British Journal for Military History

Volume 9, Issue 2, July 2023

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ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 31 July 2023

Citation: Fionnuala Walsh, “A fanatical separation money mob’: The British Army Soldier’s Wife in Wartime Ireland, 1914-1918’, *British Journal for Military History*, 9.2 (2023), pp. 106-124.

www.bjmh.org.uk

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'A fanatical separation money mob': The British Army Soldier's Wife in Wartime Ireland, 1914-1918

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the experiences of Irish soldiers' families during the Great War. Soldiers' families occupied a complex place in Irish society. Initially supported and praised for their husband's service, working-class women quickly came under criticism and surveillance from the British state and civic authorities. They developed a reputation for excessive drinking and neglect of their children, blamed on the corrupting influence of the separation allowance. The 1916 Easter Rising and the by-elections in 1917 and 1918 provided opportunities for violent clashes and for the negative reputation of the women to be cemented in the public imagination. Separation women as an identifiable group disappeared in the aftermath of the war but the difficulties and challenges for Irish military families continued.

During the Great War a street-song named Salonika became popular in Ireland, especially in county Cork. It is told from the perspective of a working-class woman whose husband is serving with the British Army. The lyrics include reference to two prevalent tropes associated with the wartime soldiers' wife: the material benefits linked to the separation allowances, and the sexual immorality that soldiers' wives were supposedly engaged in.[1] The song's narrator mentions the presence of American soldiers in Cork in 1917 and suggests that for every child born in America, there would be two in Cork. She wonders if her own husband is alive and if he is aware he has a 'kid with a foxy head'. In Bureau of Military History Witness Statements collected in the 1940s, republicans recalled their interactions during the war years with the dependents of British Army soldiers, describing the women as 'a fanatical separation

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i2.1713
[1]Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800-1940,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 178.

money mob', the rabble of the city and depicting them as shrieking hordes of wild women. The families of British soldiers exist in Irish popular memory primarily in two contrasting images: the weeping woman waving farewell in August 1914 and dutifully knitting socks as she waits for news of her loved one on the home front; or the drunken disorderly 'separation woman' recklessly spending her allowance at the local pub and protesting against the republican movement. Untangling these stereotypes helps us gain a stronger understanding of the home front and of the relationship of the British Army to Irish society. Soldiers do not participate in the military in isolation, they belong to families who are affected by the military service. This article focuses on the experiences of soldiers' families and the relationship between Irish women and the British Army during the Great War. This was a time when the British Army had unprecedented contact and interaction with soldiers' families and the home front in Ireland. There are a few key questions central to examining the experience of the Irish soldier or their dependents in the British Army: How were the families of those enlisted treated within their communities? What did service in the British Army mean in an Irish context and how did this differ to Britain? How were veterans and their families treated in the aftermath of the war? These questions will all be addressed in this article.

The impact of the war on women in Ireland was immediately apparent in August 1914. Reservists in the British Army were quickly mobilised and sent to the front leaving bereft families behind. As estimated 210,000 Irishmen voluntarily served in the British Army between 1914 and 1918. The Dublin based magazine *Lady of the House* described the weeping women in the streets of Ireland, as they feared for their menfolk in the army. The magazine editor sympathised with the distress of the women left at home waiting for news, noting that women 'live through more battles than ever those they love have fought or will fight'.[2] The novelist Katharine Tynan wrote in her memoir, first published in April 1918, of her distress on hearing of the enlistment of her son Toby: 'On the last day of 1914 I had finished up my little diary with "Lord my heart is ready!" I do not know why I wrote it. I never thought then that the War would last long enough for the boys to go'. Emily Shirley in County Monaghan experienced similar anguish when her son Evelyn was called up in autumn 1914, adding 'May God help us' to her diary entry which noted his mobilization.[3] The casualty list of men wounded or killed in the war began appearing in the local newspapers as early as 5 September 1914 and would remain a tragically regular feature for the duration.

Before 1914 only a small proportion of British Army soldiers were entitled to marry; soldiers required the permission of their commanding officer, and it was only granted

[2]*Lady of the House,* 15 September 1914

[3]Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereinafter PRONI), D3531 Diary of Emily Shirley, 5 August 1914.

for those who had served for at least seven years, were of good character and had some savings.[4] For those granted permission, the families under the system of 'marriage on the strength' received a small separation allowance during the overseas service of the men. It was expected that the payments would be supplemented by the Poor Law system or through philanthropic relief if the families were regarded as sufficiently deserving.[5] The demand for recruits after the outbreak of war in 1914 led to the significant expansion of this scheme and a relaxation of the marriage restrictions. In the United Kingdom the wives and children of all enlisted men received separation allowances.[6] By November 1918 the British government was providing separation allowances to 3,013,800 families in the United Kingdom.[7] This was an unprecedented system of universal welfare, resulting in uncertainty as to its administration and confusion as to whether the payment constituted a welfare entitlement or charitable aid, and as such what conditions should be attached. This was further complicated by the initial involvement of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Families' Association (SSFA) in their administration.[8] The SSFA was established in 1885 in the United Kingdom to provide support for soldiers' families. From 1914 to 1916 the organisation also administered the separation allowances on behalf of the War Office.[9] The SSFA undertook to assess families to ascertain their level of dependency and the veracity of their claim for support, and to issue advances to women while they waited for their separation allowances to be processed. These assessments were carried out by 'lady visitors' – typically middle-class Protestant women acting in a voluntary capacity.[10] For example, Emily Shirley, widow of the Conservative Party MP Sewallis Shirley, was one of these lady visitors in county Monaghan, combining visits on behalf

[4]Army, Report of an Enquiry by Mrs. Tennant Regarding the Conditions of Marriage Off the Strength, December 1913, Parliamentary Papers, 1914, vol. 51, Cd. 7441.
[5]Myra Trustrum, *Women of the regiment: marriage and the Victorian Army*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 90-91, p. 189.
[6]Susan Grayzel, 'Men and women at home' in Jay Winter (ed.), *Cambridge history of the First World War, vol. III, Civil Society,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 107-108.
[7]War Office, *Statistics of the military effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920* (London, 1922), 570.
[8]Susan Pedersen, *Family, dependence & the origins of the welfare state,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 110-111; Stephanie J. Brown, "An "insult to soldiers' wives and mothers": the Woman's Dreadnought campaign against surveillance on the home front 1915-16', *Journal of Modern Periodical Studies*, 7, 1-2 (2016), pp. 121-162.
[9]Paul Huddie, 'The Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association and the separation women of Dublin in 1914', *Dublin Historical Record*, 71, 2 (2018), pp. 185-201.
[10]Ibid., pp. 189-192.

of the SSFA with Red Cross sewing circles in Carrickmacross.[11] These inspections ended in 1917 when the Ministry of Pensions took responsibility for the administration of the allowances.[12]

Negotiating the welfare system could be bewildering for families even with the support of the SSFA. The wives of soldiers were entitled to a separation allowance, the rate of which depended on the rank of the soldier and the number of children the family had. For other family members however, including mothers and siblings, an allowance could be claimed based on pre-war dependency on the soldier. The responsibility was on the family member to accurately report the earnings and their level of dependency. The War Office reported in August 1915 that there was abundant evidence of the scheme being abused and warned that the only effective means of 'dealing with the evil' was to prosecute those who had made false claims.[13] There were many court cases in Ireland during the war years concerning allegations of fraudulent allowance claims, ranging from failure to adequately complete paperwork to deliberate impersonations. Many of the investigations for fraud reflected honest mistakes in the completion of the forms. Mary Bothwell, for example, was suspected of fraudulently conspiring to get a higher separation allowance by listing herself as the 'wife' of her son, rather than as his mother on her original application. It could not be proved that this was a deliberate falsification rather than an error and consequently no prosecution was taken.[14] There were also several cases involving mothers exaggerating the financial support provided by their soldier sons before the war to claim a higher separation allowance.[15] In one case the mother allegedly recorded her son's worth as opposed to what he had in fact been providing for her. Bridget Lee stated that her son was a 'good boy, and worth what she had claimed for him'.[16] Lee was convicted of fraud and fined ten shillings. Several tragic cases involved women prosecuted for claiming separation allowance for children who had recently died.[17] Annie Moran, for example,

[11]Diary of Emily Shirley, 1914-1916.
[12]Holly Dunbar, 'Women and alcohol during the First World War in Ireland', *Women's History Review*, 27, 3 (2018), pp. 379-396 & p. 389.
[13]*Annual report for the Local Government Board for Ireland 1915-1916* (Dublin, 1916), xvi.
[14]National Archives Ireland (hereinafter NAI), CSO/ RP/ 1917/607: Case for prosecution of Mary Bothwell.
[15]See for example, NAI CSO/ RP/ 1917/ 246 Case of fraud against Sarah Maguire, November 1916-January 1917; see also *Freeman's Journal*, 7 August 1915; *Freeman's Journal*, 13 November 1915; *Ulster Herald*, 11 December 1915; *Irish Times*, 10 August 1915; *Irish Times*, 13 September 1915; *Irish Independent*, 25 September 1915; *Irish Times*, 24 December 1915.
[16]*Irish Times*, 24 December 1915.
[17]*Irish Independent*, 25 May 1917; *Anglo-Celt*, 14 July 1917; *Irish Independent*, 25 July 1917; *Irish Independent*, 1 December. 1917.

was prosecuted in 1917 for failing to declare the death of her child and continuing to claim the higher rate. The court imposed a fine of 10 shillings, noting the seriousness of the case but acknowledging that the family was in financial difficulty following the military discharge of her husband.[18] Mary Connolly was similarly convicted of fraud for failing to promptly report the death of her child and was fined the more substantial sum of £2.[19]

Others engaged in more serious deceptions. There was more than one case of a woman claiming to be her soldier brother's wife, to receive a higher allowance.[20] For example, Mary Rogers impersonated Priscilla Rogers, the late wife of her brother John. Priscilla had died in 1914 and Mary had decided to claim the allowance for herself and for Priscilla's child, whom she was raising. She did not consider the pretence wrong in the circumstances.[21] Katharine O'Brien was convicted for claiming as her brother's dependent while not informing the authorities that she was also receiving an allowance in respect of her husband's war service. She was fined £2 together with the costs of the court case.[22] She was fortunate to escape a custodial sentence. Mary Wood and Rose McNamara were both jailed for three months for claiming two separation allowances simultaneously. Wood was described as 'one of those who is stealing the country's money'.[23]

Wood's prosecution for fraud was in 1917 by which time the negative reputation of soldiers' wives had solidified in the public consciousness in Ireland. Previous scholarship has revealed the significant controversy and press commentary generated by the separation allowances in Ireland.[24] Contemporaries recognised the value of the separation allowances for soldiers' families but worried about how women with absent husbands might spend the money. Rumours abounded of soldiers' wives spending their allowances on alcohol and of creating 'a disturbance' when they withdrew their weekly payments.[25] This reputation persisted even when it was evident that it was not

[18]NAI CSO/RP/ 1917/ 1913: Case of Annie Moran, March 1917 to June 1917.
[19]NAICSO/RP/ 1917/2448: Case of prosecution of Mary Connolly.
[20]See case of Margaret McKinnon, *Freeman's Journal*, 23 October 1915; that of Mary Rogers, *Irish Independent*, 6 September 1917; and Elizabeth Wood, *Leitrim Observer*, 15 September 1917.
[21]*Irish Independent*, 6 September 1917.
[22]NAI CSO/ RP/ 1917/ 1137: Case of Katharine O'Brien, April 1917.
[23]*Freeman's Journal*, 2 December 1915; *Irish Independent*, 28 March 1917.
[24]Fionnuala Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 97-113; Dunbar, 'Women and alcohol', pp. 379-396; Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society*, pp. 178-184.
[25]See for example, NAI, Bureau of Military History (hereinafter NAI BMH) Witness Statement (WS) 887 Aine Ryan.

supported by police records. There was a marginal increase in the number of women arrested for drunkenness or drunk and disorderly behaviour in 1915, but the total arrests of women for such crimes otherwise declined over the course of the war. The number of men arrested for alcohol related offences also declined sharply, resulted in more visibility for the women offenders.[26] Brian Griffin rightly observes that criminal statistics represent police knowledge of crime rather than its true incidence; they also reflect variables in the number of police and the attention paid to specific crimes at different times.[27] This is especially relevant for comparing wartime Ireland with the pre-war period. Nevertheless, the statistics offer a useful insight into the gendered nature of wartime prosecutions.[28] The increase in arrests in 1915, both in Dublin and more generally in Ireland, corresponds to the time when there was most public anxiety about the supposed excessive drinking by separation women.

The question remains of how many of those arrested were separation women. The SSFA Dublin branch noted few cases of soldiers' wives whose behaviour deemed them unworthy of support. In his examination of the minute books for 1914, Huddie has uncovered just three such incidences out of a total of approx. 8,000 women who received support from the branch during that time. One woman was noted as being 'bad, not to be helped' while two more were 'written off' without further explanation. The organisation themselves suggested that some of the complaints about drunken separation women may 'arise out of personal squabbles and may frequently not be true'.[29] In January 1916 Rev. John Manning defended the reputation of the women of Arklow, county Wicklow. He noted that there were a few hundred women in the locality collecting weekly allowances and that he would 'defy any town in the world to produce such a record – hardly a drunken woman'.[30] An editorial in the *Irish Independent* newspaper later asserted that the fears of excessive drinking in the first year of the war were either unfounded or that the situation had significantly improved.[31] The rumours persisted however.

The anxiety surrounding the drinking of soldiers' wives was primarily motivated by concern about its effects on their children. Women drinking in the home were seen as endangering their infants through neglect and carelessness.[32] The National Society

[26]Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 105-106.
[27]Brian Griffin, *Sources for the study of crime in Ireland, 1801-1921,* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), p. 62.
[28]Dunbar, 'Women and alcohol', p. 380.
[29]Huddie, 'The Soldiers' and Sailors' Families Association', pp. 197-198.
[30]*Freeman's Journal*, 20 January 1916.
[31]*Irish Independent,* 21 December 1917, cited in Dunbar, *op. cit*., 392.
[32]Edward Coey Bigger, *Carnegie United Kingdom Trust: report on the physical welfare of mothers and children, IV, Ireland,* (Dublin: Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 1917), p. 44.

for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) investigated the welfare of 33,234 children of soldiers in Ireland between August 1914 and March 1917.[33] Some of the investigations performed by the NSPCC in the first months of the war were merely attempts to see if the family required support obtaining the allowances or managing without the breadwinner husband. Occasionally the soldier would himself request that the NSPCC report to him on his children's welfare, perhaps motivated by concern about his wife's conduct in his absence.[34] Despite the high number of investigations, the society took over the administration of the separation allowance for just 116 families.[35] The criminal judicial statistics reveal that while child neglect and cruelty declined during the war, the proportion of female offenders increased. This was a significant change, from 42 per cent for the period 1911-14 to 63 per cent for the following three years, and likely reflects the higher numbers of women in the position of head of household in wartime and the particular focus by the NSPCC on the children of serving soldiers.[36]

In 1917 there were over 1,700 soldiers' dependents registered as heads of households in Dublin tenements.[37] These overcrowded living conditions made it more likely the families would come to the attention of the welfare authorities and that the children would be identified as suffering from neglect. In his 1917 report on the physical welfare of mothers and children, Dr Edward Coey Bigger lamented the impact of the appalling housing conditions on the morality and industriousness of the inhabitants.[38] The separation allowance was typically blamed as the corrupting influence however, rather than entrenched poverty. The challenging pre-war living conditions of the Merrigan and Fitzgerald families, for example, were unlikely to have been fully resolved by the separation allowance. Mary Merrigan was sentenced to two months' hard labour in September 1915. Her two older children had recently died of pneumonia and she was accused of spending her allowance on alcohol and of neglecting her surviving infant.[39] Her husband had been a general labourer before joining the army and they were living in a one-room home in Dublin city with their eldest child in 1911.[40] Mary Anne

[33] *Twenty-eighth annual report of the NSPCC* (Dublin, 1917), p. 11.
[34] Padraig Yeates, *A city in wartime: Dublin 1914-1918,* (Dublin: Gill, 2011), p. 259.
[35] *Twenty-eighth annual report of the NSPCC* (Dublin, 1917), 11.
[36] Compiled from the Judicial Statistics, Ireland, 1900-1919; Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 108-109.
[37] Dublin City Archives, 'Report of the housing committee, 1918', *Reports and printed documents of the Corporation of Dublin, vol. I 1918* (Dublin, 1919), pp. 115-145.
[38] Bigger, *Carnegie United Kingdom* Trust, p. 40.
[39] *Freeman's Journal*, 10 September 1915.
[40] NAI, 1911 census record for the Merrigan family. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Dublin/Kingstown_No__2/Patrick_Street__East_Side/95710/. Accessed 21 June 2023.

Fitzgerald's family was living in a two-room home in Carrick-on-Suir in Tipperary in 1911, with seven of their ten children, aged between thirteen and under a year.[41] Fitzgerald was sent to prison for child neglect and drunkenness in 1915, again blamed on the corrupting influence of her separation allowance.[42] In contrast, Kate McEvoy was spared a prison sentence when accused of the same crime in December 1915 because she was a sergeant's wife and had a certain social status'. Her husband had been in the Royal Irish Constabulary for twenty-five years and had recently enlisted in the army. Her solicitor claimed her case was 'not an ordinary case of unfortunate women not used to much money drawing separation allowance'.[43] Those involved in policing women's behaviour also differentiated between the deserving and undeserving poor. Intemperate mothers were typically held responsible for their poverty and were considered unworthy of welfare or support. The focus of the State and charitable agencies was the needs of the soldiers' children and ensuring their welfare.[44]

The allowance had served as an incentive for enlistment among poor communities in Ireland's cities, particularly in Dublin where many labourers had few employment prospects following their participation in the 1913 Dublin Lockout. The regular army payments, made available to the women directly, brought some relief in the early months after enlistment and in some cases greatly improved the material welfare of households and reduced the vulnerability of women. The rate varied significantly depending on the rank of the soldier, but the allowances took account of the number of children in a family. They compared favourably to the wages of unskilled labourers. The prevailing cultural memory of the separation allowances in Ireland emphasises the material benefit of the welfare for impoverished working-class families.[45] However, many families continued to struggle in wartime, especially as inflation drove the price of food and coal up and essential items were in short supply. Housing conditions also deteriorated in Dublin. The housing report of the Irish Convention in 1918 estimated that 67,000 new working-class houses were urgently required in urban areas across Ireland.[46] Building work came to a standstill after the outbreak of war in 1914, lending greater urgency to the urban housing crisis. By 1917 the separation allowance was no longer keeping pace with inflation and the high cost of food and fuel in urban areas was creating significant hardship. The winter of 1916-1917 had been exceptionally

[41]NAI, 1911 census record for the Fitzgerald family. http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Tipperary/Carrick_on_Suir__Urban_/Moores_Lane/839869/. Accessed 21 June 2023.
[42]*Freeman's Journal*, 8 July 1915.
[43]*Nenagh News*, 11 December 1915.
[44]Buckley, '"Growing up poor"', pp. 350-351.
[45]Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 76-77.
[46]Report of the Housing Committee, adopted by the Convention on 5 April 1918, in *Report of the proceedings of the Irish Convention*, (Dublin: HMSO, 1918), p. 137.

cold, affecting crops and making the coal shortage more acute.[47] Cecilia Daniel, a Westmeath farmer writing to a relative in Australia, described it as 'the most extraordinary winter and spring ever experienced in Ireland. No one alive ever remembered such a winter'. Daniel lamented the 'indescribable' sufferings of poor families on account of the fuel shortages and worried that they would 'feel many a pinch in the next few months as everything is getting very scarce and dear'.[48] Women attempting to feed their families in these conditions had little money to spare for the public house. Indeed, the *Irish Independent* reported destitution was widespread in Dublin in March 1917 and separation allowances were 'barely sufficient' to feed a family and left no money for clothes or school supplies.[49] Women who attempted to alleviate these difficulties by supplementing the allowance with work outside the home were criticised for neglecting their children. In January 1917 Alice Whelan in County Tipperary, was charged with non-compliance with orders directing her to send her children to school. She was criticised for going out to work 'every day instead of looking after the children' despite being in receipt of a separation allowance.[50]

The separation allowances brought the state and welfare agencies into women's domestic lives and legitimated an unprecedented level of state surveillance and intervention in the family. Frequent references made to the state's duty of care to the soldier and his children reflected the perception of the allowances as 'public money'. This was not unique to Ireland however, and similar rhetoric can be seen regarding the morality and conduct of soldiers' wives in Britain.[51] However, the difficult relationship between the British Army and Irish society complicated the Irish situation and increased the hostility towards the women. The extension of the separation allowance to unmarried mothers in 1916 for example, led to accusations that the British state was promoting immorality and illegitimacy.[52] Patrick Maume has noted that republicans viewed the provision of allowances to illegitimate children as proof that Britain was 'irredeemably debauched' and that Ireland needed independence to save its soul from such depravity.[53] Maria Luddy has persuasively linked wartime hostility to separation women to long-standing antipathy towards the British Army dating from the Anglo-Boer War among some segments of the population, which

[47]David Fitzpatrick, 'Irish consequences of the Great War' *Irish Historical Studies*, 39, 156 (2015), pp. 643-658; Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 66-71.
[48]PRONI, T2782: Letter from Cecilia Daniel to Mrs Flett, 9 May 1917.
[49]*Irish Independent*, 27 March 1917.
[50]*Nenagh News*, 13 Jan 1917.
[51]Brown, 'An "insult to soldiers' wives and mothers"', pp. 136-140.
[52]Yeates, *A city in wartime*, p. 282; See for example, *Irish Citizen*, 21 November 1914, *Kildare Observer*, 30 October 1915.
[53]Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life, 1891-1918,* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999), p. 165. See also Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society*, p. 180.

manifested itself in anti-recruiting campaigns and efforts to prevent girls 'walking out with soldiers'.[54] The National Archive of Ireland's Bureau of Military History witness statements demonstrate the extent to which separation women became embedded into nationalist and republican memory of the Great War.

The impact of the separation allowances on women in Ireland was denounced as 'national demoralisation' by the republican Seamus Babington in his witness statement to the Bureau of Military History. He recalled that although public sympathy was growing towards the separatist movement after the 1916 Easter Rising, the separation money was having a pernicious influence on morale: 'the nationalist spirit seemed dead or dormant'. Interestingly he had little criticism for the Irish army recruits, acknowledging that many were young men who 'joined from sheer necessity, no industry, no employment' but described the men's families in pejorative terms as 'pro-British separation women' who engaged in active hostility towards the Irish Volunteers.[55] Indeed, the separation women became known in Ireland as much for protesting the republican movement as for their drinking and criminality. The economic incentive of the separation allowance was believed to have had such a demoralising effect that the women were willing to sacrifice nationalist aspirations to ensure the continuation of the regular payments. They were viewed as war profiteers, more preoccupied with their allowances than with the safety of their family at the front. The prejudicial depictions of the women in the witness statements are revealing of social class tensions, with the women variously described as 'the rabble of the city', and as belonging to the 'rowdy class'.[56]

Caution is needed with the source material for researching soldiers' wives, especially regarding their political activism. One of the challenges for historians attempting to uncover the women's motivations and experiences is that we lack sources which give us the voice of the separation woman. She is described repeatedly and vividly by others, mostly negatively, and recalled and quoted in apocryphal anecdotes but we have no surviving sources from her perspective. Even those prosecuted for drunkenness were seldom given a voice in the press accounts of their court cases. We view them the prejudiced perspective of others and are encouraged to see them as one-dimensional characters. Most of the commentary on the separation women comes primarily from republican sources who were determined to attribute all opposition to their cause to women with connections to the British Army, and to the economic motivation of the separation allowance. This is especially relevant for the

[54]Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society*, pp. 142-152.
[55]NAI BMH WS 1595 Seamus Babington.
[56]NAI BMH WS 1048 Sean Murnane; BMH WS 1103 Dennis F. Madden; NAI BMH WS 939 Ernest Blythe.

Bureau of Military History where political bias is just one of the limitations. The Bureau of Military History consists of witness statements from 1,747 participants of the Irish Revolution, 1913-1921, that were collected in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of the statements were collected orally and converted into 'a coherent statement submitted to the witness for approval', others were collected as responses to questionnaires.[57] The contributors include former members of the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Republican Army, the Irish Citizen Army, Cumann na mBan and Fianna Éireann. The bulk of the statements come from Irish Volunteers and IRA officers in Dublin and Cork. There are 146 testimonies by women included in the collection. The statements consist of 'flawed memories from a remove of several decades' and must be treated with sufficient caution.[58] They nonetheless provide a wealth of information about the activities of the Irish Volunteers, the IRA and Sinn Féin that is otherwise unrecorded. Eve Morrison has persuasively argued for their importance, highlighting the 'considerable range of opinion, experience, motivation and complexity' evident in the statements.[59] Examination of a wide sample provides insight into the attitudes of those active in the nationalist and republican movements towards separation women.

There is also extensive contemporary evidence from diverse sources, including diary entries, police reports, and press accounts, which substantiate the Bureau testimonies of separation women engaging in violent protests against the republican movement from 1915 onwards. A notable instance of this occurred in May 1915 when separation women protested members of the Irish Volunteers parading through Limerick city. The event and the participation of separation women was recorded in the Judicial Division Intelligence Notes for Limerick in 1915, and mentioned in a letter from Sir Matthew Nathan to Lord Basil Blackwood, private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, on 24 May 1915: 'they met with a bad reception from a section of the population who had relatives in the army'.[60] Nineteen Bureau statements mention this Limerick demonstration, often in the context of praising the Volunteers for their restrained response. The local press in county Cork reported several incidents involving violent demonstrations by separation women in Cork city over the course of the war, including clashes between republicans and separation women on Easter

[57]Diarmaid Ferriter, "In such deadly earnest", Accessed 25 June 2023. *Dublin Review*, 12 (2003).
[58]Fearghal McGarry, *The Rising: Ireland Easter 1916,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 6.
[59]Eve Morrison, 'The Bureau of Military History' in Donal O'Drisceoll, John Crowley and Mike Murphy (eds) *Atlas of the Irish Revolution,* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), pp. 876-880.
[60]Bodleian Library, Matthew Nathan papers, MS 463: Letter from Sir Matthew Nathan to Lord Basil Blackwood, 24 May 1915.

Monday 1917 and an attack on camogie players at a republican parade in June 1917.[61] Other incidents recalled in the Bureau statements were mentioned in contemporary diary accounts and newspapers.[62]

The interaction of separation women with rebels during the Easter Rising is also heavily documented in both contemporary diaries by the republican doctor Kathleen Lynn, and a Dublin apprentice, while Patrick Pearse's Easter week statement referenced the participation in looting by 'hangers-on of the British Army'. The hostility of the local Dublin population to the rebellion was remembered in notably pejorative terms in more than forty retrospective witness statements.[63] Kevin O'Shiel's statement for example, refers to a 'dreadful old hag' and a 'motley crowd of men and women from the back streets and rat infested tenements'. [64] The anger of separation women at the actions of the rebels is understandable given the women's inevitable loyalty to the men in the British Army drafted in to suppress the rebellion. St John Ervine described in his autobiographical novel *Changing Winds* how the Dubliners who were full of mourning for the Irish lives lost at Gallipoli the previous year were in 'no mood for rebellion'.[65] The response of soldiers' families is memorably depicted in the figure of Bessie Burgess in Sean O'Casey's play, *The Plough and the Stars*, first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1926. Bessie, a soldier's mother, is horrified by the events of the Rising and she felt that the rebels were betraying the Irish men in British Army: 'Stabbin' in th' back th' men that are dyin; in the threnches for them!'.[66] There were 41 Irishmen among the British military who were killed during Easter week in Dublin. The destructive impact of the events on the women's locality further

[61]John Borgonovo, *The dynamics of war and revolution: Cork city 1916-1918,* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2013), pp. 60-65.

[62]For example, CP Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, described in his diary the support for the Irish Parliamentary Party candidates during the South Longford by-election in 1917 provided by the 'wives and mothers of enlisted men' who 'went about waving both the Irish flag and the Union Jack and cheering for the khaki': Trevor Wilson (ed.), *The political diaries of CP Scott 1911-1928,* (London: Collins, 1970), pp. 289-290. See also reporting of the activities of separation women during the 1918 general election in the *Irish Independent* in December 1918, cited in Senia Paseta, *Irish nationalist women, 1900-1918,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 259.

[63]Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 178-180. See Paseta, *Irish nationalist women*, p. 195.

[64]NAI BMH WS 177 Kevin O'Shiel.

[65]St John Ervine, *Changing Winds* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 498. Cited in Keith Jeffery, *Ireland and the Great War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 44. See also the depiction of separation women in Walter Macken, *The Scorching Wind,* (London: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 54-55.

[66]Sean O'Casey, *The Plough and the Stars* (London: Macmillan, 1926).

affected their response. Richard Grayson has noted the high recruitment rates to the British Army among families in inner city Dublin, in the areas which witnessed most fighting during the rebellion. 65 men from Marlborough street, for example, enlisted in the British Army, nine of whom had been killed by Easter 1916. The street suffered significant damage during the fighting.[67] Some compensation was provided for the civilians who had experienced hardship through the Prince of Wales National Relief Fund, but the amounts paid out were relatively small and many of those most in need received no compensation.[68]

Over the following two years, Ireland witnessed increased public political engagement by soldiers' wives. As an identifiable group, they vociferously opposed the advanced nationalist movement, protesting Irish Volunteer parades and Sinn Féin by-election events. In his 1953 memoir, the republican activist Frank Gallagher recalled the separation women as a 'new element in Irish politics' who caused great disturbance and unrest.[69] The role of separation women in the by-election campaigns in 1917 and 1918 was particularly notorious with incidents reported in East Clare, South Longford, and Waterford. According to the Bureau testimonies, the protests by separation women had a significant impact on advanced nationalist events. Irish Volunteer and Sinn Féin meetings were disrupted, and detours and event cancellations were required. Irish Volunteers were drafted in to Clare to protect the Sinn Féin leader Eamon De Valera from the 'truculent crowd' of separation women who allegedly attacked De Valera's supporters with 'bottles, stones and whatever missiles were available'.[70] The contemporary association between the separation women and the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) is shown by a Sinn Féin propaganda poster from the South Longford by-election in 1917.[71] The poster shows two women dressed in rags and elaborate furs. One of them is standing at a bar with a drink while the other is waving a banner in support of Patrick McKenna, the IPP candidate. Several tropes relevant to the reputation of the separation women are evident in the poster: the furs representing their supposed extravagant spending, the Union Jack in the woman's cap indicating their link to the British Army, the drinking in public referring to their reputation for alcohol abuse, and the banner indicating their overt support for the IPP.[72] The South Longford constituency included garrison towns with established recruiting traditions

[67]Richard S. Grayson, *Dublin's Great Wars: the First World War, the Easter Rising and the Irish revolution,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 163-165.
[68]Yeates, *A city in wartime*, p. 122.
[69]Frank Gallagher, *Four glorious years* (Dublin: Irish Press, 1953), p. 28.
[70]NAI BMH WS 985 Peter O'Loughlin and BMH WS 1048 Sean Murnane; BMH WS 1322 Art O'Donnell
[71]National Library of Ireland, Sinn Féin, "The Irish Party's only props in Longford", 1917.
[72]Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society*, p. 181.

to the British Army and the soldiers' families were especially vociferous in their hostility towards Sinn Féin.[73]

This hostility from soldiers' wives was also evident in Waterford city where there was a high level of local support for the war effort. Waterford was particularly dependent on the army and munitions industries and about 35 per cent of the area's eligible male population had enlisted in the army in the first 16 months of the war.[74] Rosamond Jacob, a suffragist, Republican and writer, described in her diary the dramatic scenes in Waterford in March 1918 where a Sinn Féin meeting was disrupted by IPP female supporters 'roaring and screaming to drown the speakers' voices and singing Keep the Home Fires Burning'.[75] In December 1918 she noted how a meeting to plan the Sinn Féin general election campaign in Waterford city was disrupted by separation women making 'a great uproar'.[76] There were also violent clashes on polling day.[77]In his Bureau statement, Charles Wyse Power recalled that in Waterford the women were 'made half-drunk each evening and then let loose on the streets with their aprons laden with stones'.[78] Although there were physical attacks on the Sinn Féin supporters, the Volunteer veterans asserted in their Bureau statements that the police turned a blind eye to the actions of the women.[79] Most women over the age of thirty could vote in the general election in 1918 but achievement of the franchise does not appear to have had any immediate impact upon the numbers of women expressing their politics through public demonstrations and violence. There is also no evidence of the IPP specifically targeting female voters in that election.[80]

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between the IPP and the women is ambiguous. The *National Volunteer* newspaper denounced the violent confrontation between Irish Volunteers and separation women at the 1915 Limerick parade, arguing it sullied the noble cause of nationalism.[81] This was the only reference to such

[73]Maume, *The Long Gestation*, p. 196.
[74]Michael Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland: the Sinn Féin party 1916–23,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 125; Pat McCarthy, *The Irish Revolution, 1912-23: Waterford,* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), p. 28.
[75]NLI MS 32,582/34, Diary of Rosamond Jacob, 11 March 1918.
[76]NLI MS 32,582/35: Diary of Rosamond Jacob, 17 November 1918. See also McCarthy, *The Irish Revolution*, p. 56.
[77]McCarthy, *The Irish Revolution*, p. 57.
[78]NAI BMH WS 420 Charles Wyse Power.
[79]Laffan, *The resurrection of Ireland*, p.126; NAI BMH WS 985 Peter O'Loughlin, NAI BMH WS 1552 Bartholomew Flynn, BMH WS 420 Charles Wyse Power.
[80]Elaine Callinan, *Electioneering and propaganda in Ireland, 1917-1921: votes, violence and victory,* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2020), p. 66.
[81]*National Volunteer*, 29 May 1915.

confrontations in the paper during the period of its publication, 1914 to 1916. The public support of the women for the Irish Parliamentary Party did not necessarily help its election candidates. The women acted as a visible reminder of the IPP's support for British Army recruitment, a divisive issue that Sinn Féin was exploiting in their campaigns.[82] Opponents of the Irish Parliamentary Party accused its candidates of using the women as a mob for hire, to be paid through alcohol.[83] The republican newspaper *New Ireland* described the separation women as the 'great stand-by of the party' whose 'special dislike against Sinn Féin' had been converted into 'fanatical hatred' by the IPP.[84] *New Ireland* was especially hostile to the IPP throughout this period and exploited the actions of the separation women to strengthen their propaganda against the party.

The separation women involved in anti-republican demonstrations represented a minority of soldiers' wives in Ireland. Many soldiers' families had direct links to the Irish republican movement. The Foster family in Dublin illustrate the mixed allegiances of many families. Kate Foster suffered the loss of her child Sean in the crossfire during the Easter Rising. Her brother was serving with the Irish Volunteers at the Four Courts while her husband had been killed on active service in France some months previously.[85] Joseph Byrne was himself a member of the British Army when he temporarily deserted to follow his brothers and try to join the rebels during the Easter Rising. On his demobilisation from the British Army in 1918, Byrne joined the IRA.[86] There were many others who combined military service in the British Army with membership of the IRA and many families with complex or competing loyalties during the war.[87] Separation women were also not immune from the shift in public opinion in favours of the rebels after the events of the Easter Rising. Robert Brennan recalled in his witness statement that he heard two separation women comment positively on the Easter 1916 rebellion after they received permits from the rebels to purchase provisions: "'Glory to be God, Katie, isn't this a grand government'".[88] Michael Brennan was interned in Wales after the Rising and recalled in his statement the crowd

[82]Marie Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish revolution* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003), p. 59.
[83]*New Ireland*, 12 May 1915.
[84]*New Ireland*, 30 March 1918.
[85]*Irish Times*, 23 September 2015.
[86]NAI BMH WS 461 Joseph Byrne.
[87]Paul Taylor, *Heroes or traitors: experiences of southern Irish soldiers returning from the Great War 1919-1936,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 14. See also Steven O'Connor, ""It's up to you now to fight for your own country": Ireland's Great War veterans in the War of Independence, 1919-21', in David Swift and Oliver Wilkinson, eds, *Veterans of the First World War: ex-servicemen and ex-servicewomen in post-war Britain and Ireland,* (Routledge: London, 2019), pp. 104-121.
[88]NAI BMH WS 779 Robert Brennan.

of 'separation allowance ladies' who 'howled insults, pelted us with anything handy' at Limerick station as they departed. On his return eight months later, he was greeted by a crowd who 'cheered themselves hoarse and embarrassed me terribly by carrying me on their shoulders'. For Brennan the contrasting responses indicated that the Rising 'had already changed people'.[89] The overwhelming support for Sinn Féin at the expense of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the December 1918 election indicates that the separation women who continued to protest Sinn Féin events represented a declining minority of the population. Bound together primarily by the commonality of their husband's war service, they no longer featured as an identifiable group in the post-war years.

Many of the women involved in these protests would have faced difficult times in the aftermath of the war, however. The separation allowances ended, and pensions or disability payments were paid directly to the soldier husband, renewing the economic vulnerability experienced by women within the household. Not all men returned home to their families, and not all reunions were joyful affairs. Paul Smith's novel *The Countrywoman*, inspired by his mother's experience, evokes the difficulty endured by some working-class Dublin women on the return of their husbands. Molly Baines, the novel's central character, had enjoyed a wartime improvement in the standard of living of her family due to the separation allowance. She was able to provide food and clothes for her children, pay off debts and feel some relief from the strain of potential destitution: 'The gradual ease from want gave Mrs Baines time to explore the world about her and in the second year of the war she discovered the canal and the water fast-flowing'.[90] This temporary respite was quickly destroyed on the arrival home of her husband Pat. In Pat's case, the penchant for drinking and recklessly spending the family's income was a continuation of his pre-war behaviour, with the war making it easier for him to get the money to drink from the 'British Legion and all the other patriotic bodies in the city'.[91] Other people in the novel are more notably scarred by their wartime experiences: 'some propped on crutches, others nursing hidden wounds'. One character, Mr Thraill returned from the war and began 'wearing a carnation in his buttonhole and, on Saturdays, setting fire to his wife'. A nurse veteran was suffering from trauma: 'Mary Ellen Timmons who had been a nurse in the Army and been shell-shocked, came down to the pipe in broad daylight in her skin and had to be dragged back to the room screaming and the priest had to be sent for'. Within the novel, the war widows also had challenging experiences. One woman drowned herself in the canal when her husband didn't return and her daughters had to resort

[89]NAI BMH WS 1068 Michael Brennan.
[90]Paul Smith, *The Countrywoman,* (London: Picador Books, 1982), p. 4.
[91]Ibid., p. 39. The character of Pat Baines is inspired by Smith's father, a British Army soldier known for his alcoholism and violence: Laurence William White, 'Paul Smith' in Dictionary of Irish Biography (2009). Accessed 25 June 2023.

to prostitution, while two others became habitual drunkards, attributed to the temptation of the income provided by the widows' pensions.[92] O'Brien was born in 1920 into a family living in a two-room tenement home by the Grand Canal in Dublin city. His father served in the British Army and O'Brien recalled in an interview how his mother had raised ten children alone on seven shillings and six pence when his father was away.[93]

War widows received pensions from the British government, albeit consisting of smaller sums than the separation allowance. However, the pensions were conditional on good behaviour and were ended if the woman remarried. Widows were subjected to police surveillance and were vulnerable to having their allowance withdrawn if they were observed to have partaken in 'serious or persistent misconduct'. This could include infidelity, child neglect or prostitution, amongst other offences.[94] Such conditions were not unusual at the time, however. The gratuities provided to the widows of deceased Royal Irish Constabulary members were also contingent on the moral character of the widow and were liable to be reduced or cut entirely if the widow was known to be 'intemperate…or to have borne an indifferent or bad character'.[95] Siblings and parents of the men lost had limited supports. Annie Casey, a Dublin woman, was left in poverty following the death of one of her brothers and the permanent disablement of the other on war service. They had both previously contributed to the family income following their father's death. Annie had worked in munitions during the war but in 1921 she applied for a grant to train as a housekeeper. She was twenty-six by then but unmarried and fully dependent on the family income.[96] There are many similar examples in the applications for financial aid for training programmes submitted by Irish women during the scheme's existence from 1920 to 1922.[97]

While demobilisation brought challenges for the population across the United Kingdom, life was particularly difficult for the families of ex-servicemen in Ireland. Many women suffered on account of their husband's war service or the perceived loyalty of the family to the British Crown. Soldiers' families in Ireland continued to face financial

[92]Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[93]Eibhear Walshe, "A wounded lynx", *Irish Pages*, 7, 2 (2013), pp. 51 & p. 56.
[94]PRONI, MIC 523/24 Secretary of State to Chief Constable, RUC, 1925, PRONI, MIC 523/24.
[95]PRONI, D989/B/2/4A Papers relating to pensions for widows of ex-Royal Irish Constabulary, 1922, PRONI, D989/B/2/4A.
[96]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) LAB 2/1580/CCW911/2/1920: Central Committee for Women's Training and Employment for the South of Ireland, Case of Annie Casey, Dublin Board, 30 September 1921.
[97]Walsh, *Irish women and the Great War*, pp. 204-206.

difficulties in the aftermath of the war, with unemployment levels among Irish veterans particularly high. Many veterans depended on the British Legion, the UVF Patriotic Fund and the Southern Irish Loyalist Association for basic support.[98] The records of these organisations reveal the desperate circumstances many ex-servicemen's families found themselves in after the war ended. The following appeal for aid was sent to the Southern Irish Loyalist Association and printed in one of their pamphlets in 1925,

> I am a married ex-service man with a wife, 10 children and myself, almost naked in the want of some clothing at this present time. I am out of work, and I am not in receipt of any pension. I served 3 years in the late war... Sir I am in a very bad way at this present time for clothing, my wife is about to become a mother again and I don't know what to do. [99]

The daughter of a recently deceased veteran wrote to the same organisation saying she and her siblings were struggling to survive on the wage of her brother who only earned a few shillings a week. She pleaded that 'employment is very scarce here and it's not ex-servicemen or their son that gets what employment there is'.[100] In 1927 the British Legion reported on the 'pitiful' conditions in Ireland and noted that in many areas that 'the men are afraid to identify themselves with the Legion for to acknowledge themselves as British Ex-servicemen means, speaking generally, unemployment and no guardians relief'.[101] Associating with organisations such as the Southern Irish Loyalist Association and the British Legion also exposed the veterans and their families to accusations of disloyalty and potential intimidation and violence from the IRA. The files of the Southern Loyalist Relief Association and the Irish Grants Distress Committee reveal many examples of soldiers' families being targeted by the IRA during the War of Independence and Civil War.[102] Emmanuel Destenay argues that the motives for these assaults were usually more complex than simple retaliation for British Army service, however veteran status was an easily identified indicator of

[98]Robinson, 'Nobody's children?' p. 321. See discussion of the charitable support provided by the UVF Patriotic Fund in the *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 May 1921.
[99]PRONI, D989/C/1/68 Printed Leaflet Irish Ex-Servicemen. Fate of Loyalists who fought for the Empire. Circa 1925.
[100]Ibid.
[101]PRONI, D4246/2/3, Davis Papers, report of the British Legion in Southern Ireland, A review of the clubs and branches visited in Southern Ireland, November 1926.
[102]Fionnuala Walsh, '"The future welfare of the Empire will depend more largely on our women and girls": Southern Loyalist Women and the British War Effort in Ireland, 1914–1922', in Brian Hughes and Conor Morrissey (eds), *Southern Irish Loyalism 1912-1949,* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 137-154.

loyalty to the Crown for the IRA.[103] Many soldiers' families fled Ireland, feeling that they were no longer welcome in their home communities and indeed in their own country.

Soldiers' families occupied a complex place in Irish society. Initially supported and praised for their husband's service, working-class women quickly came under criticism and surveillance from the British state and civic authorities. Despite the material benefits of the separation allowance, women were mistrusted and believed incapable of responsible control over the family finances. Perceived lapses in morality were framed as an affront to the sacrifice of their heroic husbands on the one hand or as proof of the negative influence of the British Army in Ireland. Even the republicans who opposed Irish recruitment to the British military had more empathy for the men in uniform than their families left behind who dared express their hostility to the 1916 Rising and the rise of Sinn Féin. The by-elections in 1917 and 1918 provided opportunities for violent clashes and for the negative reputation of the women to be cemented in the public imagination. Separation women as an identifiable group disappeared in the aftermath of the war but the difficulties and challenges for Irish military families continued. Veterans and their families suffered assaults and intimidation. Rebuilding domestic and family life was difficult across the United Kingdom but particularly so for soldiers' families in independent Ireland.

[103]Emmanuel Destenay, *Shadows from the trenches: veterans of the Great War and the Irish Revolution 1918-1923,* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2021), pp. 91-92.