

Limerick Cumann na mBan

by Helen Litton

The story of Limerick Cumann na mBan is inseparable from that of the Daly family, a noted republican family of the city. After two Daly brothers, Edward and John took part in the 1867 Fenian rebellion, Edward endured a brief imprisonment and John escaped to the USA, where he joined Clan na Gael. Edward married and he and his wife Catherine had eight daughters and one son. This generation was destined to be deeply involved in the Easter Rising of 1916.

Clan na Gael sent John Daly to England as part of their dynamite campaign in the 1880s and he spent twelve years in prison. Returning to Limerick in 1896, he became involved in local politics, becoming Limerick's first nationalist mayor. A triumphant lecture tour in America, recounting his prison experiences and calling for amnesty for the remaining Fenian prisoners, brought in enough money to start a bakery business in Limerick. This proved successful, but not through his

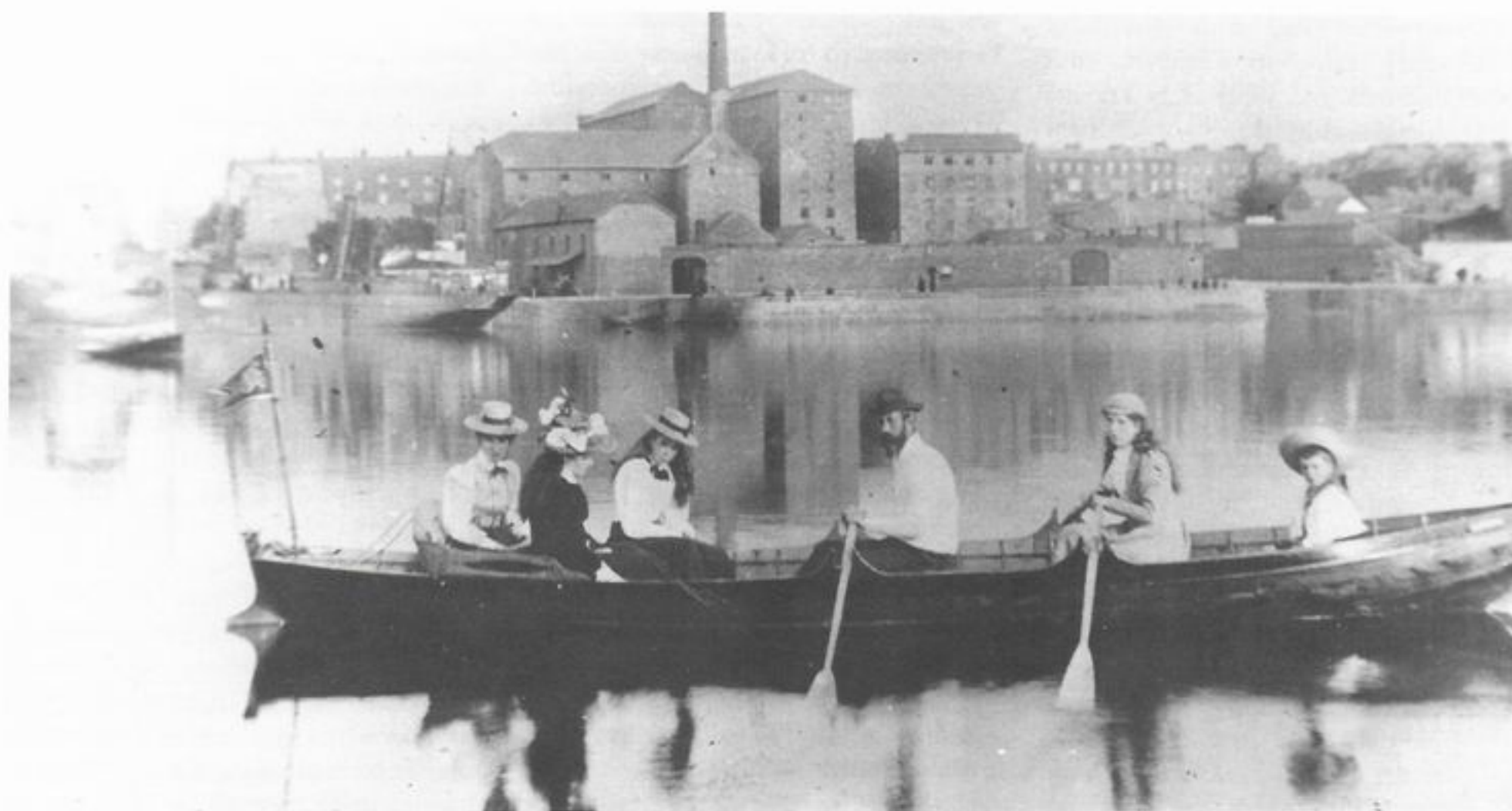
own management skills; the business was principally run by his niece Madge Daly, who subsequently became head of Limerick's Cumann na mBan.

Madge, second eldest of the Daly family, was seen as having the business head of the family, and stayed at school longer than her sisters, as a pupil-teacher. While her other sisters' talents lay in dressmaking, millinery, lacemaking and embroidery, Madge (whose childhood dolls had always been nieces and nephews, never her own children) bent her intelligence to accountancy and business matters. She eventually owned a great deal of property in Limerick, through careful investment, and ultimately aided all her family financially, as well as engaging in numerous charitable activities.

When Cumann na mBan was founded, it was inevitable that the Daly sisters should seek to form a branch in Limerick. Their brother Edward was already in the Volunteers, soon to be a

Commandant, and their uncle John was secretly financing the careful work of the IRB in Dublin, under the auspices of his old prison comrade, Tom Clarke. In 1911, John and Madge provided land and paid for the building of a hall in which the Limerick Fianna (boy scouts) could drill and train, and this hall also became the venue for meetings of the Limerick Volunteers and Limerick Cumann na mBan.

Madge Daly became first President, and remained in this position until 1924. In an article she wrote some years later, she remembers other names as Mrs Dermot O'Donovan (Vice President), Mollie Killeen (secretary), Annie O'Dwyer (treasurer), along with Tessie Punch, Maggie Tierney, Una O'Donoghue and Mrs Michael O'Callaghan, and her own younger sister Laura Daly (my grandmother). Committee meetings were held in the bakery premises at 26 William Street.



Eileen, Madge, Agnes, John, Kathleen and Ned Daly rowing on the Shannon.

(Courtesy of the Daly Collection at the Glucksman Library, University of Limerick)



Daly sisters; Nora, Agnes and Annie.
(Courtesy of the Daly Collection at the Glucksman Library, University of Limerick)

Over seventy members were active in the classes for first aid, drilling, signalling, and the care and use of arms. Captain Monteith and other Volunteer officers instructed them in military matters, and several city doctors and nurses gave first aid and nursing lectures. The hall, which had a stage and seating accommodation, was used for lectures, Irish dances and concerts, and leading members of the IRB such as MacDiarmada, Pearse, Casement and others came to give lectures. Indeed, during those years anyone who was active in nationalist matters would stay with the Dalys when they came to Limerick, and MacDiarmada and John Daly became close friends. Admission was charged to all events to help Volunteer funds. One fete in aid of the arms fund raised over £130, all given immediately to the Irish Volunteers; another three-day fete raised £220. Madge speaks highly of the women with whom she worked on the committee:

We worked together as one, each one doing all possible to help the organisation and to forward the cause, whilst never counting the cost. This applies equally to the rank and file, in which each girl not only carried out the task allotted to her, but, in addition, let pass no opportunity of doing any national work that came to hand. As time passed, and the difficulties and dangers multiplied, the girls rose gallantly to the occasion, so that it was a joy to work with them.'

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought another opportunity to gain funds for the Irish Volunteers. The Department of Education initiated examinations in first aid, and a number of Limerick Cumann na mBan members passed the exam. Each member who passed earned a grant from the Department, and in this way they raised £48 for the arms fund of the Irish Volunteers. As Madge said, 'the British Government was unwillingly subscribing to the funds of its enemies.'

When Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party started to try to gain control of the Volunteers, Limerick Cumann na mBan received an influx of new members, some of whom were elected to the committee. However, the revolutionary spirit prevailed, and additional members were co-opted to the committee until a majority was anti-Redmond. The new members resigned in a body, and started the National Volunteer Ladies' Association in rooms in O'Connell Street, but it soon faded away, as Madge says, 'because it had neither the faith nor the enthusiasm of Cumann na mBan.'

Limerick was a garrison city, with several British Army barracks, and neither the Volunteers nor Cumann na mBan were popular. A large Volunteer parade at Whitsun, 1915, with battalions from Dublin, Cork and Tipperary, turned into a shambles, as drunken citizens threw vegetables, bricks and bottles at the marching men, and tried to snatch their weapons. The dishevelled Volunteers

eventually made it to the railway station, to travel home; most of the lost weapons were eventually recovered. Accounts do not say if Cumann na mBan was part of this parade.

As the Rising approached, work went ahead with great energy and enthusiasm and for a few weeks a group of girls was constantly busy in the Daly house making first aid outfits. Kathleen, Madge's sister, who was married to Tom Clarke, came from Dublin in the days before the Rising, to leave her three sons with their aunts for safekeeping, and to bring messages to the Limerick Battalion. Delayed for a day, she passed the time by helping with the first aid outfits, though she found herself out of tune with the enthusiasm of the young women – she herself feared the outcome of the Rising, feeling their resources were too small, and anticipated the death of her husband.

The Daly sisters Agnes (or Una), Laura and Nora were active as Cumann na mBan couriers during the time leading up to the Rising. Agnes and Laura were sent to meet the Limerick Battalion, gathered at Killonan under Michael Colivet, when the message came through from Pearse that the Rising was going ahead. Colivet had obeyed MacNeill's countermand, and stood down all the Limerick forces apart from this small group at Killonan, and he was not inclined to obey any message from someone who, as far as he knew, was subordinate to MacNeill. Besides, the arms they had hoped to have had been sunk in Killala Bay as Casement was arrested, and there seemed little point in embarking on a futile endeavour; the Limerick Battalion did not come out. The Daly sisters were disgusted; John and Madge had paid for and equipped the Limerick Battalion, and the family never forgave Colivet and his men. Indeed, Madge and Ernest Blythe equipped a second Battalion for Limerick after the Rising, and relations between the two forces remained poor for years.

Half-way through Easter Week, Laura and Nora took a train to Dublin, hoping to find out what was going on. They made it to the GPO, and were greeted warmly by Clarke and MacDiarmada, who knew them well. They were given a rather rude message for Limerick by MacDiarmada, and a request for the Cork Volunteers to create a diversion

and distract some British troops from Dublin. They got a train back to Limerick, and Nora stayed on till it reached Cork by pretending she had lost her ticket. She delivered her message, and made her way back to Limerick.

The next time Laura saw Dublin was the night after Tom Clarke's execution, when she and Madge managed to make their way to Kathleen's house in Fairview, unaware of what had happened. Greatly distressed, Kathleen informed them that their brother Ned would also be executed the following day, and that night all three sisters were brought to Kilmainham to say goodbye to him. Both Kathleen and Madge later gave some account of that interview, but Laura, who was always Ned's closest friend, never spoke of it to her family. Ned Daly was executed on 4 May, aged 25.

After the Rising, Kathleen Clarke and others established a fund for the dependents of Volunteers, and Limerick Cumann na mBan worked for this fund, and to maintain the memories of the dead. They arranged Requiem Masses for the dead; one of these was celebrated in St John's Cathedral on 4 May 1917, the anniversary of Ned Daly's execution. Although it was celebrated at dawn, the cathedral and the surrounding area were packed; Madge recalls 'the altar was crowded with young priests, the choir was splendid, and the impressive ceremony was altogether unforgettable.' The early hour was presumably to avoid any attention from the authorities, because demonstrations in support of the Easter Rising were forbidden.

Some of the captured men were released at Christmas 1916. Limerick Cumann na mBan had collected money to send food parcels to them: 'we got about 500 cwt of butter from local creameries, and this was sent with hampers of cakes, ham and all kinds of Christmas fare'. The balance of the money, £80, was sent to Dublin to be spent on the released prisoners. By June 1917, all the internees were released, and work started on the Sinn Fein campaign for the local elections. Cumann na mBan were of course vigorously engaged in this work. The jails began to fill again, this time with members of Sinn Fein, and again Cumann na mBan bent to the work of providing meals, writing to families and arranging visits. Madge Daly would receive word from a sergeant in William

Street Barracks when prisoners arrived from Kerry, Tipperary or County Limerick, and she would make sure that their families knew where to find them.

Madge Daly's account of Limerick Cumann na mBan brings it down to 1924, when she resigned the Presidency. They worked throughout the War of Independence, distributing the leaflets and posters which would arrive from Dublin Headquarters, posting them by night on walls and chapel gates. Desmond FitzGerald put Madge in touch with interested people overseas, and she and Tessie Punch, with the aid of a duplicator, sent out a large volume of propaganda. During the War of Independence, the leaders of Cumann na mBan had little peace. Their homes were regularly raided, and furniture seized for unpaid fines. Daly's bakery was set on fire, though it survived, and Madge proudly drove the fire-damaged trap through town the following day, behind the bakery pony. Agnes Daly was attacked one night by Black and Tans; her hair was cut off, and her hand cut to the bone by a knife. Undaunted, she later tore down a military proclamation from the bakery window, and was fined £40.

Black and Tan atrocities were publicised widely, especially in Irish-American newspapers. Madge wrote one article for the *Irish World*, New York, called 'The Cruel War on Irish Women', and another called 'How British Make War on Irishwomen'. This approach, of woman as victim, proved very effective in gaining sympathy.

Madge says, 'sometimes wounded Volunteers were brought to the Limerick hospitals and to the credit of the staffs the men were sheltered and nursed and never a word or a hint of their presence reached the British. Whenever the hospitals were raided by the Black and Tans, the wounded men were safely hidden. There was never a question of fees, nor was there idle talk which would have led to the capture of the wounded.'

During a Royal visit to Dublin, Madge hung a black flag from the window of the Daly home, but it was taken down by the military. The only other black material she could find was one of her petticoats, so she hung that out instead, but lost it also. However, she had made her point.

After the death of a republican in the local barracks, Cumann na mBan led the funeral procession. Madge had to dash home from the shop to change into her uniform, and appeared leading the parade with one black and one tan stocking. She seemed to be making a political point, but later insisted that she had been in too much of a hurry to notice.

By November 1920, police estimates give a membership of ten branches, with 344 members, for the Limerick area. After the Treaty, Limerick Cumann na mBan lost members; the police estimated that Limerick gained two branches, but lost more than half their membership. Republican forces took over Limerick barracks at the outbreak of the civil war, and were joined by Cumann na mBan, including nurses Laffan and Connerty. They attended to the sick and wounded cooked meals and looked after weapons and equipment. 'When the Republicans evacuated the city, the girls remained in the barracks until the men had got clear, and then returned to their homes, still ready to undertake any duty required of them'.

The work of Cumann na mBan became more vital than ever during the Civil War. They provided safe houses, along with food, clothing, medical (scabies) and dental care, and barbering. They chalked propaganda on roads, pasted posters on walls, and provided guns for firing parties at funerals, hiding them under their skirts – a rifle with its stock cut down to allow this is on view in Glasnevin Cemetery.

A very active member of Limerick Cumann na mBan, Mrs Hartney, who went to Adare to help the IRA, was shot dead by Free State troops. Her husband was with the Irregulars, and their home and business had already been burnt down. She left two young daughters. Limerick Cumann na mBan arranged High Mass and a public funeral, and buried her in the Republican Plot in Limerick Cemetery. From then on, they made all the burial arrangements for Republicans killed in the fighting. 'It was the saddest period of our history, the comrades of yesterday fighting and killing one another.' Madge Daly became Trustee of the Republican Plot.

Conditions in Limerick Jail were deplorable, and Cumann na mBan did all they could to help. In 1922 a number

were arrested outside the jail, where they had been waiting for prisoners who were supposed to escape. 'It later transpired that this was a plot to capture the girls.' Madge remembered some of their names – Maura O'Halloran, Nellie Blackwell, N O'Rahilly, Nellie Fennell, Josie O'Brien, and Nannie Hogan. They were held in Dublin jails for a long time, hunger-striking with Mary MacSwiney and Mrs O'Callaghan.

Madge's archive in the University of Limerick contains correspondence with Alice Comiskey, living in New York, who was the treasurer of Cumann na mBan, Inc., an American group which collected funds for Cumann na mBan in Ireland. The President of the American group was Sarah McKelvey, and the Chair of the Relief Committee was Rose MacDermott, sister of Sean. The funds provided enabled the provision of food for men in internment camps, and aid for wives and families who would otherwise be destitute. For example, in October 1921, \$100 was provided to a Mrs Casey and \$50 for Mrs Clancy. It should be noted that aid was not restricted to republican sympathisers; a letter from Miss Comiskey in September 1921 refers to aid given to the widow

of a policeman. After the Treaty was signed, however, it became harder for the American group to raise funds, as people would assume that the Irish Free State government would provide for the needy. 'We on this side don't know just where we are at; the Irish Free State surely is not what men died for. Suppose all we can do is hope for the best'.

Although she ceased to be President of Limerick Cumann na mBan in 1924, Madge continued to help the organisation. Their Easter Lily committee appealed to her for funds in 1930; the badges they made were sold to fund republican activities, and help IRA prisoners. They hoped to make between 250,000 and 500,000 badges, but to do this they needed a loan of £50. Madge agreed to give her name as security to the Munster and Leinster Bank in Dublin, but the bank wondered why she did not deal with a Limerick branch of the bank. She could not explain why the money was needed, or the name of the organisation it was for, as both were illegal. Eventually she had to apply for the loan in her own name, to the Limerick bank.

'I look back now with pride and pleasure to my long association with these grand women of the Limerick Branch of Cumann na mBan. I never observed a sign of pettiness, jealousy or personal ambition amongst them. All worked for the cause to the utmost of their abilities, giving of their time and means willingly and upholding their principles regardless of consequences.'

Sources

Cal McCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution* (Cork, 2014).

Jason Knirck, *Women in the Dáil* (Dublin, 2006).

Ann Matthews, *Renegades* (Cork, 2010).

Sinead McCool, *No Ordinary Women, Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923*. (Dublin, 2006).

Madge Daly, 'Gallant Cumann na mBan of Limerick', published article, date and place unknown.

Helen Litton *Kathleen Clarke, Revolutionary Woman*. (Dublin, 2008).



Limerick City Volunteers and Cumann na mBan, c. 1915. (Reproduced by kind permission of Patricia Haselbeck Flynn ©The Haselbeck Collection) Front row, left to right: Mrs Bermingham, Mary Clancy, Miss Downey, Mrs MacCormack, Eileen Crowe, Eileen O'Donoghue, Siún O'Farrell, Madge Daly, Carrie Daly. Back row, left to right: Ned O'Toole, James O'Driscoll, Alphonsus O'Halloran, John Grant, James Ledden, Liam Forde, George Clancy, David Hennessy, Jimmy Kirby, James MacInerney, Stephen Dineen, Michael Colivet, James Dalton, Patrick Walsh, Robert Monteith.