

# Internment and women during the Civil War 1922-23

Ann Matthews

## Introduction

It is estimated that during the Civil War over 14,000 men were interned by the Irish Free State. The figure for women is 645 and yet, most republican propaganda and historiography is dominated by the female experience where they are portrayed as victims. This paper will endeavour to explain a complex story, and show that these women were anything but victims. This work is based on research conducted for my PhD dissertation completed in 2003, and published in two volumes as *Renegades: Irish Republican women 1900-1922*, (2010) and *Dissidents: Irish Republican women 1922-41*, (2012) and primary source material.

In January 1922, a new political party Cumann na Poblachta was formed by Sean T. O'Kelly for those members of Dáil Éireann and members of the Sinn Féin party who opposed the Anglo Irish Treaty. By July 1922 a new Republican triad came into being when the anti-Treaty Irish Republican Army (IRA), with the third Cumann na mBan, instigated physical opposition to the Irish Free State, and brought Cumann na Poblachta on board.<sup>1</sup> The remit of this Republican triad was to oppose by arms the democratically elected Irish Free State government. It positioned Éamon de Valera as its figurehead and its opposition culminated in a Civil War, which began in July 1922, lasted for nine months and was essentially a period of ferocious bloodletting. In October 1922, the IRA underlined its dominance of the Republican triad by setting up an alternative Republican government that would take its mandate from the second Republican government of 1921 (i.e. the second Dáil Éireann). The IRA then issued a proclamation, saying that it had invited the fifty-seven anti-Treaty members of the second Dáil to a meeting in September, and 'called on de Valera and the faithful to form a Provisional Republican Government'.<sup>2</sup> This proclamation was published in the *Poblacht na hÉireann* newspaper and stated in part:

The people desire the continuance of the Republic and that given a free choice they would vote for it in an overwhelming majority and ... On behalf of the soldiers of the Republic, acting in the spirit of our oath, as the final custodians of the Republic, and interpreting the desire of all true citizens of

1 Ann Matthews, *Dissidents: Irish Republican women 1922-41*, Chapter 2, 'The Republican Triad,' pp 18-43

2 Ibid., Chapter 2 pp 18-43

the Republic, we have called upon the former President de Valera and the faithful members, to form a government, which they have done.<sup>3</sup> At this point, it appears that Éamon de Valera had talked himself into the position of Republican leader and he had accepted this invitation. The proclamation continued, 'in the name of the Army we hereby proclaim, Éamon de Valera to be President of the Republic.'<sup>4</sup>

### Civil War

During Holy Week in April 1922 the Anti-Treaty forces (or irregulars) entered the Four Courts and remained there in a siege situation until 28 June when the Irish Free State Army began a bombardment of the complex. Fighting spread to the city centre and after six days the irregulars surrendered. During the six days the irregulars were supported by the third Cumann m mBan and the women of the Irish Citizen Army. In the wake of the surrender several hundred men were arrested by the Free State army and incarcerated in the civil/convict prison at Mountjoy Jail, while Kilmainham Prison was hastily re-opened. All the female irregulars were allowed to go free. At Mountjoy, the men rioted, removed the iron bars from the cell windows, and then 'arming themselves with the iron bars' they escaped into corridors.<sup>5</sup>

The Irish Free State Executive Council responded immediately and the male convict prison was converted into a military prison, with a military governor Commandant Diarmuid Ó hÉigearthaigh, with Patrick O'Keeffe, (former office manager for the Sinn Féin party) was appointed deputy. The male convict prisoners were then transferred to the civilian female section of Mountjoy and the women convicts were removed elsewhere. As the civil war intensified in September 1922, a new Coercion Act, was introduced, which enabled the government set up Military Council (tribunal). Offences against the state were enumerated as:

1. Every civilian charged with an offence specified in section two of these Regulations, shall upon trial and conviction by a Military Court be liable to such punishment as is hereinafter specifically provided.

#### STATEMENT OF OFFENCES.

2.
  - A. Taking part in, or aiding or abetting, any attack upon, or using force against, the National Forces.
  - B. Looting, arson, destruction, seizure, unlawful possession or removal of, or damage to any public or private property.
  - C. Having possession without proper authority of :—
    - 1) Any bomb or article in the nature of a bomb.
    - 2) Any dynamite, gelignite, or other explosive substance.
    - 3) Any revolver, rifle, gun, or other firearm or lethal weapon, or any ammunition for any such firearm.

3 *Poblacht na hÉireann*, War news, 28 October 1922.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Irish Free State Government Executive Minutes (P.G.46) 2 July 1922

D. The breach of any general order or regulation made by the Army Council.<sup>6</sup>

The members of the council were Richard Mulcahy, commander-in chief of the Irish Free State army, Lieutenant General O'Sullivan, chief of staff, the adjutant general, the director of organisation and Colonel M. J. Costello, director of intelligence.<sup>7</sup> Sentences ranged from penal servitude, imprisonment, deportation, internment and fines to execution.

On 2 October, the Military Councils were established throughout the country and the military could now arrest and try civilians for offences against the state. The Coercion Act also placed responsibility for all military/political prisoners within the remit of the military and several Military prisons were hurriedly established.

An administrative department was created specifically to deal with all aspects of imprisonment. This was the Prisoners Department of the Adjutant General (Prisoners Dept.) and its HQ was located at the headquarters of the Irish Free State army in Parkgate Street, Dublin. The first Military Court sat on 3 November, when twelve men were charged with 'having possession, without proper authority, of a revolver, or rifle, or ammunition'.<sup>8</sup>

Because the Free State army allowed the women to go free after the fall of Dublin in early July, they assumed they had immunity from arrest and became more openly active in their opposition to the Free State. Cumann na mBan and the IRA worked together preparing ambushes on the Free State army. While there is no evidence that any women took part in these ambushes they did play a significant role in supplying, storing, cleaning and priming the guns. They also acted as couriers and many were arrested while carrying IRA intelligence documents or hiding them in their homes.

The Irish Free State Executive Council decided the situation was getting out of hand and made a decision that any woman found 'actively assisting the "Irregulars" should be arrested and imprisoned'.<sup>9</sup> In a manner strikingly similar to that of the British in 1916, the Free State excluded women from execution. With a week of this decision Countess de Markievicz president of the third Cumann na mBan left Ireland for Scotland and remained there for the duration of the war.

### Women and internment

Over the period of the war female political prisoners were held at Kilmainham Prison, Mountjoy Jail and the North Dublin Union (NDU) prison camp. Some of them were held for just a few days, while around 300 were held for periods ranging from a few weeks to several months, while about ten women served almost a year. In each of the prisons the women organised a prisoners' council, which dealt with the relevant prison governor on their behalf. However, the most fractious

6 02/10/1922: Military Courts – General Regulations As To Trial Of Civilians

7 Irish Free State, minutes executive council, 28 September 1922 (N.A. G.2/P/ G/10/ 9 (a)).

8 'Military Courts and their sentences' (M.A. A Files A/07611)

9 Ibid.

relationships in the prisons were those between the women themselves, as they were not a homogenous group – they were not members of Cumann an mBan and they came from across the class spectrum of upper, middle, working and rural peasant classes. When the middle-class and upper-class women assumed leadership among the prisoners it caused resentment within the ranks of the latter two groups. This manifested itself in rows about keeping the prison clean, which was a factor of their political prisoner status.

The first woman arrested under the Coercion Act, was Eithne Coyle from Donegal. She was arrested and released so often that she came to believe that the Free State didn't intend to imprison women. She recalled: 'I discovered my error when a bunch of Staters arrested me as soon as I arrived by boat, outside Donegal Town.' Coyle was held in Rock Barracks in Ballyshannon. The imprisonment of women was more complex than that of men. The women arrested by the military were held in barrack buildings guarded by soldiers. This caused problems as the women objected to this situation as indicated in a letter written by Eily McAdams from Ballyshannon published in the Donegal Vindicator. It was addressed to Mrs Mulcahy (formerly Min Ryan), a former member of Cumann na mBan. McAdams said:

I wish to appeal to you to use your influence on behalf of Miss Coyle, a prisoner in Rock Barracks here ... she has spent several weeks in custody without even seeing the face of her own sex. I ask you as a woman to pity her and try to secure her removal to some place where there are women. You know a woman cannot deny her fundamental needs and yet there are things she cannot ask from a soldier.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile as women were being arrested across in the country the numbers rose, (albeit in small numbers compared to the men) it created problems for the military. By November women were being held in military custody in Cork, Galway, Kerry and Mayo, and in several small towns so the Prisoners Dept., made a decision to move all female political prisoners to one location based in Dublin. Initially, Richard Mulcahy had intended holding the women in A Wing in Kilmainham Prison, but it needed serious renovation work, and B Wing was being used to hold male political prisoners, and while men could be dumped anywhere, women couldn't. A decision was taken by the Prisoners Dept., to use the hospital section of B Wing Mountjoy Military Prison to hold female prisoners. This building had a capacity for fifty-four prisoners. It was a two-story structure with twenty-two single cells and, a large hospital ward with ten beds and a bathroom.

On 9 November the headquarters of the Cumann na Poblachta party was raided by Irish Free State troops and all those found on the premises arrested. Ten women were arrested and interned in Mountjoy Jail. The Deputy governor O'Keeffe always dealt with women. At this point B Wing was holding thirty women; comprising nineteen political and eleven criminal prisoners. The convict prisoners were there to clean the wing and serve the food to the political prisoners. There were also female warders working there. At the end of November 1922

<sup>10</sup> Report on Eithne Coyle (M.A. A Files A/07630).

political prisoner status was granted which enabled the prisoners wear their own clothes and accept responsibility for cooking and serving of food, they were also required to keep their quarters clean. The male prisoners accepted all the rules and complied with them. However, in the female prisons there were difficulties.

For example in Mountjoy the women refused to clean the general area of their block. Margaret Buckley, in *The Jangle of the Keys*, recalled that 'in the cause of hygiene we agreed to wash out own cells, but steadfastly refused to put a "hand to" the corridors and staircases'.<sup>11</sup> After some time these areas became very dirty and Deputy O'Keeffe passed remarks on the dirt every time he passed in and out. Buckley said that one morning he called her to his office in her capacity as O/C of the prisoners' council, told her he was sending in buckets and brushes to get the corridor washed, and said she could organise some of the prisoners to do the work. Buckley said that she responded to him, "I can WHAT?" I roared. "How dare you suggest that we become your charwomen!"<sup>12</sup> She said that she then stalked out of the room with her head in the air. The following day, 'presumably on O'Keeffe's orders, the matron arranged for some of the criminal prisoners to be brought in to clean up the place' and Buckley observed 'these poor derelicts were glad of the change and gladder of the drop of tea and cigarettes which we gave them'.<sup>13</sup> The interned women appeared to believe they should be allowed to select the aspects of the political prisoner regulations that suited them. Many of these women, coming from comfortable backgrounds and employing servants and charwomen, had never wielded a mop or broom in their own homes.

Over the winter months of 1922-23 at Kilmainham Prison the male political prisoners were removed and it was given an extensive renovation for the reception of female prisoners. Unlike Mountjoy, the administration of Kilmainham Prison remained the responsibility of the General Prison's Board (GPB) who insisted that the prison be prepared properly for female prisoners. The board was also responsible for the employment of female warders. The prison was opened as a female prison in February 1923, and Commandant Timothy O'Neill was appointed Military Governor. Due to the layout of the prison it was easier to have the criminal convicts do the cleaning, cooking and serving meals. Consequently the women had the advantages of political prisoner status without the disadvantages. Within a month Kilmainham, was holding over 200 women from all over the country.

As the number of prisoners rose steadily at Kilmainham, overcrowding was a serious problem. By late April 1923 there were over 300 women in Kilmainham and 51 in Mountjoy and the former was seriously overcrowded. But in the interim the North Dublin Union Barracks (NDU) was being prepared by military authorities. The NDU was opened in mid-April and between 27 April and 2 May 1923, 335 women from Kilmainham and 53 from Mountjoy were transferred to the NDU. The North Dublin Union workhouse had been requisitioned by the British Military under the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) in 1918, for use as a barracks and in 1922, it was passed over to the Irish Free State Army as a barracks. The female internment camp was located in a section of the barracks that

11 Margaret Buckley, *Jangle of the Keys*, pp 26-7

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p.50.

contained the hospital of the former barracks. It was located within the wider complex of the NDU barracks close to the boundary with the Broadstone railway station, and it was known as 'The Compound'. Before the women were moved there it was inspected by a delegation from the International Red Cross that was in Ireland examining the conditions prevailing in all the military internment camps and it reported that:

The buildings of the old NDU are in the course of alternation for the reception of those women detained in Kilmainham. These buildings and the surroundings garden will fulfil all desirable hygienic conditions.<sup>14</sup>

The Free State medical officer certified that the NDU could hold up to 335 female prisoners. In each the three prisons, the women elected a prisoner's council whose role it was to deal with the Authorities on behalf of the general body. The relationship of the prisoners with the Military staff was determined by the council and it held control in each prison. The Military staff governor and their deputy's representing the Free State authorities became the focus of the women's fury. Timothy O'Neill who was governor in Kilmainham was transferred with the women to the NDU. The NDU did not have criminal prisoners to do the cleaning. The NDU was a military prison and now the women were expected to abide by the rules of Political Prisoner status. The camp was more spacious than Mountjoy and Kilmainham as the women now had a proper dining hall and were expected to organise the serving of the food and clean all areas of the camp. Their subsequent refusal to keep the compound clean led to difficult relationship between the prisoners' council and as the camp became dirty the rows became very bitter and a standoff ensued.<sup>15</sup>

### **Hunger strike as a weapon of protest**

Between November 1922 and November 1923, twenty-four hunger strikes took place in the three female prisons, in which a total 219 women took part. The first hunger strike took place in November 1922 when Mary McSwiney was incarcerated in Mountjoy Jail and went on hunger strike as a protest against her imprisonment. This gave the Republican side fodder for its anti-Free State propaganda. She went on hunger strike because she believed it 'was the most effective form of protest'.<sup>16</sup> Within days, Maud Gonne McBride with Charlotte Despard formed the Women's Defence League, an anti-Free State association whose sole remit was to protest at the imprisonment of anti-Treatyites. Every Sunday they held public meetings where they denounced the government on McSwiney's behalf and McBride told the assembled crowd 'to protest against the attempt to murder the sister of Terence McSwiney' adding 'this infamous Government should be wiped out'.<sup>17</sup> Annie McSwiney joined the fray by sitting outside the gates of Mountjoy Jail.

14 International Red Cross Investigation/committee of inquiry October 1922-July 1923 (NAI. Department of Taoiseach files S1369)

15 Ann Matthews, *Dissidents*, Chapter 5, 'The North Dublin' Moyn pp 84-119.

16 Mary McSwiney personal propaganda (UCDAD McSwiney papers, P48/a/ 206).

17 Report military prisoner's department, 23 April 1923 (N.A. Dept Taoiseach files, S 1/369/3).

On her first week in Mountjoy, Mary McSwiney received communion at Sunday mass. On the subsequent Sunday, she was too weak to leave her bed. The prison chaplain visited her in her cell, but he refused to give her communion. Perceiving herself as a martyr, McSwiney wrote 'whether I am released or whether like my brother, my sacrifice is to be consummated, I am happy it is to be'.<sup>18</sup> Inside Mountjoy, the women organised 'a half-hour prayer vigil' and 'drew up a timetable to make sure everyone took part'.<sup>19</sup> Richard Mulcahy 'concerned for McSwiney's comfort ordered that a water bed be delivered to Mountjoy for her use'.<sup>20</sup>

After twenty-three days on hunger strike, McSwiney was released, frail but unbowed.<sup>21</sup> Before she was released her confession was heard, she received Holy Communion and the last rites, and she subsequently adopted a palpable tone of triumph. She now set the template for the other women to follow. (The other prisoners were unaware of the heated water bed) After the release of McSwiney a new prisoners' council was elected and Margaret Buckley was elected Officer Commanding. Then as the precedent set by McSwiney almost became the norm the use of Hunger strikes became the council's response against any perceived infraction by the Military Prison authorities. Margaret Buckley explained:

The hunger strike was the only weapon we could wield, and we felt justified in using it...we were being deprived of the common necessities, which are accorded to the most depraved criminal.<sup>22</sup>

By the middle of March 210 women and girls were being held in Kilmainham Prison and the first hunger strike took place there.<sup>23</sup> In response to attacks on its troops the Executive of the Irish Free State Council withdrew political prisoner status, which meant all 'letters, parcels or fresh supplies of tobacco' were stopped.<sup>24</sup> This took place on 15 March 1923. The prisoners' council in Kilmainham, responded by ordering a hunger strike and a general meeting of the women took place in the A wing to discuss the issue. One of the prisoners, Hannah Moynihan, who was from Kerry described this in her journal.

During the War of Independence, a sense of elitism developed among the Dublin based republican women. It appears that the women in A Wing contained a significant number of this elite. Moynihan wrote:

We are awed by the wonderful self-possession and confidence of the Dublin girls. The people from GHQ had always been mentioned by us with bated breath. Now here are face to face with them; living under the same roof

18 Mary McSwiney, Letter to Ireland's friends in America, in Erskine Childers papers (CD/6/40/1)

19 Margaret Buckley, *Jangle of the Keys*, pp 26-7.

20 File 'Kilmainham maintenance of prison etc' (M.A. A files A/04055 )

21 Mary McSwiney, statement on her internment in Mountjoy Jail, 27 November 1922 (UCDAD., McSwiney papers, p48/a/ 206).

22 Margaret Buckley, *Jangle of the Keys*, p.31.

23 Ann Matthews, *Dissidents*, Chapter 4, 'Kilmainham Female Prison', pp-63-83

24 Minutes, Irish Free State executive 15 March 1922

and they seem to us more wonderful than we had ever dreamed.<sup>25</sup> Bridie O'Mullane... fired by a righteous indignation and a determination to improve conditions, or die in the attempt...fired my blood as I listened; not so much, with what she said as the way she said it. Oh! to be like her, a leader of women!

then:

Much to our dismay all speakers pressed for a hunger strike. Fresh from the country our appetites are healthy and big. Have we the physical courage to refuse?... We must consider the moral aspect—is one justified in dying for letters and parcels?<sup>26</sup>

The hunger strike began on 23 March and less than half (91) of the 210 prisoners took part. Moynihan wrote that the hunger strikers believed that 'the authorities would cave in after a few days but as the strike went into its fifth day, the medical officer Dr Jennings brought in hot water bottles for each of the hunger strikers. She wrote:

The real diehards seem to become more slightly (sic) as the days go but there are some who "never thought it would last so long" Mrs Humphreys (The O'Rahilly's Sister), who is no longer finding it wonderful...continues to walk about. The place is very quiet and lonely and the recreation yard is deserted.<sup>27</sup>

The hunger strike ended after six days when the Free State executive council restored the prisoner's privileges as an Easter concession.<sup>28</sup> However, three women namely Kathleen Costello, Nellie Ryan and Annie O'Neill remained on strike demanding their release. These three women didn't come to the attention of the propagandists, but this changed in April when they were joined by three famous women, (the heavy hitters) namely Mary McSwiney, Mrs Kathleen O'Callaghan, and Maud Gonne McBride. It was republican propagandist nirvana as the newspapers made a meal of the story.

The prisoners' council organised a Rota thereby ensuring all the prisoners visited the hunger strikers continuously. They were also required to recite the rosary several times a day and Mrs Humphreys who was appointed an O/C Prayers organised a twenty-four-hour shift to ensure that there were two prisoners constantly keeping a prayer vigil at the altar they erected in A Wing. Twice each day, morning and evening, she summoned the prisoners for a recitation of the rosary 'by banging on an enamel plate with a spoon. Every evening the women also gathered near McSwiney's cell and sang for her. On one occasion, she asked them to sing, 'Let us

25 Hannah Moynihan diary, 18 March 1923. (KMG 2010.0246)

26 Ibid

27 Ibid

28 Minutes of the Executive Council 29 Mar. 1923(M.A. A files A/08603)

carry your cross for Ireland Lord'.<sup>29</sup> The International Red Cross delegation did not visit Kilmainham and in their report, they explained why, saying that:

Prisoners had been on hunger strike since their arrest to obtain release or immediate trial, and not as a protest against the prison regime. Their written statements moreover verify this fact.

Consequently the delegate did not consider it his duty to insist on getting in touch with these prisoners, fearing that his intervention, misinterpreted, would only encourage them to persist in their attitude, and give rise to a new case of strike...The complaints regarding the prohibition of correspondence with prisoners 'families', sanitary conditions and food in camps are unfounded. Each prisoner is supplied with an iron bed, pillow, mattress sheets and two blankets.<sup>30</sup>

The first hunger strike in the NDU was by Gobnait Ní Bruadair who was arrested on 1 May 1923, in Listowel, Co. Kerry. When she arrived at the NDU, she had a gunshot wound. She went on hunger strike, made a great deal of fuss, and was released after seven days. The Prisoners' council from Kilmainham had established themselves as the de facto council in the NDU but the general body insisted on an elected council. Difference of class and general angst were now surfacing and they manifested themselves in their dealing with Tim O'Neill. While the issues are too complex to deal with in this paper, the issue that preoccupied the women most was the row over who should keep the camp clean.<sup>31</sup> They were political prisoners and as such were responsible for the cleanliness of the own accommodation, but their refusal to keep the compound clean posed several problems and by summer the place was rank. These problems did not arise in the male camps where the men abided by the rules of political prisoner status and simply got on with things.

### **The Final hunger strike.**

The Civil War ended in April 1923 and in June the authorities began releasing women in small numbers. By early October, there were eighty-six women (deemed the most dangerous) left in the NDU. Then on 13 October 1923, the male republican prisoners in Mountjoy began a hunger strike in protest at their continued detention. On hearing this news, the women in the NDU held a meeting to decide whether they should 'support the men by also going on hunger strike'.<sup>32</sup> According to Maire Deegan who was a member of the prisoners' council the women divided into four distinct groups.

1. believed they 'would be shirking in their duty to the Republic if they did not fall in line with the men'

29 Hannah Moynihan prison diary 19 Apr. 1923 (KMG 2010.0246)

30 International Red Cross Investigation/committee of inquiry October 1922-July 1923 (NAI. Department of Taoiseach files S1369)

31 Ann Matthews, *Dissidents*, Chapter 5, 'The North Dublin' pp-84-119

32 Military Court of Inquiry, 8 November 1923 (M.A. Costello Papers, MS, 265).

2. 'was totally opposed to sympathetic action of any kind', but 'were prepared to strike for their own release'.<sup>33</sup>
3. A third faction believed that their 'prison conditions were decent' and they had 'no logical reason for going on strike and any subsequent death, could not be morally justified,' and if they were 'faced with death would have to come off the strike'.
4. The fourth group believed a hunger strike was simply a bad move, 'but not having a moral misgiving they were prepared to support the majority if a decision was made to go on strike'.<sup>34</sup>

The meeting was very heated with taunts of cowardice being leveled at those reluctant to go on hunger strike. When a final vote was taken from the combined meeting, the majority was in favour, whereupon some of the conscientious objectors threw in their lot with the majority, and agreed to go on hunger strike, because they did not want to let the others down. Maire Deegan disapproved of the hunger strike because she thought that extending the strike to the female prison didn't help the men in Mountjoy Jail. She said 'that while the men had very definite reasons for their action; the women in the NDU did not', and 'by going on strike, they were simply 'diverting public attention from the vile treatment the men were receiving in Mountjoy Jail'.<sup>35</sup>

Deegan also doubted the benefit of women's hunger strike to the republican movement and said it would simply add to the anxiety of their families, in particular of those women whose families were poor and had brothers and fathers on hunger strike in other camps. Fifty-one of the women went on strike.

Table 1 Final Hunger strike: fifty women began a hunger strike on 24 October 1923.

<b>Ended hunger strike</b>	<b>No of women</b>
7 November 1923	33
10 November	10
23 November 1923	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>

Source: Civil Prison ledgers (M.A. CW/P/06/04) and the Military Court of inquiry papers 10 November 1923, (M.A., Costello Papers, MS, 265).

The last eight women had persisted with the hunger strike until 23 November 1923, when Tom Derrig, Adjutant General, IRA, visited all the military prisons to explain that the republican leadership had decided to end the hunger strike, 'as it

33 Letter, Maire Deegan to Cumann na mBan HQ, undated (UCDAD., Humphreys papers, p106/1172).

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

would not be worthy sacrificing all our lives'.<sup>36</sup> Sighle Humphreys who was apparently the main driving force behind this final hunger strike in the NDU said he told her it was over. She told her mother in a letter that:

I woke to see Tom Derrig standing beside my bed. He had come to say that the men leading had decided to call off the strike, and he and David Robinson were visiting all the jails and camps in the country. For the men it had been a 40-day strike, for us 30 days.... we were all released about a fortnight later...and so ended my jail experience for 1923.<sup>37</sup>

The eight women were released two weeks later. This was the last release of women who had been imprisoned during the Civil War but it did not lead to the ending of internment. When Countess de Markievicz returned to Ireland from Scotland in mid-November 1923, she was involved in public propaganda denouncing the Irish Free State. On 20 November, she was in Aungier Street in Dublin with Hannah Sheehy Skeffington making speeches and asking people to sign a petition for the release of political prisoners and was arrested by the police and taken to the Bridewell Station. She was charged with 'causing an obstruction in the public thoroughfare', and immediately went on hunger strike when removed to the NDU.<sup>38</sup> She was on hunger strike for thirty-six hours until the general prison strike was called off. By mid-December, there were five prisoners in the NDU who had been arrested post-Civil War. They were Una Garvin, Kathleen Hyland, Sheila O'Hanlon and Emily Valentine (political prisoners), and Countess de Markievicz who was a convict prisoner. The Ministry for Home Affairs wanted the NDU cleared so that the complex could be handed over to the Grangegorman Mental Hospital, and they requested that the women be sent to the civil prison at Mountjoy.

However, there was no room at Mountjoy, and on 15 December Colonel Costello recommended that the women should be released. Four were released, but as de Markievicz was a civil prisoner her detention and release fell within the remit of the civil authorities, who should have initially placed her in 'in the Civil Wing of Mountjoy'.<sup>39</sup> De Markievicz was eventually released on 23 December and on 1 January 1924 the NDU camp was handed over to the Grangegorman Hospital.

### Conclusion

Between November 1922 and November 1923, 645 women were interned. There were twenty-four separate hunger strikes in Mountjoy Jail, Kilmainham Prison and the NDU involving 219 women but because some women went on hunger strike more than once, the final number is difficult to quantify. What can be ascertained

36 Letter, Sighle Humphreys to Ellen Humphreys, 13 December 1923 (UCDAD. Humphreys papers, p106/1047)

37 Ibid.

38 Ann Matthews, *Dissidents*, Chapter 5, 'The North Dublin' p.117

39 Letter from PDAG to Commandant McAllister 15 Dec. 1923 (M.A. NDU Letters CW/P/02/01/06a)

is that the number of women who used hunger strike as a weapon was always in the minority.

In terms of Republican politics, the prison experiences of the women engendered significant republican propaganda. Its main purpose was apparently to indicate that the Free State was cruller than the British were, when dealing with female prisoners. By remaining in Scotland for the duration of the Civil War, Countess de Markievicz who was president of Cumann na mBan gave credence to this view. One issue seldom discussed in the prisoner's accounts, is the fact that in the women's prisons, female warders were employed. Consequently, whether it was intentional or not, the impression was created that the female prisoners were guarded only by male soldiers. The story of the 14,000 male internees has still to be written.

**Ann Matthews** biography to come