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**‘We work with shells all day and night’: Irish female munitions workers during the
First World War
Fionnuala Walsh**

The ‘munitionette’ or female munitions worker is one of the most familiar images from the British home front during the Great War. The role of women in munitions industries is central to the histories of women and war and to perceptions of changing identities in wartime. These women have been variously described as challenging ‘gendered taboos’ through their active participation in the ‘culture of death’ and as ‘powerful symbols of modernity’.¹ Angela Woollacott argues that British munitions workers undermined class differences through their increased spending power while simultaneously challenging the gender order by performing non-traditionally female roles.² There were over one million women employed in munitions work in Great Britain during the Great War.³ They generated a significant amount of commentary in the contemporary press with attitudes varying from praise for women’s patriotism to criticism of their supposed extravagant spending of their wages. The Irish munitions industry was much smaller than that in Britain but it nonetheless offered expanded employment opportunities for Irishwomen from diverse backgrounds and a chance to participate directly in the war effort. This article briefly examines the extent of munitions work in Ireland, the class backgrounds of the munitions workers and their motivations for entering such work.

The Irish Munitions industry

How extensive was the Irish munitions industry? Five state-run National Shell Factories were eventually established in Ireland in the second half of the war – in Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Galway. Nonetheless, the combined floor space of these factories and the total number of people employed in them was described by Edward J. Riordan, secretary of the Irish Industrial Development Association in June 1918 as ‘far less than that of a very moderate sized munition factory in Great Britain’.⁴ By the announcement of the Armistice, the five factories employed 2,148 people. They also began production comparatively late in the war –the National Fuse Factory opened in March 1916 but the National Shell Factory (both located at Parkgate factory in Dublin) did not begin operations until April 1917, barely eighteen months before the end of the war.⁵

The decision of the British government to locate so few national munitions factories in Ireland was controversial, and there was extensive lobbying by Home Rule MPs, trade unions and local pressure groups for more munitions contracts to be granted.⁶ It was believed by some that the extension of war manufacturing employment would help to create and sustain a ‘war atmosphere’ in Ireland. The loyalty of the Dublin shell factory staff during the Easter

Rising was stressed in an attempt to alleviate security concerns after 1916.⁷ It was also hoped that more extensive munitions contracts would help with the problem of unemployment and short time work among female textile workers in Ulster.⁸ Although Emmet O'Connor has suggested that the small number of munitions factories in Ireland was part of a British policy to keep the south de-industrialised, no national shell factories were located in the 'loyal north'. Niamh Purséil argues that there was no practical reason to situate munitions factories in Ireland and significant logistical and security reasons made it inadvisable.⁹ It is true however that the majority of the War Office contracts for Ireland went to Ulster, which was likely motivated by both security concerns and the significantly stronger industrial infrastructure. In total, 252 Irish firms received contracts from the War Office between August 1914 and 31 March 1919. Of these 160 were based in Ulster, sixty-four in Leinster and the remaining twenty-eight in Munster and Connaught. These came to the value of £24,695,355, forming just 2.6 per cent of the total provided for the United Kingdom as a whole.¹⁰

Many private company-owned factories in Belfast began producing munitions to fulfil War Office contracts. These were referred to as 'controlled establishments' and came under the remit of the Munitions of War Act in July 1915.¹¹ It was estimated in September 1915 that there were nearly one hundred factories of varying sizes engaged in manufacturing war munitions in Belfast.¹² In September 1918, it was reported that close to 5,000 women were working in munitions in Belfast.¹³ This would make up about 3.8 per cent of all Belfast women aged between fifteen and sixty-five in the 1911 census.¹⁴ Some of the textile plants converted to munitions factories following the outbreak of the war. For example, James Mackie & Sons (known as Mackie's), a Belfast textile machinery plant, opened a munitions department in early September 1915 which later split into two departments consisting of bombs and grenades. From February 1916 a shell factory, exclusive of the munitions department, was listed in the wage book, and an aircraft department from April 1918. The aircraft department closed at the end of December 1918 and the shell factory closed in February 1919.¹⁵

Examples of private munitions factories in the south include Pierce's engineering firm in Wexford and Kynoch's in Arklow, County Wicklow. Pierce's employed two hundred extra women workers during the war.¹⁶ Kynoch's Cordite Works significantly expanded their workforce. Over the course of the war, the number of employees increased from six hundred to almost 5,000.¹⁷ Among the employees were a number of teenage girls from the locality.¹⁸ The work was very dangerous and the number of workplace injuries very high. On 21 September 1917 there was a huge explosion in the factory, killing twenty-seven men and seriously injuring six more. The factory closed shortly after the war's end.¹⁹

Gender and munitions

It was assumed from the outset that the majority of the Irish munitions workforce would be female. The *Lady of the House* magazine enthusiastically greeted the news that there would be an expansion in the number of munitions factories in Ireland in September 1915, noting that it was particularly good news for women. They hoped that this would bring ‘ample’ employment for girls of ‘various social grades’.²⁰ Women made up 66.4 per cent of the workforce in the national shell factories.²¹ There was a deliberate policy to show preference to women to prevent the creation of new jobs deterring men from enlisting in the army. Government munitions regulations stated that only 5 per cent of the industrial workforce could be male, however this policy was evidently not always implemented in practice.²²

Table 1.1 Gender breakdown of employees in the National Munition Factories, Nov. 1918²³

National factory	Males	Females	Total	Females as percentage of the total
Dublin shell factories	278	531	809	65.6%
Dublin fuse factory	123	434	557	77.9%
Waterford cartridge factory	262	257	519	49.5%
Cork shell factory	34	114	148	77%
Galway shell factory	25	90	115	78.3%
Total	722	1426	2148	66.4%

The gender breakdown of employees varied considerably between the different factories. For example, 78.3 per cent of the Galway employees were female compared to just 49.5 per cent of the Waterford workers. Efforts were made to ensure a supply of local skilled workers for the factories. Accordingly, a large number of girls were reportedly sent from Waterford to undergo training at the Gramophone Works at Hayes near London so they would be ready to begin work in the Waterford National Cartridge Factory.²⁴ This also occurred with women workers at the Cork shell factory and was anticipated for the Galway shell factory.²⁵ Irish women also travelled to England to receive training as shell inspectors in English munitions factories before returning to Ireland to act as instructors.²⁶ Training for female munitions workers was also provided in Dublin and Belfast through the technical institutes. In Dublin, classes were provided for sixteen girls in munitions work at the Bolton street institute and classes for ten girls in lathe work at the Kevin Street School in 1916.²⁷ In Belfast, a special course of lectures for women munition workers employed by Messrs Coates & Sons was

organised in the Municipal Technical Institute in 1917. The course involved twelve lessons ranging from fractions to the construction of automatic lathes.²⁸

Munitions work was comparatively well paid for women's employment. Irishwomen working in munitions factories in Ireland or in Great Britain could earn significantly more than was possible in the textile industry or domestic service. This was especially true after the arrival in Ireland in 1918 of the British trade union, the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW). The NFWW established Irish branches in 1918 specifically to support munitions workers. It was organised on a wider geographical spread than any previous women's union in Ireland and had branches in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Wexford and Londonderry.²⁹ The NFWW led numerous successful claims for Irish female workers, improving their pay and the conditions in which they worked. In April 1918, Irish women workers in munitions factories were finally granted equal pay with women doing similar work in Great Britain. The increases and back pay applied to the shell workers but also to the messengers, canteen attendants, charwomen and cloakroom women, demonstrating the benefit of trade union involvement for various occupational groups.³⁰ Other successful claims included abolishing the unpaid overlapping half hour in the national shell factories in Dublin and succeeding in obtaining the shop-stewards' committee sought by workers in the Dublin shell factory.³¹ Although the NFWW branches did not survive for long after the war, it left the Irish female trade union movement in a much stronger state than on its arrival.

Florence Lea's situation demonstrates the economic benefit of munitions work for Irishwomen. Florence Lea was the daughter of an iron moulder and lived in Sandymount. She worked as an apprentice dressmaker in 1914, earning just two shillings a week. She began working in the Dublin Dockyard Company's Munitions Works in March 1917 and by the end of the war she was earning fifty shillings a week.³² Was Florence Lea typical of the Irish munitions workers? Who worked in the munitions factories? They ranged from former textile workers and domestic servants seeking steady work and higher wages to upper and middle class women entering the munitions industry primarily as a means of supporting the war effort. The diverse backgrounds of the employees however led to conflict and protests about the displacement of working class women by voluntary labour.

Class conflict

The Ministry for Munitions as well as individual factories held advertising campaigns to persuade middle and upper-class women to enter the factories on a voluntary basis, which was partly motivated by the realisation that it would be more difficult to dismiss working class women at the war's end.³³ Although friction was evident in British munitions factories between the middle-class volunteers and the working-class employees, the issue was particularly apparent in Ireland due to the much smaller munitions sector.³⁴ The *Woman*

Worker reported ‘bitter complaints’ against voluntary munitions workers in Belfast in summer 1916.³⁵ A ‘good deal of discontent’ was reported among women on short time in the mills about the employment of ‘amateur ladies’ on munitions work to the exclusion of textile workers in financial distress owing to the war.³⁶

Dora Mellone of the Central Committee for Women’s Employment complained to Sir Matthew Nathan, under-secretary for Ireland, about the recruitment of voluntary female labour by Mackie’s. She argued that girls were being denied employment in other areas on the grounds that they could get munitions work, but were then refused work by Mackie’s in favour of voluntary labour.³⁷ The Belfast Trades Council also objected strongly to the use of volunteers in munitions factories, arguing that the ministry of munitions should ensure that before any volunteers were taken on, every woman ‘who is now unemployed or earning an insufficient wage in the mills and factories in Belfast owing to the war, shall be employed at the earliest possible date’. The Council described the advertisements for voluntary labour as a ‘serious scandal’.³⁸ On 2 March 1916 it stated that it had been ‘established beyond doubt’ that ‘titled ladies and other well-to-do people were working in munitions work at Mackie’s’. Although the Council was reluctant to interfere in the affairs of the trade unions, it was felt by many of those present that the issue was a public matter and ‘one which concerned the community most immediately’.³⁹ The Local Government Board also initiated an investigation into the matter of ‘ladies, amateurs’ being employed in munitions factories in Belfast in place of wage earners.⁴⁰ The Ministry of Munitions representatives, Alexander McDowell, however defended Mackie’s and suggested that the accounts were greatly exaggerated. He claimed that Mackie’s chose their munitions employees on their merits from a long list of applicants and ‘the question of birth or position had, I believe, nothing to do with the selection’. He noted that a number of those selected had already taken courses on using the necessary machinery.⁴¹

The presence of middle or upper-class women in Irish munitions factories is evident in the magazine produced by female workers in Mackie’s factory. The weekly magazine began in late November 1916 and was referred to as ‘Mackie’s magazine or the Turret Lathers Friend’. The editors described it as an ‘outlet for the talent of our shift and for the edification of all in general’.⁴² It was edited and produced by the workers for their fellow workers and contained poems, short stories (often set in munitions factories), an occasional advice column and notices of social events. The magazine appears to have been similar to those produced in munitions factories in Great Britain, as described by Claire A. Culleton in her study of working-class culture in wartime Britain. Such magazines performed a similar function to trench newspapers, in boosting morale and using humour to make the conditions more endurable.⁴³

The Mackie’s magazine combined spoof advertisements for sofa chairs for factory work and extendable arms for their machines, with articles and poetry about the role of their

work in the war.⁴⁴ The poem ‘A country’s call’, extracted below, is indicative of the style of the literary work with the dominant sentiment being pride in their vital role in the war effort:

To aid their country in the awful strife
Came forward the women in every station of life,
To tighten their grip on the Turks and the Huns
Was the work of the women, the men and the guns

With bomb, shell and hand grenade
The womenfold are undismayed
They work with silence and precision
Calmly awaiting the final decision⁴⁵

Another poem used military language to describe ‘Mackie’s finishing corps’:

‘We’ve got an army all of our own
in fact for valour it stands alone
we work with shells all day and night
to show the Germans that we can fight’.⁴⁶

The magazine exhorted the workers to remember that each shell they made would help to win the war and bring the day nearer when ‘our boys will come home o’er the sea’. Such knowledge seemingly helped to raise their spirits when the unpleasant nature of work made it difficult to continue.⁴⁷ Occasionally unease at the nature of their labour was expressed, as evident in one anonymous article titled ‘Thoughts in a munitions factory’:

Midst the laughter and the singing I often wonder why I am with others engaged in such an occupation. To see the row of shells, so innocent looking, yet made for a specific and terrible purpose –that of human destruction –makes one deeply conscious of their work. It is difficult to think of women in the 20th century engaged in such an occupation.

The writer continues by reminding the readers of the ‘havoc wrought by our enemies’ and warns that if they grow ‘too conscious of our work the chances are that our own city might be devastated’.⁴⁸

Who were the Mackie’s workers writing in the magazine? It appears they were primarily middle or upper-class women who entered the factory to assist with the war effort

rather than from economic necessity. Although Culleton assumes the writers of similar British magazines to be working-class, the high level of education evident from the style of the text and the frequent literary allusions in both Mackie's magazine and the papers she references, would suggest otherwise.⁴⁹ For example one issue of the Belfast magazine contained an example of a conversation between Mackie's workers written as though 'people talked nowadays as do the characters in Mr William Shakespeare's drama'.⁵⁰ That same issue gave some insight into the pre-war activities the munitions workers were accustomed to. These included going to the theatre, playing golf, and spending money on clothes. These interests are contrasted with the wartime activities of women: driving ambulances, nursing, making munitions and working on farms. It stated that after the war's end they planned on becoming 'totally frivolous', buying six new hats and wearing their dance shoes into holes.⁵¹ Although a light-hearted humorous piece, the article gives an insight into the privileged backgrounds of the contributors and the readership of the magazine. It also suggests that working in a munitions factory was war service akin to nursing soldiers and was entered into with a similar spirit to that of Red Cross volunteering. This is also evident in the British Red Cross service records of two Irishwomen who worked in munitions during the war.

Emily McVea, from county Antrim, was a munitions worker in Mackie's for most of 1916. Emily came from a Presbyterian middle class family. Her father was a wholesale merchant and the family lived in a first class house with one servant in 1911. Emily, although aged twenty-four in 1911, was not in the workforce.⁵² She left Mackie's in October 1916 and enlisted as a VAD member with the joint committee of the British Red Cross Society and St John Ambulance Association. She served as a voluntary nurse in France until ill health necessitated her return home. She subsequently enlisted again to serve in a clerical capacity in a hospital in England.⁵³ Mary Frances Jones, from Bangor, County Down also made shells in a munitions factory. Her war service combined the munitions work with assisting in the Bangor hospital when required and attending a weekly Red Cross work party which sent clothing and comforts to soldiers at the front and in prisoner of war camps. She was also from a prosperous background with no stated income when recorded at age thirty in 1911.⁵⁴ Evidently these women viewed munitions work primarily as a means of contributing to the war effort rather than enhancing their career opportunities.

The economic motivation for munitions work is however evident in the oral history testimony provided by Isabella Clarke, née McGee, to the Imperial War Museum in 1976.⁵⁵ Clarke, from Belfast, had worked in White Lund munitions factory in Morecambe, Lancashire during the war. When asked why she decided to volunteer for such dangerous work, she bluntly acknowledged her financial motivation:

For the money, because there wasn't much of a chance in Belfast to get a decent job. And it was for the money and my mother was left a widow

with three of us, and she had only a half a crown from the Church to keep us.

Her brothers served in the Royal Navy during the war and her stepfather served in the army. Clarke was just sixteen when she took up the munitions work through the labour exchange in 1915 and had never travelled beyond Ireland before. Her job involved the manufacture of gas shells, which affected her health. After a close friend of hers died from gas poisoning, Clarke moved to another factory and spent the remainder of the war in Coventry. After the war's end Clarke returned to Belfast and worked in a flax mill for a time before returning to Coventry to marry a man she had met while working there. When asked how she felt about her work after the Rising, Clarke noted that she knew little about the Rising at the time, but that after the war the political turmoil made her reflect on her involvement in the war:

After the war I thought twice about what we'd done, what our people had done and what we'd come back to. I thought of what my brothers had fought for and my stepfather and what I'd done as a girl and my sister who worked as a crane driver.

However when asked whether she had enjoyed her war work, she was emphatically positive about it:

Yes every minute of it, it was a very happy time. Well everything was very happy. We were in work and the people we were in work with. Everyone was very happy to help you.⁵⁶

Clarke was from Belfast and possibly from a Protestant background which may have affected her integration into the English factories. The experience of munitions workers from rural southern Ireland may have been quite different. Consequently, while Clarke's account may give some insight into the experience of Irish munitions workers in England, generalisations based on her experience can only be tenuous.

Irishwomen in British munitions factories

Isabella Clarke was one of thousands of Irishwomen who found employment in British munitions factories during the Great War. Although Irish migration to Great Britain had been waning in the years before the war (with the Irish born making up just 1 per cent of the population of England and Wales in 1911) this decline was reversed after 1914 due to the significantly improved employment opportunities in Britain.⁵⁷ Irish labour was obtained

through the labour exchanges and by direct recruitment from officials, agents and contractors.⁵⁸ Advertising campaigns in Ireland to recruit Irishwomen for British factories emphasised the higher wages available in Britain.⁵⁹ For example, in September 1916 a representative of a munitions firm in Barrow-in-Furness visited various towns in Ireland to recruit Irish women to munitions work. All women aged sixteen to thirty-five and at least five feet two inches tall were eligible to apply. The minimum wage was £1 a week, significantly more than typically earned by Irish textile workers or domestic servants.⁶⁰ The divisional officer at Dublin Castle reported in November 1918 that 2,034 women from Ireland had been sent to Britain for government work in 1917 and 847 women in 1918.⁶¹ There was also many more travelling to Britain to seek work in the war industries themselves.

Precise figures for those migrating to Britain to work during the war cannot be ascertained. Weekly returns for the Irish labour exchanges for the years 1917 and 1918 show that the exchanges sent a total of 34,207 people from Ireland to Britain to work on the shipyards and in munitions factories. These figures include both male and female labourers.⁶² Neil O' Flanagan estimates that between 40,000 and 50,000 Irish people migrated to Britain for work during the war through the labour exchanges.⁶³ However, English and Scottish workers did not always view this increased Irish migration favourably.⁶⁴ A report on the state of the munitions industry in Ireland asserted in November 1916 that Irish munitions workers in England were 'not liked' and consequently it was difficult to import sufficient Irish labour.⁶⁵ The *Labour Gazette* records an incident the same month where one English midlands firm went on strike rather than work with Irish men of military age. The dispute was resolved by the Irish workers being returned to Ireland.⁶⁶ Yet this is the only incident of a strike linked to the employment of Irish workers recorded in the *Labour Gazette* over the course of the war.

The Irish women workers in England often formed their own groups, leading to descriptions of being 'clannish', and in one notable recorded incident, became involved in a physical fight with their fellow workers.⁶⁷ Gabrielle West, a supervisor in a Hereford factory, described in her diary clashes between the Irish girls and the English girls in August 1917.⁶⁸ The Irish girls allegedly engaged in provocative behaviour, the English girls responded and the situation escalated from name-calling into physical violence on at least two occasions:

“The Irish sang Sinn Fein songs & made offensive remarks about the Tommies. The English replied in kind. Each side waxed very wroth. The Irish wore orange & green, & the English Red white & blue. This went on for weeks”.⁶⁹

In the end it was decided that the only means of resuming order was to send the Irish girls home. However a 'tremendous battle' ensued at the train station between about twenty Irish girls and rest of the workers and as their train left the station it was pelted with 'rotten

vegetables, eggs and bad language'.⁷⁰ The Irish girls were clearly in the minority in the factory and, although the initial provocation may have come from their singing, they appear to have been bullied and intimidated by their fellow workers. They were physically attacked not only by their co-workers but by locals in the village and received little support from the police.⁷¹

West's account of this incident is mentioned in a number of British histories of women workers in WWI and is often the only reference to Irish female war workers, giving the impression that conflict between Irish and British workers was the norm.⁷² Although Deborah Thom notes the rarity of incidents such as that described by West, others have used West's account with little interrogation or questioned the extent to which it was representative of the experience of Irish girls in British factories.⁷³ David Fitzpatrick acknowledges the increased hostility towards Irish migrant workers but argues that the Irish workers, rather than 'constituting a disruptive faction' in British society, were anxious to demonstrate their loyalty to Britain.⁷⁴ Incidences of deliberate antagonism by Irish workers, such as that described in West's account are likely to have been rare. There is also some evidence of harmonious relationships between English and Irish munitions workers. Isabella Clarke spoke very positively of her experience while the *Cardonald News*, a Scottish munitions magazine, published a poem addressed to a 'beautiful young Irish girl leaving the NPF Cardonald for her home in Ireland'. Although a mawkish sentimental piece, the poem is a testament to the friendship between the two workers.⁷⁵

Nevertheless there is some evidence of resistance from within Whitehall to the efforts of the British government to recruit Irishwomen. In 1918, the Ministry of Labour requested funds from the Treasury to provide accommodation for women travelling from Ireland to England for government war work. They claimed that many of the Irish workers were 'uneducated girls from remote villages' and that 'in view of the difficulties which we have to contend with in dealing with the question of the migration of Irish labour to England' it would be best to avoid situations involving Irish women arriving in English towns late at night.⁷⁶ The Treasury questioned the necessity of recruiting Irishwomen at all, to which the Ministry of Labour responded that for the present, at least, it was essential to draw upon Irish resources but that they would 'of course not draw upon Irish labour for any demand which it is possible to meet locally'.⁷⁷

Nevertheless the government persisted in actively recruiting Irish women for war work and attempted to find ways of improving their particular situation such as supporting schemes to provide hostels and protective patrols in port areas. The Department of National Service even suggested that one means of assuaging fears about Irish girls travelling to England would be to arrange for Roman Catholic priests to accompany parties of Irishwomen if it was found impossible to 'supply their spiritual needs' in the locality to which they were to be sent.⁷⁸ A representative of the Ministry of Munitions noted at a meeting in Dublin of

women workers that munitions employers in England ‘spoke most highly of the morals of Irish girls and their good work’.⁷⁹

Demobilisation

The announcement of the Armistice in November 1918 resulted in the quick closure of the munitions factories in Ireland and Britain. Between the Armistice and the end of April 1920, the number of women employed in either army work or industrial work in the UK decreased by 600,000.⁸⁰ The termination of army contracts combined with the anticipated return of enlisted men resulted in the immediate loss of employment for women in Ireland. There was an 8.3 per cent contraction in the number of women employed in industry in Ireland between November 1918 and July 1919 and a 93 per cent contraction in those employed in ‘government establishments’ – the national munitions factories.⁸¹ By 20 November 1918, three hundred women in the Dublin shell factory had lost their jobs.⁸² It was claimed in December 1918 that the Waterford munitions factory had dismissed some of its women workers after the Armistice on the grounds that they were incompetent. The workers in question had been employed by the factory since its opening and the timing of their dismissal suggested that it was a ploy to avoid having to pay them unemployment benefit.⁸³ By the end of December 1918 all three to four hundred workers at the factory had been dismissed.⁸⁴ The remaining munitions factories in Ireland all closed over the following twelve months.

Many of the discharged workers had difficulty sourcing work afterwards. Very few of the former munitions workers in Dublin had apparently succeeded in finding employment by June 1919. This was attributed to the fact that there were no suitable industries in Dublin to absorb the labour. They were no longer entitled to the out-of-work donation provided by the British government and were reliant on the seven shilling a week unemployment benefit. Former munitions workers in Waterford, Galway and Cork were reported to be in a similar situation.⁸⁵ Although former munitions workers were typically reluctant to enter domestic service, accustomed as they were to the higher pay and greater freedom offered by war work, many had no choice.⁸⁶ It was reported in June 1919 that several former munitions workers had found work as domestic servants in England through the Sligo Exchange.⁸⁷

The Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction of Ireland offered short courses in domestic training for former war workers in 1920 with funding provided by the Treasury. The scheme was intended for:

Young registered unemployed women who desire to return to or enter employment who by reason of war work or war service have either lost their skill or lost the opportunity of gaining requisite knowledge and practice in normal women’s industry or occupation.⁸⁸

Given the limited extent of industrial occupations for women in Ireland, it was decided that courses in general domestic work would be most useful. Forty former employees of Kynoch's cordite factory in Arklow enrolled for a local course. They had lost their employment on the closure of the firm and had no other prospect of local industrial employment.⁸⁹ A course was also run in Dublin for forty-five women, the majority of whom were former munitions workers. Courses in shorthand typing for a small number of applicants who had definite prospects of clerical employment were provided in Dublin, Belfast and Derry from March 1920.⁹⁰ Many Irishwomen however chose to emigrate to seek work, re-establishing the pre-war pattern of exceptionally high emigration from Ireland.

In common with other new areas of wartime employment, munitions work proved a short-lived job opportunity for Irishwomen. The quick dissolution of the industry and the small industrial sector in Ireland meant that the majority of former munitions workers had to return to more traditional forms of female employment such as domestic service. Their experience was very similar to those in Great Britain. By 1920 almost two thirds of British women who entered employment during the war had left it again. The employment rate of British women in 1921 closely resembled the 1914 rate.⁹¹ The historian Susan Pedersen rightly observes that the post-war contraction in women's employment across the United Kingdom was somewhat inevitable given that the most significant areas of expansion were unsustainable in peace conditions and were unique to the demands of war.⁹² The combined need for munitions and the mobilisation of men for the armed forces provided an exceptional opportunity for women to enter the workforce but were generally accepted as specific wartime circumstances.

The demand for labour dissipated quickly in 1919 while the demobilisation of soldiers led to increased competition for the remaining jobs. The particularly high unemployment among army veterans in Ireland (46 per cent of those demobilised were dependent on the out-of-work donation in autumn 1919 compared to 10 per cent in Britain) is evidence of the difficulties within the labour market after the war and indicates the particularly few opportunities available to women workers.⁹³ Demobilised soldiers and sailors were given priority by many employers including the Guinness brewery and the railway industry for the work that was available.⁹⁴ Women also had to contend with the determination of many male employers, workers and trade unionists to force women out of the paid workforce and back into the domestic sphere. For example, although the Dublin Dockyards company claimed in 1918 that they wished to retain female labour in their engineering shops, they 'feared that an objection would be raised by the trade union bodies'.⁹⁵ The Sex Disqualifications (Removals) Act improved the opportunities for middle class women to enter professional work but the Restoration of Pre-war Practices Act negatively affected working-class women. The Act removed the dilution agreements of wartime industry and excluded dilutees from their wartime

positions.⁹⁶ Pedersen persuasively argues that wartime mobilisation of women served to strengthen the growing pre-war perception of wage earning as a temporary activity for women, a brief aberration from their roles in the domestic sphere.⁹⁷

The Great War resulted in the temporary expansion in employment opportunities for women through the munitions sector although this was much less substantial in Ireland than Great Britain. The much smaller munitions industry combined with the lack of conscription in Ireland meant that there was much less need for women to substitute for men in the industrial workforce. The female munitions worker, described by Woollacott as a 'powerful symbol of modernity' was far less evident in Ireland.⁹⁸ Despite these differences, the war acted as a catalyst for Irishwomen's role in the workforce, accelerating pre-war trends such as the move of women into clerical work and away from domestic service. Although the number of munitions workers in Ireland was comparatively small, significant attention was paid to Irish munitions workers with their impact far greater than their numerical contribution to the workforce. Munitions work gave Irishwomen a more visible role in the workforce and enabled them to earn higher wages than was typical for industrial work. It also provided an opportunity for women to directly contribute to the war effort and feel they were supporting their men in the army. However conflict arose between women of different classes which was particularly apparent in Ireland due to the intense competition for available positions. Nationalism also created conflict between Irish and English workers in factories in England, particularly in the second half of the war. However the majority of Irishwomen migrating to Britain for war work integrated well into the factories, sharing with their British counterparts a mix of economic and patriotic motivations for their decision to seek such work.⁹⁹

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- ¹ Susan R. Grayzel, "Women & men" in John Horne (ed.) *A companion to World War I* (Oxford, 2010), p. 267; Angela Woollacott, *On her their lives depend: munition workers in the Great War* (London, 1994), p. 3.
- ² Woollacott, *On her their lives depend*, p.3.
- ³ *Labour Gazette*, March 1919.
- ⁴ Edward J Riordan, "Restraint of Industry" in *Studies: an Irish quarterly review*, vol. 7, no.26 (June, 1918), p. 310.
- ⁵ Liza Marie Toye, "Women workers in Dublin during the First World War" (M.Litt, Trinity College Dublin, 1989), p. 27.
- ⁶ The National Archives (TNA), Ministry of Munitions MUN 4/109, note of conference on the Irish munitions industry, 4 Jan. 1917; Linen Hall Library, Belfast Trades Council, 3 Feb. 1916; National Library of Ireland (NLI) P3212: Report of the twenty-second annual Irish Trade Union Congress and Labour Party, Sligo, 7, 8 and 9 August 1916, p. 62.
- ⁷ TNA, MUN 4/109, Report by E.A. Aston on munitions industry in Ireland, 6 Jan. 1917.
- ⁸ Bodleian Library, Nathan papers, MS 465, Letter from Sir Matthew Nathan to Captain R.C. Kelly, 30 Oct. 1915; Letter from Sir Matthew Nathan to Captain R.C. Kelly, 15 December 1915; National Archives of Ireland (NAI), Chief Secretary Office Registered Papers, CSO RPP 1916/7443, Letters and memorandum from S.C. Harrison to Sir Matthew Nathan as to munitions work in Belfast, 28 March 1916.
- ⁹ Emmet O'Connor, *A labour history of Ireland 1824-1960* (Dublin, 1992), p. 96; Niamh Puirseil, "War, work and labour" in John Horne, *Our War: Ireland and the Great War* (Dublin, 2008), p.184; TNA, MUN 4/109: report on state of munitions industry in Ireland, November 1916.
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