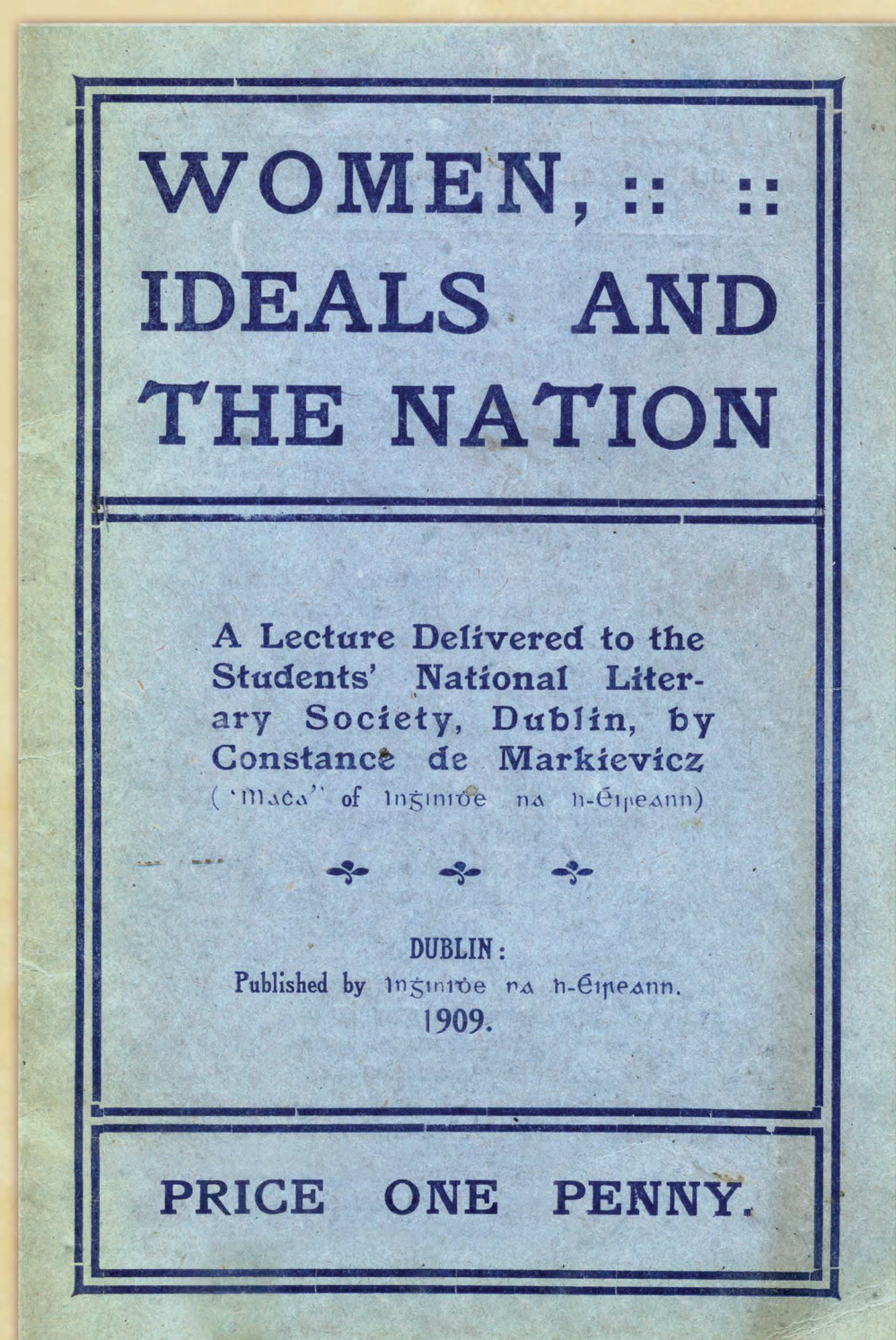


Constance Markievicz

I gCÚIS NA hÉIREANN

Agitator on the path to Revolution



Women, Ideals and the Nation
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In a lecture given to the Students National Literacy Society by Constance on March 28th 1909 was an appeal to women to get politically involved in the nationalist movement: “Fix your mind on the ideal of Ireland free, with her women enjoying the full rights of citizenship in their own nation”. However, in the struggle for suffrage (i.e. the right to vote) for Irish women, Constance argued for the primacy of national sovereignty i.e. when Ireland has a parliament of its own, it can give Irish women the right to vote. Independence must come first. She did not want Irish women to work for change via the House of Commons in London she wanted them to await an Irish sovereign nation to address the issue.

In May 1909 Constance writing in “*Bean na h’Éireann*” suggested the forming of an Irish Army through the training of boys. *Sinn Féin*, while avowedly a nationalist party, did not support the use of physical force (i.e. violence) to further its’ aims and viewed her proposal as beyond their support. After an abortive start Constance with the assistance of Bulmer Hobson formed what appeared to be a scouting organisation that was called *Fianna na h’Éireann*.^{*} For Bulmer Hobson the creation of the *Fianna* gave him a pool of likely recruits for the I.R.B..

Fianna na h’Éireann were from the outset “a physical force organisation”. Its purpose was to educate its’ members in all the requisite military skills from drilling, shooting, tactics and strategy that would enable its members to become an army for Ireland. One of the original members Con Colbert devised a set of drill instructions in Gaelic that were used throughout the organisation.

In 1910 Casimir Markievicz wrote and produced a new play “*The Memory of the Dead*” which is set in 1798 and was performed in Dublin and went on tour in Roscommon, Castlerea and Westport. And according to the Irish Independent it had “too much of the ‘die for Ireland’” But this is the one role, of Norah, for which Constance received almost universally positive notices.

Constance paid for the rent of a hall in Camden Street that became known as *The Fianna Hall*. The large field in front of the cottage in Balally was now used as a rifle range. Constance, having a hunter’s familiarity with guns and rifles, taught Helena Moloney to shoot and they then both undertook the instruction of the boys. At this stage there were only boys. In 1911 Constance travelled to Belfast to inspect the first company of girls. But it was only in August 1912 that she succeeded in having a motion passed, by one vote, at the Annual Convention to open the *Fianna na h’Éireann* membership to girls. This was passed after strenuous efforts by Constance. Mr Sheehy Skeffington, (husband of Hannah Sheehy Skeffington) and editor of the avowedly feminist “*Irish Citizen*” wrote:

“We note with interest this display of anti-feminist spirit in the ranks of the most advanced Nationalists. We feel sure all our readers whatever their opinions of *Fianna na h’Éireann* will wish success to Countess Markievicz in her struggle to obtain equal rights for her sex in an organisation which owes so much to her efforts.”

But while Constance may have succeeded in carrying the proposal and also remain as President of *Fianna na h’Éireann* and Chief Scout she had in fact been sidelined. The I.R.B. had established a group called the John Mitchel Circle (Con Colbert held the title centre and Padraic O’Rian was the Secretary) and which consisted of *Fianna na h’Éireann* members aged over seventeen, and they decided what proposals were to be carried and what rejected before the annual convention of the *Fianna na h’Éireann*. Constance cannot have been completely unaware of the takeover but it is important to note that while she may have been prepared to wait for the wider demands of the suffragettes to be met by a free and independent Irish Parliament some things had to be delivered immediately. In winning the vote she demonstrated that she still was able to exercise a degree of personal influence on the membership.



Countess Markievicz. She is a well-known suffragette.

Portrait of Constance Markievicz
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Daily Mirror Monday May 1st 1916

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