Template cover sheet which must be included at the front of all projects

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<td>&quot;More a Volunteer than a Member of the Women’s Movement&quot;</td>
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THE STORY OF MARY O’DWYER

‘MORE A VOLUNTEER THAN A MEMBER OF CUMANN NA mBAN’

OSÍN Ó SÍOCHÁIN

Gaelcholáiste Choilm
Baile an Chollaigh
Co. Chorcaí
INTRODUCTION

Mary O’Dwyer (1902-2003), from Coleraine, Co. Tipperary, was an amazing woman. What made her stand out, and the reason I chose to do this project on her, is not just the normal activities that she as a member of Cumann na mBan carried out during the War of Independence, but also the activities that she was involved in that were outside of the norm for revolutionary women of that time. I will write about some of the ordinary activities she was involved in, but also the extraordinary ones. What exactly did Dan Breen, author of *My Fight for Irish Freedom* and Mary O’Dwyer’s good friend, mean when he wrote that he “would class her more a Volunteer than a member of Cumann na mBan”?

I believe that the role women played in the War of Independence was cast aside until only recently and even now the importance of their work has still not been fully appreciated. The men of the IRA fought a guerrilla war to achieve the liberation of Ireland. But, who smuggled their guns for them? Who fund-raised for them? Who carried dangerous dispatches for them? Who gathered important intelligence for them? Who cooked for them? Who treated their wounds for them? Who made it possible for the IRA to achieve what it did? The role of Cumann na mBan, and of women like Mary O’Dwyer, has been underestimated for many decades.

People who knew Mary O’Dwyer say that she was a very bright, confident and witty woman who liked being in good company. But behind all that, she held in a history about the War of Independence that she “was reluctant to talk very much about”1. With the recent release of the Bureau of Military History documents, however, new information about her role in the War of Independence and Civil War has emerged. It is now possible to get a much clearer picture of what she was involved in, and to understand what Dan Breen meant when he wrote that she was more like a Volunteer than a member of Cumann na mBan.

I hope you enjoy reading the story of Mary O’Dwyer.

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1 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p.48.
Map showing places referred to in the text

1. Coleraine – Mary O'Dwyer’s birthplace
2. Ballyowen House – Pierce McCan’s home
3. Duala Village
4. Newtown Cross (see Fig. 4)
5. Ballinure RIC Barracks
6. Noan House – Cummins' workplace
7. Meldrum House – Cummins' death
EARLY LIFE

Mary O'Dwyer was born Mary Breen, and married Ned O'Dwyer. I will refer to her as Mary O'Dwyer from now on. She was born on April 13th 1902 in Coleraine, near Dualla, in south Tipperary. Johnny Breen, her father, worked as an agricultural labourer, and he was married to Johanna Colville. Mary was one of six children. She had one older brother, Philip, three older sisters, Honoria, Dorothy and Annie, and one younger sister, Josie.3 They lived in a small, two-roomed house which still survives, though it has been unoccupied for many years (see Fig. 1).

Unfortunately, there is not much information about Mary O'Dwyer’s early life. We do know, however, that at the age of sixteen, she was active as a Sinn Féin canvasser in the 1918 general election in the Tipperary East constituency. The canvassers were not always welcome, and Mary recalled that she was ‘chased with pitchforks’ from some places.4 The candidate, Pierce McCan, a prisoner in Gloucester Jail, was elected. He was from Dualla, Mary O'Dwyer’s local village, which is sometimes known as the ‘patriot village’,5 and he was a prominent member of both Sinn Féin and the Gaelic League. I think that her interest in republicanism might have originated in this local connection. McCan died in prison in

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3 Census of Ireland, 1901, 1911.
4 I thank Pat O'Donnell, Mocklershill, a good friend of Mary O'Dwyer’s, whom I interviewed in January 2017, for informing me of this.
5 Tipperary Star, April 20th, 2002
March 1919 and his body was returned to Ireland (see Figs 2-3). Mary O’Dwyer must have attended his funeral in Dualla, which was attended by thousands of people, where Cathal Brugha gave the oration. The death and funeral of Pierce McCan, a well-known and important local man, must have further radicalized Mary O’Dwyer.

The following year, aged eighteen, Mary O’Dwyer made a decision that changed the course of her life. She joined Cumann na mBan in 1920 and was soon promoted to Captain of E Company, 7th Battalion, 3rd Tipperary Brigade. This is the brigade that fired the first shots of Ireland’s War of Independence in Soloheadbeg.

Fig. 2 Pierce McCan, from Dualla, died in prison in 1919. Mary O’Dwyer had campaigned for his election three months earlier.

Fig. 3 McCan’s funeral was one of the biggest ever seen in Tipperary. As shown in the photograph, Michael Collins and Harry Boland helped carry his coffin.

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

None of Mary O’Dwyer’s family was involved in republican activities. Actually, she ignored advice not to get involved. We know this because Harry Bushe, 7th Battalion, wrote that as she sat in Dualla church one morning the parish priest “advised all the local girls not to have any sympathy with the IRA, [but] she was one of the girls who stood by us”. Despite the parish priest’s advice, she remained a member of Cumann na mBan and, in Bushe’s opinion, became “the most active member … in the 7th Battalion area”. As I stated in the Introduction, she was more than the average Cumann na mBan woman and below I will show that she was engaged in incidents that women would not normally have been

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6 Irish Independent, March 10th 1919. In 2016 the boys and girls of Ballytarsna national school produced a short video on Pierce McCan (see Youtube Ballytarsna School commemorate Pierce McCan and the 1916 Rising)
7 Walsh, M., Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World 1918-1923, London, 2015, p. 74-82
8 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 36.
involved in. In the words of Dan Breen, “She took big risks during the fighting ... all the risks of a volunteer”.  

Ordinary Cumann na mBan Activities

Like every Cumann na mBan woman, Mary O’Dwyer was involved in lots of different republican activities. Much of the information about this is contained in her statement in her Military Service Pensions and Awards file. She cooked for the IRA men who were on the run. She hid and transported arms, collected information, fund-raised, and treated wounds. Here are some examples of the kind of work she did.

Mary O’Dwyer would keep up to seven or eight IRA men who were ‘on the run’ in her house, sometimes two or three times a week. She fed and cooked for them, and had changes of clothing and boots ready. Some of the men suffered from ‘the itch’, presumably scabies, and she got sulphur baths and ointment for them. One of the more famous people she nursed, when his arm was injured, was Seán Hayes; he was with Liam Lynch in the Knockmealdown Mountains when Lynch was killed, and later went on to become a Fianna Fáil politician. She helped guide the men across fields and bóírins to new destinations, sometimes to link up with other members of the IRA.

She also stored weapons for the IRA. In her pension application she says that she kept “rifles off and on, also a few revolvers at the house ... these were generally hidden in a hayshed” and that she “had charge of all this stuff, gave it out when required and took back the arms afterwards.” She sometimes transported arms and on one occasion travelled seven miles by donkey and cart with weapons and ammunition. This was extremely brave of her. She knew very well that if caught she would be dealt with ruthlessly, especially by the ‘Black and Tans’.

The BMH sources demonstrate that she gathered a lot of intelligence for the IRA. She spied on the RIC in Cashel, and monitored the movements of the British Army at the time of the killings of the Looby brothers, who were also from Dualla. The sort of intelligence she gathered led to events like the Newtown Ambush and the killing of David Cummins (see below).

On many occasions Mary O’Dwyer got IRA men away from danger. For instance, one morning in 1921, she had nine or ten IRA men hiding in her house. While she was on lookout, she saw the army approaching the house and she safely led the men away from danger.

This type of work was normal amongst Cumann na mBan women, and without them it would have been even more difficult for the IRA to operate. This work, however, was fairly routine compared to other things Mary O’Dwyer did during the War of Independence.

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9 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 48.
10 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p. 49.
11 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O'Dwyer), p.50.
The Newtown Ambush

The first major event that involved Mary O’Dwyer was the Newtown ambush. The sources that are available for this ambush are several newspaper accounts,13 as well as Mary O’Dwyer’s Military Service Pension Collection file,15 and a local history book.16 I have read all of these, and the following is a summary of what is contained in them.

An RIC bicycle patrol left the barracks in Ballinure, between Cashel and Killenaule, on the second day of every month, at 10.30 am, to collect their pay in Cashel, and returned in the afternoon. Unknown to the patrol, it had been under surveillance by Mary O’Dwyer for some time, who had been ordered to do so by Comdt. Tommy Donovan. She reported her information back to Donovan, and it was decided to ambush the patrol on July 2nd 1920 at a crossroads at Newtown, midway between Dualla and Ballinure (see Fig. 4).

On that day the patrol consisted of four men: Sgt. Robert Tobin, Const. Brady and Const. Moloney, of the RIC, and one Auxiliary, Constable David Ross, from Scotland. The ambush party consisted of six IRA men — Tommy Donovan (who three months later was shot dead in Killenaule); Seán Hayes (see above p.5); Seán Walshe (who went on the run following the ambush); Michael Burke (who was arrested the following month, imprisoned in Cork, where he took part in the famous hunger-strike of 1920)18; Paul Mulcahy, and Joseph Ormond.

The ambush party hid behind a wall, facing in the direction from where the RIC patrol came from. I have visited Newtown Cross (see Fig. 5), and I saw that there is a slight bend in the road here, making it difficult for the RIC patrol to see much ahead before the crossroads. It seems that the ambush site was carefully chosen. According to Mulcahy, their plan was to call on the constables to halt and only shoot if resistance was offered. He wrote, “We did not consider seriously the fact that they might offer resistance”.19 But this is exactly what happened.

At approximately 4.30 pm the R.I.C. patrol arrived at Newtown Cross. What happened next is not entirely certain, as there is conflicting information in the different sources. It appears, however, that the IRA called on the patrol to halt and they jumped off their bicycles and went for cover. According to the RIC the IRA opened fire first, while Mulcahy and Tierney said that Tobin opened fire first. What is certain is that Robert Tobin, 42 years old and married with six children, was shot and killed. He was one of forty-six RIC men killed in Tipperary between 1919 and 1922.20

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13 Cork Examiner, July 5th 1920, The Liberator, July 3rd 1920
14 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Paul Mulcahy) p. 8-10; BMH Witness Statement 1227 (Timothy Tierney), p. 4-5.
15 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p.41, 49, 51.
17 Shelley, J.R. A Short History of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade, Cashel, 1996, BMH Witness Statement 1363 (Seán E. Walshe), 6-7
19 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 8
Fig. 4 OS 25" map of Newtown Cross. This small crossroads is located half-way between Dualla and Ballinure, to where the RIC patrol was heading. This patrol had been under surveillance by Mary O’Dwyer who was involved in planning the ambush.

Fig. 5 On the left is the wall used by the IRA at Newtown Cross. The RIC patrol cycled up from the bend (Photo: Oisin Ó Siocháin).
Const. Brady bravely started to cycle for help towards Dualla. He was under fire and was wounded in the lower abdomen. Despite this he kept cycling, but when he got to Dualla he collapsed. One of the volunteers had been ordered by Donovan to pursue and shoot him, but when he found the wounded and collapsed constable there was a group of locals gathered around him. Because of this the volunteer “refrained from carrying out Donovan’s order”. Brady went on to live to a very old age in Clonmel.

Back at the ambush site, the remaining two constables were disarmed and released. Then the IRA, with the captured arms and bicycles, withdrew. Mary O’Dwyer, who was in the area, took revolvers and ammunition from the IRA men and scouted the road for them so that they could make a safe escape.

The Newtown Ambush was regarded by the 3rd Tipperary Brigade as a success. I think it is interesting to see that Mary O’Dwyer was involved in both setting it up and in helping the men’s getaway. Michael Burke, in his letter of support for Mary O’Dwyer’s pension application, wrote “The success of this ambush was considerably helped by her efforts”. I believe that the ambush shows us that the Cumann na mBan activities of Mary O’Dwyer were far more important than simply cooking and supplying first aid for the men of the IRA.

**The Capture and Killing of David Cummins**

During the War of Independence spies and informers were a serious threat to the republican movement. This is why the IRA dealt with them very harshly, and most of the time they were shot dead as an example to others. County Tipperary was no different, and sixteen spies were killed there.

I find it very interesting that Mary O’Dwyer was involved in the capture and killing of an alleged spy in 1921. The sources that are available for this are newspaper accounts, BMH witness statements and Mary O’Dwyer’s Military Service Pensions and Awards file. The following is a summary of what is contained in them about this event.

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21 BMH Witness Statement 1434 (Capt. Paul Mulcahy), p. 10
22 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 49.
23 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 41.
26 *Cork Examiner*, July 11th 1921, July 13th 1921; *Sunday Independent*, July 10th 1921.
28 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 46, 50.
David Cummins, worked as a chauffeur for Frederick Armitage, of Noan House, who was a landlord with a large estate in the Ballinure area. Cummins served with the British forces during the First World War and my research shows that in 1921 he was 34 years of age, was single, and that he was a Protestant from Donegal.29

Cummins was suspected by the IRA to have been a spy. Tierney and Mulcahy in their Witness Statements wrote that they did not know what evidence there was for this, but that the brigade and battalion staff had issued an order to have Cummins killed. In my opinion there is a chance that he might not actually have been a spy, and the suspicion may have been there simply because he was an ex-British army soldier and an Ulster Protestant who now worked for a local loyalist landlord.

On July 8th 1921, Mary O'Dwyer was sent by Ned O'Dwyer, her future husband, and Vice-Commandant Paddy Byrne to scout the Noan Estate to make sure that it was clear of Crown Forces. She reported back that it was clear and they, with others, entered and captured Cummins in the stables. He was brought to Meldrum House, nearby, where only a caretaker was living. He was asked by Byrne if he wanted to see a priest, but replied simply “No, I am not a Catholic”. While the execution was being carried out, Mary O'Dwyer was on lookout duty outside the house. Cummins’ body was then brought to the roadside at Dualla, where a notice stating Convicted Spy; Spies and Informers Beware was put on it.

Fig. 7 Meldrum House, where David Cummins was shot in July 1921.

29 Census of Ireland 1901 and 1911.
One of the impacts of the death of David Cummins on the community of south Tipperary, was that four days later, when his funeral took place in Tipperary town, a notice was issued by the Urban District Council, presumably on orders from the British, which said that all business premises were to be closed “on account of the funeral of D. Cummins, an ex-soldier, who was brutally done to death by rebels at Dualla on the 8th July”. A local newspaper reported that this was done, but then the shop-keepers received a counter-order from the IRA telling them that they should re-open.³⁰ Some re-opened straight away and others hesitated to do so. I find it odd that the British attempted to shut down the town for Cummins’ funeral. This may have been simply because he was an ex-soldier, but it could also have been, from the British point of view, that Cummins was a man who had been passing information on to them. Perhaps, he was a spy?

Cummins’ mother received £600 in compensation for his death from the Ireland Compensation Commission, and “liability in the case was ‘Agreed 50/50’ in terms of British responsibility”.³¹ But, I believe you can’t be half responsible for someone’s death! This compensation makes it seem more likely that he was a spy. He was buried in the graveyard at St. Mary’s Church of Ireland, Tipperary, in an unmarked grave. I think it is sad that neither the Armitage family, nor his own family, erected a headstone to him.

I think that Mary O’Dwyer’s involvement in the capture and death of Cummins is very interesting. I think she was picked for two reasons. Firstly, as she showed at the Newtown Ambush a year earlier, she was known to be capable of carrying out difficult orders. In fact, Geraldine Purcell, president of the 1st Battalion, wrote that “she was an excellent officer and was always at her post when required either night or day”.³² Secondly, Mary O’Dwyer was from Coleraine, which is very close to Noan, Meldrum and Dualla, and she knew this area like the back of her hand.

It was rare enough for Cumann na mBan women (or “girls”, as they were often called by their male colleagues) to have been involved in the killing and wounding of RIC men, but to have a woman involved in the execution of a spy during the War of Independence is quite astonishing. Having read a lot on this issue, I cannot find any other example of this.

³⁰ Nenagh News, July 16th 1921.
³¹ Ó Ruairc, P.Ó., Truce: Murder, Myth and the last days of the Irish War of Independence, Cork, 2016, p. 82-84.
³² BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 38.
Eventually, a Truce was declared on the 11th of July, 1921. During this period of peace, an IRA officer’s training camp was established at Ballinard Castle, near Fethard. This trained officers so that if the talks with the British broke down the IRA would be able to put up a stronger fight in south Tipperary. The training officer was Sergeant Prout, a Tipperary man who served in the US Army during World War 1.

Ballinard Castle, which I have visited (see Fig. 9), is an ideal place for a training camp. It is surrounded by fields and a wood, which would have been a suitable place to train for guerrilla warfare. There are lots of sheds and buildings around the castle which could have been used for accommodation. The castle was owned by William Quirke, an Intelligence Officer in the 3rd Tipperary Brigade. Mary O’Dwyer attended the camp for three weeks and catered for the men, as well as organising dances for them. In fact, she used say that “Joining Cumann na mBan improved my social life dramatically.”

Fig. 9 Ballinard Castle, Clooneen. This was the location of an IRA officers’ training camp during the Truce, where Mary O’Dwyer spent three weeks.

35 Ambrose, J., Dan Breen and the IRA, Cork, 2006, p. 124-25
36 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 50.
37 I thank Pat O’Donnell for informing me of this.
A number of photographs of this training camp were taken by Lt. Seán Sharkey (see Figs. 10-11), and these seem to show that there was a lot of fun and *craic* there.\(^{38}\)

After some months of negotiations a treaty was signed in London. Many Irish republicans, including those in south Tipperary, were not happy with its terms. As a result, in June 1922, a terrible Civil War started. Most of the IRA and Cumann na mBan in the 3\(^{rd}\) Brigade’s territory fought against the treaty, including people like Dan Breen, Dinny Lacey and Mary O’Dwyer. The Free State commanding officer in Tipperary was Major-General Prout, who had earlier been associated with the local training camp.\(^{39}\) Mary O’Dwyer was now in a difficult personal situation as the leader of her enemy in Tipperary was the man she had known during her time at Ballinard.

I would say that the work Mary O’Dwyer did during the Civil War was just as dangerous as what she did during the War of Independence, as the Free State army dealt severely with republicans. During the Civil War, she was working as an attendant in Clonmel District Mental Hospital. She spied on the Free State forces in Clonmel and reported back to the IRA. Her information often proved important, as James Nugent wrote: “From her information from time to time we were able to locate free state forces”.\(^{40}\) On another occasion, she heard in Clonmel that there were Free State soldiers approaching a location near Dualla, where some anti-Treaty IRA were hiding. Mary immediately cycled to where they were hiding and warned them. Nugent wrote that “through her information I got the opportunity of escaping”.\(^{41}\)

She also scouted and guided Dan Breen’s famous flying column in the area between Drangan and Dualla (around 20 km). On one occasion Breen sent her into Thurles to get information on the strength of the Free State forces there. She was, however, caught and arrested. It must have been harder for her to do this type of work during the Civil War because some of the Free State soldiers would have known her. She was released after four nights.\(^{42}\) I find it quite interesting that Mary O’Dwyer, who had been involved in the Cummins affair and the Newtown Ambush, and other types of activities, including intelligence gathering, was only arrested once during the War of Independence and Civil War. She got away with a lot, presumably because she was good at what she did.

Mary O’Dwyer continued on as a captain in Cumann na mBan until the end of the Civil War in May 1923. According to her friend Pat O’Donnell,\(^{43}\) she only reluctantly accepted the Free State and remained sympathetic with the original aims of the republican movement.

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\(^{40}\) BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 42.

\(^{41}\) BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 42.

\(^{42}\) BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 50.

\(^{43}\) (See footnote 27 above)
Fig. 10 The photograph, taken at Ballinard training camp, shows men training with a Hoschkiss machine gun. This was a type of weapon which the IRA usually didn’t have access to. [Source: Lt. Sharkey Collection]

Fig. 11 The photograph shows that there was a certain amount of fun and socializing at the training camp, and that people’s moods during the Truce would have been better than during the war. [Source: Liz Gills, Women of the Irish Revolution, 2014, Cork]
RETURN TO NORMALITY

Mary O’Dwyer married Edward O’Dwyer after the Civil War. Edward or ‘Ned’ (see Fig.12) was a member of the 2nd Battalion and, with Mary, had been involved in the capture and killing of Cummins. He also served in Dinny Lacey’s famous flying column during the Civil War.44

![Fig. 12 Ned O’Dwyer, Mary O’Dwyer’s husband. He was a member of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade, and served in Dinny Lacey’s flying column during the Civil War [Source: O’Dwyer M., A Pictorial History of Tipperary 1916-1923, Cashel, 2004]]

The O’Dwyer’s had three children, Philomena, Joan, and Angela, and the family lived in Kilsheelan, near Clonmel. In the late 1940’s they bought a farm in Caherbaun, just across the road from Mary’s birth place of Coleraine. Following Ned’s death, in 1971, she sold the farm and moved to nearby Mocklershill. Later, her daughter and son-in-law, Joan and Colm, came here to live with her.

In the final years of her long life she was often visited by people who were interested in the War of Independence and republicanism. These included Martin O’Dwyer, who wrote a number of books on Tipperary’s War of Independence,45 and Pat O'Donnell, who shared her interests. Some of the more famous people who called to her were Fr. Des Wilson, who, in Gerry Adams’ opinion, “was central to efforts to develop a peace process years before it eventually took root”,46 and Fr. Paddy Ryan, the ‘republican priest’, who was

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44 BMH Military Pension Service Collection 55887 (Mary O’Dwyer), p. 46
46 Irish Times, November 30th 2015.
wanted by Scotland Yard and who stayed at her home on occasions. In fact, Fr. Ryan was eventually found by Gardai during a raid on her house in 1992.\textsuperscript{47} She was ninety years of age at the time.

Mary O’Dwyer lived to be 100 years old. She was the last surviving member of Cumann na mBan in south Tipperary and one of the last in Ireland.\textsuperscript{48} A civic reception was held in her honour in 2002 by Cashel Urban District Council, which she greatly enjoyed (see Fig.13). She also had a big birthday celebration in Dualla, with family and friends, which was also attended by Minister Noel Davern, T.D. She proudly wore her War of Independence medal that night (see Fig.14).

Unfortunately, no one lasts forever. In St. Patrick’s Hospital, Cashel, on March 29\textsuperscript{th}, 2003, in her 101\textsuperscript{st} year, Captain Mary O’Dwyer passed away. She now rests in Dualla, the ‘patriot village’, with her husband, Ned, another veteran of the War of Independence. Her grave lies within yards of the monument to Pierce McCan, who inspired her to fight for Irish freedom.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Mary-O-Dwyer.jpg}
\caption{Mary O’Dwyer, centre, pictured after leaving the Cashel Urban District Council civic reception held in her honour, in 2002. Pictured, from left to right are: Adrian Corcoran, her grandson, Joan Corcoran, her daughter, and Rita Smyth, her niece. [Source: Liz Gills, Women of the Irish Revolution, Cork, 2014]}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{47} Irish Independent, April 30\textsuperscript{th} 1992.

\textsuperscript{48} Tipperary Star, April 20\textsuperscript{th} 2002.
Fig. 14 Mary O’Dwyer, pictured at her 100th birthday party in Dualla, 2002, proudly wearing her medal. [Source: Denise Maher]

Fig. 15: Standing at the grave of Mary and Ned O’Dwyer, Dualla, December 2016.
CONCLUSION

How did Mary O’Dwyer try to improve the quality of women’s lives in Ireland? What republicans believed was that the quality of everyone’s life would improve if the programme of the First Dáil was implemented. It was a radical programme for the time, and promised to advance the rights of all the people of Ireland, women as well as men – “We declare that the Nation’s sovereignty extends ... to all men and women of the Nation”. Cumann na mBan’s main objective was to “advance the cause of Irish liberty” in order to achieve this type of Ireland, which explains why so many of them, including Mary O’Dwyer, were bitterly disappointed with the Treaty.

I believe that they must also have been very disappointed with the lack of change the new Free State brought for women and women’s rights. But, even worse, the role they had played in the War of Independence was not fully recognized by subsequent governments. Lots of them, including Mary O’Dwyer, had to fight very hard to get their military pensions. It was almost as if they were invisible. This really came across to me when I visited Tipperary County Museum in December 2016, and saw Aislinn O'Keefe’s art exhibition. The artist believes that “women’s participation in the struggle for independence was brushed under the rug of history” and her exhibition shows this. One drawing that really struck me showed a group of marching Cumann na mBan women, who are shown as faceless (see illustration below). I thought that this was really powerful as it shows that these women, who had done so much for Ireland, were regarded by the new Ireland as being without identity, unimportant, forgotten, marginalized and put in their place. I think that Mary O’Dwyer would really have understood this drawing.

I now understand why Dan Breen said that Mary O’Dwyer was “more a volunteer than a member of Cumann na mBan”. I am very proud to say that she was my great grandaunt.

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49 Programme of the First Dáil, 1919
50 Constitution of Cumann na mBan, 1914
51 As if She had a Right to be There, Exhibition Catalogue, Tipperary County Museum, 2016
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