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At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916: An interview with Lucy McDiarmid

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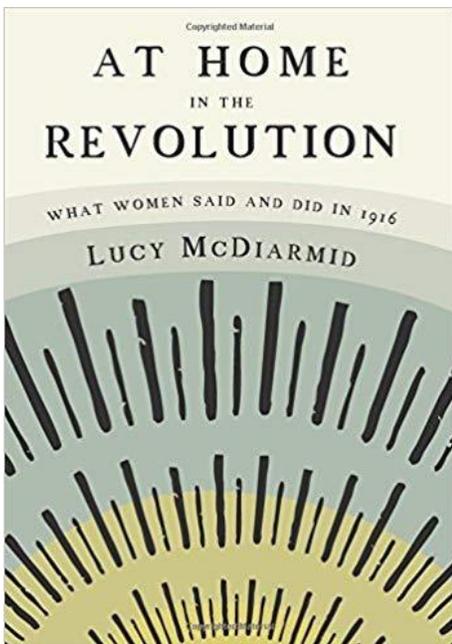
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Lucy McDiarmid is a scholar and writer. Her academic interest in cultural politics, especially quirky, colorful, suggestive episodes, is exemplified by The Irish Art of Controversy (2005) and Poets and the Peacock Dinner: the literary history of a meal (2014; paperback 2016). She is a former fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation and of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. Her most recent monograph is At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916 (published 2015). The Vibrant House: Irish Writers and Domestic Space (co-edited with Rhona Richman Kenneally) was published in 2017. At the moment she is completing a book on recent Irish poetry. She is currently Marie Frazee Baldassarre Professor of English at Montclair State University.

At Home in the Revolution was published by the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, in 2015, and is available online and from the Royal Irish Academy's web site.



***At Home in the Revolution:
what women said and did in 1916:
An interview with Lucy McDiarmid***

How is your book *At Home in the Revolution: what women said and did in 1916* different from other books on Irish women political activists?

My book is based on accounts by women themselves — many of them written in real time or just after the events — about their participation in the Easter Rising. Several families generously gave me access to unpublished narratives written by grandparents and great-aunts, and I also read memoirs, autobiographies, interviews, diaries, witness statements in the Bureau of Military History in Dublin, and pension applications in the Military Service Pension Collection.

The last two sets of documents are available on line, and they contain hundreds of narratives by women about precisely what they did in 1916. The witness statements are wonderful because many of them offer details about the women’s upbringings — their political childhoods, the newspapers and books they read, their families’ nationalist or unionist backgrounds — as well as day-by-day accounts of their experiences in 1916.

Can you give us some examples?

Well, for instance, Rose McNamara, a member of *Cumann na mBan* [“The Women’s Council,” an Irish republican women’s paramilitary organization formed in Dublin in 1914] in the Marrowbone Lane Distillery, used bayonets to take cooked chickens out of the pots when she made dinner for the garrison. Leslie Price argued with a priest who at first refused to attend the men at the GPO because he

thought it too dangerous to go there. Annie Cooney writes that the women locked in Kilmainham [Gaol] after the Rising danced a sixteen-hand reel, not as an expression of joy but as an act of defiance.

The pension applications are also detailed, because getting a pension for military service depended on precisely what the applicant had done and for how long. The applications I read were primarily from the 1930s. The women were often denied pensions (surprise!) because the relevant committee didn't believe their stories, and they had to apply over and over again to get even the lowest grade of pension. (One woman whom I shall not name was on the pension board and regularly turned down the women applicants.) Sometimes relatives wrote the appeal because the woman was dying and money was needed to cover the funeral; those appeals are heartbreaking to read.

What exactly did the women do?

The *Cumann na mBan* women in the garrisons staffed by the Volunteers — the major ones were the GPO, Jacob's Biscuits Factory, the Four Courts, Mendicity Hall, South Dublin Union, and the Marrowbone Lane Distillery — served as couriers, as nurses, and as cooks. As couriers, conscious of men's expectations of gendered behavior, they could play the role of "women" and be helpless, flirtatious and weak strategically. Hiding their uniforms, wearing youthful clothes and keeping their hair in "plaits," stashing dispatches in the hems of their skirts or under their berets, they could safely pass by British soldiers. But courier work was also more dangerous, because there were always bullets flying. The most common excuse women gave the intercepting soldiers was the need to go home to a "sick mother"; there were lots of "sick mothers" during Easter Week.

The women in *Cumann na mBan* were trained in first-aid, so even those who were not professional nurses could clean and bandage wounds. Some of the former were modest about viewing the naked male body. Aine Heron, one of ten or so pregnant women "out" in the Rising, writes in her witness statement about the arrival of a Volunteer with a "deep cut in the thigh," noting, "Miss Hayes suggested that as I was a married woman I should take it on."

Many of the women write about the challenges of obtaining food and of cooking, but on the first day of the Rising, some food was appropriated and "paid" for with promissory notes from the newly proclaimed Republic. As Vona Groarke writes in her poem, "Imperial Measure," "The kitchens of the Metropole and Imperial hotels yielded up to the Irish Republic / their armory of fillet, brisket, flank." One of the youngest women out in the Rising, fifteen-year-old Mary McLoughlin, describes her courier work and then says, "Again returning to the G.P.O. tired and hungry I was brought upstairs to the kitchen for food and a rest. This was the first time I saw a whole salmon cooked laid on a dish."

Winifred Carney, James Connolly's secretary, accompanied him and brought a typewriter (and a gun) into the GPO with her; she was one of the first women to enter and one of the last to leave the building.

There were no women in Bolands Mills, because Commandant de Valera didn't want them. As he explained in 1937, women were "untrained for soldiering." He regretted that decision, he said, because he had to use good male soldiers for housekeeping tasks.

In the Citizens Army garrisons, City Hall and the Royal College of Surgeons (originally camped on St Stephen's Green), the women (according to Helena Molony) "did military work, except where it suited them to be first-aiders."

Did you write only about rebel women?

My book is also distinct because it was gender, not political position, that interested me, so I considered Unionist women's accounts also. The Rising diary of Elsie Mahaffy, daughter of Trinity Provost John Pentland Mahaffy, gives a point of view rarely studied, one that feminist scholars are less familiar with: her 180 handwritten pages — a still-unpublished major historical document — describe life inside the gates of Trinity College, where the British army was quartered during the Rising. As the mistress of her father's household, Mahaffy was in charge of a domestic site that became a military site. The correct word to characterize Elsie Mahaffy's attitude would be "counter-revolutionary." She was presented to the Viceroy as a debutante the same year as Constance Gore-Booth, "then a lovely tall creature," she writes, but one who later "lost her shame and dignity and married a Pole." Quite apart from her reactionary politics, so unlike those of most 1916 women usually studied, Mahaffy is an excellent and occasionally eloquent writer. She is conscious of the way the natural world is changed by all the violence: when the army "pounds down" Liberty Hall, she observes that "in the garden all the birds who had sung and warbled sweetly through all the previous noises, became mute, huddling together in terrified clusters."

How specifically did the women's approaches determine the way you wrote about their participation in the Rising?

The women were interested in the immediate facts of their lives. They wrote about the way domestic life and military life interacted. Mary Spring Rice's "Diary of the *Asgard*" describes what it was like when she and Molly Childers, on board the yacht running German guns for the Volunteers, had to sleep on top of 900 rifles: "The cabin door had to be fixed permanently open so we had an arrangement of a dishcloth which could be hung across as a curtain when one was dressing." She suspected that there would be "a lot of hair-pins found" among the rifles when they were unpacked. Women also wrote about emotions and noted who cried: Commandant MacDonagh, Rose McNamara noted, cried when he announced the surrender to her garrison. Many women wrote about final conversations with their husbands and brothers in Kilmainham, a subject the executed men would never be able to describe.

And so my chapters were determined by the women's subjects: I wrote on domestic space, on flirtation and courtship, on women and male authority, and on what I call "the Kilmainham farewell." I noticed that in all the women's accounts of saying goodbye forever to the men, only hours before the men were to face the firing squad, the women took their cues from the men's high-minded resolve. In his final conversation with his wife and daughter Nora, James Connolly (in Dublin Castle, not Kilmainham) said, "Don't cry, Lillie, you'll unman me," and most of the women took great care not to "break," as Kathleen Clarke put it. Yet weeks later, Clarke had a miscarriage, and Eily O'Hanrahan fainted at the bottom of the steep Kilmainham stairs after her final conversation with her brother Micheál: the suppression of emotion could be kept from their countenances during those meetings but could not be kept from their bodies later.

What theoretical grounding do you use as you analyze all these wonderful details that have not been discussed in previous books?

In *Interaction Ritual*, Erving Goffman introduces the concept of “small behaviors,” what he considers the “ultimate behavioral material”: the glances, gestures, positioning, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into” any situation. The tiny details show how the larger society is constructed. And in the material I read, the women’s accounts that formed the heart of all my material, I saw the continued association of women with domesticity, even when they were inside military garrisons; I saw the designation of women as secondary, as the question of whether the women would be imprisoned arose in the minds of both the rebels and the British army; and I understood more precisely what the women’s “positions” were when I looked at the issue of spatiality. Goffman’s term offered the justification for my approach, because the “small behaviors” recorded by the women revealed social change in process: not the official history of manifestoes and legislation, but the unofficial history of gestures.

Can you give an example of a “small behavior” that you think important?

In *At Home in the Revolution*, I’m not asking, “was the Rising a good thing or a bad thing?” I’m asking questions like, “how did the women get into the garrisons?” This particular “small behavior” is of fundamental importance because it shows how women were denied, or granted, or at first denied and then granted access to the major sites of action, because the rebels in the Easter Rising were housed in garrisons circled around the center of Dublin. Women’s access to men’s space was a literal, not a figurative, matter. Men’s accounts never include the motif I found in almost all the women’s accounts, “The Entry into the Garrison.” Women were not the norm, and they knew it, and to enter a male-dominated space like a garrison during an armed rebellion required not only courage, but also a bit of negotiation at the threshold.

In the first minutes of the Rising, just after twelve noon on Monday, April 24th, Catherine Byrne, a member of *Cumann na mBan*, was denied entrance into the GPO: “I’ll tell Paddy on you,” said Captain Michael Staines, invoking her brother, whose moral authority was part of his maleness. Byrne found her own way of entering: she went around to the side, found two Volunteers she knew, and asked their help. They lifted her up, she kicked in a window, jumped, and landed inside the GPO: so much for the glass ceiling! When Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, with five other *Cumann na mBan* women, deliberately went to the garrison at Jacob’s Biscuits Factory because she was fond of Thomas MacDonagh, he said, “We haven’t made any provision for girls here.” She had to make the case for their usefulness: “we could cook for the garrison and look after casualties”— and then the women were allowed in. MacDonagh wasn’t deliberately discriminatory; he just seemed not to have anticipated that women would offer to help out in his garrison.

In narratives by Min (Mary Josephine) Ryan, by Mairéad Ní Cheallaigh, and by so many other women, issues of entry into garrisons and of shared spaces recur, making visible the unsettled and ambiguous nature of their situation in public space.

What inspired you to write this book?

The conscious inspiration for this book was my affection for Kathleen Clarke's autobiography *Revolutionary Woman*, a book that (as I've discovered) few of the major male Irish historians have read. Its details tell much about 1916 that can't be found elsewhere. I suspected that other Irish women had written accounts as vivid and significant as Clarke's, and I wanted to read and analyze them. Also, I'd been teaching the Easter Rising for many years and wanted to contribute something to the literature about it.

The unconscious inspirations were more obviously feminist: my previous book, *Poets and the Peacock Dinner: the literary history of a meal*, was about an all-male gathering of poets to which women were not invited, though all the poets had met through their wives and female lovers. Having just finished a book in which men were in the center and women on the margins, I wanted to write one in which women were the center of my attention and men on the margins.

I was also, it now seems to me, reacting to much of the piety and conservatism I'd observed in American Irish studies: too much attention has been devoted uncritically to Church history and to the major male political figures. That emphasis had to be corrected.

And finally, the struggle to share male space, to get a foot in the door, is the story of my own professional life.

Do you have a political position on the material in your book?

As for the Rising itself, as I say in the "Author's Note" to my book, "What I would have done in the Dublin of April 1916 I have no idea; I have a rebel temperament, but bullets and explosives don't appeal to me. What interested me most in the material I studied for this book is the close view of the way women led their lives."