

Gender and Memory: Depictions of Femininity in Irish Revolutionary Art

Pearl Joslyn

Senior, History and Global Studies

The popular narrative of the 1916 Easter Rising, which marked the start of the Irish Revolution, reflected highly gendered views of masculine and feminine roles in armed rebellion. In the gendered environment of British-ruled Ireland at the end of the Victorian Era, women were frequently pushed out of active combat roles. Instead, women were expected to aid the young men of Ireland, who were frequently sent to their deaths, a trope not uncommon in the history of revolution and warfare. These gender roles were reflected in the Irish arts during the years surrounding the 1916 Easter Rising. Depictions of masculinity and femininity in Irish Nationalist art often portrayed women as helpless victims of British oppression, who needed young men to give their lives to protect their honor. The arts played a critical role in Irish nationalism and codified the common perception of the role women played in 1916 as passive and marginal. The adoption of this vision into the collective consciousness undermined the active role women played in the Easter Rising and subsequent war for independence, effectively rewriting the history of women who took up arms against the British and served as active combatants.

This paper compares depictions of the mythological personification of Ireland, Kathleen ni Houlihan,¹ with the true stories of female active combatants to investigate where collective memory of the Easter Rising diverged from the truth. By presenting these examples against the backdrop of traditional gender roles in the era of Irish state-building, this paper hopes to contribute to the study of gender in revolutionary Irish history. Additionally, this paper offers a critique of the over-reliance on romanticized versions of the past that derive from fiction in collective memory. This paper will shed light on the women of the revolution, whose vital role in Irish history is often overlooked.

When Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1901, they did not expect it to become a rallying cry for revolution. The play, however, became a sort of call to arms among young nationalists who saw a vision of renewal in the play's conclusion. The play's influence on society horrified Yeats and Gregory, who feared that the outcome of a violent revolution would not only be disastrous for Ireland, but also for them as members of the British aristocracy.² For Yeats and Gregory, there was something romantic in their vision of Irish rebirth, but

¹ A number of spellings of the name Kathleen ni Houlihan exist. For the purposes of this paper, the common spelling of Kathleen ni Houlihan is used. All other spellings are retained from the use of the authors.

² William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in *Collaborative One-Act Plays, 1901-1903*, Ed. James Pethica (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), XXXV-XXXVI.

both saw it as more of a symbolic and gradual rebirth than a sudden one brought on by revolution. In fact, Yeats saw the play in quite a different light, viewing the groom's abandonment of his bride as symbolic of "the perpetual struggle of the cause of Ireland and every other ideal cause against private hopes and dreams, against all that we mean when we say the world."³ While Yeats and Gregory may not have intended to spur nationalists to action, their play helped awaken a movement. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* provided a highly gendered image of revolution, wherein young men had to give their lives to restore youth and beauty to the elderly and helpless Ireland. In fact, when the young protagonist, Michael Gillane, asks Cathleen ni Houlihan what she wants from his family she responds "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all." After Cathleen ni Houlihan tells Michael that she wants him to give his life for her, he forgets everything from his old life, including his fiancé and parents.⁴ The play ends with Michael's brother, when asked if he had seen the "Old Woman" Cathleen ni Houlihan, responding "I did not; but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen."⁵ Despite the passive role she takes in sending men to their deaths, their martyrdom is shown as bringing renewal to Cathleen ni Houlihan, and thus to Ireland. This play depicts an extremely gendered and rigid power structure. Cathleen ni Houlihan exhibits little agency over her own life, while the

young men of Ireland are forced to take on violent roles to protect her youth, beauty, and purity.

Cathleen ni Houlihan was based on Yeats' earlier poem "Kathleen the Daughter of Hoolihan and Hanrahan the Red." The poem, in contrast to the play, presents Cathleen ni Houlihan as the object of the protagonist's desire, rather than the distraction from love that she is presented as in the play.⁶ The evolution of the use of Cathleen ni Houlihan from the poem to the play is perhaps due to Lady Gregory's influence, or the need for higher stakes and greater conflict in a stage play than in a short poem. Regardless of the motivation for the evolution, Cathleen ni Houlihan still serves the same purpose as the personification of Ireland, the object of love. As such, she is used in both works to disguise nationalist sympathies under the guise of romance.⁷ Yeats was somewhat self-conscious of being overtly nationalistic, surely for personal reasons, but also for the sake of his writing. He worried that more frank allusions to nationalism weakened the structure of a work. This is evidenced in William Dall Hefernan's poem about Cathleen ni Houlihan, which is much more overtly political and less romantic.⁸ By presenting a highly romanticized version of this story, Yeats was able to avoid accusations of nationalism by instead

³ Yeats and Gregory, XXXVII.

⁴ Yeats and Gregory, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, 92-95.

⁵ Yeats and Gregory, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, 95.

⁶ Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and Artistic Power* (New York: NYU, 1992), 56.

⁷ Marcus, *Artistic Power*, 56.

⁸ Marcus, *Artistic Power*, 56-57.

presenting his work as carrying on the legacy of Irish myth through romanticism.

A more overtly nationalist work, the poem “Roger Casement” by Eva Gore-Booth again presents a male martyr who gave his life “For the sake of God and Kathleen ni Houlihaun.”⁹ This poem, written by Gore-Booth to her sister Constance Markievicz following the 1916 Easter Rising, presents a particularly interesting study because of the circumstances surrounding Roger Casement’s death. Casement was born to a Protestant family, but was raised Catholic. After trips to the Congo Free State and the Putumayo region of the Amazon to investigate atrocities being carried out under imperialism, Casement became strongly anti-imperialist. Following these experiences, Casement returned to Ireland where he worked to gain German support for the Rising. After being caught, he was executed for high treason by the British government. Casement’s trial and subsequent execution have remained a controversial subject because of the accusations of homosexuality brought against him in his trial. In the poem, Gore-Booth addresses and refutes these allegations, saying:

I dream of the hatred of men,

Their lies against him who knew nothing of lying,

⁹ Eva Gore-Booth, “Roger Casement” in *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz*, Ed. Esther Roper (New York: Krauss Reprint Company, 1970), 130.

*Nor was there fear in his mind.*¹⁰

In the poem, Kathleen ni Houlihan again takes on a passive role, with no action by her being depicted while the central figure of the poem gives his life for her honor.

Gore-Booth’s refutation of Casement’s sexuality is especially interesting, given her own queerness. Most viewed accusations against Casement as deliberate acts of character assassination aimed at destroying his legacy, and Gore-Booth was clearly no exception.

The painting “Eire” by Beatrice Elvery, also known as Lady Glenavy, again depicts the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan as the personification of Ireland. In the painting, Kathleen ni Houlihan sits in a traditional cloak in front of a Celtic cross. Holding the infant Ireland in her lap, with saints behind her and the bodies of martyrs at her feet, Kathleen ni Houlihan resembles the Virgin Mary.¹¹ The painting plays on the trope of the Virgin Mary as a bringer of renewal through the birth of Jesus, but again shows the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan as a passive actor in the struggle for Irish independence. Like Yeats and Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, this painting also inspired feeling of martyrdom amongst young Irishmen, much to the shock of the artist. In fact, Lady Glenavy was inspired by Yeats and Lady Gregory’s writings to create the painting.¹² The painting was hung at St.

¹⁰ Gore-Booth, 130.

¹¹ Beatrice Elvery, *Éire, 1907*, Pearse Museum, Dublin.

¹² Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922* (Cork, Ireland: Mercier Press, 2010), 26.

Enda's College, and upon meeting a student from the school, Lady Glenavy was horrified to learn that the painting had driven the young man to be willing to lay down his life for Ireland. Like Yeats and Gregory, Lady Glenavy had thought her work to be of little interest to Irish nationalists, and was surprised to learn of its impact.¹³

These works showcase a depiction of gender roles and expectations that were in keeping with the era. In reality, women played a much more direct role in the revolution. Countess Constance Markievicz, the sister of Eva Gore-Booth, was an active combatant in the Rising, and was only spared from execution because of her gender.¹⁴ This prevented Markievicz from being remembered as one of the martyrs of the Rising, which would help to explain her absence in the national memory of the Rising, if not for the popularity of Michael Collins and Éamon de Valera, who also avoided the firing squad. Like Collins and de Valera, Markievicz took an active role in early state formation in Ireland, even becoming the first woman elected to the British Parliament.¹⁵ While Markievicz is, without a doubt, the most widely known woman of the Easter Rising, her memory has been overshadowed by the legacies of the men she fought beside, and by overly-critical analyses of her life and role in the Rising. One such work was Seán

¹³ Marcus, *Artistic Power*, 123-124.

¹⁴ Loredana Salis, "The Duty and Pleasure of Memory: Constance Markievicz", *Studi Irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, No. 8 (June, 2018).

¹⁵ Salis.

O'Faoláin's 1934 biography of the Countess, which Esther Roper published her *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* in response to. Roper's book was an attempt to shed light on the deep personal sacrifices Markievicz made for the Rising, and to prove her significance in the revolution.¹⁶ This book showcases what was a rare attempt at the time: Roper hoped to rewrite the popular narrative of Markievicz's life by using primary sources to prove her involvement in the Rising.

Like Constance Markievicz and Eva Gore-Booth, the women who dominated Irish politics were usually highly educated, especially compared with their rural counterparts. Many of the women leading the charge on issues of suffrage and independence were educated in the arts and humanities in Dublin, and as a result were very likely well-versed in Irish literature. In comparison, most Irish women were relegated to domestic roles and lived in devoutly Catholic rural areas.¹⁷ Because of these factors, the views of the prominent Irish women of this time were not necessarily representative of the majority of Irish women. Instead, these were the views of a small class of elites who had the ability to dedicate their time to political causes. Regardless, these women fought for the rights of all Irish women and many joined in with the nationalist cause, often hoping that

¹⁶ Salis.

¹⁷ Margaret Ward, "'Suffrage First-Above all Else!' an Account of the Irish Suffrage Movement". *Feminist Review* 0, no. 10 (Spring, 1982): 21. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1300471635?accountid=14270>.

independence would afford more leeway for women's rights issues.

Women were active in the nationalist movement for decades before the Easter Rising, and played an important role in merging Irish literary movements with nationalism. Alice Milligan, an author, poet, and Gaeilgeoir (Irish speaker), became a prominent figure in the Irish literary world at the turn of the century. She befriended Yeats, along with other writers of the Irish literary revival. As editors of the nationalist literary publication *The Northern Patriot*, and later *The Shan Van Vocht*, she and writer Anna Johnson gave a voice to some of the rising figures in the nationalist movement, most notably James Connolly. Milligan and Johnson published Connolly's early socialist writings under the Irish Socialist Republican Party. Milligan's upper-middle class Methodist roots afforded her the opportunity to create *The Shan Van Vocht* and further the merging of Irish artistic society with the nationalist cause.¹⁸ In these ways, the nationalist movement was more inclusive of women than traditional society, however, female participation was still greatly limited within some nationalist organizations and circles.

The *Inghean A na h-Eireann* (meaning the Daughters of Ireland) was founded in 1900 by Maud Gonne and Helana Maloney, and was the predecessor to *Cumann Na mBan*. This occurred at the same time as the circulation of the *Bean na h-Eireann*, a pamphlet for women. Eight

years later, the Irish Women's Franchise League was created, followed by *Fianna Na h-Eireann* a year later.¹⁹ The organizations formed the early basis for the participation of women in the Easter Rising. As nationalist activity increased, James Connolly and James Larkin formed the Irish Citizen Army in 1913. The Irish Citizen Army offered full equality to women, and drew upon members, including women, from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.²⁰ These early groups encouraged women to be politically engaged and work alongside men to further the cause of Irish independence. Additionally, the groups attracted women who had already been engaged in the suffrage movement. These women could bring powerful organizing skills to the nationalist movement. The results of women's participation through separate organizations, however, were usually not so evenly balanced.

It is worth further investigating Maud Gonne's relationship with the revolution, and with nationalist works. Gonne, an heiress and member of the Irish aristocracy, seemingly developed deep nationalist sympathies, or was at least very good at pretending she had. It was observed that she used charm to gain the trust of nationalist men who were initially suspicious of the ethnically English heiress suddenly appearing in nationalist circles. As a result, Gonne was able to work her way into what had until then been male-only

¹⁸ Matthews, *Renegades*, 27-28.

¹⁹ Gore-Booth, 14.

²⁰ Gore-Booth, 14-15.

areas. Gonne's sympathies were reflected in her participation in organizing the centenary events commemorating the 1798 rebellion. It was during this period of event planning that Gonne and Yeats grew close and began a relationship.²¹ This close relationship between Yeats and Gonne is somewhat surprising, given Yeats' hesitance toward radical nationalism and concerns over maintaining his position in society. Yeats' relationship with Gonne lasted for several years, however, and it was ultimately Gonne who inspired *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, according to Yeats. Trying to avoid the play being viewed as a work of nationalist propaganda, Yeats let the public know that the idea for the play came to him in a dream. The connections between Kathleen ni Houlihan in the play and Gonne are obvious, and it was unsurprising that Gonne was cast in the lead role.²² Gonne's relationship with Yeats highlights the important ways in which these nationalist works were really thinly veiled depictions of real events, which in retrospect hinted at the looming Easter Rising.

In the case of Cumann na mBan, the women's branch of the armed independence movement, the highly gendered nature of Irish society in the early twentieth century was replicated within the independence movement. In the years leading up to the revolution, the women of Cumann na mBan

were relegated to the secondary role of collecting funds and excluded from decision-making processes, despite the centrality of equality to the movement. This was in part caused by the unwillingness of the leadership of the Irish Volunteers to risk alienating members by giving women a more active role in the organization. Because of these factors, despite being the Cumann na mBan President, Constance Markievicz focused much more effort on the Citizen Army, which allowed the participation of women.²³ Simultaneously, many of the women in the organization agreed that women should take on a subsidiary role. At a 1914 Cumann na mBan meeting, member Alice Stopford Green expressed a desire "that the women of Ireland would band themselves into a real body of volunteers," but clarified this role, by explaining that she meant for women to take on the task of collecting money for the Irish Volunteers.²⁴ It was not until after the 1916 Easter Rising that Cumann Na mBan gained a more active role in the independence movement. Even then, the sentiment was in response to the need for more fighters during the war for independence rather than a shift in values.²⁵ These views on women's participation were influenced by mainstream views of appropriate conduct by women, even though these views undermined the goals of the revolution.

²¹ Adrian Frazier, "Cathleen ni Houlihan, Yeats's Dream, and the Double Life of Maud Gonne", *Sewanee Review* 121, no. 2 (2013): 225-233, <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.temple.edu/article/506240> (accessed December 7, 2018).

²² Frazier, "Yeats' Dream".

²³ Ward, "Irish Suffrage".

²⁴ Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2007), 23.

²⁵ Ward, "Irish Suffrage".

Even Markievicz grew tired of the constant uphill battle to be recognized as an equal in the revolution. Spared from execution because of her gender, Markievicz aired some of her frustrations in letters sent from prison to her sister. She recalled, “It is such years since we served on committees together: not since we went out to force a suffrage bill through Parliament. I have no ambition to vote for an English Parliament, and don’t suppose I would use it,” and then conjectured, “I think I am beginning to believe in anarchy. Laws work out as injustice, legalized by red tape.”²⁶ Markievicz seemed to have grown tired of the barriers she faced in her activism, enough that she at least ruminated on the benefits of anarchy. These feelings were no doubt inspired by the sexism she faced in the revolutionary movement, evidenced by her discussion of her work as a suffragette, and her difficulty asserting women’s rights in the republican movement.

The literature of the period surrounding the Easter Rising reflects the general attitudes of the era toward women’s role in the nationalist movement. Yeats and Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* presents femininity as being based in youth. Additionally, the play presents a feminized depiction of Ireland that has lost its purity. The male figures in the play are tasked with regaining Ireland’s purity, by giving their lives in an act of violence. As such, the figure of Kathleen ni Houlihan exhibits almost no agency over her own life, creating a highly unbalanced power structure. Yeats’

earlier depiction of Kathleen ni Houlihan presents Ireland as a young, attractive woman, but still reinforces this lack of agency. In her painting, *Éire*, Lady Glenavy depicts Kathleen ni Houlihan as a maternal figure, but again her presence is secondary to the main, male figure. Finally, in her poem “Roger Casement”, Eva Gore-Booth constructs a rigid gender landscape, where a dominant male figure gives his life for the virtue of Kathleen ni Houlihan.

When juxtaposed with the actual roles women played in the revolution and the trials they faced because of their gender, it is clear that these works were not an accurate reflection of the roles women took on during the revolutionary period. Constance Markievicz took an active enough role in the combat surrounding the Rising to warrant her imprisonment. While she was spared the same fate as her male counterparts, this was only because of societal standards of the era. When compared to the passive roles artists portrayed Kathleen ni Houlihan in, it is clear that the popularity of these works is more based in the popularity of romanticism and reflections of traditional gender roles than in historical accuracy. It is the unfortunate nature of these works, mostly created by women, that they are reflective of the ideals of the time and projecting a simplified narrative of national history. As a result, these works overshadow the stories of the real women of the Rising, and steer the national narrative toward the stories of male participants.

²⁶ Markievicz, *Prison Letters*, 174.

The impacts of these artistic works have carried over into the popular narrative of the Easter Rising, which centers on the martyrs and male figures of the Rising while overlooking the stories of the women involved. These artistic works compose an important segment of Irish history by highlighting the importance of romantic art to the national narrative. At the same time, they need to exist alongside a greater awareness of the contributions real women made to the revolution. Unless these two stories can exist in the national consciousness simultaneously, an important aspect of the story of Irish revolution will continue to be overlooked.

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