

# WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATIONS IN LIMERICK, 1912-1914

**T**he agitation for the right of women to vote in parliamentary elections in Ireland during the years 1912-1914 must be set against the background of the Home Rule movement. Home Rule meant that Ireland would have its own government, but would be still part of the British Empire. The Liberal Party of Great Britain is mainly associated with the Home Rule Bills. The first Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1886, but was defeated in the House of Commons. The second Home Rule Bill, in 1893, was passed in the Commons, but defeated by the House of Lords. The House of Lords had power, up to 1911, to veto any legislation passed by the government. After a budget crisis in 1911, its power of veto was broken, but it was still able to delay a Bill going through parliament for at least two years.

When the third Home Rule Bill came before the House of Commons in April, 1912, it was passed, but was rejected by the House of Lords. In the following year the Home Rule Bill was again passed by the Commons, but was once more rejected by the Lords. It was eventually passed, at its final reading, in May, 1914; this time it did not need the consent of the Lords. However, with the outbreak of the Great War in August, 1914, Home Rule was put on the shelf.

It is well to recall that, at this time, not all men had the vote, and that some were involved in the struggle to win the vote for women. But there is no doubt that women were the main driving force of the movement.

The first women's suffrage association in Ireland, the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association, was founded in 1876; twenty-five years later it changed its name to the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLA). As its name indicates, the Association not only wanted the right for women to vote, but also wanted equal rights for women in local government work. Between 1900 and 1914, other associations advocating the right for women to vote in parliamentary elections sprang up. In 1908, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (whose parents were from Co. Limerick) and Margaret Cousins founded the Irish Women's Franchise

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*Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington leaves Mountjoy Prison, in August, 1912, escorted by her uncle Fr. Eugene Sheehy and her husband, Francis.*

League (IWFL). Another association, the Munster Women's Franchise League (MWFL), was founded by the writers, Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, with Susan Day. Of the many associations that existed around Ireland in those years, we know that the three mentioned above had branches in Limerick.

The IWSLA was established in December, 1910, the IWFL in January, 1911, and the MWFL was set up in March, 1913. Most of the women in the leadership of the suffrage societies came from middle-class backgrounds and were well educated. The names of some of the Limerick suffragettes have been documented: Mrs. Mabel Dodds B.A. and Miss Everina Massey, M.B. IWSLA; Mrs. Robert Gibson, of the IWFL; Mrs.

O'Connor of the MWFL and Miss Helen Morony, LLB of the MWFL. Helen Morony had been a member of the IWFL in 1911 but switched to the MWFL in 1913; she was also on the executive committee of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation during 1913-14.

What motivated the early pioneers of women's rights? To find answers we have to go back to the 19th century laws passed by men which discriminated against women. For instance, by a law of 1839, a mother had the right to custody of her child only up to the age of seven years. This was changed in 1873 to allow her custody of her child up to the age of sixteen. Another law prevented married women from owning property.

The Contagious Diseases Act was a



Cartoon from *The Irish Citizen*, 1912.



Cartoon from *The Lepracaun*, November, 1912.

movements in Britain and the United States, but they also had strong contacts with Norwegian, Australian and South African women, among others.

As the 20th century dawned, the main struggle in the women's rights movements was to gain the vote in parliamentary elections. They had tried, in the last decades of the 19th century, to achieve this by writing letters to the press, speaking to influential people and lobbying members of parliament, but these softly, softly approaches fell by the wayside.

In 1903, a new era in the struggle for women's votes began. This was the founding, by Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel, Sylvia and Adela, of one of the most militant women's associations in the then British Isles, the Women's Social Political Union (WSPU). Mrs. Pankhurst admitted that some of their militant tactics originated from Charles Stewart Parnell and the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster. In time, the WSPU militant strategy influenced some of the Irish women's suffrage associations, in particular the IWFL.

The rise of the British Labour Party gave an added impetus to the campaign. The first party conference took place in Belfast from 25 to 27 January, 1907, and the following motion was passed:

*That this annual conference of the Labour Party declares that the time has arrived when equal voting rights should be extended to all men and women and is further of the opinion that any suggested measure to extend the franchise on a property qualification to a section only would be a retrograde step and should be opposed.*

The party's leader, Keir Hardie, told delegates:

*In order that the people might rule, the people must be enfranchised. It is a bastard form of democracy in which one half of the community, merely because of their sex, is barred out from the rights of citizenship.*

In 1910, the Liberal Party's Conciliation Bill, a bill that would have given at least 1,000,000 women the vote, was defeated. The following year, in May, 1911, the

law enacted to control prostitution. Although well-intentioned, it was open to abuse; any woman could be arrested on mere suspicion. Refusal to be examined meant a prison sentence with hard labour. This act punished the women involved, but not the men, who indulged in illicit sex. Of course, all these laws were eventually repealed.

By 1896, Irish women were allowed, with certain property conditions, to serve as members of a Board of Guardians, bodies which were responsible for the workhouses in Ireland.

In 1898, Irish women were allowed, again with certain property qualifications, to vote in local government elections and to be elected to District Councils. It was not until 1911 that they were allowed to serve on county and borough councils.

As well as national and local pressure groups, there was also an international dimension to the Irish suffrage move-

ment. Examining this influence, Cliona Murphy has observed:

*From the beginning of the suffrage movement in Ireland there was a consciousness among Irish women that they were not alone and were part of an international movement. Louie Bennett, the Irish suffragist and trade unionist, expressed the hope that "every Irish suffrage society will work to keep alive the consciousness that the women's movement is a world wide movement; that we suffragists are working for all women and that we recognise the bond of sisterhood uniting women of every nationality". As a number of comparative studies on suffrage movements have shown, contact between women in different countries was very important in terms of moral support and intellectual stimulation. Reading one another's literature, writing letters and exchanging visits all served to reinforce the suffragists' determination. The Irish women were particularly conscious of the*

Conciliation Bill was re-introduced, and passed its first reading. As it came up again, in March, 1912, the Irish Parliamentary Party, which was more concerned with the attainment of Home Rule, than with women's rights, was instrumental in bringing about the defeat of the Conciliation Bill.

So it can be seen that opposition to the suffrage campaign manifested itself in many groups, including the nationalist movement. In considering this opposition, Margaret Ward has written:

*The all-too-obvious prejudices that kept the majority of women confined to the domestic sphere enraged the feminists, and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, co-founder in 1908 of the militant Irishwomen's Franchise League, wrote a scathing polemic in answer to those whose nationalism appeared to blind them to the realities of everyday life. Hanna reasonably pointed out that a person holding nationalist views was not automatically transformed into a new being, freed from all the cultural prejudices that had been inculcated from birth. Ireland was a conservative, rural-based society, heavily influenced by religion, where women suffered immense social and economic disadvantages and most people – in political organisations or outside them – reflected the views of that society. The role played by women in political organisations was therefore likely to conform to certain expectations about women's traditional concerns, and she proposed to analyse their participation in a most realistic manner. The core of Hanna's argument against the nationalist dismissal of the suffrage campaign centred on this question of the nature of women's political participation. She agreed that women were prominent in the Gaelic movement, in the industrial revival and in Sinn Féin, but claimed that this was far from progressive as the nature of their work reinforced their domestic role. The Gaelic League's primary appeal was to the young to learn their native tongue, and women were important in this movement as mothers, in ensuring that their homes were as Irish as possible, and as teachers in schools and Gaelic League classes.*

The year 1912 started in Limerick with a series of educational meetings run by the IWFL, at which papers dealing with special aspects of the women's suffrage question were read by members. During the meetings, copies of the book *Votes for Women* were sold and leaflets were also handed out.

On 8 February, the IWSLA held their first Annual General Meeting, at the Chamber of Commerce. A report on the activities of the association, since it was founded in 1910, was read out by one of the secretaries:

*In December 1910, our Society succeeded in getting a resolution in favour of Women's Suffrage passed by the Limerick Borough Council. Our branch of this association has now been a little more than one year in existence, and we are*



Cartoon from *Votes for Women*, 1912.

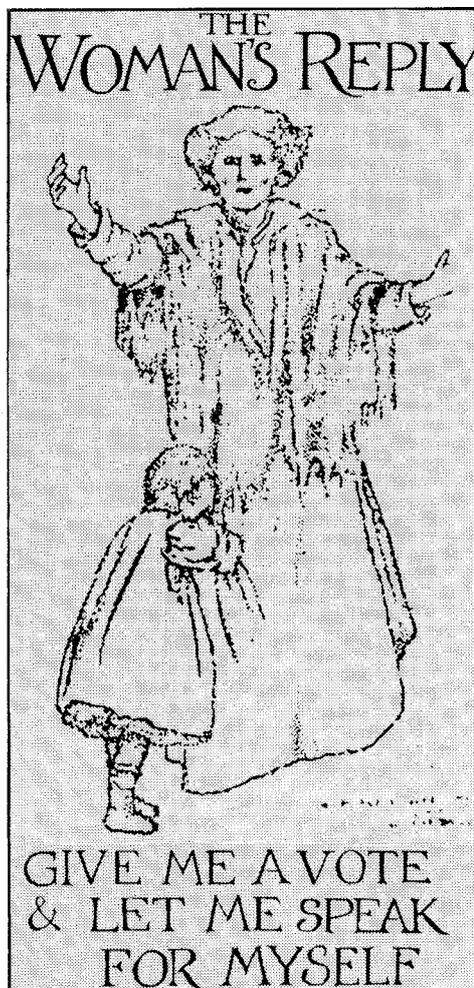
*glad to be able to report that during that time its growth has been considerable. During the past year we have more than doubled the number of our subscribers, owing to our efforts in holding public meetings, and in the distribution of suffrage literature.*

The secretary went on to relate how they had gained new members by moving

from drawing-room meetings to the hiring of the Athenean Hall for a large public meeting on Easter Week, 1911, where Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington was one of the speakers. During the Poor Law Guardian elections of 1911, the IWSLA succeeded in getting one of its members elected to the board. The more militant IWFL was also successful in getting one of its members elected. By the end of 1911, due to pressure from the IWSLA, Limerick County Council passed a resolution in favour of votes for women.

Although the Irish Parliamentary Party's line on women's votes was anti-suffrage, there were individual members who were favourable towards women getting the vote. The M.P. for Limerick, Michael Joyce, was one of them. In the Catholic Church similar positions, for and against, were held. In his Lenten Pastoral, of February, 1912, which addressed the subjects of marriage and education, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Edward Thomas O'Dwyer, also made reference to the agitation "to draw women into the turmoil of politics":

*Another phase of this modern movement is the agitation which has been set on foot to draw women into the turmoil of politics. I do not refer now to them taking part in local affairs, especially those such as the administration of workhouses, which are, more or less, of a charitable nature, and afford scope for their special energies, but their claim to get the Parliamentary suffrage, and to vote, and of course to act equally with men in Parliamentary elections. Hitherto this very grave question has been merely academic and provoked a smile of amusement rather than serious consideration. Now, it has come within the range of practical politics, and it is for everyone to weigh well the consequences, immediate and remote, of so profound a change in our social conditions. Many women, who*



Cartoon from *The Lepracaun*, 1912.

will hear this letter read, will think that it is impossible that a measure for which none of them have ever asked, which most of them regard as an absurdity, which public opinion in Ireland has not demanded, should be suddenly imposed upon us. Yet it is quite possible. The game of parties in Parliament often leads to strange results, and it is well for us in Ireland to realise the danger that, without our consent, this measure may become law, and the women of Ireland be placed in a position from which all their instincts and habits of thought would shrink. The objection to giving votes to women is not that they would exercise the franchise with less judgement or honesty than men. In intelligence, in conscientiousness, in genuine desire for public good, they are not inferior to men. That is not the objection. But it is the total change it would work in their whole domestic and social position. From the peace of their homes they would be drawn into the angry and often squalid strife of political parties. Now they stand outside all such contentions.

It would be fair to point out that there were people who were genuinely concerned about women becoming involved in politics. Bishop O'Dwyer and others like him had been born in an era when politics was a dirty word, often linked to bribery and corruption. It was not until 1872 that the secret ballot was introduced and, by 1883, the worst aspects of electoral corruption were made illegal.

Naturally enough, the bishop's pastoral letter did not go down too well with the IWFL and in a letter to the *Irish Times*, and one of its founder members, Margaret Cousins, replied:

*The whole of Dr. O'Dwyer's diatribe against votes for women is based upon misrepresentation not facts. Those who will get the vote under our demands are women who have no men to represent them - widows and women who have to work for a living - and against those women getting the vote the Bishop makes no case ... the Bishop is again wrong when he says there is no demand for it here. It should have come to his knowledge that the two most important representative bodies in his diocese, the Limerick County Council and Limerick Corporation, have passed resolutions in favour of women's suffrage, and in Limerick city there are strong and active branches of three suffrage societies. Belief in justice and common sense of votes for qualified women has been expressed similarly all over Ireland, and we are cheered by hearing from the Bishop that the movement is so near to victory. If politics are so bad and corrupt as the Bishop thinks them, then the sooner the women who have public welfare at heart get an entry to them and start spring cleaning the better.*

Meanwhile, the Limerick branch of the IWFL drafted a memorial (or statement) to which those in favour signed their signatures. It was a short statement:

*We the undersigned claim the right for*



Cartoon from *The Lepracaun*, 1913.

*Irish-women to vote on the same terms as men.*

It was hoped that the memorial would appeal to "the factory-workers, a class of women who, in the south at least, have hitherto taken little interest in the question, which touches them so nearly". In May, the women's suffrage newspaper, *The Irish Citizen*, made its first appearance.

At a mass meeting of women's associations, in Dublin, on 1 June, to protest against the exclusion of women from the third Irish Home Rule Bill, which the British government had introduced, Mrs. Gibson, the representative of the Limerick branch of the IWFL, again appealed for women to be given the right to vote:

*I come from a city in which women are working for the good of women as loyally as our sisters fought for our men in the times of the sieges ... We want to improve the status of our women workers. The*

*bare possibility of a Minimum Wage Bill shows that men's votes have not gone for nothing. On economic grounds women are justified in demanding the vote. Equal rights for women will mean equal rights for all.*

Mrs. Gibson called on the British government to amend the Home Rule Bill by including votes for women. This appeal fell on deaf ears and the IWFL decided to adopt more militant measures. Between June and July, windows were smashed in Dublin; British suffragettes followed the Prime Minister Mr. Asquith, across to Dublin and threw a hatchet at the horse and carriage in which Mr. Asquith, and the leader of the Irish Party, John Redmond, were travelling through the streets. They also tried to set fire to the Theatre Royal, in which Mr. Asquith was to speak. These acts drew a rebuke from a number of Irish women's suffrage groups, including the Limerick branch of the IWSLA. The



Cartoon from *The Lepracaun*, 1913.

Association deplored and condemned the militant tactics, saying that they were morally wrong and utterly unsound, and that all women's groups would now be painted with the same brush.

After a Unionist anti-Home Rule meeting, in Limerick, in October, rioting took place and a number of houses in Broad Street were looted. By the end of the year, amendments to the Home Rule Bill, to allow Irish women the vote, were also defeated.

On Thursday, 4 February, 1913, a meeting organised by the Munster Branch of the Irish Women's Franchise Federation was held at the Town Hall. Timothy Ryan, ex-Mayor, as chairman, opened the meeting by thanking the Mayor and the Corporation for giving them the use of the Town Hall. The principal speakers were Mrs. Cowan, and Miss Day, both from Cork. Mrs. Cowan began by saying that the IWFF was not a militant body and was outside the sphere of party politics, its sole aim being the enfranchisement of women. She ridiculed the fact that women were placed in the same class as those other disenfranchised members of society, criminals, lunatics and paupers. Mrs. Cowan agreed that a woman's first duty was to her home and her family, but added that her duty did not end there. She finished her lecture by emphasising how important the right to vote was to women, not just at home, but also to the women that worked, for without it women's grievances could not be redressed.

Miss Day was next to speak. She said that the object of the meeting was to establish a branch of the IWFF in the city. She went on to outline the history of the Association since it was founded in Cork in 1911, and said that it catered for all shades of political opinion, Home Rulers, Unionists, and Sinn Féiners, just to name

a few. She felt that in continuing the campaign in Munster, Limerick would fall into line, and in working for the vote the women were looking for a concession which they had enjoyed down to 1832, when they were deprived of it on a legal quibble which decided that a woman was not a 'person'. If women did get the vote, said Miss Day, they would improve the conditions of life in the small Irish towns and make things brighter and better for the people. She concluded by saying that their cause was justified and that without the help of good and true men it would not be in the position it was in today. The proceedings were closed with a vote of thanks to the chairman.

In April, the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation, an umbrella group for co-ordinating the various women's suffrage associations, organised a number of successful tours for speakers from England. One of these was a Miss Abadam, who accepted an invitation from the MWFL to speak in Limerick. On 28 April, when she spoke at a meeting in Cork, shots were fired and the meeting broke up in disorder. The next day, Thursday, 29 April, she arrived in Limerick to address members of the MWFL at a meeting in the County Courthouse, on the same evening, on the claims of women to the parliamentary franchise. Because of the disturbance in Cork, the meeting was held behind closed doors and admission was by ticket only. Policemen were on duty outside the courthouse, the meeting passed off quietly.

On Sunday, 10 May, a number of letters and postcards in the letter-box of a local firm were set on fire. When the box was opened, sometime later on, a note with the words "Votes for Women" written on it was found. At first, the police thought it was the work of some local suffragettes, but, upon further

investigation they found that it was a prank, committed by some youths.

In June, 1913, the British government introduced into Ireland the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill Health) Bill, commonly called the "Cat and Mouse Act" it was already in operation in Britain. When British suffragettes were arrested, some went on hunger strike and were forcibly fed. This Act allowed the police the power to release them and re-arrest them when their health had improved. The measure did not have much success in Ireland, and as far as is known there was only one case of a suffragette being force fed, and she was a British citizen.

On Sunday, 12 October, a meeting in favour of Home Rule took place at the Markets Field. The principle speakers were John Redmond, leader of the Irish Party at Westminster, and John Dillon. Prior to the meeting, representatives of the Limerick branches of the IWSLA and the MWFL had written to Redmond, requesting an interview during his stay in the city. They also stated in their letter that if he refused to meet them, he would not be subject to any annoyance from their members. By Saturday, they still had not received a reply.

Meanwhile, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, and Mrs. Margaret Connery, of the IWFL were on their way down to Limerick; the Dublin police notified their colleagues in Limerick and asked them to keep the two ladies under observation. On Sunday morning, Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington and some suffragettes from the county went to Cruise's Hotel and succeeded in speaking to Dillon. Later on in the morning, another suffragette went to the hotel to seek an interview with Redmond, but this time the front door was barred to her. However, she did manage to see Alderman Michael Joyce and some other members of the party, one of whom stole her suffragette badge to keep as a trophy.

That afternoon Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington and Mrs. Connery went to the Markets Field. Mrs. Connery took up a position below the speakers platform, while Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington was invited on to the platform, near Mrs. Redmond and her party. Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington was asked for a guarantee of "good behaviour". "I declined", said Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington, stating that none of the other women had been asked to do so, to which Mrs. Redmond replied: "Oh, yes. we have all been asked". Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington then said to one of the organisers: "You know I haven't a bomb". He replied: "Words are as bad as bombs sometimes, and a few interjections at intervals in Mr. Redmond's speech might just have the effect of a bomb". At this point, Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington was forcibly removed from the platform and escorted out the gate where a crowd had gathered. One man asked her if she was a "Suff", and when she replied yes, he spat into her face. A woman tried to pull her hat off. Another

man said he would provide a bodyguard for her "the next time" and that they would be able to make their protest unmolested. The police eventually intervened and offered to take her to the police station for protection. Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington asked if she was being arrested, and if not, then she did not need "protection from a Limerick crowd". With that, the police released her and she went her own way.

In December, the Irish Suffrage Federation held a Conference in Dublin at which representatives from all over Ireland attended. One of the representatives from Limerick was Miss Morony of the MWFL. The branch had collected information on women's employment in Limerick, and it was on this subject that Miss Morony based her address:

*In Limerick many women and girls are paid as little as 3s-6d a week, the average wage being 7s. Apprentices to millinery work pay a fee of £5 for three years, or £10 for two years and are then paid only 10s per month. Their hours are from 9.00a.m. till 7.00p.m. and if they work overtime, as is very often the case, they are paid 1d or 2d per hour.*

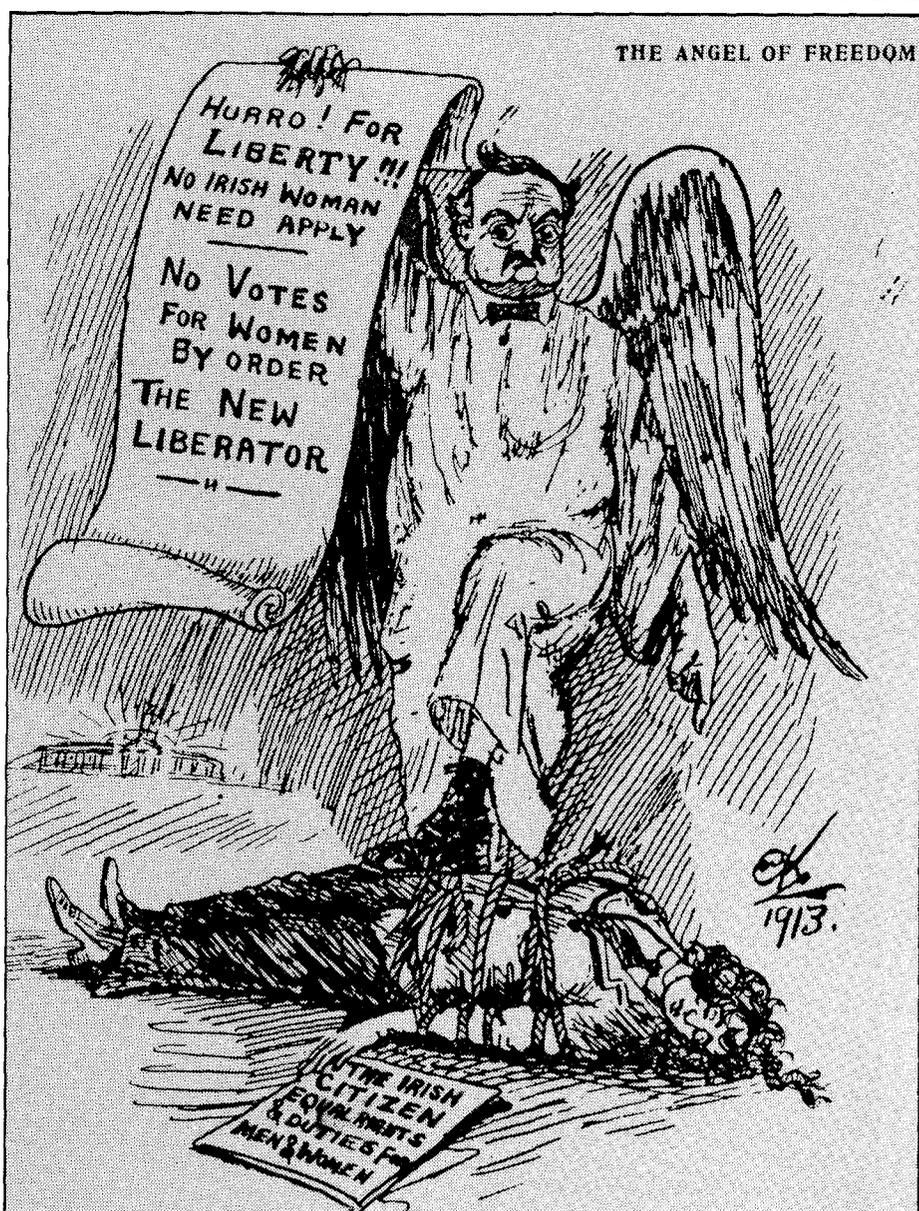
Miss Morony advocated the abolition of the apprenticeship system and the substitution of a plan by which girls would remain longer at school, with compulsory attendance at technical classes, after which they would start work at a living wage. Low wages, long hours and a lack of holidays were the main causes of ill-health amongst women workers, she stated.

Women suffrage activists in Limerick, in the months leading up to the outbreak of war in Europe, August, 1914, were somewhat quiet. They still held meetings. Miss Susan Day, a founder member of the MWFL, gave a lecture in Limerick on the 19 February; the hall was crowded and tea and music were supplied.

The only other item of interest was an argument between a northern suffragette, Mrs. Metge, and Miss Morony of the MWFL, both members of the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation. Both of them had attended a meeting of the federation, in Dublin, that February. Mrs. Metge maintained that the report on the activities of the Federation for 1913 was being withheld from the members. This report would have included the new constitution and rules for the Federation. In particular, she wanted to know who had the right to sit and vote on the executive committee, and who could not, as she felt some irregularities had taken place during the voting at the executive committee meeting.

Miss Morony replied by saying that she felt Mrs. Metge's memory was at fault, and if she had any complaints, she should have voiced them at the committee meeting. But if Mrs. Metge's memory was at fault, so also was Miss Morony's, when she said that the committee meeting was long and "it is hard to preserve exact recollections".

A few months later, after the invasion



Cartoon from *Votes for Women 1913*, depicting the relationship between the suffragette movement and the nationalists.

of Belgium, Britain declared war on Germany. Women's suffrage societies varied in their response to it. In Britain, the WSPU became involved in the war effort. In Ireland, some societies gave up, or put off to a later date, their suffrage activities and became involved in war relief works. One of the charitable works credited to the IWSLA was the setting up of an emergency fund to help Belgian refugees. Some refugees stayed at Mount Kennett house. The MWFL, whose headquarters were in Cork, bought an ambulance and presented it to the military authorities. The IWFL kept up the struggle for the vote for women.

In January, 1918, the British government introduced an Act that gave the vote to all women over thirty, and to all men of twenty-one years of age; this measure applied to Ireland also. In 1922, the constitution of the new Irish Free State granted the vote to all those of twenty-one years of age, irrespective of their sex. It was not until 1928 that the vote was extended to all English women.

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