. Arrington, “Liberté, égalité, sororité”, art. cit., p. 217.

62. Markievicz made an effective case against the Irish Free State by contributing articles and caricatures to several Republican newspapers published under the initiative of the IRA publicity department supervised by Erskine Childers.



Fig. 2: “Free Staters breaking up Maud Gonne meeting” (1922, Lissadell Collection)

frequent at the time as many republican women told of frequent night-time raids by the British and then the Free State forces.⁶³ *At a Republican Home* (1922) evokes First World War recruitment propaganda and stereotypically portrays the woman being left at home while her husband goes off to fight: “Kiss Daddy goodbye Darling, he’s going off to fight for the Republic”.⁶⁴ If this depiction could sometimes be accurate, in the case of Markievicz’s caricatural portrayal of Free State politics, it certainly added melodrama to the scene and the home was described as “republican”, adding ambiguity to the role of the woman after her husband’s departure. In other caricatures, the ambiguity is made even clearer through the use of an ironic caption. Markievicz’s series *Free Staters in Action* (1922) depicted the exactions of this new army that she described as replacing the British forces and perpetuating their work. One caricature in the series describes Free Staters attacking a meeting organized by Maud Gonne and gathering women and children on O’Connell Street (Fig. 2). It shows different reactions among the female figures, from despair to calm and composure as a form of resistance while the caption ironically indicates the ladies continued the meeting elsewhere before being attacked again:

63. Louise Ryan, “Furies’ and ‘Die-Hards’: Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Gender and History*, 11(2), July 1999, p. 256-275 (doi:10.1111/1468-0424.00142), p. 268.
 64. Arrington, *Revolutionary Lives*, op. cit., p. 229.



Fig. 3: “Cuman na mBan bicycles taken by Free Staters” (1922, Lissadell Collection)

This courageous attack was launched against ladies, wives, mothers and children of Republican prisoners, who were holding a meeting in O’Connell Street. Mrs Despard is addressing the meeting and Mme Gonne McBride stands by her. The ladies made an orderly retreat on Mountjoy, where they continued the meeting. They were followed by two Lancia cars and again attacked.

While the cartoon plays on the trope of women as victims, the caption uses military vocabulary that almost represents the women as a rival army: “the ladies made an orderly retreat”. The repetition of attacks on women shows the vanity of Free State action. Another caricature (Fig. 3) in the series *Free Staters in Action* represents several of them threatening two Cuman na mBan auxiliaries in a Dublin street (1922). Markievicz ironically chose to exaggerate the difference in height and stature between



Fig. 4: Constance Markievicz, “The Bodyguard of the Republic” (PD 3076 TX 14, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland)

the Free staters and the two women, together with the representation of one the Free Staters with disproportionate fists. But the caption totally discredits the action of Free Staters: “Glorious Victory over the two Miss O’Reed’s. Two valuable bicycles captured” while the women are represented as calm and strong. Using ambiguous or stereotyped caricatures allowed Markievicz to represent Republican women as martyrs and female heroes like the “Women of ‘98”. In *The Bodyguard of the Republic* (1922), the figure of Hibernia is shown with her arm around a female Republican fighter holding a gun while a man, also in uniform is ready to fight with a rifle in hand (Fig. 4). Both the man and the woman are represented protecting the Republic hand in hand like their Polish counterparts in Markievicz’s 1909 lecture *Women, Ideals and the Nation*.

This question of dress and costume is often emphasized in Markievicz’s rhetoric, all the more as she used it herself as political tactics. In her historical column on the “Women of ‘98”, Markievicz described the costumes and dress of the women

whose mini-biographies she related. One was “dressed in a green habit with the tricolor and red plume in her hat”. Another “had talents for acting and disguising herself”, which allowed her to gather information unnoticed and disturb the English army. This shows that the feminine body could be a subject of dispute as some women played an active part in the national struggle instead of asking the men to go off to fight.⁶⁵ For Markievicz, women could be soldiers too and they had to dress suitably for that purpose. Uncovering the previously untold stories of the “women of ‘98” enabled her to go against the accepted behaviour of women in her own time.

Some famous 1915 studio photographs of Markievicz show her dressed in a military outfit and plumed hat that was reminiscent of the costumes and uniforms she described in “The women of ‘98”. It could thus be argued that her own outfit was chosen to create a link with earlier women fighting for Ireland.⁶⁶ As a trained artist, Markievicz was well aware of the potential of portraits for political expression and she used

65. Mary Caulfield shows that the character of Peggy O’Byrne in the play *Blood Money* (1925) by Markievicz provides a subversive critique on the nationalist image of femininity. See Mary Caulfield, “Fashion Advice: Constance Markievicz’s ‘Unmarked’, ‘Mismarked’ and ‘Remarkable’ Women”, *Staging Thought: Essays on Irish Theatre, Scholarship and Practice*, Rhona Trench (Ed.), Oxford..., Peter Lang, 2012, p. 191-203.

66. Steele, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

studio portrait photography to shape her public image and call the women of Ireland to join her in taking up arms. Steele argued that her poses as Joan of Arc clasping a sword and her more famous portraits with a gun seemed to be chosen to hide her feminine body and enhance her militant energy with the idea of masculine combativeness.⁶⁷ Dowler rather claimed that Markievicz's photographs provided a "model for accepted behavior of women in war" focusing on Markievicz's supposed uneasiness with her gun, her feathered hat and the pastoral landscape in the background, considering the image given of Markievicz corresponded more to the expression of "femininity and status" rather than to the heroic description of her actions during the Easter Rising.⁶⁸ I would rather argue that Markievicz's studio portraits were transgressive, following Benton's argument that in the republican ethics, women were excluded from arms-bearing and should be protected by the men. Markievicz's deliberately theatrical cross-dressing, her hyperbolic self-representation – the uniform with the feathered hat – should thus be read "as a sign and symptom of the dissolution of boundaries, and of the arbitrariness of social law and custom". The strong reactions she inspired show cross-dressing's "considerable power to disturb, its transgressive force".⁶⁹ Her self-representation was one of the ways she chose to act against the "consensus" that discouraged female militancy.

After the Civil War, Markievicz was elected to the Daíl for South Dublin in August 1923 but refused to take the oath of allegiance to the king, thus disqualifying herself from sitting. Removed from politics, she went on producing publications that focused on her memories of former glories. Disappointed by contemporary realities, she turned back to theatre as part of her propaganda campaign and in an attempt at incorporating female militancy in collective memory through another medium. She dramatized female militancy in her plays including *The Invincible Mother* (1925) and *Blood Money* (1925). Mrs. Fagan, the main character of *The Invincible Mother*, is inspired by the story of the "Patriot Mother" told in Markievicz's 1915 column "The Women of '98". In the play, the story is not set in 1798 but sometime after 1850, thus linking the heroism of the 1798 patriot mother to contemporary female efforts. The English soldiers try to force Mrs. Fagan to become an informant to save her son's life but she recalls her family history of dying "true" and evokes the martyrs of 1798. The character, who appears weak at first, can be read as a subversion of Mother Ireland as she challenges the expected notions of motherhood. Markievicz's *Blood Money* is reminiscent of the story of "Norah,

67. *Ibid.*

68. Lorraine Dowler, "Amazonian Landscapes. Gender, War and Historical Repetition", *The Geography of War and Peace from Deaths Camps to Diplomats*, Colin Flint (Ed.), Oxford, Oxford U.P., 2005, p. 133-148, p. 140-142.

69. Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 25, p. 71.

pride of Wexford maids”, that was also told in the column “The Women of ’98”, providing the tale with an alternative successful ending.⁷⁰ Only produced posthumously by the Republican Players Dramatic Society, *Broken Dreams* (1927) expresses Markievicz’s disillusionment with the repression of women in the republican movement.⁷¹

With the stories that she told in her historical column in the *Irish Citizen*, Markievicz demonstrated that she was well aware of the role of theatre in shaping the minds of the revolutionary generation.⁷² She also wished to continue fostering women’s active participation in the public and political life of the nation in spite of the Free State’s attempt to take rights from women and gradually eliminate them from public life.⁷³ Women were indeed expected to fall back into domesticity as they disturbed the myth of manliness and brotherhood on which the neo-colonial state sought to build itself.⁷⁴ Markievicz’s plays, journalism and self-representation challenged the many limitations imposed on Irish women and provided alternative possibilities for women’s roles in Irish society and in the nationalist struggle, using roles models taken from a forgotten or silenced past, from “ghost stories”. Each of her contributions and publications provide insight into her conception of her own role and that of women in the Irish struggle for independence. Markievicz also had to address an audience made of feminists and nationalists that could be more socially conservative than she was herself. Once the war of independence was over, she had to deal with the fact that many men feared the radicalism and militancy of the women the war had brought to political activism. This led some of them who had always supported woman suffrage like Arthur Griffith to weigh that up against their support for the Treaty, as the vast majority of Republican women were known to oppose the Treaty. Markievicz’s late theatre and journalism expressed her sense of betrayal at the politics of the Free State had trouble considering women as militants and rejected “women in men’s clothing”⁷⁵ as “furies”⁷⁶ and “die-hards”.⁷⁷

70. Caulfield, “The Women of ’98”, art. cit. p. 88.

71. Mary Caulfield, “‘The Woman With a Garden’: Unearthing the Artistry and Activism of Constance Markievicz 1908-1927”, PhD Thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2011 ([hdl:2262/77913](https://hdl.handle.net/2262/77913)), p. 102.

72. Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces, The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923*, London, Penguin, 2014.

73. See Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, “Defining Their Role in the New State: Irishwomen’s Protest against the Juries Act of 1927”, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 18(1) (Women and Irish Politics), July 1992, p. 43-60 ([doi:10.2307/25512895](https://doi.org/10.2307/25512895)).

74. Benton describes brotherhood as essential in times of war thus denying women’s participation both in the mythic and actual struggle. Benton, art. cit., p. 148.

75. Markievicz makes a reference to a remark made by a Teachta who spoke before her. See Markievicz, “On Women’s Franchise”, art. cit.

76. “Politics and Patriotism, Bishop’s Advice to People, Women Who are Furies”, *Cork Examiner*, 18 May 1925.

77. President Cosgrave, cited in *Irish Times*, 1 January 1923.

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