

North Mayo Heritage Centre Mayo Heritage Newsletter

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Image: UCC.ie

International Womens Day 2026



(Image: RTE.ie)

Cumann na mBan and its role in Irish history

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Cumann na mBan

Cumann na mBan, the women's auxiliary corps of the Irish Volunteers, was founded in Wynne's Hotel, Dublin on the 2nd of April, 1914.¹ They were to play a crucial role in the events of the next decade; the 1916 Easter Rising, the anti-conscription campaign in 1918, the War of Independence, between 1919 and 1921, and the Civil War of 1922-23.

Cumann na mBan became essential to the fight for freedom. The 'flying columns' who fought the War of Independence were small in number. This was guerrilla warfare, and the columns had to be small, nimble, well trained and trustworthy. For guerrilla warfare to work, the demarcation line between combatant and civilian had to be blurred. That required a huge effort from the population from which these fighting men were drawn. In reality, without Cumann na mBan, the campaign would never have gotten off the ground. They were crucial in concealing and transporting weapons, and they were the lines of intelligence communication between active units often hiding out in remote places. Peg Duggan, a member from Cork, recalled her activity:

*'I and my sisters devoted every spare moment of our time to harbouring wanted men, carrying ammunition and guns for the IRA, visiting prisoners in jails, providing comforts for them and carrying dispatches.'*²

Intelligence and other documents were transported by Cumann na mBan members hidden in the handlebars or seat tubes of their bicycles, or in their clothing. In doing this, they ran enormous risks, not just for themselves,³ but for their families and even their native villages, should they be apprehended.

Although soldiers and police initially refrained from searching women, from late 1920 onwards, female searchers were employed and this made the member's lives even more dangerous.⁴

As Cumann na mBan officer in Leitrim Brigid Doherty explained:

*'we could get through very often with dispatches where men would not have a hope. The enemy did not always have lady searchers with them and then only in very limited numbers.'*⁵

Early branches in Mayo included Westport, and Newport, the latter started by Ann Kilroy, wife of Michael Kilroy, who became the Commander of the West Mayo Brigade during the War of Independence.

In the aftermath of the 1916 Rising, police reports stated that there was one company of Cumann na mBan active in Mayo, and it had 40 members.⁶ The conscription scare of 1918, and the rise in popularity of the Sinn Féin party, gave the organisation a tailwind. Despite becoming a banned organisation in that year,⁷ membership grew to 10 branches and 326 members across the county.⁸

Among the prominent members in Co. Mayo were Anita McMahon (Achill), Betta Healy (Claremorris), Margaret Ford (*née* Conway, Ballinrobe), and the Kenny sisters of Crossard, Ballyhaunis. Anita McMahon was later arrested while carrying dispatches for the West Mayo Brigade and was incarcerated in Galway jail.⁹

In Ballina, Josephine Curry (*née* Boshell), Ida McGrath (*née* O'Hara) and Margaret Donnelly¹⁰ carried many coded IRA messages.¹¹

When the Treaty was ratified in 1922, the movement split along pro and anti-Treaty lines. Many Cumann na mBan members from Mayo were imprisoned during the ensuing civil war, among them Miss N. O'Rourke (Swinford), Miss O'Hara (Knox Street, Ballina), Miss Quinn (Swinford, Miss Brennan (Main Street, Swinford), Miss Sweeney (Ardagh) Miss Higgins, (Kilkelly), Miss McMenamin and Miss O'Grady (George's Street, Newport).¹² Although activity during the civil war is less well recorded, some of the women became more public in their activity, appearing in military uniform on the anti-Treaty side.¹³

It is only in recent decades that the Cumann na mBan story has been given its due prominence. 'The story of female participation was not so much written out of history, as never written at all'.¹⁴

The service these brave women gave was eventually recognised by their inclusion in the military pensions awarded to veterans of the period between 1916 and 1924. A total of 172 women from Co. Mayo are recorded as recipients of these pensions.¹⁵

SOURCES:

¹ From militaryarchives.ie

² From rte.ie

³ Augusteijn, among others, has mentioned the use of sexual violence against women in this period, with the Dutch researcher noting the suppression of evidence in this regard.

⁴ From rte.ie

⁵ From rte.ie

⁶ Augusteijn, J. 2023. *Mayo, the Irish Revolution 1912-23*. Four Courts Press, Dublin. Four Courts Press, Dublin. p.44

⁷ Price, D. 2012. *The Flame & the Candle*. The Collins Press. p.17-18

⁸ Augusteijn, J. 2023. *Mayo, the Irish Revolution 1912-23*. Four Courts Press, Dublin. p.55

⁹ Price, D. 2012. *The Flame & the Candle*. The Collins Press. p.49

¹⁰ Reilly, T. 2014. *Ballina, One Town, Three Wars & More*. Yew Plain Publishing, Ballina. p.322

¹¹ Reilly, T. 2014. *Ballina, One Town, Three Wars & More*. Yew Plain Publishing, Ballina. p.400-404

¹² Price, D. 2012. *The Flame & the Candle*. The Collins Press. p.244

¹³ Price, D. 2012. *The Flame & the Candle*. The Collins Press. p.128

¹⁴ Conlon, L. 1969. *Cumann Na mBan and the Women of Ireland 1913-25*. The Kilkenny People

¹⁵ From military archives.ie