

# **‘A Smoking Woman Should be Sent to a Reformatory’: How the Irish National Press Prescribed and Adapted Behaviours for Women**

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21 January 1919, Sinn Fein MPs in Ireland set up Dail Eireann, an independent Irish parliament in Dublin. They refused to take the seats in Westminster to which they had been elected in the December 1918 election and instead proclaimed an Irish republic. What followed was a tense fight against Britain for Irish independence that saw the use of guerrilla tactics, which Charles Townshend argues with hindsight can easily be seen to stem from the winter of 1919-20.<sup>1</sup> On 11 December 1920 Britain declared martial law across Cork, Kerry, Limerick and Tipperary, indicating the escalation of events. In December 1921 the Anglo-Irish Treaty drew to a close the Irish War of Independence and allowed for the creation of an Irish Free State.

Between the creation of the republic and the Anglo-Irish Treaty, as well as throughout the revolutionary period in Ireland, exceptional women were involved in republican and revolutionary activities. Ann Matthews has explored their contribution in her work *Renegades Irish Republican Women 1900-1922*, whilst Cal MacCarthy has given an illuminating account of how Cumann na mBan, an Irish republican women's organisation, was more active than earlier work suggests, and has exposed the intricate workings of the organisation.<sup>2</sup> Sinead McCoole has also worked to trace the participation of individual women, looking at both female activists between 1916 and 1923, and specifically at the women held at Kilmainham Gaol.<sup>3</sup> Studies of revolutionary women laid the foundations for writing on Irish femininity and gender. Louise Ryan's work suggests that between 1919 and 1921 women were most involved in republicanism, and transgressed traditional gender norms and roles, often by using their feminine appearances and clothes to engage in illicit activities such as gun smuggling and couriering messages.<sup>4</sup> Ryan suggests that their involvement was obscured by traditional female work in the home, and that during this time ‘the boundaries of private home and political battlefield became blurred.’<sup>5</sup>

Less historical attention has been paid to more ‘everyday’ women during this period of revolution and to the femininity prescribed by the mainstream, national press, as

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 113.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Matthews, *Renegades: Irish Republican Women 1900-1922* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2010); Cal MacCarthy, *Cumann na mBan and the Irish Revolution*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Sinead McCoole, *No Ordinary Woman: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923*, (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2004); Sinead McCoole, *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol, 1916-1923* (Dublin: Government Publications, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Louise Ryan, ‘‘Furies’ and ‘Die-hards’: Women and Irish Republicanism in the Early Twentieth Century,’ *Gender & History*, 11:2 (July 1999): 256-275.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, ‘‘Furies’ and ‘Die-hards’,’ 263.

studies have tended to put the spotlight on the radical press and on extraordinary individuals or organisations. What constituted the mainstream press at this time can be hard to pinpoint. However, this paper will use material from the *Irish Independent*, owned by businessman William Martin Murphy and transformed into a popular, 'modern mass-circulation' format from 1905, a move which helped it to become the 'market leader' in Ireland.<sup>6</sup> This article will discuss three aspects of the ways in which 'everyday' Irish femininity was adapted in the national press, through a consideration of the debate concerning female smoking in the years 1919 and 1921. This is intended to contextualise and complement work on the more revolutionary female actions concurrent in this period.

Firstly, I contend that the nature of Irish femininity was portrayed as a series of cultivated behavioural signifiers. Candace West and Don Zimmerman pioneered the concept of 'doing gender'. This entailed gender being 'the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one's sex category.' Their theory suggests that whilst sex is based on socially agreed-upon biological criteria, often indicative of 'sex category', gender is acting out behaviours culturally assigned to a specific sex.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, this paper will consider the ways in which polemic about Irish femininity was formed against the backdrop of Ireland's place within the British Empire and the emphasis on the Irish-Ireland movement that was inherent to conceptions of Irish femininity. Thirdly, consideration of the debate surrounding women smoking exposes the strengthening, distinctly female presence within the national press, less visible in the pre-war and wartime years. This demonstrates that, as revolutionary women became more active in political life, the majority of Irishwomen also became more confident voicing opinions in a public forum and on a broad range of topics (including female smoking) which were neither explicitly political nor traditionally feminist concerns.

A fierce argument over female smoking raged in the *Irish Independent* between 1919 and 1921. It gained steam in the re-established women's section of the newspaper during 1920, but when the editor of the woman's section ended discussion on the subject after being overwhelmed with correspondence, the debate moved into the main 'Comments' section of the newspaper.

From the beginning of this period, female smoking was a substantial concern for commentators in the press. In a letter to the editor of the *Independent*, on 15 January 1919, 'Cabhan' remarked upon a gathering he had recently attended at which fourteen to twenty women had been smoking 'in a most bare-faced fashion.'<sup>8</sup> This indicated the brazenness of a female smoker to step outside of the traditional parameters of feminine behaviour, but also demonstrates that despite prescriptions of ideal femininity in the national press, which precluded masculine behaviours such as smoking, a range of feminine types were also present alongside an ideal version. Cabhan concluded that 'their diminutive statures and pale faces testified to the terrible havoc which the nicotine poison was making' on their bodies. Drawing attention to the different aspects of these women that were worsened by the smoking, both their 'statures and pale faces', Cabhan's words represented one of many examples in the press of women being discussed as sum parts that could work to signify womanliness.

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<sup>6</sup> Felix M. Larkin, 'The Freeman's Journal,' revised 21 August 2012, accessed 27 May 2014, <http://www.nli.ie/blog/index.php/2012/08/21/thefreemansjournal/>.

<sup>7</sup> Candace West and Don Zimmerman, 'Doing Gender,' *Gender and Society*, 1:2 (June 1987): 127.

<sup>8</sup> Cabhan, 'Letters in Brief,' *Irish Independent*, 15 January 1919.

This view of 'fragmented femininity' was not just espoused by male correspondents. Often female journalists also displayed similar conventional thinking about feminine roles and behaviour. Gertrude Gaffney, writing for the *Independent* in 1920, remarked:

If one is in the company of a man smoker one is scarcely conscious that he is smoking: one's attention is ever forcibly attracted to the lighting of numerous cigarettes. His smoking is so much a part of him... With the woman smoker it is different. Her movements, her whole attitude, attract attention.<sup>9</sup>

Gaffney then described entering a room in which a young girl was smoking; because her smoking attracted attention, she remembered noticing all of the girl's imperfections, including big arms and overly large ankles.

One growing concern over female smoking was that it entailed women engaging in a masculine activity that contradicted the fundamental distinction between male and female behaviours. Clare Herlihy, wife of John Herlihy, a founding editor of the *Cork Free Press*, warned:

What is it that attracts a man towards the opposite sex? It is the very fact of her being opposite to himself. It is the feminine in her that attracts him... who would be chivalrous to the short-haired, masculine, cigarette-smoking type of girl? She gives one the impression she is more than capable of taking care of herself. And as to making love to such a girl, the idea is ludicrous!<sup>10</sup>

This view was shared by a correspondent, 'H.P.', in the column 'Opinions of Our Readers' that was placed within the woman's section of the *Independent* in 1921. H.P. wrote:

Every man is an idealist and he has constantly mirrored before him his ideal woman, virtuous, loving and effeminate, gentle and mild, accomplished or gay, but always possessing the first three characteristics, and it is the last-mentioned of these that she loses when she becomes addicted to smoking.<sup>11</sup>

H.P.'s fear that through smoking a woman lost the effeminate quality of her sex indicates that the least attractive quality in a woman was manliness. This emphasises the way in which womanliness was constructed against the 'other' of masculinity. Women who displayed masculine qualities were often seen as outside of gender, outside of nature and, in H.P.'s view, a mutant and unnatural 'hybrid' of male and female.

'E.M.C.' exclaimed that 'if women would only cease 'trying to be men' we should have a happier world.' He or she went on to say that 'a smoking woman should be sent to a reformatory.'<sup>12</sup> Inherent in this statement was the belief that smoking was a very conscious behaviour, which women were choosing to develop and that men felt the need

<sup>9</sup> Gertrude Gaffney, 'The Woman Smoker,' *Irish Independent*, 16 October 1920.

<sup>10</sup> Clare Herlihy, 'A Woman's Greatest Charm,' *Irish Independent*, 7 April 1921.

<sup>11</sup> H.P., 'May a Woman Smoke? Opinions of Our Readers,' *Irish Independent*, 4 February 1921.

<sup>12</sup> E.M.C., 'Opinions of Our Readers,' *Irish Independent*, 15 February 1921.

to correct, thus casting women in a weaker and more childlike role by virtue of their social behaviours being policed by men.

Miss J. Toal demonstrated how women often acted in support of the established social and gender order in a letter to the editor of the *Independent* in October 1921, in which she wrote:

Modern Christian men have wisely withheld the tobacco weed from women because they know it debases and detracts from their true womanly virtue and grace, which is the inherent right of every Christian woman.<sup>13</sup>

Alongside the polemic suggesting that smoking was unnatural in a woman and served to draw attention to her unattractive elements, there was an emphasis on the potential health risks women exposed themselves to through smoking. Smoking was generally held to be bad for health, despite a contemporary lack of concrete and public knowledge of the true risks. Nonetheless, as women were believed to be physically weaker than men it was felt to be more damaging to them. 'A Male' wrote:

I do not like to see a woman, delicate and fragile in comparison to man, the embodiment of grace and beauty, uniting in herself all these exterior and interior perfections which make us men glorify the opposite sex - I do not like to see her, I repeat, addicted to a habit that, we all know, ruins our health and damages our respiration.<sup>14</sup>

Health concerns had also been evident in H.P.'s letter, when he wrote in despair that smoking was 'injurious even to men' and therefore must be worse for women 'who naturally, are not as strong.'<sup>15</sup>

The Irish-Ireland movement was incredibly influential upon Irish femininity. Senia Pašeta describes the widespread female participation in Irish-Ireland activities, which included teaching and learning Irish, and buying Irish goods. She notes that these everyday activities sometimes led women towards more revolutionary involvement in the turbulent political events of the revolutionary period.<sup>16</sup> The movement's influence on Irish femininity was significant, and was often seen through the way that women engaged broadly in Irish-Ireland activities during this period, defining femininity against the English female 'other' as well as against the Irish male 'other'.

Irish women were prescribed to be more feminine and to have more distinctly feminine qualities such as purity, gentleness, grace and morality than other women, often specifically more than English women. This was demonstrated by a rift which formed between the Christian Women's Association of Ireland and the Christian Women's Association of England over dancing, smoking and drama. The Christian Woman's Association of Ireland disapproved of less conservative behaviours being countenanced in their sister organisation and could not condone women smoking, dancing or taking part in dramatics.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> J. Toal, 'A Woman's Protest,' *Irish Independent*, 7 October 1921.

<sup>14</sup> A Male, 'Opinions of Our Readers,' *Irish Independent*, 8 March 1921.

<sup>15</sup> H.P., 'May a Woman Smoke?'

<sup>16</sup> Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women 1900-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Anon, 'Items of Interest,' *Irish Independent*, 13 February 1919.

A belief that smoking was a fashion that had come to Ireland from England made it seem even more distasteful. 'Leix Woman' wrote to the editor of the *Independent* in October 1921:

The masculine sex should refrain from commenting on women smokers and women's fashions since the girl who ambitions becoming a social success finds it necessary to smoke, dress in hues rivalling the rainbow and adopt mannerisms and slang certainly not of her own Green Isle... If men are anxious to stop smoking amongst women let them cease patronising smoking girls, and that shoddy smartness which belongs to the West Briton.<sup>18</sup>

Leix Woman indicated that engaging in habits, which were both foreign and, worse still, English, was a betrayal of women's national identity, perverting their natural 'Green' and implicitly Irish femininity. This is particularly implied by the term 'West Briton', which was commonly used to denote an Irish person who was too closely affiliated with Britain and British habits, and who favoured British rule in Ireland. Again, the weakness of individual women is stressed through their need to be protected by men. Equally, as they were being protected from English habits, this carries undertones of a semi-colonial discourse centred on the distinction between Irishness and Englishness. Leix Woman demonstrated how Irish-Ireland was interlinked with Irish femininity and appropriate female behaviour by finishing her letter with the words, 'I am a non-smoker and an Irish-Irelander.' It also reflected the national and racial tensions that were heightened because she was writing during the last month of the War of Independence.

Whilst it is clear that there were very distinct and rigid roles and behaviours prescribed for women in the national press, resistance to these is also evident, and women were becoming increasingly visible and vocal. The press did give space to dissenting female voices in the latter years of the revolution, and such voices made their displeasure known at being derided over the issue of smoking.

Mrs. Connery, writing to the editor of the *Independent*, was so angered that the newspaper had allowed the derogatory discussion of female smoking to become so protracted, migrating as it did from the woman's section to the main 'Comments' section of the newspaper, that she publicly announced the end of her subscription:

As a protest against the vulgar and cowardly attack made on women as women... under the plausible pretext of criticising cigarette smoking, I am ceasing to buy and read your paper... Any stick is good enough to beat a dog with, and any mudslinger who has a cheap jibe or sneer to hurl at women can always count on the hospitality of your paper.<sup>19</sup>

The *Independent* published her correspondence with a rather sarcastic title, 'Mrs Connery's Diatribe'. The editor clearly did not feel the loss of this business too keenly.

Also present within the discussion of female smoking was a broader debate about inequality between the sexes. This included use of the phrase 'the double standard' to denote gendered inequality, and arguments putting forward the illogicality of drawing

<sup>18</sup> Leix Woman, 'Women and the Smoking Habit,' *Irish Independent*, 14 October 1921.

<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Connery, 'Mrs. Connery's Diatribe,' *Irish Independent*, 7 October 1921.

distinctions along gendered lines. In a regular column in the *Independent*, 'Today & Yesterday', it was noted that many girls smoked. The columnist wrote:

The question involves the whole theory of the double standard: for men and women. The weaker sex has definitely taken up this position: Smoking is a disgusting habit for anybody, but women have as much right to indulge in it as men.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst the use of the term 'the weaker sex' reflects the pervasiveness of patriarchy of the time, this also highlights a growing awareness of gendered inequality and the kindling of female action (on a very banal level) in an attempt to combat prejudice.

During the revolutionary period Irish femininity was strongly prescribed by the national press. Women and what was perceived to be feminine were portrayed as a sum of cultivated behavioural indicators. Irish-Ireland and cultural nationalism had significant influence upon conceptions of Irish femininity. From 1919 women became increasingly vocal within the national press. As journalists they began to move away from the use of aliases (as had been seen in the pre-war woman's section in the *Independent*), and in the 'Comments' and women's sections of the newspapers they were more willing to give their views on many areas of life. To be vocal in the press a woman did not have to be a feminist or a suffragette. Considering 'everyday' femininity is therefore important in order to trace the changes to the everyday lives of women in the revolutionary period, and the broader atmosphere within which more radical and political actions and events unfurled. By the end of the revolutionary period there was a recognition in the national press of a dual standard of expectations applied to men and women, and a tentative questioning over whether this dual standard should be allowed to persist.

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<sup>20</sup> Anon, 'Today & Yesterday,' *Irish Independent*, 16 February 1921.

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