

“What we can do to help India”: Irish women and the fight for Indian Independence

By

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Introduction

In 1932 the Indian-Irish Independence League was formed in Dublin to formally express solidarity for the Indian Nationalist movement, to highlight the similarity of the struggles of Indian and Irish Nationalisms, and to support the fight, from Ireland, for Indian home rule. Although much of the history of the relationship between these two countries focuses on the men involved, much of the anti-imperialist discourse and activism, including the founding and running of the Indian-Irish Independence League, was done by Irish Republican women.

This thesis argues that the experiences of Irish women in Ireland's revolutionary period (1916-1923) led to their involvement in the anti-imperialist movements in the 1920s; their background in these struggles and a common animosity toward the British Empire led to a dynamic cooperation with Indian nationalists in the 1930s. These women, and one woman in particular, Mary Flannery Woods, used their nationalist connections and anti-imperialist leanings to correspond with and host Indian nationalist men.

Historians of Ireland have written extensively on the association that Ireland has with the British Empire. There is no shortage of literature that discusses about Ireland's colonial beginnings in the 1600s, or Britain's impact on Ireland during the famine of the 1840s.¹ More recently, historians have begun to look at how Irish

¹ Stephen Howe, "Historiography," In *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220-230.

people acted with agency within the British Empire, while also being subjugated by the British.²

One of the first books to talk about Ireland and India's relationship at length was *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*, edited by Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes in 1997. Before this, literature focused heavily on the uneasy relationship between Britain and Ireland during the Free State period and the emergence of Irish Nationalism as a reaction to British Imperialism in Ireland.³ The Holmes and Holmes collection included several essays that compared the Indian and Irish movements side by side without connecting them, several essays about Irish people in India, as well as one about Indian settlement in Ireland, several essays that discussed the political connection between the two countries, and two essays that talked about women's activism. With the exception of the comparison essays, many of these essays discuss the links between Ireland and India, such as diplomatic exchanges, the association between William Butler Yeats and Rabindranath Tagore, and the activism of Irish women in India, such as Sister Nevea and Annie Besant.⁴

In 2000 Stephen Howe published *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*, which changed the conversation about Ireland's place in

² Michael Silvestri, "The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000): 468.

³ Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-20.; Stephen Howe, "Historiography," In *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 237.

⁴ Essays from *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*. Eds. Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes, 29-51. (Dublin: Folens, 1997).; Margaret Kelleher, "Literary Connections: cultural revival, political independence and the present."; Michael Holmes, "A friend of India? Ireland and the diplomatic relationship."; Sarmila Bose and Eilis Ward, "'India's cause is Ireland's cause': elite links and nationalist politics."

the British Empire. Howe traced the language of imperialism and anti-colonialism to see how they had been deployed in historical Irish contexts, but primarily used secondary sources and evaluated their arguments rather than doing his own archival work. Howe was largely critical of the work up to 2000 on the subject of Ireland and imperialism, and argued that imperialism as a theme in Irish Republican propaganda was “part of wildly eclectic, if not merely opportunistic inter-war Republican attempts to find allies.”⁵ Howe, as well as others before him, argued that recent arguments selectively used quotations about Ireland as a colonized country in order to advance a modern political narrative that emerged post-1969 to discuss the situation in Northern Ireland.⁶ This changed after 2000 due to increased research on the relationship between Ireland and Empire, and since then there have been a great number of important sources that have looked at Ireland and Empire from a more global perspective.

Howe’s argument against treating Ireland as a strong anti-imperialist nation or a post-colonial nation like India or South Africa has provided a rich subject for debate that has carried through the literature on Ireland and empire since 2000. Several historians have made great strides to contradict Howe’s conclusion about the history of imperialist rhetoric in Ireland.⁷ One such historian, Niamh Lynch,

⁵ Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 59.

⁶ Caoilfionn Ni Bheachain, “‘The Mosquito Press’: Anti-Imperialism Rhetoric in Republican Journalism, 1926-39,” *Eire-Ireland* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer 2007): 258.

⁷ Niamh Lynch, “Defining Irish Nationalist Anti-Imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel,” *Eire-Ireland* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer 2007): 82.; Sean Ryder, “Ireland, India and popular nationalism in the early nineteenth century,” in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Conner. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 12. In his first two sentences, Ryder sets out his aim to argue the exact opposite of Howe’s claim that there was ‘no such thing’ as Irish nationalism.

argues that no anti-imperialist movement would meet Howe's criterion for being truly anti-imperialist, since his conclusion was based on the "observation that Irish nationalists usually attacked the empire with Irish interests foremost on their mind".⁸ In fact, this definition would only cover anti-imperialist action that took place in the metropole by the members of the ruling class. Historian Deirdre McMahon took on Howe's claim that the English didn't intentionally view Ireland as a colony; she argues that the 1886 Irish Home Rule debates that took place in Parliament demonstrated that Ireland's place in the empire was still being negotiated. McMahon quoted the Duke of Argyll's statement that said Ireland "is a colony which we have only partly colonized, and in which the natives have neither been exterminated nor thoroughly assimilated..."⁹ Howe's thesis continued to be challenged by an influx of new literature on the subject of Ireland and Empire, until he admitted in a 2009 review of new literature on the subject that the progress that had been made in the field since 2000 had made his earlier claims obsolete.¹⁰

That is not to say that all of Stephen Howe's arguments have become obsolete. He also argued that there was use in analyzing Ireland in context of the British Empire, but did not think that the colonial/post colonial framework is adequate when describing Ireland. Howe rightly pointed out the problems with reducing Ireland to either colony or metropole, and historians of Ireland and Empire since Howe have

⁸ Niamh Lynch, "Defining Irish Nationalist Anti-Imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel," *Eire-Ireland* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer 2007): 83.

⁹ Deirdre McMahon, "Ireland, the Empire, and the Commonwealth," In *Ireland and the British Empire*, ed. Kevin Kenny (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 185.

¹⁰ Stephen Howe, "Minding the Gaps: New Directions in the Study of Ireland and Empire," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37, no. 1 (2009): 136.

demonstrated the fraught relationship that Ireland has had with its own position in the British Empire.

In 2002, Michael Malouf discussed acting President Eamon de Valera's complex relationship with British Imperialism and Ireland as the "last white colony". Malouf argues that while he was in the United States in 1919 and 1920, De Valera used a language of imperialism that compared Ireland's war with England to the American Revolution. This language painted Ireland as "the last white colony" in order to gain recognition and sympathy from Americans, and it was used in various ways by many Irish Nationalists who visited the United States, including Mary MacSwiney.¹¹ This issue of Ireland as "the last white colony" has been discussed among some historians writing about Irish-Americans, but it is rarely discussed in the literature of Irish anti-imperialist movements within Ireland.¹²

Historians in the early 2000s wrote extensively on the influential nineteenth century Irish thinkers who began examining their own nationalism while considering their place in the Empire.¹³ These historians identified that some early Irish denouncers of British Imperialism spoke about the conditions of Indians, South Africans or Afghans, while ignoring groups that were not struggling for home rule, such as African Americans. Others specifically used the racialized language of the

¹¹ Michael G. Malouf, "With Dev in America: Sinn Fein and Recognition Politics, 1919-21" *Interventions* 41 no.1 (2002): 22-25.;

¹² Damien Murray, "Ethnic Identities and Diasporic Sensibilities: Transnational Irish-American Nationalism in Boston after World War I," *Eire-Ireland* 46, no. 3&4 (2011): 124.

¹³ Niamh Lynch, "Defining Irish Nationalist Anti-Imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel," *Eire-Ireland* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer 2007): 83.

African American experience to define the struggle of the Irish and create an image of disempowerment that would encourage the Irish public to take action.¹⁴

Between 2006 and 2012 there was an explosion of literature on Ireland and Empire, especially the connections between Ireland and India. This began with Foley and O'Connor's anthology on Ireland and India. Within this volume was a piece by historian Sean Ryder, who argued that the complex approaches to anti-imperialism were reflective of "the determined search for deep racial and cultural origins by an Anglo-Irish class in need of self-definition." The position that Ireland holds as victim and participant in imperialism, Ryder argued, can be valid as long as it is recognized that these positions do not cancel each other out.¹⁵ Also within this volume, Kate O'Malley first introduced the Indian Irish Independence League, on which this thesis is largely based, to the literature on Irish anti-imperialist movements.¹⁶ Finally, Caoilfhionn Ni Bheachain closes out the anthology by discussing anti-imperialism within the nationalist Irish press.¹⁷

The relationship between India and Ireland is the most common cross-cultural study in the literature about Ireland and Imperialism. This scholarship frequently takes the form of a comparative study of the countries rather than a

¹⁴ Paul A. Townend, "Between Two Worlds: Irish Nationalists and Imperial Crisis 1878-1880," *Past & Present* 194, no. 1 (February 2007): 146.

¹⁵ Sean Ryder, "Ireland, India and popular nationalism in the early nineteenth century," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 12.

¹⁶ Kate O'Malley "Ireland, India and empire: Indo-Irish separatist political links and perceived threats to the British Empire," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 225.

¹⁷ Caoilfhionn Ni Bheachain "'Ireland a warning to India': Anti-imperialist solidarity in the Irish Free State," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 268.

discussion of the dialogues that happened between them.¹⁸ One major development since 2000 has been that historians of Ireland and Empire have increasingly discussed the use of Irish tactics by Indian men in the struggle against the British Empire.¹⁹ While this comparison is certainly useful in the literature about the British Empire, it is important to note that there is more to the connection between India and Ireland than partition, famine, and an affinity for hunger strikes. Only a few historians have delved deeper to explore the political connections, the way Irish nationalist newspapers covered India and British imperialism, and the formation of the Indian-Irish Independence League.²⁰

The recent research on Ireland's anti-imperialism movement, and more specifically, the Irish republican connection with Indian nationalists, has not included analysis on the role that women and women's organizations played on these movements. Similarly, research on Irish women's activism in the 1920s and 30s lacks discussion of Irish women's involvement in anti-imperialist discourse, yet many famous Irish Nationalist women were actively involved in anti-imperialist organizations. The closest the literature comes to delving into the involvement of

¹⁸ Some examples of this include: Sikata Banerjee, *Muscular Nationalism: Gender, Violence, and Empire in India and Ireland, 1914-2004*. (New York: NYU Press, 2012.); Shereen Ilahi, *Imperial Violence and the Path to Independence: India, Ireland and the crisis of Empire*. (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016.); Nicholas Kenney, "Strikes against the Crown: The ideological origins of the Irish and Indian Nationalist Movements." (Dissertation, Tufts University, 2015.) Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert and Louise Ryan, "Mother India/Mother Ireland: Comparative Gendered Dialogues of Colonialism and Nationalism in the Early 20th Century." *Women's Studies International Forum* 25, no. 3 (May 2002).

¹⁹ Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Michael Silvestri, "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000). The Sinn Fein of India

²⁰ Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 19.; Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).; Michael Silvestri, "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000).

these women in anti-imperialist movements is in biographies of some of the women who were involved, such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Helena Malony.²¹

Women's involvement in the Easter rising, the war of Independence, and the Civil War are especially popular and exciting topics for historians of Ireland, and literature about women's involvement in these events is common.²² The importance of the Irish Nationalist movement and the Suffrage movement has ensured that the primary sources on these topics have been collected and saved. The anti-imperialist movements in Ireland at this time have been less well documented; thus, women's participation in this movement has not been studied with the same vigor. However, when studying Irish anti-imperialist movements, nationalist women are found signing their names to documents denouncing British Imperialism, forming and running leagues, and writing letters to Indian Nationalists. It is hard to keep from wondering what these women were doing and why they were doing it. It is especially important to discuss the contributions of politically active, nationalist women to the anti-Imperialist movement in Ireland, because their actions came at a time when women in Ireland were facing increasingly limited political power and influence.²³

²¹ Nell Regan, "Helena Molony (1883-1967)," and Margaret Ward, "Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946), In *Female Activists: Irish Women and Change 1900-1960*, Eds. Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy. (Dublin: The WoodField Press, 2001).

²² Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995).; Lisa Weihman, "Doing my Bit for Ireland: Transgressing Gender in the Easter Rising." *Eire-Ireland* 39, no. 3 (2004): 228-249.

²³ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995).; Mary E. Daly, "Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-39: The Interaction Between Economics and Ideology." *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1995): 99-116.; Rosemary Cullen, *A Social History of Women in Ireland 1870-1950*. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005).; Briggittine M. French, "Gendered Speech and Engendering Citizenship in the Irish Free State." In *Women, Reform and Resistance in Ireland 1850-1950*, Edited by Christina S. Brophy and Cara Delay. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

The experience of Irish women in Ireland's revolutionary period (1916-1923) prompted their involvement in the anti-imperialist movements in the 1920s, which then resulted in cooperation with Indian nationalists in the 1930s. One important but relatively unknown Irish Nationalist woman named Mary Flannery Woods exemplified this evolution. Mary Woods' personal reminiscences and letters provide valuable insight into the unique role that Irish women played in the Nationalist and anti-imperialist movements.

Ch 1- Irish Women and Nationalism

In the autumn of 1920, the second year of the Anglo-Irish War, a young Irish Nationalist named Maire Comerford was at a friend's house in Dublin when she met a mysterious stranger, a young man whose name no one said out loud. As the party was breaking up it was clear to Maire that this young man didn't know where to go, so she asked him if he had a place to stay. "Would you know where Sean Etchingham is?" he asked. Maire did know, since she had brought Sean to a safe house herself earlier that year. She also knew that she was not allowed to bring a stranger to one of the secret houses. Nevertheless, she escorted him to 131 Morehampton Road, the home of Andrew and Mary Woods. She waited anxiously as the stranger was admitted and went up to Sean Etchingham's room, and was relieved to hear a shout of greeting and laughter. Liam Mellows, home from the States after escaping from Ireland after the Easter Rising, had found the home and friends who would help him during his few remaining years.¹ This is how the most ardent anti-imperialist Irish Nationalist met the woman who would one day fight for Indian Independence with Subhas Chandra Bose and Gandhi.

Understanding anti-imperialism in Ireland is dependent on understanding the forces at play during the Irish wars between 1916 and 1922. Irish anti-imperialism is fundamentally tied to Irish nationalism; anti-imperialist movements in Ireland happened only because activists were already in a place where they could encourage them. Irish nationalist women were often involved in suffrage and feminist activities in addition to nationalist activities, sometimes combining these

¹ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

feminist and nationalist organizations, such as Maud Gonne MacBride's Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Erin). In order to understand the women who were involved in the Indian Independence movement and anti-imperialism in the 1930s, we must examine their activism during the period of time in which they flourished—the Irish Revolutionary movement.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, a young Maud Gonne, in her first foray into Irish Nationalism, attended several meetings of Celtic Literary Society in Dublin. During this period she met and became friends with the previous generation of Irish separatists, such as John O'Leary, and the future generation of Irish nationalists, such as Arthur Griffith.² She also became friends with musicians, artists and literary figures such as William Butler Yeats. Although Maud Gonne was able to attend a few meetings of the Celtic Literary Society, women were not allowed to become members. Nor were they allowed to join the Irish National League, a political party arguing for the self-government of Ireland. Maud Gonne resented these exclusions, and told the men involved that “[she] would have to start a Women's society and get all of their sisters and sweethearts into it,... and they would have to look to their laurels then.”³

Maud Gonne, described by Maire Comerford as being “a person of reactions, resenting injustice,” was not able to quietly retreat from her activist inclinations simply because she was a woman.⁴ In response to being shut out from cultural and

² Maud Gonne MacBride, *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995,) 92-93.

³ Maud Gonne MacBride, *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995,) 94.

⁴ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 220.

nationalist organizations, Maud Gonne and Yeats formed the National Literary Society, which was open to female membership, in 1892.⁵ Maud Gonne also formed Inghinidhe na hEireann (Daughters of Erin) in 1900.⁶ The objectives of Inghinidhe na hEireann were: “to re-establish the complete independence of Ireland, encourage the study of Gaelic, Irish Literature, History, Music and Art among the young by organizing and teaching classes, to encourage Irish Manufacture, to discourage the reading and circulation of low English literature, the attending of vulgar English entertainments at the theatres and music hall, and to combat in every way English influence.”⁷ In one of her first public addresses, Maud Gonne spoke in front of a crowd of 30,000 school children who had been gathered by Inghinidhe na hEireann’s Patriotic Children’s Treat Committee. The rally, held in order to oppose Queen Victoria’s visit to Ireland in 1900, was the only organization to show dissent to Queen Victoria.⁸ Maud Gonne married John MacBride in 1903, and sought a separation in 1904. She moved to France in order to maintain custody of their son Sean, and did not return to Dublin permanently until after John MacBride was executed due to his involvement in the Easter Rising.^{9 10}

⁵ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 45.

⁶ Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 6-8.

⁷ Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), 19.

⁸ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 59.

⁹ Maud Gonne MacBride, *The Autobiography of Maud Gonne: A Servant of the Queen*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995), 6.

¹⁰ The Easter Rising took place on Easter week, April 1916. The Irish Volunteers, led by Patrick Pearse and James Connolly launched an armed insurrection to establish independence in Ireland, and issued a statement declaring Ireland an independent nation. The initial rising was unsuccessful, and its 16 leaders were executed in the following weeks. The executions swayed Irish opinion against the British, and war broke out between Ireland and England in 1919.

Many other active nationalist women also got their start in Inghinidhe na hEireann. Helena Molony, a feminist who would become a labor and anti-imperialist activist, joined Inghinidhe na hEireann after hearing Maud Gonne speak. Molony encouraged Constance Markievicz, Kathleen Lynn, Madeleine ffrench-Mullen to get involved organization as well, thus beginning the nationalist activism that would result in these women participating in the fighting during Easter week 1916.¹¹ Other Irish nationalist feminists, such as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Mary MacSwiney, who were actively involved in suffrage organizations, disagreed with Inghinidhe na hEireann's position that accepting enfranchisement under the British parliament would be 'humiliating.' Sheehy Skeffington argued that even if Ireland won its freedom, Irish men would not necessarily allow women the right to vote either.¹²

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington started her career in activism as a pacifist and suffragist with her husband, Francis. After Francis' death at the hands of British jailors during the Easter Rising in 1916, Sheehy Skeffington adopted a more nuanced view of the necessity of occasional armed struggles.¹³ After the Easter Rising, Sheehy Skeffington traveled to the United States to present President Wilson with a copy of the Republican Proclamation of 1916. After her meeting she toured the United States, giving lectures, and raising money and supplies for the Republican cause among Irish Americans.¹⁴ Sheehy Skeffington was a member of Cumann na

¹¹ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 68-69.

¹² Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 70-71.

¹³ Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870-1970*. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 2005), 146.

¹⁴ Joanne Mooney Eichacker, *Irish Republican Women in America: Lecture Tours 1916-1925* (Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2003), 47.

mBan early on, but she and other feminists, such as Helena Molony, ended their association with the organization due to their perception that Cumann na mBan members were “bad feminists” and “servile to the men.”¹⁵

Mary Flannery Woods, the woman who housed Liam Mellows in 1920, was an Irish Nationalist who would eventually become heavily involved in anti-imperialist activism. Mary Flannery was born in County Sligo to a poor family who had been involved in the Irish National Land League to fight against absentee landlords and high rents. She was brought up in what she described as “a hotbed of Nationalism.”¹⁶ Mary’s mother emphasized the importance of caring for what she called “God’s Poor,” and the family would provide food and shelter to neighbors in need.¹⁷ As a teenager, Mary wrote stories and poems for the Irish Fireside Club, which published columns by young people in the *Weekly Freeman*. She became very involved in the club, recruiting other children and young people to join, and making friends with the others who wrote for the paper. After her schooling, Mary worked as a governess for the family of an army surgeon posted in Malta. She stayed in Malta for a year, then returned to Ireland in 1901 to marry another writer for the

¹⁵ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/12.

¹⁶ Mary Woods, “Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924,” *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 1-4. The events from this source are based on Mary Wood’s reminiscences about 30 years after the events. She admits that she has forgotten a lot, and that her mind is confused about the dates and sequence of events. I have done my best to put her statements in a logical order, but I could be mistaken as to the time periods in which the events take place.

¹⁷ “Reminiscences” The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Weekly Freeman, Andrew Woods. They had never met in person, but had fallen in love with each other through articles and letters.¹⁸

Andrew and Mary Woods moved to 131 Morehampton Road in Dublin where they joined the Irish National Literary Society, founded by Maud Gonne and William Butler Yeats, which was how they met many notable Irish writers and thinkers. As a young couple they were also involved in anti-recruiting demonstrations against the British Army, and the Ancient Order of the Hibernians, an Irish Catholic fraternal organization that had ties to the nationalist movement.¹⁹ The Woods family had five children, whom Mary brought up to be strong nationalists. Their oldest son, Tony, who was a young teenager, was enrolled in Patrick Pearse's school, and many of Tony's older classmates joined the Easter Rising in 1916 under Pearse's leadership. Mary heard that there would be a rising from the parents of Tony's classmates, but she was not involved in it herself. During Easter Week Andrew helped to distribute food to the poorer districts. Shortly after, Mary joined Cumann na mBan, the women's auxiliary of the Irish Volunteers, which would eventually become the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.). During the war against England she worked on finding safe houses, clothes, and food for the men who were fighting. She assisted in multiple escapes of I.R.A. men from Mountjoy Jail by baking hacksaws into cakes.²⁰ Mary would occasionally transport the escaped prisoners to Roebuck house, where Charlotte Despard and Maud Gonne MacBride lived, where they would be able to

¹⁸ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 5-6.; Articles from Weekly Freeman. The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

¹⁹ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 8

²⁰ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30. "When it came to hiding a hack saw in a cake she was an artist." She also smuggled revolvers into Mountjoy.

stay while permanent lodging was arranged.²¹ Maud Gonne and Charlotte Despard also started the Woman's Prisoner's Defense League (WPDL) which protested the conditions in Irish prisons, which Mary was also heavily involved with.²²

Outside of her involvement in rescue missions, Mary Woods primarily made her home the location of her nationalist activism. Mary became known for keeping one front and one back window open so that Volunteers could enter from any direction. She frequently would enter her dining room in the morning to find men asleep on the floor, and would feed them breakfast and send them on their way.²³

Andrew Woods was not always happy about their home being a center of activity, and frequently grew frustrated with Mary giving away his clothes, but he came to enjoy the company of the many of the men who stayed with them. Maire Comerford described Andrew as "the best little man who ever declared he was no republican," The oldest son of Andrew and Mary, Tony, said that his father was "a neutral, shadowy figure," and that the only thing that Andrew Woods ever did for Ireland was to teach future president Eamon de Valera how to shoulder arms when they both joined Redmond's Volunteers prior to World War I.²⁴ This statement by Tony is unfair to his father. Mary admitted that they preferred to keep up a pretense of him being a parliamentarian, despite him having been converted to militarism by

²¹ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 10. Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

²² Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 217.

²³ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 12.

²⁴ Uinseann Mac Eoin, *Survivors*, (Dublin: Argenta Publications, 1980): 311.

a Vincentian missionary.²⁵ When the war broke out in 1919, Eamon de Valera was serving as the political leader of the Nationalist movement. He broke out of prison, and Andrew Woods helped de Valera escape across the border to Northern Ireland. From there de Valera was able to travel to the United States, where he attempted to gain recognition for Ireland as a free nation from the Wilson administration. When Andrew died in November of 1930 de Valera helped to carry the casket.²⁶ This close friendship between Andrew Woods and de Valera later became useful to Mary Woods' anti-imperialist activism, when she was always able to catch de Valera's ear, even when he became Prime Minister of Ireland.

Mary had already become known as a woman who would gladly keep I.R.A. men in her home by the time Maire Comerford met Mary and brought Sean Etchingham and Liam Mellows to live at 131 Morehampton Road, in 1920. Liam was in charge of purchasing weapons for the Irish Republican Army, and the Woods family got involved in his mission. Mr. Woods worked at Messrs. Nolan, Provision Merchants as a senior executive. From time to time he would travel the country for business, and he would occasionally drive Mellows around. Tony Woods also used his father's car and acted as Liam's driver on many of his missions collecting supplies and weapons around the country. Messrs. Nolan supported the nationalist cause and the Nolan family became friends with Mellows. They allowed him to have weapons and war provisions shipped to them using their butter boxes. The Woods

²⁵ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30; Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 12.

²⁶ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 45. Mary states that Andrew died in 1929, but his obituary states that he died in 1930.

and Nolan families decided to disguise Mellows as Mr. Nolan's nephew.²⁷ Before Liam would leave the house, Mary would dye his blonde hair and mustache. Her dye job was admired among the other women in Cumman na mBan who also kept I.R.A. men who were in disguise.²⁸ Liam would keep the weapons in the Wood's attic and distribute them from there, which resulted in the family being raided many times in the next few years. The raids would sometimes include a strip search of the members of the family, including the young children. Because of the activism that took place within the Woods' family's home, their two teenage daughters, Máirin and Eileen were also caught up in the Republican cause. If Mary wasn't home when an I.R.A. man stopped by, the girls would provide them with food, clothing, or weapons from the attic.²⁹

Michael Collins, the commander of the Irish Republican Army also became acquainted with Mary Woods. Around 1920 he instructed her to back away from her duties in Cumann na mBan and act as if she had become disillusioned with the cause so that she could work for him personally and carry out espionage. She bought several houses on Michael Collins' orders, including one at 17 Harcourt Terrace, which Collins used for himself when he was on the run from the British. Mary enlisted Maire Comerford's mother to stay with him as a caretaker. This was an

²⁷ Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 229.

²⁸ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

²⁹ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 12.

extension of Mary's former activism. She still kept nationalists in her home, but also organized safe houses on a larger scale.³⁰

Mary Woods' activist activities were not uncommon during the 1920s. Women in Cumann na mBan collected food and clothing, and organized housing for many Irish men who were on the run. They also helped nationalists break out of prison. Many Irish women, including Helena Molony and Constance Marckievicz were in and out of prison themselves.³¹ Charlotte Despard and Maud Gonne MacBride kept the house where Mary Woods took the prisoners that she helped escape from prison. Molly Childers was involved in gunrunning, organizing housing for escaped nationalists, and espionage activities.³² Mary MacSwiney and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington traveled to the United States where they held fundraisers and rallies among sympathetic Irish Americans. Sheehy Skeffington was the first Irish nationalist to obtain an interview with President Woodrow Wilson. She presented him with the Republican Proclamation of 1916 signed by Patrick Pearce and the other leaders of the Rising.³³ The nationalist movement was active and very interconnected. These women became involved in the same organizations and worked side by side with each other. As a result, Mary Woods cultivated an extensive set of acquaintances who could be called upon whenever their skills were needed.

³⁰ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 26.; Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

³¹ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

³² Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 76.

³³ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/12.

Liam Mellows was captured during the Irish Civil War, and executed in Mountjoy Jail on December 8, 1922. As soon as they heard, Mary and Andrew Woods drove to the Jail to try to get his body. Along the way, they picked up Liam Mellows' mother, and Maud Gonne and Charlotte Despard, but were unable to recover the body. The Woods family and Sean Etchingham were distraught after the death of Mellows, who they considered to be the greatest living Republican. Mary said that the only time she had seen her husband cry was after Liam's execution.³⁴ Etchingham wrote to Mary two days later saying "Will you give to Eileen and the little boys my sympathy. They will think of all the happy musical nights and wonder why such a thing could be done."³⁵

The period of time after the Civil War was difficult for Irish Nationalists. The split between the pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions led to disenchantment with the cause and its leaders. The deaths of Erskine Childers, and Liam Mellows at the hands of the Irish were disheartening for those who believed that the English were the source of all of their problems. Sean Etchingham articulated these thoughts in a letter to Mary, "I always believed the truth of what I so oft reiterated on platform and on the press that the Irish race was the noblest of the peoples of the world. That any other contender was vile English propaganda. Liam [Mellows] believed it too. He loves the people of the land he adored- for he did idolize Ireland- And oh God

³⁴ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, Undated, 14.

³⁵ Sean Etchingham Dec. 10th, 1922. The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

what must have been his feelings, what must have been his agony of soul as he faced a firing party.”³⁶

Two main political parties grew out of this split; the pro treaty Cumann na nGaedheal and the anti treaty Sinn Fein. When Sinn Fein refused to take their seats in parliament, the small Labour party, who had not officially taken sides, remained the only opposition party to Cumann na nGaedheal. Many anti-treaty republicans were ousted from state jobs after the Civil War as a way to ensure the survival of the Irish Free State.³⁷ State employees were required to take an oath of allegiance to the British monarchy in order to gain employment, and many anti-treaty nationalists could not compromise their beliefs to do this. Many private employers refused to hire anti-treaty republicans. Poverty and the lack of jobs available to anti-treaty republicans suppressed their ability to enact change or oppose the Free State in any meaningful way.³⁸

The Republican movement responded to their defeat by claiming a stance of “spiritual nationalism,” which based its arguments on ideological purity and did not concern itself with politics or the economic struggles of its poorer members. The subject of whether or not to support Irish men fighting in the British Army was a topic of much discussion among Irish Nationalists. In a letter from Maire Comerford to Mary Woods, they discussed how hard it was to ask the Irish soldiers not to join

³⁶ Letter from Dec 10, 1922. The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College. Military Statement.

³⁷ Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fail and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present*, (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997): 14. Sean Hutton, “Labour in the Post Independence Irish State” in *Ireland’s Histories*, 53.

³⁸ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995),209.

the English army when there were no opportunities for them in Ireland.³⁹ Since they refused to swear an oath to Britain, nationalists were largely unable to hold political office, leaving their opponents unchallenged. This movement regarded any emigrants who left Ireland with disdain.⁴⁰ Maire Comerford could no longer afford to live in Dublin, and moved to Wexford for a few years to set up a poultry farm. She wrote to Mary Woods about this time period saying; "I went to Wexford in '24 because I had no job- you know the struggle I had. I never forgot the look or the reply that I had got from some one of our fellows that was about to emigrate and asked me how he was to live here when I protested.... What are we to say to the young people if we ask them not to go?"⁴¹

Pro-treaty republicans were also worried that providing full suffrage to women would hurt their cause since Cumann na mBan and other women's organizations had come out against the treaty. To combat this perceived threat, free state politicians placed an emphasis on the place of women in the home, which led to restrictive laws regulating jobs and strong censorship of morality issues for Irish women.⁴² Many Free-State supporters viewed republican women as unwomanly. In 1924 one politician said that during the Civil War, "Dublin was full of hysterical

³⁹ Undated letter from Maire Comerford, The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

⁴⁰ Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fail and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present*, (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997): 14.

⁴¹ Undated letter from Maire Comerford, The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

⁴² Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870-1970*. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 2005), 125, 255.

women (who) became practically unsexed, their mother's milk blackened to make gunpowder, their minds working on nothing save hate and blood'.⁴³

In 1926 Eamon de Valera began a new political party called Fianna Fail, which was a split from the Sinn Fein republican movement after the vote for the partition of Ireland passed parliament. De Valera recognized that the current republican ideology was not sustainable, and more effort must be made to address economic concerns and to appeal to the poor.⁴⁴ De Valera's party was also based on principles of Catholicism, which valued the traditional role of women in the home, and while he agreed to meet with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and other feminist nationalists to discuss the concerns of women, the policies of Fianna Fail continued to marginalize Irish women.⁴⁵

The Cumann na nGaedheal government led by William Cosgrave further curtailed the rights of the nationalists in 1927 after the assassination of a Free State official who had been involved in executions of anti-treaty nationalists after the Civil War. Cosgrave passed bills that limited the right of trial by jury and ensured that any candidate elected in Ireland must swear an oath to the British government. These bills were a direct effort to challenge Fianna Fail.⁴⁶

The organization of Fianna Fail and the actions by the Cosgrave government restarted nationalist activism. With the reemergence of Irish Nationalism, a strong interest in Anti-Imperialism also arose that had been largely absent from the earlier

⁴³Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870-1970*. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 2005), 126.

⁴⁴ Kieran Allen, *Fianna Fail and Irish Labour: 1926 to the Present*, (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997): 15.

⁴⁵ Rosemary Cullen Owens, *A Social History of Women in Ireland, 1870-1970*. (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd, 2005), 255-275. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

⁴⁶ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 204.

discourse. The next few years saw an increase in the number of republican prisoners in Ireland's jails, which encouraged Cumann na mBan to take up their old activities, including protesting and boycotting British goods. The Women's Prisoner's Defense League had been banned by the Irish State, but continued its activities under the name People's Rights Association.⁴⁷

Through their involvement in Irish Nationalism, Irish women such as the ones discussed in this chapter gained experience forming and running leagues, protesting, boycotting British goods, and housing radical nationalists in their homes. These experiences would contribute to their work on a more national scale through their engagement in anti-imperialist organizations in the 1920s and 1930s. As Anti-Imperialism became a central tenant of Irish Nationalism, these women were optimally placed to take charge of the anti-imperialist movement in Ireland.

⁴⁷ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 216.

Ch 2 Foundations of Anti-Imperialism

Before 1916, Ireland's anti-imperialist debate both opposed Britain's paternalism and imperialism, while simultaneously reproducing it in their relationship with other colonized countries; Ireland was in a position to lend aid to India while also emphasizing their own superiority. Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish Nationalist MP who advocated a Home Rule Bill for Ireland in the 1870s and 1880s, spoke out against Britain's acquisition of colonies, yet did not agitate for nationalism for colonies outside of Ireland. Other Irish MPs also considered themselves the ideal spokespeople for unenfranchised colonized people.¹ Influential nineteenth century Irish thinkers began examining their own nationalism while considering their place in the Empire.² For example, some early Irish denouncers of British Imperialism spoke about the conditions of Indians, South Africans or Afghans, while ignoring groups that were not struggling for home rule, such as African Americans. Others specifically used the racialized language of the African American experience to define the struggle of the Irish, calling Ireland "a nation of Slaves" to create an image of disempowerment that would encourage the Irish public to take action against their oppressors.³ This type of language created a narrative among the Irish that they could help their colonized brothers and sisters, but also lead them.

The unique place of Ireland in the British Empire meant that many Irish had actively taken part in the colonizer role. In the 1850s, over 40 percent of the East

¹ Deirdre McMahon, "Ireland, the Empire and the Commonwealth," In *Ireland and the British Empire*. Ed. Kevin Kenny, 182-219, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.): 188.

² Niamh Lynch, "Defining Irish Nationalist Anti-Imperialism: Thomas Davis and John Mitchel," *Eire-Ireland* 42, no. 1/2 (Summer 2007): 83.

³ Paul A. Townend, "Between Two Worlds: Irish Nationalists and Imperial Crisis 1878-1880," *Past & Present* 194, no. 1 (February 2007): 146.

India Company's European regiments in India were made up of Irish soldiers. These opportunities provided a steady income and employment for young Irish men who were unable to find jobs in Ireland.⁴ Irish missionaries traveled to India and other colonies to set up schools and orphanages, and to provide medical care.⁵

Some Irish men and women who traveled to India in these capacities identified with the Indian Nationalist struggle while others did not. In Bengal a popular character in memoirs and recollections involved an "Irish Jailor" who was sympathetic to Indian revolutionaries, but a jailor nonetheless. Subhas Chandra Bose and Surendra Mohan Ghose both recounted stories of Irish Jailors which they encountered who felt compassion for their political prisoners.⁶ In 1895, Margaret Noble, a young Irish woman, traveled to India to redeem the "half naked men and women" and "to stand in the street yonder and say that [she] possess[ed] nothing but God."⁷ Once she arrived, Margaret, subsequently called Sister Nivedita, was inspired to practice an aggressive brand of Hinduism and became known for her active support of Indian nationalism until her death in 1911.⁸ Two other Irishwomen, Annie Besant and Margaret Cousins, also famously traveled to India and became activists.⁹ As an editor of the Indian Women's magazine *Stri Dharma*,

⁴ Thomas Bartlett, "The Irish Soldier In India," In *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*. Eds. Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes, 12-28. (Dublin: Folens, 1997), 14.

⁵ Anne Maher, "Missionary links: past present and future," In *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*. Eds. Michael Holmes and Denis Holmes, 29-51. (Dublin: Folens, 1997), 29-30.

⁶ Michael Silvestri, "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000): 468.

⁷ Maina Singh, "Political activism and the politics of spirituality: The layered identities of Sister Nivedita/ Margaret Noble." In *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadihg Foley and Maureen O'Conner. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 39.

⁸ Maina Singh, "Political activism and the politics of spirituality: The layered identities of Sister Nivedita/ Margaret Noble." In *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, 40.

⁹ Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, "Writing Stri Dharma: International Feminism, Nationalist Politics and Women's Press Advocacy in Late Colonial India." *Women's History Review* 12, no.2 (2003): 628.

Margaret Cousins took it upon herself to step down once the Indian movement began to reject involvement from foreign nationals. Cousins supported the idea that the East should do its own leading but “call upon the west for special contributions.”¹⁰ Many Irish women who traveled to India understood the connection between the nationalist struggle in India and the struggle in Ireland; however, their beliefs about their place in the Indian nationalist movements were complicated by their conception of the place that Ireland had in the empire, such as an opposition to English policies coupled with a desire to spread Christianity. This echoes the belief of English women whose concern for Indian women was shaped by their cultural assumption in the legitimacy of empire, but is complicated by the Irish nationalist disdain for anything English.

The next generation of Irish nationalists, who would become involved in the Easter Rising and the War of Independence, invigorated their own version of anti-imperialist rhetoric while traveling in the United States. A significant portion of the anti-imperialist and pro-Indian discourse among Irish people in the late 1910s and early 1920s took place between Irish Nationalists and Indian nationalists traveling in the United States. Irish Nationalists traveled to the United States after the Easter Rising in 1916 in order to rally support, collect funds, and to escape execution by the English. These Irish Nationalists found that although many Americans were not willing to criticize England during and after the First World War, they had natural supporters among the visiting Indian nationalists, such as Lala Lajpat Rai and

¹⁰ Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, “Writing Stri Dharma: International Feminism, Nationalist Politics and Women’s Press Advocacy in Late Colonial India.” *Women’s History Review* 12, no.2 (2003): 631.

Sailendranath Ghose.¹¹ In March 1919 a group of prominent Irish Americans and Indian nationalists in New York City joined together to form an organization called the Friends of Freedom for India (FOFI). Their purpose was to defend the rights of Indians in the United States and to support Indian nationalist interests, particularly the overthrow of British rule in India. The founders of this League were firm believers in 'the Indo-Irish link.'¹²

The Friends of Freedom for India had a significant impact on the Irish Nationalists who visited the United States. One such nationalist, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington traveled to the United States on several speaking tours after the death of her husband in 1916. While she was in the United States she met Dr. Gertrude Kelly, an Irish American socialist and feminist was one of the founding members of FOFI and served as treasurer of the organization. Sheehy Skeffington became involved in the Friends of Freedom for India, and spoke at many of their events. When Muriel MacSwiney, sister in law of Mary MacSwiney, visited the United States, she too traveled and spoke at events under the auspices of the Friends of Freedom for India.¹³ These joint meetings further entwined the connection between Irish and Indian nationalists.

Eamon de Valera also encouraged connections between Ireland and India while he was visiting the United States. De Valera's original purpose in the United States was to gain recognition as an independent nation from the Wilson

¹¹ Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 14.

¹² Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory*, 15, 28-29.

¹³ Written introduction to Mr. Das, August 13, 1922, MacSwiney Club (Pittsfield, Mass.) Collection, MS 1881B. Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, Boston Public Library. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Books.

Administration, but he was unsuccessful. He continued to tour the United States in an attempt to raise funds and rally support among Irish Americans. In 1920 de Valera made a famous speech to the Friends of Freedom for India in New York City. This speech was carefully crafted to appeal to both American and Indian representatives in the audience. He began by quoting George Washington's message to the Irish people "Patriots of Ireland, your cause is identical with mine." De Valera took the liberty of taking George Washington's position by saying "Patriots of India, your cause is identical with ours."¹⁴ Throughout this speech he made explicit comparisons between the situations in India and Ireland saying, for example; "I do not think anyone anywhere needs a book of facts to be convinced that the British have bled India to death... but if anyone does need such a book it is not an Irishman."¹⁵ A few weeks later, members of the Friends of Freedom for India marched in the St. Patrick's Day parade in New York City wearing emerald green turbans and holding banners saying "315,000,000 of India with Ireland to the Last".¹⁶

De Valera's use of references to the American Revolution compared Ireland's fight against England to America's origin as a British colony. This attempt played on the claim by many Irish that Ireland was the last in a long line of "white nations" that was trying to gain its freedom, which echoed the anti-imperialist arguments from earlier generations of Irish nationalists.¹⁷ During Mary MacSwiney's tour of the

¹⁴ Eamon de Valera, *India and Ireland*. New York: Friends of Freedom for India, 1920, 3.

¹⁵ Eamon de Valera, *India and Ireland*. New York: Friends of Freedom for India, 1920, 11.

¹⁶ Michael Silvestri, *Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory*, 13-14.

¹⁷ Michael G. Malouf, "With Dev in America: Sinn Fein and Recognition Politics, 1919-21" *Interventions* 41 no.1 (2002): 22-25.

United States, she also gave many speeches in which she emphasized the whiteness of the Irish saying, that Ireland was “the only one of the white races in the world today that is not free.”¹⁸ At the same time, she spoke at Friends of Freedom for India events throughout the United States and spoke at anti-imperialist events in Dublin. The emphasis on race, and on Ireland as a “white nation” touched on the complexity of Ireland’s position in the Empire, and weakened de Valera’s claim that he believed that the Indian cause was identical to the Irish cause.

Liam Mellows also developed strong anti-imperialist beliefs while traveling in America, and was the most eloquent nationalist to argue for cooperation between Ireland and the colonies in the early 1920s. He became involved with Irish and Irish-American socialists who, during World War I, adopted a view that in order for peace to be achieved, the British must vacate India, Egypt and Ireland. Mellows addressed a meeting of this organization in April 1919, and attended several events that hosted Indian nationalist speakers while he remained in the United States.¹⁹ Liam Mellows returned to Ireland in 1920 to serve as the purchasing director of the Irish Republican Army. During the Civil War he was a strong opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, and spoke out saying; “We are going into the British Empire now to participate in the Empire’s shame, and the crucifixion of India and the degradation of Egypt. Is that what the Irish people fought for freedom for?”²⁰ Mellows remained

¹⁸ Damien Murray, “Ethnic Identities and Diasporic Sensibilities: Transnational Irish-American Nationalism in Boston after World War I,” *Eire-Ireland* 46, no. 3&4 (2011): 124.

¹⁹ Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 149, 205-208.

²⁰ Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*. 149, 278.

a strong anti-imperialist until his execution in 1922. While in prison he wrote; “India: isn’t the time approaching when we should be in closest touch?”²¹

This outspoken anti-imperialist sentiment would likely have influenced Mary Woods and the rest of the Woods family. She does not mention any involvement in Anti-Imperialist activities in the early 1920s, and her path to involvement can only be based on clues. She was friends with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Eamon de Valera. She loved Liam Mellows, and spent many hours in his company. It is not unreasonable to think that the family talked about politics, and perhaps Liam voiced his thoughts about Anti-Imperialism and making contact with Indian nationalists. Maire Comerford claimed that “it was in [Mrs. Woods’] house that some of us got our first knowledge of the appalling poverty and degradation of India under British rule, and of the leadership of the Indians by Mahatma Gandhi, and of his non-violent ideals.”²²

After 1926 nationalist activism increased due to the emergence of Fianna Fail and pushback against Cosgrave’s government, and with it came an interest in anti-imperialist activism. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Helena Malony, and Maud Gonne MacBride began to show up in the newspapers acting as anti-imperialism activists. They got involved in the League against Imperialism, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which was a pacifist organization. Occasionally the newspapers would mention a Mrs. Woods, Mrs. Woods of Donnybrook, or Mrs. Andrew Woods at these meetings as well.²³

²¹ Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution*. 149, 356.

²² Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

²³ *An Phoblacht*, 1929-1931

Irish Nationalist women took the lead in anti-imperialist activism. In 1926, Countess Constance Marckievicz, a hero of the Easter Rising and the first woman elected to the British House of Commons, led one of the first protests against Imperialism in Dublin. Marckievicz was the first female supporter of Eamon de Valera's Fianna Fail party. Marckievicz specified that her protest was just against England and its imperialism, but not against those Irish who fought for England. This protest led to some quarreling in the streets among those who attended the meeting and some bystanders who disagreed politically with the Fianna Fail nationalists.²⁴

Further anti-imperialist protests and meetings slowly began to become common, and picked up significantly in 1929. In a meeting of the Women's Prisoners' Defense League on November 3, 1929, Maud Gonne MacBride spoke on the "unchangingness of British Imperial policy towards Ireland." Charlotte Despard spoke on British Imperialism in India, highlighting the parallels between them and Ireland, and giving "a moving account of the sufferings of the Indian prisoners in Meerut" The meeting ended with a collection taken up to be sent to the Meerut Prisoners' Defense Fund to "show how Irish people sympathise with their fellow-victims of British Imperialism."²⁵ This article highlights the close connection that anti-imperialist activism had to Irish Nationalist organizations, and especially the organizations of Irish women such as the Women's Prisoner's Defense League. The

²⁴ "Protest Against Imperialism" *The Tralee Liberator*, November 11, 1926

²⁵ "The Duty of Anti-Imperialists" *An Phoblacht*, November 9, 1929.

women of Cumann na mBan also contributed to articles on anti-imperialism, and sent sympathetic messages to Indian nationalists.²⁶

Irish anti-imperialist arguments in the late 1920s and early 1930s focused particularly on the similarities between England's actions in its colonies and their actions in Ireland. Nationalist newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, had regular segments about anti-imperialism, sometimes written by Maud Gonne MacBride. These articles educated the Irish on English atrocities carried out against citizens of the colonies; most commonly India, but also South Africa, Egypt, Palestine, China, and Gambia.²⁷ One such article, describing the crumbling British Empire, said; "The allegiance of the white dominions is purely nominal. South Africa and Canada will definitely not participate in another world slaughter; the help of Australia and New Zealand is doubtful. Amongst the subject peoples grave unrest is rife."²⁸ This type of anti-imperialist rhetoric indicates the understanding among the Irish that they were part of a larger trend in world events. Unlike the earlier forms of anti-imperialism in Ireland, this trend was particularly international in scope.

Interspersed with descriptions of miscarriages of justice in the other colonies, readers were reminded of similar events happening in Ireland. One such article stated: "We read that the brother of the late Jatindranath Das was amongst those subjected to the indignity of an illegal police-search. The brother of Terence MacSwiney suffers similarly in Ireland. Imperial methods are alike in both

²⁶ "Greetings to Indian Woman Leader" *An Phoblacht*, May 24, 1930.

²⁷ "On the Anti-Imperialist Front" *An Phoblacht*, Nov. 23, 1929.

²⁸ "The Ebbing Tide of Empire" *An Phoblacht*, January 4, 1930.

countries- for do not both enjoy the blessings of British rule?"²⁹ By relating the events in other countries back to the events in Ireland, the authors of these articles were able to make the case for anti-imperialism personal for Irish nationalists.

While Irish nationalists were beginning to fight against British Imperialism internationally, they continued to foster a special relationship with India. This is partially because Indian nationalists were paying a lot of attention to Ireland. After World War I, Ireland's use of physical force was the best example for Indian nationalists to use for their own nationalist aims.³⁰ Terence MacSwiney's death while on a hunger strike was a symbol used by many Indian nationalists, including Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawalalara Nehru, and Jatin Das.³¹ Terence MacSwiney's book *Principles of Freedom*, was popular among Indian nationalists, as was *My Fight for Irish Freedom* by Dan Breen.³² One article, titled "India Ablaze" began by stating; "Floggings, shootings, torture- these are but rousing Indians to ever greater revolutionary fervour." News from India was commonly reported in Irish Nationalist newspapers, telling of guerilla fighting, arrests, executions, boycotts and protests.³³ Irish Nationalists reached out to the people of India to express sympathy and concern. When Indian hunger striker Jatin Das died in

²⁹ "On the Anti-Imperialist Front" *An Phoblacht*, Nov. 23, 1929.

³⁰ "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000). 455.

³¹ Sarmila Bose and Eilis Ward, "'India's cause is Ireland's cause': elite links and nationalist politics," in *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*, eds. Michael Holmes and Dennis Holmes (Dublin: Folens, 1997), 55.

³² Kate O'Malley "Ireland, India and empire: Indo-Irish separatist political links and perceived threats to the British Empire," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Conner. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 225. Michael Silvestri, "'The Sinn Fein of India': Irish Nationalism and the Policing of Revolutionary Terrorism in Bengal," *Journal of British Studies*, (2000). 470.

³³ *An Phoblacht*, May 31, 1930; *An Phoblacht*, 1929-1931

Lahore Jail in 1929, Mary MacSwiney famously sent her sympathies to India, saying “Ireland joins India in grief and pride over the death of Jatin Das. Freedom shall come.”³⁴

The trends in anti-imperialism in Ireland developed as Irish Nationalists renegotiated their position in the British Empire. During periods of strong nationalist agitation, Irish nationalists found that they had allies within Britain’s other colonies, especially India. Liam Mellows advice, “India: isn’t the time approaching when we should be in closest touch?,” would be taken very literally by some of Mellows’ closest friends: the Woods family.

In 1930, Mary Woods’ daughter Eileen met and fell in love with Tripura Dey, an Indian Nationalist medical student studying at Trinity College. Dey had gone to Calcutta University where he had met Subhas Chandra Bose and Gandhi. Tripura Dey and Eileen Woods would not get married until 1936, but the Woods family met the Tripura and his parents in the early 1930s. It is possible that this introduction also helped to spark Mary Wood’s active political involvement in the Indian Nationalist movement in the 1930s.³⁵ Charlotte Despard felt compelled to write to Tripura Dey, describing her interest in India and her disgust for the history of the East India Company. Later she became familiar with history of East India Company, and told Dey that: “to me, the subjugation of India is one of the great crimes of history.”³⁶

³⁴ Sarmila Bose and Eilis Ward, “‘India’s cause is Ireland’s cause’: elite links and nationalist politics,” In *Ireland and India: Connections, Comparisons, Contrasts*, eds. Michael Holmes and Dennis Holmes (Dublin: Folens, 1997): 55.

³⁵ Kate O’Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 63.

³⁶ Charlotte Despard to Dr. Dey. MS 17,823 (6) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

Mary Woods, Maud Gonne and Charlotte Despard become founding members of the Indian Irish Independence League in 1932 based on their anti-imperialist beliefs. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Lynn and Helena Malony would attend meetings. All of these women were involved in multiple other feminist, nationalist or anti-imperialist organizations. In the 1920s, these women had worked together toward the cause of Irish freedom. When their cause suffered with the formation of the Irish State these Irish women regrouped and aimed their sights higher; to end British Imperialism. In the absence of political power within the Irish Government they continued to practice politics by forming leagues, in the same way that they had done to fight for suffrage and Irish independence.

Chapter 3: Mary Flannery Woods and the Indian Irish Independence League

On October 30th 1931, the Irish Press published a picture of Mary Woods with one of the many safe houses that she owned. The caption read “No. 7 Grove Park Avenue, Blackrock, the house of Mr. Anthony Woods, where Gandhi will stay while on his visit to Dublin. Mrs. M.F. Woods will be Mr. Gandhi’s hostess.”¹ Earlier that fall, Mary Woods had traveled to London to meet Mahatma Gandhi, who was in town for the Second Round Table Conference to discuss constitutional reforms in India. She brought with her a list of signatures from Irish men and women of all sections of the community who wished to invite Mr. Gandhi to visit them in Ireland.² There is not much information about their meeting, except what can be gleaned from a letter written by Irish Politician Robert Briscoe in response to Mary Woods. Briscoe told Mary that he was pleased to hear that her visit with Mr. Gandhi had been pleasant, and was glad that Gandhi had accepted her invitation to be her guest in Ireland.³ Gandhi, however, was unable to visit Ireland. In a letter he wrote to Vivian Butler Burke of County Mayo, he said “I am very sorry to inform you that my contemplated visit to Ireland is likely to be dropped, because of a peremptory summons from India. If it is at all possible, however, I hope to visit Ireland, in which case I shall stay with a private friend.”⁴ Perhaps this friend was Mary Woods.

The next summer, Charlotte Despard was in London when she reached out to Indian politician Vithalbhai Jhaverbhai Patel and the organization “Friends of India.”

¹ Newspaper clipping, Letters and docs re visit to Ireland of M Gandhi, MS 17,823 (4) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

² Letter, 30th September 1931. Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (Electronic Book), New Delhi, Publications Division Government of India, 1999, 98 volumes.” V. 54, (143-144)

At this meeting Despard suggested that a partnership of Indian and Irish Nationalists be introduced in Ireland to take advantage of a less censored press.⁵ Patel had hoped to start a chapter of the “Friends of India” society in Ireland, and they agreed that Patel would visit Ireland later that summer. Despard wrote to Mary Woods to tell her about these developments.⁶ In June 1932, Atma Kamlani, a secretary of the Friends of India Association, wrote to Mary saying that Mary’s address had been given to Mr. Patel and asking her to prepare for his visit.⁷ Patel then publically toured Ireland, meeting politicians such as de Valera and giving speeches encouraging the Irish to boycott British goods. He met with Charlotte Despard, Maud Gonne MacBride, and Mary Woods privately at MacBride’s home; together they formed the Indian Irish Independence League.⁸

The nationalist newspaper *An Phoblacht* published a list of entrance and membership fees for the Indian Irish Independence League (IIIL). In addition to Mary Woods, Charlotte Despard, and Maud Gonne, other prominent Irish members of the League in the early days included politicians such as Robert Briscoe and Maurice Moore, and activists Dr. Kathleen Lynn and Madeleine ffrench-Mullen. While there were a few men involved in the organization, the majority of members were Irish women. Irish women also made up a majority of the positions of

⁵ Kate O’Malley “Ireland, India and empire: Indo-Irish separatist political links and perceived threats to the British Empire,” in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Conner. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 227-228

⁶ Letter from Charlotte Despard to Mrs. Woods, June 17, 1932, MS 17,823 (6) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

⁷ June 30, 1932, MS 17,823 (1) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

⁸ Kate O’Malley “Ireland, India and empire: Indo-Irish separatist political links and perceived threats to the British Empire,” in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*, eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O’Conner. (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 227-228.; Kate O’Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 66.

leadership within the organization, with Maud Gonne MacBride acting as President, Mary Woods as joint treasurer and joint secretary, and a Miss B. O'Mullane as the other joint treasurer.

V. J. Patel enlisted his associate, Mr. I. K. Yagnik, to work closely with MacBride and Mary Woods as their permanent Indian contact in Ireland. In a letter to Mary Woods about Yagnik, Patel said; "Mr. Yagnik will help you as best as he can but he is not familiar with local conditions and political currents and is therefore likely to make mistakes unless you take him in hand and give your advice and guidance... you know I rely upon you entirely for the success of the league."⁹ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington also attended several meetings and continued to correspond with Mr. Yajnik after he left the League.¹⁰

According to its constitution, the aim of the Indian Irish Independence League was to "help by every means possible to secure the complete national, social and economic independence of the people of India and Ireland." In order to accomplish this they would organize a boycott of British goods, establish an Indian Information Bureau, link the Irish and Indian independence movements to fight against the British Empire, explore opportunities for a trade alliance between India and Ireland, and call upon sympathizers with the Indian and Irish independence movements to form similar leagues.¹¹

⁹ September 8, 1932, MS 17,823 (1) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

¹⁰ Yajnik wrote to Sheehy Skeffington in 1935 reminding her that he was the ex-III secretary, referring to a speech that he had given that had "brought a hornet's nest around his ears under her friendship" MS 24,122 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland.

¹¹ Constitution included in appendix of Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, 193.

The boycott of British goods campaign established a link between the Indian Irish Independence League and traditional Irish Nationalist activism. The league's boycott coincided with a series of boycotts of British goods by Cumann na mBan, and other republican groups.¹² Maud Gonne MacBride and Mary Woods were both involved in the Boycott British campaign as well as the Indian Irish Independence League. The two leagues also shared an address, 44 Parnell Square,¹³ which was also a base for other Republican organizations.¹⁴ The overlap of members in each organization, and its location at the hub of Irish Nationalist activity made the link between the movements very clear.

The purpose of the Indian Information Bureau was to spread information about Indian events as reported by Indians rather than through British media. The Bureau also planned to coordinate Indian and Irish movements in order to effectively fight the British, and explore trade possibilities between Ireland and India. Mary Woods took the lead on these goals, and was extremely successful in her communications with Indian Nationalists and the dissemination of information about events in India. Mary submitted articles to various Irish Nationalist newspapers, and kept correspondence with Indian nationalists and other allies in Europe.

¹² Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 219

¹³ 44 Parnell Square wasn't the main address for the activities of the Indian-Irish Independence League, but one of their published bulletins used that address, which indicates that they used it at least once. "The Indian Irish Independence League" From the personal papers of Charlotte Despard (No date), Public Records office of Northern Ireland.

¹⁴ "Embargo on British" An Phoblacht. September 24, 1932.

V.J. Patel left for a tour of the United States in September of 1932. Before he left he asked Mary Woods to look after his friends, a Mr. and Mrs. Singh.¹⁵ There is not much information about this couple, but they did speak at several meetings of the Indian Irish Independence League and they donated money to the cause.¹⁶ Patel left Mr. Yagnik to run the Indian side of the operations for the League in his absence. Patel asked Mary Woods and Maud Gonne MacBride to write introductions for him and send a list of influential Irish men and women upon whom he could rely in the United States. Part of Patel's purpose in the United States was to mobilize a "Boycott British" movement among sympathetic Americans.¹⁷ He spoke at a meeting of Irish Americans in Washington D.C. that was attended by several congressmen.¹⁸

The league published regular bulletins, which were written in order to express their solidarity with the Indian struggle. The bulletins, signed by Maud Gonne and Mary Woods, speak to an Irish audience specifically, saying, "Ireland as a Christian Country has a duty, what can we do to help India in her struggle which is ours also?" The points brought up in this document align India with contemporaneous and historical movements in Ireland. The formation of the Indian-Irish Independence league came at a time in which Irish republicanism was regaining popularity. One statement of solidarity from the league deplored the conditions of the Indian jails, saying:

The conditions in most of the jails defies description, corrugated iron sheds, to touch the roofs of which raise blisters on the skin in hot weather, house many of the captives, many have died from prison conditions, forty-nine

¹⁵ September 2, 1932 MS 17,823 (1) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

¹⁶ An Phoblacht, October 22, 1932

¹⁷ "A reply to Mr. Saklatvala," An Phoblacht, October 29, 1932.

¹⁸ Michael Silvestri, Ireland and India: Nationalism, Empire and Memory, 30.

prisoners in the Andaman Island went on hunger strike as protest, three of whom died as a result of forcible feeding.¹⁹

This statement about prison conditions in India, which would have resonated with the Irish people, shows an understanding of the grievances of the Indian Nationalists. Prison conditions for political prisoners had been the topic of much debate and activism in Ireland for many years, and Ireland had a history of using hunger strikes as political statements. Not only had Mary Woods collected money and supplies for the Prisoner Defendant's Fund during the Civil War, but Maud Gonne MacBride and Charlotte Despard had founded the Women's Prisoners' Defense League (WPDL), of which Mary Woods was also a member.²⁰ In 1932 the organization again took up weekly meetings. In a meeting, Maud Gonne MacBride spoke to a crowd of 3,000 people about political prisoners kept in British jails in India. She summoned the Irish people who were gathered there that day to "repudiate any association with an Empire who was committing such hideous crimes against humanity" and also to boycott all British goods.²¹

In 1932, when the Indian-Irish Independence League was formed, Despard and MacBride, with the help of Cumann na mBan, had recently succeeded in securing the release of all political prisoners in Ireland for the first time since the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922.²² It is in the context of this popular and successful movement that MacBride, Despard, and the other members of the IIL

¹⁹ "The Indian Irish Independence League" From the personal papers of Charlotte Despard (No date), Public Records office of Northern Ireland.

²⁰ Mary Woods, "Witness Statement: Reminiscences of the period 1895-1924," *Bureau of Military History*, 33-35. Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 219. Kate O'Malley, *Ireland, India and Empire: Indo-Irish Radical Connections, 1919-1964*, 63.

²¹ An Phoblacht, July 1932.

²² Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 219.

brought the case of the Indian prisoners to the attention of other Irish Republicans who knew personally understood its significance.

The IILL also linked Ireland's history of famine to India's, blaming the British for both:

Even to-day millions of Indians kept in enforced illiteracy bow their heads in resignation to the Will of God and let themselves die of famine as one million Irish people did in our own country in 1846, without realizing that Famine and Starvation are the direct result of British rule and exploitation and opposed to the Will of God, who has made the earth fruitful enough to feed all.²³

By referencing the "Will of God" in this paragraph, and Ireland as a Christian country, as mentioned earlier, the writers of this bulletin express their connection to India as furthering a greater cause, religious duty. The wording of these paragraphs, stating that Ireland had a 'duty' to India and that the Indians "let themselves die of famine" indicates that the writers were viewing India as helpless and in need of Ireland's guidance. These women entreated Ireland as a Christian nation to help the non-Christian India. This is reminiscent of one of Ireland's main roles within the imperial system, which was sending missionaries overseas to India and Africa. While stating solidarity with India, Ireland also claimed superior knowledge and an alignment with the will of God. The members of the Indian-Irish Independence League highlight these imperialist undertones themselves: Irish (white) women are helping Indian (non-white) men. This argument could be made from reading the penultimate paragraph of the bulletin:

One obvious way is to help India to bring her case before the world. We know the power of British propaganda, it has been used against ourselves, we have learnt in some measure how to counter it, let us put all our propaganda genius

²³ "The Indian Irish Independence League" From the personal papers of Charlotte Despard, PRONI.

at the disposal of India, let Ireland voice India's appeal to the conscience of the Western World.

It is possible that many Irish Nationalists believed that its place as a Western country provided it with a platform from which to speak that India was not privy to, and it was the duty of the Irish people to speak on India's behalf. The quotes from this document suggest that at the time of its founding, the Irish women involved in the Indian-Irish Independence League were still struggling with the complex position of Ireland as a "white colony" in the British Empire, which had dogged Ireland's anti-imperialist rhetoric since the mid 1800s. These Irish women were caught between their perceived duty as white Christians and their disgust for England, just as their predecessors had been.

Despite the formation of the Indian-Irish Independence League in the context of this imbalance of power, Indian leaders still sought out this relationship. The League was formed on an understanding of India and Ireland as colonized siblings. Shortly after its formation, the founders of the League, Patel and Despard, ceased their involvement. Charlotte Despard moved to Belfast in 1933 and lived there for the rest of her life,²⁴ and V. J. Patel became sick while traveling in America and died the same year. The League, however, continued to be active until the beginning of World War II in 1939, with Maud Gonne and Subhas Chandra Bose as leaders.

Subhas Chandra Bose, an Indian nationalist and politician began writing to Mary Woods in 1933. Bose was a political opponent of Gandhi who supported an armed fight against the British, and studied the resistance of Sinn Fein and Irish

²⁴ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, (East Haven: Pluto Press, 1995), 223.

Republicans as an example for India to follow. Bose's correspondence with Mary Woods began when Mary wrote to V.J. Patel just before his death, and Bose responded to the letter for Patel.²⁵ In his will, Patel left a substantial sum of money to Bose with the intention that it should be spent "for the political uplift of India and preferably for publicity work on behalf of India's cause in other countries."²⁶

Upon the death of Patel in October 1933, Mary sent a "sympathetic message of Irish friends to the Indian Press," which Bose compared to the sympathetic message sent by the family of hunger striker Terence MacSwiney to the Indian press upon the death of hunger striker Jatin Das.²⁷ These notes to nationalists in India demonstrated awareness by Irish Nationalists of the events taking place in India, as well as an acknowledgement that the events had a similar meaning to nationalists in both locations. Bose's comparison indicates that the two events were still resonating with both Indians and Irish nationalists a decade after the formation of the Irish Free State and after the Civil War damaged relations between opposing groups of nationalists. Bose emphasized the Indian Nationalists awareness of the history and events in Ireland in his first letter to Mary Woods, saying "In my part of the country

²⁵ The correspondences between Mary Woods and Subhas Chandra Bose in this volume are titled as being to an E. Woods but the letters are addressed to Mrs. Woods. Copies of the letters are in the collection at the National Library of Ireland, and the originals are in India. The NLI says that these letters are to Mary Woods, which is also backed up by the references to her children and known acquaintances. Kate O'Malley and I have both assumed this to be a typo on the part of person who transcribed these letters for the book. Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, 34.

²⁶ "Late V.J. Patel's Will" August 28, 1935. MS 17,823 (1) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

²⁷ Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, December 1, 1933, 40.

(Bengal), recent Irish history is studied closely by freedom-loving men and women and several Irish characters are literally worshipped in many a home.”²⁸

After V.J. Patel’s death, Subhas Chandra Bose became a main Indian Nationalist contact and the supplier of news from India for Mary Woods to include in the Indian-Irish Independence League bulletins. In a letter to Mary, Bose said:

I duly received a copy of your bulletin and I liked it. Do you get any of the Indian papers (In English) regularly? If you get them, would it be possible for you to pick out the interesting news- or would it be necessary to supply you with the news in ready form? How often do you publish the bulletin? I am anxious to supply you with information about India.²⁹

Bose also asked for Mary to send him news and information from Ireland, and asked her to give his articles to local papers: “I would like very much to write an article on official repression in India on the points that you have suggested... I shall send it to you and you could place it in the best paper. For publicity, I think, the *Irish Press* would be best.”³⁰ Bose continued to contact Mary Woods when he wanted to place information in various Irish papers. In a letter from March 1936, Bose told Mary that he received a letter from the British Consul in Vienna, where Bose was staying, threatening that he would be arrested if he returned to India. He asked her to share this with the Irish press: “Perhaps you could put this into the Dublin papers- particularly the *Irish Press*- if you make a personal request.”³¹ This plea demonstrates that Mary Woods was the person whom Bose believed was best able

²⁸ Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, December 7, 1933, 40-41. December 21, 1935, 124-125.

²⁹ Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, December 7, 1933, 40-41.

³⁰ Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, Feb. 20, 1934.

³¹ Letter from Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, Oct. 12, 1933, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, March 17, 1936.

to get his message to the Irish press, which she could accomplish with the personal connections that she had among influential Irish nationalists. Mary was not only the contact person of the Indian-Irish Independence League, but she had the skills and connections that were advantageous to people in India's nationalist movement.

Bose was finally able to visit Ireland for the first time in 1936. Through a series of letters before his visit, it is clear that Mary Woods was in charge of planning the details of Bose's trip. Several weeks before the trip Bose wrote: "Please make the necessary arrangements for my meeting President de Valera, the party leaders, the Lord Mayor etc. You may also make arrangements for meetings as you think best."³² The significance of this request is striking: Subhas Chandra Bose, one of the most prominent Indian politicians of the 1930s, asked Mary Woods to organize a meeting with Eamon de Valera, one of the most prominent Irish politicians of the 1930s (not to mention the other local politicians). This is not the only time that Mary Woods organized a meeting between Bose and de Valera. In 1937 Bose wrote a letter to Mary saying: "Can you please make enquiries *confidentially* if I can pay a visit to President de Valera when I am in England? ...Please treat this matter as *strictly confidential* and let not a soul know beyond the President and his Secretary."

While Bose was in Ireland he spoke at several meetings and luncheons that were attended by many prominent Irish Nationalists, such as future president of Ireland Erskine Childers, Sean MacBride, and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Maire Comerford attended as a reporter for the Irish Press, and representatives of Cumann

³² Ibid, January 23, 1936.

na mBan, the Inter-University Republican Club, Dublin Libraries, and other social and political organizations were also present. Mary Woods and Maud Gonne spoke at these events.³³ Articles from those events describe a loud and enthusiastic crowd. One man from the event wondered, “how many years would it be before Dublin would rise to the dignity of Calcutta and have a Mayor who would not be allowed into Britain,” since Bose was not been able to obtain a passport for England on this visit.³⁴

Subhas Chandra Bose did more than provide information about the Indian Home Rule Movement to Ireland. In 1934 Bose mentioned hearing from Maud Gonne that the work of the IIRL would likely come to an end due to a lack of funds. Bose continued by telling Mary “I do hope that you will manage to continue, come what may. On my side, I am determined to do my best to foster this contact.”³⁵ Bose then mentioned other acquaintances around the world who were interested in keeping the League running, and this seems to have worked, since the League was able to continue its work for several more years. Bose was able to make contacts in Vienna and France, which expanded interest in the League beyond India and Ireland. Mary Woods began writing regularly to these contacts as well.³⁶

The relationship between Subhas Chandra Bose and Mary Woods began through letters for the purpose of the League. The contents were friendly and curious. Bose wanted to know what information he could send to Mary, and asked

³³ Clipped articles, MS 17,823 (2) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

³⁴ Clipped articles, MS 17,823 (3) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

³⁵ Letter from Subhas Chandra Bose, January 23, 1936. *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*.

³⁶ Schenkl to Mrs. Woods, 17th April 1936 MS 17,823 (5) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

her what newspapers from Ireland he should be getting. As their contact continued into the late 1930s the letters took on a slightly more urgent tone; Bose was detained when he entered Egypt, and arrested and imprisoned for several months upon his return to India in 1937. During this time the police were watching Bose's mail, but they allowed Mary Woods' papers to get through. When Bose was no longer able to get his regular supply of Irish newspapers due to the censor, he asked Mary to send him the news herself and a copy of the new constitution created by the de Valera government that year.³⁷ Bose asked Mary to arrange a secret meeting between himself and de Valera in 1937, and in one of his final letters to Mary Woods before the war Bose puts in his postscript, "I am enclosing the cover of your letter. I wonder if your seals were in this condition when the letter left Dublin."³⁸ Their communications began as League business, albeit with personal beliefs in a shared goal, but eventually the collaboration between Bose and Mary Woods developed a personal urgency that resulted in active organizing, secret messages and shared dangers.

Mary Woods also corresponded with other supporters of Indian freedom across Europe. In 1936 she received a letter from Emilie Schenkl in Vienna. Schenkl was Bose's clerical assistant while he was in Europe. The first letters between Mary and Schenkl were professional. Schenkl sent Mary articles to put in the newspapers, and asked Mary for contact information for Maud Gonne and some other

³⁷ Letter from Subhas Chandra Bose, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*. May 11, 1937.

³⁸ Letter from Subhas Chandra Bose, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*, December 30, 1937.

sympathetic friends in France.³⁹ Soon the letters became a mix of professional and personal as the women bonded over their regard for Subhas Chandra Bose and the shared worry about their letters being tampered with. In addition to the business of Subhas Chandra Bose and Indian Independence, they sent each other holiday snaps, wrote about their travels, and sent holiday cards.⁴⁰

It is worth noting that Bose was not the only Indian person to contact Mary Woods regarding the Indian and Irish Nationalist movements. In 1934 an Indian journalist named B. N. Anantani contacted Mary asking her if she could get a signed message from de Valera to be put in the *Bombay Chronicle* and *The Sun*.⁴¹ Mary had also sent a sympathetic mention to the Indian press after the death of V.J. Patel. She wrote a cable to the Indian press that was published by all of the newspapers “with a great deal of prominence” when Bose had been imprisoned upon his return to India.⁴²

The letter from the Indian journalist and the letters from Subhas Chandra Bose after his visit to Dublin thank Mary Woods for her hospitality and ask after her family members, mentioning many of her children by name. Even V. J. Patel, in the early days of the Indian Irish Independence League, asked after Mary’s daughter in a letter, hoping that she remembered him.⁴³ These passages indicate that Mary entertained these Indian guests with her family, possibly in her home. These sections of the letters are a stark reminder that Mary Woods was not only a political

³⁹ Schenk to Mrs. Woods, 17th April 1936 MS 17,823 (5) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

⁴⁰ Letters between 1937-1938, MS 17,823 (5) Dublin: National Library of Ireland.

⁴¹ Letter from B. N. Anantani, The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

⁴² Subhas C. Bose to Mrs. Woods, September 9, 1937, *Letters, Articles, Speeches and Statements, 1933-1937*.

⁴³ V. J. Patel to Mrs. Woods, September 8, 1932. MS 17,823 (1) Dublin: National Library of Ireland

activist, but a widow and mother of many children. In this way Mary differs from many other female activists who did not have children, such as Charlotte Despard and Dr. Kathleen Lynn, and nationalist women who are remembered primarily for their dead brothers and sons, such as Margaret Pearce or Mary MacSwiney.

In the archives, the correspondence relating to the Indian Irish Independence League are all addressed to Mary Woods. Mary Woods' half of the conversation is not available. It is difficult to tell exactly what Mary Woods believed or what actions she actually took since they can only be inferred based on the responses of her correspondents. The letters from Subhas Chandra Bose and Emilie Schenkl were formal at first but became a more personal relationship as time went on. What is known about Mary's personality is indicated from her own reminiscences and from Maire Comerford's description of her during the Irish revolutionary period. She was a woman of strong convictions, with a deep hatred for the British violence in Ireland, India and Africa. She was also well connected and incredibly resourceful.⁴⁴ Throughout her life, her new friendships shaped the direction of her activism from Ireland to a more global perspective.

The Indian-Irish Independence League has not been frequently studied, and it is unclear what lasting influence it had in world politics. What is clear is that much of the communication between the leaders in Ireland and India came as a result of the Indian Irish Independence League, and particularly through the Indian Information Bureau led by Mary Woods. Mary Woods used her influence in the Dublin political sphere to make important connections between Indian politicians

⁴⁴ Maire Comerford Papers, UCDA LA 18/30.

and Irish media and Irish politicians and Indian media. Mary Woods and her nationalist friends were able to once again put their particular method of activism to work in the fight against British Imperialism. Through forming leagues, keeping nationalists in their homes, boycotting goods, and writing letters, these women practiced anti-imperialism in a way that was consistent with their earlier activist work. It was through these methods, which Irish women had been using for decades, that women were prepared to lead. Although Ireland's place in the British Empire was complex, the personal connections made between Irish women and Indian nationalists led to a friendly cooperation, which largely took place outside of traditional politics.

Conclusion

During World War II communication between Mary Woods and Subhas Chandra Bose stopped. Bose took charge of the Indian National Army in 1943, and the troops were trained and armed with the help of the Japanese army. On October 21, 1943 Bose declared the formation of Provisional Government of Free India, and a few days later the Provisional Government declared war on Britain and the United States. The British censored information about the Indian National Army within India. Bose was denounced as a traitor by the British, and referred to as “India’s Would-Be Fuhrer” by an American journalist.¹

Subhas Chandra Bose died in a plane crash in Taipei on August 18, 1945. Another passenger on the plane, a man named Habib, survived and recounted the story; he did not die immediately in the crash, but from his wounds several hours later. Just before Bose had boarded the plane British forces had arrived in Taipei to arrest him. Bose’s body was cremated in Taipei before anyone was able to arrive to see it.² These two circumstances, as well a statement that Gandhi made stating that Bose would soon reappear, led to much speculation that Bose had evaded British capture and escaped. The British made several inquiries into Bose’s death and eventually concluded that he had died from the crash.³

Mary Woods heard the rumors about Bose and wrote to their friend Emilie Schenkl in Vienna after the war hoping that he was still alive. Schenkl did not think that he was, and replied; “Re: what you mention about our mutual friend, I am sorry

¹ Sugata Bose, *His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle against Empire*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 251-258, 273-274.

² Ibid, 305-308.

³ Ibid, 312.

to say I cannot share your hopes. I have somehow the feeling that he has died... I got such a shock when I heard about this incident that for weeks I was only mechanically doing my duties.”⁴ In this letter Schenkl told Mary about the hardships that she had gone through during the war. She had gotten married, although she would not say to whom, and had a daughter, Anita. Schenkl and Anita had almost died of starvation before the Russians came through their town. Schenkl and Mary wrote to each other several more times that year, but Schenkl never mentioned to Mary that she had married Subhas Chandra Bose, and that her daughter Anita was his only known child.⁵

Sometime during the war Mary Flannery Woods moved out of her house on 131 Morehampton Road where she had entertained, housed, and hidden Indian and Irish Nationalists for so many years.⁶ In her later years she began to write about her life, reminiscences mainly about her involvement in the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, and her fond memories of Liam Mellows and other martyrs for Ireland. Her personal reminiscences all end around 1923, leaving only a few letters as evidence her international activities. Despite her active involvement in anti-imperialism, she was most proud of her work for Ireland.

In her book *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, Margaret Ward says that historical categories should be revised when writing women into history. It is not enough to tag them into what is already known;

⁴ January 18, 1946, Emilie Schenkl to Mary Woods, MS 17,823 (5) Dublin: National Library of Ireland
⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Envelopes addressed to Mary Woods at 17 Butterfield Crescent begin around 1945. The Mary Flannery Woods Papers, MS1995-34, John J. Burns Library, Boston College.

historians should revise the historical categories to include the historical events that have significance to women, and reexamine the accepted historical events until “a whole people will eventually come into focus.”⁷ Mary Flannery Woods practiced politics while also upholding the role that the country asked of her: that of a wife and a mother. She did this by politicizing her domestic space by housing and entertaining revolutionaries from Ireland and India, by utilizing her robust and varied network of acquaintances, and by writing letters, bulletins, and articles. By bringing her activism into her home, Mary was able to provide a private, and in some cases, secret, space for communication between Irish and Indian leaders during crucial revolutionary moments. This high level of political engagement was not uncommon among women in Ireland at this time, and it was especially common among Mary’s group of politically active, nationalist, feminist friends. However, while most of Mary’s friends have been acknowledged for their roles in Irish history, Mary’s accomplishments, although no less significant, have largely been overlooked because they took place in the private sphere.

The private sphere often is not credited as a location for the action in most narrated history, but its importance should not be underestimated. Behind the scenes of the male actors and the public sphere, these women were practicing a form of nationalism that was just as passionate and involved as that of Patrick Pearse and Liam Mellows. As Irish nationalism evolved into anti-imperialism, these women took the reins from their male counterparts, and came to provide a service to the cause of Ireland that has been overlooked in the historiography of the Irish

⁷ Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable Revolutionaries: Women and Irish Nationalism*, 2.

and Indian anti-imperialist struggle. Through analyzing the stories of these Irish women, the narrative of Irish history shifts further from victimhood towards their active defiance of the British Empire.

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