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# **The Politics of Equality: Catherine Mahon and the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, 1905-1916**

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**ABSTRACT** This study traces the involvement of women teachers in the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) during the years 1905-1916. It focuses on Catherine Mahon, first woman President of the INTO, and on her leadership position within the organisation during these years. The influence of 'The Lady Teachers' Own Page' on demands for equal pay and for representation on the INTO's Executive are outlined along with Mahon's success in forcing the issue of representation. Mahon's efforts to recruit new members, especially women, into the INTO and her role in securing the equal distribution of the Birrell grant are discussed. The campaign against the enforced teaching of cookery in national schools, Mahon's confrontation with Dr Starkie and the INTO's refusal to accede to his demands are also explored. The INTO's stance on the question of maternity leave for married women teachers and Mahon's leadership of the INTO during the Mansfield dismissal case are reviewed. The study concludes with an examination of women teachers' achievements in obtaining an equal war bonus in 1916.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) from its establishment in 1868 had women teachers as members. It safeguarded women teachers' interests when these coincided with those of men teachers, but where there was a conflict of interest, women teachers' concerns were likely to be relegated to second place. This was reflected in their low membership and lack of participation within the union. However, during the decade 1906-1916 a significant change took place and the INTO focused, with some degree of success, on women's issues. Catherine Mahon, the first woman elected, in 1907, to the INTO Central Executive Committee (CEC), played a critical role in this development. She raised and fought for equality issues

such as equal pay and representation for women teachers on the INTO Executive and she led women teachers in the fight against the imposition of cookery teaching. But the importance of Mahon's contribution to the development of the INTO does not lie simply in her work on equality issues. Her impact was considerably more wide ranging. Catherine Mahon set the INTO on a course of expansion with her recruitment drive. Her stance against Dr Starkie, Resident Commissioner of National Education, and the most powerful figure in primary education in Ireland at that time, led to the INTO affirming its position as an independent, representative body. During her presidential term Mahon's leadership and lobbying skills won widespread public and political support for the INTO. Yet, her achievements and her fight for equality did not change the power base within the union. Men teachers retained essential control. When the women activists of the decade 1906-1916 gradually withdrew from their leading roles the union made no effort to replace them. It was not necessary to do so because by then women's membership was firmly established and the INTO's future was assured. In the succeeding decades the imposition of the marriage bar and the requirement that women teachers retire at sixty years of age were not fought with the same vigour given, for example, to the fight for salary increases.[1]

The success of women teachers' campaign for equality during the period 1906-1916 may have been short-lived but women teachers' influence on the development of the INTO was of fundamental importance. It is an influence which has been largely ignored. The following study attempts to describe and evaluate the achievements of women teachers during the period 1905-1916. In particular, it will focus on Catherine Mahon's and Kathleen Roche's roles in raising and forwarding women's issues within the union.

### **1905: rule 127(b)**

The INTO's response to the introduction of rule 127(b) in 1905 was an indication of the low status of women within the union at that time. Rule 127(b) was introduced by the Commissioners of National Education as part of their Rules and Regulations for National Schools.[2] The rule decreed that, "Boys under eight years of age are ineligible for enrolment in a boys' school where there is not an assistant mistress, unless there is no suitable school under a mistress available in the locality".[3] The INTO at first viewed the rule as an economy measure. The government, it was claimed, would benefit financially by employing more women teachers on lower salaries than men teachers. It would also benefit by the reduction in salaries of men teachers through the removal of infant boys from their schools. The average attendance of pupils was a critical factor in determining teachers' salary

grades. The INTO objected strongly to the potential loss of salary, promotion and incremental rights of men teachers but it made no effort to safeguard the status and promotion prospects of women teachers. The Commissioners proposed, as a means of preventing a reduction in the salary of men teachers, that neighbouring girls' and boys' schools should amalgamate. Under the Commissioners' proposal the principal of the boys' school would be guaranteed the high status position of principal of the amalgamated school with a potential enhancement of his salary. Women teachers protested at their possible demotion in amalgamated schools but the INTO did not object to this aspect of the proposal. Not only was this aspect not addressed but negative reports, which implied that an increase in women teachers would be damaging to the Irish education system, were highlighted in the Irish School Weekly (ISW).[4]

By 1905 there were 6,486 women teachers and 5,795 men teachers in the service of the National Board of Education. Of these 2,422 women and 3,259 men were members of the INTO. Rule 127(b) was expected to augment the number of women teachers and if the INTO failed to recruit them its future as a representative organisation could be in jeopardy. Rule 127(b), therefore, forced the INTO to take stock and to reassess its position with regard to women teachers. From 1906 onward a change in attitude is evident within the union as it began to address some issues of concern to women teachers.

### **The 'Lady Teachers' Own Page'**

The first indication of change was the publication of the 'Lady Teachers' Own Page' in the Irish School Weekly in February 1906. Kathleen Roche, principal teacher of a Dublin primary school, was invited by the editors of the journal to write a page each week "exclusively devoted to the interests of lady teachers".[5] The editors stipulated that Roche must not write anything that could be construed as "outrageously insulting" by the men teachers.[6] However, in the introductory 'Lady Teachers' Own Page' Roche insisted she would speak plainly and asserted that, "We lady teachers owe very little to the men teachers ... what have the men teachers done towards alleviating our burdens ...? Have not the interests of the lady teachers been practically overlooked?"[7] Roche believed that the small number of women delegates sent each year to the INTO annual congress and the absence of women on the Central Executive Committee was evidence of the low standing of women within the INTO. She advised women teachers to join the INTO so that their interests would be placed "in the forefront of agitation" and to compel the Executive to admit women teachers to its ranks.[8] Roche's objective with the 'Lady Teachers' Own Page' was to have "a variety page dealing with every topic directly and indirectly connected with the lady

teachers in our National Schools”.[9] Hence, she was as likely to discuss matters of fashion such as the “no glove craze”, or a subject of general news such as Lady Aberdeen’s return to Dublin, as she was to discuss an issue of equality.[10]

The ‘Lady Teachers’ Own Page’, in its early years, served an important function. It noted the grievances of women teachers and it both reflected and encouraged concern for issues of equality. It was a forum for discussing these issues and it had considerable influence. The ‘Lady Teachers’ Own Page’ was also a source of inspiration and encouragement to Catherine Mahon who was to become one of the most powerful figures in the INTO during the period. In turn, the ‘Lady Teachers’ Own Page’ publicised Mahon’s achievements and helped her gain national prominence.

Catherine Mahon was principal of a two teacher school in the village of Carrig, Birr, Co. Offaly. She had worked her way up through the monitorial system to become a teacher.[11] Mahon was a member of the Irish Women’s Suffrage and Local Government Association and, from their inception, of the Irish Women’s Franchise League and the Irish Catholic Women’s Suffrage Association.[12] Unlike women teachers in the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in England, Mahon did not seek support for the franchise from the INTO as the rules of the INTO precluded her from doing so.[13] But her involvement with the suffrage movement inspired her work within the union as is evident in her campaigns for equal pay and for representation for women teachers on the INTO executive.[14] Her active involvement with the INTO began in 1906 when she was appointed secretary of the Birr Teachers’ Association. Of the 202 teacher associations only 6 had women secretaries in 1906.

### **Equal Pay**

The question of equal pay was raised in the first ‘Lady Teachers’ Own Page’ and it was the issue which first brought Mahon into the public arena and gave an inkling of her dynamic style. At the INTO Congress of 1906 Mahon attempted to have the following equal pay resolution adopted:

That as women teachers have to teach every subject which is compulsory on men teachers, and have in addition to teach needlework three hours in the week, they should receive salaries at least equal to those of men teachers, and we ask the same scale of salaries for all teachers, whether men or women, for the teaching of compulsory subjects of the codes.[15]

Mahon argued that in voting for the resolution men would be acting in their own interests. They all knew how the Commissioners wished to increase the number of women teachers and reduce the number of men teachers for economic reasons. Mahon was, of course, referring here to rule 127(b) and she continued, "If women were paid equal salaries with men there would be no question of preferment".[16] Ironically rule 127(b) provided a good argument in favour of equal pay. The usual arguments against equal pay that it would have a negative effect on men's salaries, or, that men needed more pay to help support their dependants were not mentioned in the *ISW* report of the Congress debate. Mahon went on to stress the injustice to women teachers. She pointed out that men had less to do than women and "in this case women teachers are actually paid less for doing more work".[17] George Ramsay, CEC representative, proposed as an amendment to the resolution that the question be referred to the CEC. This amendment was lost. Congress did not believe the issue was of sufficient importance to merit such attention but it was willing to have the resolution referred to the local committees. Mahon was satisfied with this proposal and it was unanimously agreed.

Kathleen Roche praised Mahon's admirable speech and congratulated the women teachers in having so "able a champion in the person of Miss Mahon".[18] Mahon cannot have been encouraged, however, by a leading article in the *ISW* which was dismissive of equal pay. In the article, titled 'Teaching as a Profession for Women. Prospects of Lady Teachers under the National Board', the editors stated, "let the existing scale of salaries be increased by fifty per cent as demanded by Congress, and then it will be time enough to discuss the principle of Equal Pay for Equal Work".[19] Approximately a third of the local associations had adopted equal pay resolutions but the negative view of the editors may have contributed to Mahon's decision subsequently to turn her focus to the question of representation for women on the CEC. At an address at the King's County Association Mahon stated that representation on the executive was more important at this juncture because once women were elected to the executive they could argue the case for equal pay themselves. Her address was influential. After its publication in the *ISW* the issue of women teachers' representation on the CEC became to the focus of the 'Lady Teachers' Own Page' and the question of equal pay receded into the background.

### **'Lady Representation' on the INTO's Central Executive Committee**

'Lady Representation' proved to be a more contentious issue than equal pay had proved to be within the INTO. There was no imminent danger of equal pay being granted but women representatives could pose a threat to the power structures within the union. Men, initially, resisted efforts to have any women on the Executive, but they were forced to reconsider their position. As with equal pay, Kathleen Roche brought the issue to prominence in the 'Lady Teachers' Own Page'. She suggested that if women were not given representation they should establish their own associations.[20] Mahon was also to the fore on the issue. Using the suffrage axiom "Taxation without Representation is Tyranny", she argued that women teachers were seeking the franchise from members of their own profession and "... it remains to be seen whether the men teachers will follow the example of that Government which they inveigh against, or show consistency between their principles and their actions by granting to the lady members of the profession representation according to their taxation in the Organisation".[21] Many men teachers recognised the benefits of having women on the executive but they were reluctant to relinquish control. Some supported 'direct' representation which proposed that two places would be created specifically for women teachers on the executive. Women would then be assured of representation but they could not go forward as District representatives in the normal way. One member, Mr. McMillan, aware that teachers might reject this proposal in favour of proportional representation, wrote in the ISW:

... if any are here disposed to press the 'equality' closure they should reflect that it was men who founded the Organisation, who nursed it, through its weak and struggling years, who bore the obloquy when it was traduced, who defended it when it was attacked, and now when it has become strong and influential it would scarcely be fair to ask them to relinquish half the positions they have won for an experiment, the success of which would be highly problematic.[22]

In addition, McMillan thought it would be undesirable to have women contesting elections against men as they would "lessen chivalry on the one side and womanliness on the other".[23] In effect, McMillan sought to guarantee men's control of the union. Women's "womanliness" would be tarnished if they competed against men for executive positions, yet, women's "womanliness" would not be affected if they competed against other women. Going forward for election was not the issue of concern but going forward against men was. McMillan suggested that women had done little to help the development of the INTO. How they could have done so when they were excluded from the power base was difficult to understand.

Kathleen Roche dismissed the notion “that *half* the associated teachers will, or ought to be, contented with *one-seventh* of the representation”. [24] She believed Mahon’s “extraordinary enthusiasm, and her almost superhuman energy are traits seldom met with in one individual, and render her an ideal candidate for the position of vice-president of the INTO”. [25] She urged teachers to nominate Mahon at their local association meetings for the vice-presidency. Mahon also urged the election of women both as delegates to Congress and as representatives on the CEC. [26]

These efforts were rewarded when for the first time in the history of the INTO women were nominated for positions on the CEC. The list of nominations was published in the *ISW* of 9 February 1907. [27] Miss C. M. Mahon was nominated for vice-president by a total of 8 associations. Out of fourteen teachers nominated for the position of vice-president, Mahon ranked fifth on the list. Those ahead of her, all men, were already prominent members of the executive. A minimum of six votes was required for nomination. Mahon was, in addition, nominated to represent District 2 on the CEC. But as she had received only one nomination she was deemed insufficiently nominated. Two other women Miss M. Toner and Eibhlin Nic Neill had been also insufficiently nominated to represent other districts. [28]

Mahon officially declared her candidacy for the vice-presidency in the *ISW* of 16 March 1907. “In the interests of the lady teachers in particular, and of the Organisation in general, I have, acting on the advice of many supporters, decided to go forward for Vice-Presidentship”. [29] Once Mahon declared her candidacy the drive to ensure her defeat escalated. J. R. Nash warned women teachers that if they voted for Mahon men would refuse to grant them direct representation. [30] And McMillan, writing a second time to the *ISW*, warned that Mahon’s candidacy set a precedent for proportional representation and that an executive “controlled by ladies, as it soon would be if numbers and representation must go together, would be found wanting ... from experience I observe that generally they take very little interest in Organisation concerns”. [31] Another correspondent wrote suggesting that Mahon was ineligible for the vice-presidency as she had not been a member of the INTO for three years immediately preceding the date of nomination. [32] Kathleen Roche believed this last allegation completely spoiled Mahon’s chances of being elected. Hundreds



would refrain from voting for her thinking that if they did their votes would be wasted.[33]

Given the campaign to undermine her election, Mahon won a significant number of votes in the contest for the vice-presidency.[34] She received 20% of the votes, the two men candidates received 40% each. As a result of this, and of a motion Mahon had proposed seeking direct representation, the Audit and Finance Committee recommended to Congress that "... Ireland shall be divided into two divisions, each division to consist of four electoral districts, and to return one lady representative and one assistant representative. That Congress elect two lady representatives on the CEC for the current year".[35] After some discussion the recommendations were adopted and two places, for which women only could go forward, were created on the executive. Each delegate was entitled to vote; nine women were nominated. Catherine Mahon was elected 'Lady Principals' Representative' and Elizabeth Larmour was elected 'Lady Assistants' Representative'. [36] It is interesting that nine women were prepared to go forward for election as women representatives under this system. It is doubtful if half as many would have gone forward in an open contest with men. Yet, the terms for special representation suited men best. They gave up nothing. The Executive was expanded from fourteen to sixteen members to accommodate the women representatives. The one advantage women had was the right to go forward for the higher offices of President, vice-president, Treasurer and Central Secretary. The granting of special representation stunted the process started by women teachers in 1906/07 of organising and agitating for their rights within the INTO. Questions such as the propriety of opposing men in elections, or the exact purpose for seeking representation were not properly addressed. If women had to continue to fight for representation in 1907 then practices and procedures might have been established whereby they would have developed the confidence and skills necessary to compete against men teachers. Special representation impeded this process. Women teachers did not clarify in 1907 why it was important to have women representatives. Consequently, when the rules for election to the CEC were altered in 1918 and women were entitled to stand for all positions, few women were prepared to do so.

### Mahon's Organising Work

It was understood that the "lady representatives" would look after areas of special interest to them such as cookery and needlework and that the men would carry on with the 'real' business of the INTO. Elizabeth Larmour largely conformed to this expectation. Larmour was a consistent attender at CEC meetings, often seconding motions but rarely proposing one. Mahon on the other hand began to establish herself as a leading figure within the INTO. She did this through her organising work which was part of an INTO drive to recruit into the union the 50% of teachers who were outside its ranks. Mahon was ideally suited to this work. She was an excellent public speaker, with a forceful, inspiring style of address. During the Autumn/Winter of 1907 and the Spring of 1908, Mahon travelled around the southern half of Ireland, usually at weekends, to address local and county association meetings. While her aim was to recruit all teachers into the INTO Mahon focused on women teachers, urging them to join the INTO, to attend local association meetings and to assert themselves at meetings so that matters of interest to women would be raised and discussed. Mahon's address at a meeting of the Cork Association in December 1907 is a good example of her approach. The first and most important duty of a woman teacher, she declared, was in her school and the second in her home but to allow these two, all-important as they were, to completely absorb all her faculties, "is not only a foolish but a selfish proceeding. She must remember that she also owes a duty to herself – to society – and to the profession to which she belongs".[37] If a teacher:

... settles down to a life of unrelieved drudgery for five days of the week in school, and for one or two days at home, and neglects all opportunity of interchanging ideas with her fellows, or neglects to read and keep in touch with all the questions that affect her life and work, it is inevitable that after some years her faculties will become rusty, her standard of intelligence will become lowered, all the ideals which brighten life will fade away, and she will ultimately develop into little better than a wage-earning machine, and will grow to shrink from going among her compeers ... This, I am convinced, is one of the reasons why so many lady teachers are to be found outside of the Organisation ....[38]

It was unfair of women, Mahon continued, not to fight for improvements from which they themselves would benefit. They should rather take their "part in the agitation for all reforms, honourably and generously".[39] Mahon's organising campaign was successful. Women's membership increased from 2,422 in 1906 to 4,070 in 1909.[40] Total membership of the INTO rose from 5,681 in 1906 to 8,010 in 1909. Membership continued to rise in subsequent years and the INTO's membership

profile changed as women began to outnumber men, reversing the trend which had existed since the INTO's foundation.

Throughout her organising campaign, Mahon did not raise controversial equality issues at CEC level. Had she done so she would have been referred to Congress decisions and the women's position on the CEC might have been marginalised. But when the Congress of 1908 failed to increase the number of women representatives on the executive she again focused on equality issues. In May 1908 the *ISW* published an article by Mahon on 'Women Teachers'.<sup>[41]</sup> In this article she argued strongly for equal pay for women teachers. This was an objective she subsequently pursued when fighting for the equal distribution of the Birrell Grant.

### The Birrell Grant

The Birrell Grant was significant for women teachers. It was an equal pay award and it set a precedent for a future pay award in 1916. Mahon played a leading role in rallying teachers to secure the equal distribution of the Birrell Grant. She used the *ISW* to excellent effect.<sup>[42]</sup> Teachers, since 1906, had been campaigning for the financial reform of Irish education which they claimed was being underfunded by the Treasury. Irish teachers' salaries were much lower than those paid to teachers in England and Scotland. For instance, in England the average salaries of women principal teachers was £109.13.6 and of men £160.15.9; women assistants earned £81.12.6 and men assistants £114.17.6 In Ireland the average salaries of women principals was £82.11.9 and of men £102.19.6; women assistants earned £58.1.1 and men assistants earned £73.2.4.<sup>[43]</sup>

In 1908 Augustine Birrell, Chief Secretary for Ireland, obtained £114,000 from the Treasury to supplement teachers' salaries.<sup>[44]</sup> The Commissioners of National Education proposed that £114,000 be allocated on the basis of capitation and bonuses.<sup>[45]</sup> Women teachers entitled to capitation and bonuses would receive the same amount as the men teachers. However, a large number of teachers, particularly assistants of whom the majority were women, would receive little or nothing from capitation and bonuses.<sup>[46]</sup> The teachers condemned the Commissioner's proposals but could not agree on the best method of allocation.<sup>[47]</sup> On 6 June 1908 the Central Executive Committee of the INTO voted to seek the equal distribution of the Birrell Grant.<sup>[48]</sup> The CEC resolution did not specify that women should be paid equally but its terms implied this. The terms of the supplementary estimate

were laid on the table of the House of Commons on 22 June 1908.[49] Teachers were dismayed that the proposed terms excluded small schools from the grant.[50] Mahon, who had been influential in the CEC's decision to seek the equal distribution of the grant, urged teachers to present a unified front and to lobby their public representatives so that no section of teachers would be excluded.[51] Teachers responded to this call. On the 2 July, 1908 Birrell came under pressure in the House of Commons from MPs of all parties and agreed to review the terms of the grant.[52] At a time of diverse Home Rule and suffrage demands it was a considerable achievement for the INTO to unite both nationalist and unionist parties on this issue. Under continued pressure Birrell acceded to most of the teachers' demands and the Birrell Grant awarded all teachers in the top salary grade £10, all teachers in the second and third salary grades £7 and the Junior Assistant Mistresses £4.[53] The INTO in securing the equal distribution of the Birrell Grant proved the effectiveness of a unified force which skilfully lobbied its public representatives. Mahon played a crucial role in this politicisation process. Teachers responded to her appeal for unity and supported the equal distribution of the Birrell Grant. By the end of 1908 Mahon had affirmed her leadership position within the INTO.

### **The CEC and the Imposition of Cookery and Laundry Teaching in National Schools**

The campaign against the imposition of the cookery and laundry programme illustrated the increasing confidence of the women representatives on the CEC. In 1906 the Commissioners of National Education ordered that cookery and laundry should be taught as part of the ordinary school programme in national schools.[54] No action was taken by the INTO against this rule until July 1907 when a resolution proposed by Mahon and seconded by Larmour was adopted by the CEC. The resolution stated that in all schools in which the teaching of Needlework, Cookery, Laundry Work, Domestic Science or kindred subjects was deemed desirable special facilities should be provided for instruction and apparatus and requisites should be supplied at no cost to women teachers.[55] The issue was not referred to again until, at the end of 1908, there was evidence that women teachers were being threatened with loss of increment and promotion if they did not introduce cookery and laundry in their schools.[56] At almost every CEC meeting from December 1908 until December 1909 Mahon and Larmour proposed and seconded resolutions condemning the enforcement of cookery

teaching by the withholding of increments and promotion.[57] It was agreed that cookery and laundry were important subjects for girls; what was objected to was the expectation that women teachers would provide utensils and materials at their own expense and teach the subject in conditions unsuited to their instruction. This point was emphasised by Mahon at a meeting of the Co. Kerry Teachers' Association:

... we teachers are not antagonistic to cookery we know that the ability to cook and serve food is invaluable to a girl. But granting that, we do not feel that we are called on to become martyrs in the cause of cookery either in health or in purse by introducing it at our own expense, or under conditions dangerous to health in the corner of our over-crowded, ill-ventilated school rooms.[58]

Cookery and laundry, she observed, "can be most profitably acquired by girls when their literary education is finished".[59] Kathleen Roche also kept the issue to the fore in the 'Lady Teachers' Own Page'. She was dismayed at the injustice to women teachers and declared:

In brief, we have got to do as much as the men plus cookery, laundry and needlework! If we do not, we get neither increment nor fee. Therefore, as I've already said, we are doing far more work for far less pay. Verily the emancipation of women has not yet come. To think of it all is enough to drive one into the ranks of the Suffragettes.[60]

There was however, a little ambivalence about the topic. Cookery and laundry were already established subjects in some schools and a number of women teachers were willing to teach both subjects for the fees granted. The CEC continued to press on the cookery issue up to the end of 1909. Mahon brought the issue to Dr Starkie's attention at her first, and last, deputation to the Resident Commissioner on 6 February 1909.[61] Dr Starkie assured the deputation that inspectors would not press the subject if suitable provision was not available and that inspectors would be instructed not to withhold increments and promotion. Mahon did not have confidence in these assurances and the agitation continued.[62] The focus of the agitation was on cookery rather than laundry instruction. The CEC issued a public statement on cookery teaching in October 1909.[63] The danger to health in teaching cookery in one-roomed schools was highlighted to gain the support of such bodies as the Women's National Health Association.[64] The CEC also secured the support of some school managers against the imposition of cookery and laundry.[65]

The cookery agitation was successful. The Commissioners altered the phrasing of rule 120 in their code of 1909-10 which made the cookery

rule less binding than previously.[66] A grant of £3 was also provided to assist in defraying the cost of equipment in the first year's instruction.[67] This helped reduce the expenses on women teachers. The effect of the CEC protests was evident also in the Commissioners' decision in 1910 to provide for appropriate fittings and furniture in the building of new vested-schoolhouses, and to make arrangements in 1911 for the teaching of Domestic Economy in Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction centres for national school pupils.[68] The success of the agitation can be judged too by the decline in the numbers of schools giving instruction in cookery, a decline which was evident from 1911 onwards.[69] This decline however, was counterbalanced by the introduction of the new Domestic Economy course.[70]

### **The Deputation Crisis of 1910**

The INTO's willingness to confront rather than to submit to the demands of Dr Starkie, Resident Commissioner, in 1910, illustrated the increasing strength and confidence of the union. Mahon played an important role in this development. The controversy arose from a report of the deputation of 6 February 1909. This was a deputation at which she had raised the question of cookery teaching with Dr Starkie. Mahon wrote a report on the deputation and circulated it to all INTO branches.[71] Dr Starkie, through his secretary, condemned this as a "garbled report".[72] Convinced of her report's accuracy Mahon promptly defended herself in a letter to the Freeman's Journal.[73] This was an unusual course of action at the time as Dr Starkie's powers as resident commissioner were considerable and few teachers were prepared to challenge him publicly. As a result of her action Dr Starkie refused to receive Mahon as part of an INTO deputation in 1910.[74] Believing Dr Starkie was acting under a misapprehension, Mahon drew up a statement summarising the history of the report of the deputation of 6 February 1909.[75] In particular, Mahon refuted Dr Starkie's claim that the report had been published without his sanction. Dr Starkie insisted that Mahon had betrayed his confidence and he saw her justification of herself as a form of insolence. The CEC, by a narrow margin, resolved not to send a deputation to the Resident Commissioner while he refused to receive any of its members.[76] The CEC majority decision was vindicated by the ordinary members of the INTO when Mahon and George O'Callaghan, both of whom had been banned by Dr Starkie, were elected as Vice-president and President of the INTO in 1911.[77]

Mahon viewed the CEC stance on the deputation question as significant. She observed that since:

... this manly and independent course of action, a course ratified and confirmed by Congress, the teachers' cause had made rapid headway. No longer open to the taunt of being what a certain divine styled 'Starkie's creatures', the teachers had rapidly gained the confidence of all sections of the community, as far as was possible under the civil restrictions which the Board still hung round their necks.[78]

If, as Mahon noted, the CEC had allowed Dr Starkie to ban certain members from deputations it would ultimately have given him a veto in the elections of the CEC and made the union practically "an annexe of the Education Office".[79] Mahon had helped to ensure that this would not be the case and the INTO's independent status had been confirmed.

### **Maternity Leave: rule 92(j)**

The agitation against the imposition of cookery teaching was the first time the INTO had campaigned on an issue strictly related to women teachers. The next issue of specific concern to women teachers arose in 1911 when the Commissioners introduced rule 92(j). Rule 92(j) obliged women teachers to take three months' maternity leave and to employ substitutes at their own expense.[80] Before rule 92(j)'s introduction women teachers had taken maternity leave under rule 92(b), which allowed for one month's paid leave of absence on production of a doctor's certificate.[81] The new rule meant that a married woman teacher would lose a quarter of her annual salary, a minimum of £11, at the birth of each of her children. The INTO demanded the complete withdrawal of the rule and protested strongly against the violation of the vested rights of women teachers who were in the service of the Board on 30th June 1911.[82] Men teachers, particularly those married to women teachers, took a prominent part in the protests.[83] Mahon also protested against the rule and urged its withdrawal. But when it became clear that the managers approved of rule 92(j) and were prepared to enforce it her demands changed. She then sought payment of maternity leave substitutes from State funds rather than at women teacher's own expense.[84] This option would benefit new entrants to the service and was not simply a limited defence of women already in the Board's employment. Mahon's favoured option was not agreeable to all members of the CEC and did not conform to Congress demands. As vice-president of the INTO in 1911 and as President in 1912, Mahon could not be seen to betray Congress, the INTO's supreme authority. As lady representative she could, perhaps, have taken a more independent position, and argued that she was fulfilling the mandate of her constituents. But as a higher officer of the INTO she could not focus exclusively on women's issues. Larmour and Eibhlin McNeill, the two women

representatives, did not take an active role on the issue.[85] Mahon was, moreover, diverted from attempting to gain teacher support for her favoured option when Edmond Mansfield, vice-president of the INTO, was dismissed by the Commissioners from his post as principal teacher in Cullen Boys' National School, Co. Tipperary and the INTO was thrown into crisis.

The final outcome of the campaign against rule 92(j) was that the Commissioners conceded the vested rights of women teachers who were in the employ of the Board on 30th June 1911.[86] The Commissioners also reduced the required period of absence from three to two months. Mahon, preoccupied with the Mansfield crisis, believed the rule was not being applied to new teachers and did not pursue the matter. The men teachers were, for the most part, satisfied with the maintenance of vested rights. The outcome was a limited victory for the trade union principle of vested rights; it was not a victory for the rights of women.

### **Mahon and the INTO Presidency.**

#### **The Dill Commission and Mahon's Departure from the CEC**

Mahon's firm leadership of the INTO during the years 1912-1914 helped mould it into a cohesive, powerful unit. Her handling of the crisis surrounding Mansfield's dismissal was acknowledged as brilliant.[87] During the dismissal crisis Mahon mobilised teacher and public opposition to the Board of National Education's action and her impressive presentation of the teachers' case before the Chief Secretary was a factor in his decision to establish a Commission of Inquiry into the Board's relations with national teachers.[88] The teachers, confident of her ability, revoked the rule confining the President's term of office to one year, and Mahon was elected INTO President for a second consecutive term.[89] Mahon's testimony before the Commission of Inquiry, where she adeptly dealt with hours of close questioning, fully justified the teachers' confidence in her. The report of the Commission of Inquiry was generally satisfactory to the teachers but they were disappointed that it did not recommend the reinstatement of Mansfield as principal of Cullen Boys' National School.[90] In November 1915 a CEC deputation accepted terms of reinstatement which Mahon believed betrayed the principles on which the case had been fought.[91] She tendered her resignation to the CEC but in the interests of the INTO reconsidered and remained until her term ran its course at Congress in 1916.[92] Mahon's stance on Mansfield's reinstatement was not endorsed by the general body of teachers who were glad to have the Mansfield case brought to a conclusion. However, Mahon's opposition to the non-payment



of Mansfield's salary during his period of dismissal was later proved justified as his pension rights for the period were not allowed until the Irish Government adopted a special statutory regulation for that purpose in 1934.[93]

### The Equal War Bonus of 1916

The 1916 war bonus was significant for women teachers. Its significance lay not only in that it was an equal bonus but also in the manner in which women teachers achieved parity with men teachers. War bonuses were regarded as temporary additions to salaries granted to meet exceptional rises in the cost of living.[94] The INTO had accepted the principle of equal pay for equal work at Congresses in 1913 and 1916.[95] The Central Executive Committee of the INTO in its original submission to the Commissioners of National Education sought an equal war bonus.[96] The CEC was supported in its demands by the local teachers' associations. Dissatisfied with the response of the Commissioners the CEC sent a deputation to London to lobby for a war bonus. Prior to its departure the deputation was warned by women teachers not to accept a bonus on civil service terms.[97] The civil service bonus granted 2s a week to women civil servants and 4s a week to men civil servants. The deputation was successful in securing the support of both nationalist and unionist MPs in London. This was a significant achievement at a time when the Easter rising of 1916 had intensified the divisions between the two parties. Joseph Devlin, nationalist MP for West Belfast, commented that he did not know of another question on which the leaders of the two Irish parliamentary parties could come together.[98] George Ramsay, INTO President, believed their combined support demonstrated the non-political, non-sectarian foundation of the INTO.[99]

Up to sixty MPs accompanied the deputation at their meeting with the Chancellor of the Exchequer.[100] The Chancellor's offer was disappointing. He proposed to give a war bonus on the same terms as the civil service bonus. When pressed by Sir Edward Carson the Chancellor said that if a case could be made for differentiating between women civil servants and women teachers he would reconsider the position of women teachers.[101] The teachers, dismayed at the Chancellor's offer, immediately organised a series of protest meetings. There were three main objections to the proposed bonus: (i) its inadequacy; (ii) its discrimination against women teachers and (iii) its lack of retrospectivity. Through the efforts of women teachers and especially of Mahon, who was no longer on the Executive, the issue of

inequality became the predominant one and ultimately the only demand successfully addressed.

Mahon led a vigorous and sometimes contentious campaign for an equal war bonus.[102] Her letters to the daily papers commanded public attention and helped gain widespread support for the teachers' demands.[103] While many lobbyists frequently pleaded the case of women teachers on the grounds of necessity, Mahon based her argument on the principle of equal pay for equal work. She suggested that if the CEC did not push for this principle then women teachers should organise themselves separately from the main body of the INTO. Mahon's proposal may have been prompted by events in the NUT in England. In 1904 an Equal Pay League was formed by members of the NUT. Initially, members of the League were also enthusiastic members of the NUT working within the union as a pressure group. The League, however, had little success in getting an equal pay policy adopted by the NUT. In 1909 the League changed its name to the National Federation of Women Teachers (NFWT). The NFWT consciously involved itself in suffrage agitation which provoked a huge outcry among male members of the NUT. At the NUT Conference in Buxton in 1916, an amendment to establish equal pay as a principle of the NUT's proposed salary scales was ruled out of order. As a result of this defeat many women teachers believed it was useless to try to work in the NUT for equal rights and left the Union.[104] Mahon would have been aware of these developments. The CEC, therefore, had to, and on this occasion did prove its commitment to the principle of equal pay for equal work. All members of the INTO supported women teachers' claims, yet, without the relentless lobbying and pressurising of women teachers themselves it is questionable whether an equal bonus would have been obtained. There is no other example in the history of the INTO where women teachers demonstrated such confident dedication to the pursuit of equal rights as they did in seeking the equal war bonus in 1916.

Mahon's efforts to secure an equal war bonus in 1916, especially her suggestion that women teachers should organise themselves outside the INTO if the executive did not press for an equal bonus, left her open to severe criticism by her former CEC colleagues. The INTO General Secretary attacked her suggestion in the *ISW*:

That any lady teacher should, in these circumstances, consider for a moment the splitting up of the Organisation and the placing of men and women in different and, possibly, opposite camps is a matter which deserves the serious attention of the Organisation as a whole; and I say deliberately that any proposal which would have such a far-reaching and, to my mind, disastrous effect should be met with the condemnation which such a proposal deserves.[105]

The President also attacked Mahon's proposal:

It is deplorable to see in some quarters vague threats and hints for marking out a line of future action for the women teachers as separate from the men. This is highly mischievous, and as a sincere defender of women's rights, I call upon all lady teachers to give such a movement the cold shoulder.[106]

Their denunciations brought to a somewhat bitter close the fight for an equal war bonus in 1916. They also had the desired effect, there was no further discussion of organising women teachers outside the INTO. Women teachers' contribution to the success of the INTO has not been acknowledged. Where there has been historical investigation it has emphasised the INTO's work for women rather than the benefits to the INTO of women's membership.[107] However, a review of women teachers', and especially Mahon's, involvement in the INTO during the decade 1906-1916 would suggest that the INTO benefited significantly from women's involvement. Their championing of issues such as equal pay and representation for women on the Executive made the INTO more relevant and interesting to women teachers so that they joined the union in increasing numbers. Mahon's stance against Dr Starkie in 1910 helped to clarify the INTO's status as an independent representative organisation. Her leadership of the INTO during the Mansfield dismissal crisis won political support for teachers and the Commission of Inquiry, at which she gave evidence, led to improvements in the conditions of service of teachers. These were significant achievements and merit recognition. However, further investigation is required before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

## Notes

- [1] E. O'Leary (1987) *The INTO and the marriage bar for women national teachers, 1933-1958*, Saothar, 12, pp. 47-51.
- [2] The state supported national school system, intended largely for the education of the poor, was established in 1831 and was under the control of a state board of

- commissioners. See, D. H. Akenson (1979) *The Irish Education Experiment: the national system of education in the nineteenth century*, (Toronto: Routledge & Kegan Paul). The regulations and duties of teachers can be found in Appendix A of any of the annual reports of the Commissioners of National Education. They were also published separately in booklet form.
- [3] *Rules and Regulations Commissioners of National Education 1905*, p. 35. For the rationale behind the Commissioners' introduction of rule 127(b) see *Minutes of the Commissioners of National Education 1905*, p. 85.
- [4] See, *Irish School Weekly*, 18 March 1905, pp. 164-165; 25 March 1905, p. 196. [Hereafter ISW] The ISW described itself as "A practical journal for practical teachers and a record of the work of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation". Minutes of CEC meetings, Congress reports, local association meeting reports and INTO financial statements were published in the journal. Its editorial and leading articles were written by prominent members of the INTO. See, T. J. O'Connell (1968) *One Hundred Years of Progress: the story of the I.N.T.O 1868-1968*, pp. 454-455 (Dublin: INTO).
- [5] ISW, 3 February 1906, p. 310.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] Ibid.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] ISW, 10 February 1906, p. 344.
- [11] Monitors were selected from the best qualified pupils in national schools and served a type of apprenticeship before qualifying as teachers.
- [12] See Rosemary Cullen Owens (1984) *Smashing Times: a history of the Irish woman's suffrage movements, 1889-1922* (Dublin: Attic Press), for a review of the suffrage organisations and Cliona Murphy (1987) *The Women's Suffrage Movement and Irish Society* (Brighton: Harvester/Wheatsheaf) for a critical understanding of the place of the suffrage movement in Irish Society.
- [13] One of the fundamental rules of the INTO was that "no political or sectarian topics shall be introduced at meetings ...". See, O'Connell, *One Hundred Years of Progress*, p. 12.
- [14] See Hilda Kean (1990) *Challenging the State? The Socialist and Feminist Educational Experience, 1900-1930* (London: Falmer Press) for an analysis of the politicisation of women teachers in England.
- [15] ISW, 28 April 1906, p. 654.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] Ibid., p. 662.
- [19] ISW, 30 June 1906, pp. 225-226.
- [20] ISW, 17 February 1906, p. 371.
- [21] ISW, 10 November 1906, p. 773.

- [22] ISW, 29 December 1906, p. 978.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] ISW, 16 February 1907, p. 42. There were 14 members on the Central Executive Committee.
- [25] ISW, 19 January 1907, p. 1052.
- [26] ISW, 5 January 1906, p. 994; 12 January 1906, p. 1028.
- [27] ISW, 9 February 1907, p. 24.
- [28] Eibhlin Nic Neill was elected to the CEC in 1911.
- [29] ISW, 16 March 1907, pp. 165, 166.
- [30] Ibid., p. 188.
- [31] ISW, 23 March 1907, p. 215.
- [32] ISW, 23 March 1907, p. 220.
- [33] ISW, 30 March 1907, p. 250.
- [34] ISW, 6 April 1906, p. 271.
- [35] ISW, 13 April 1907, p. 300.
- [36] Freeman's Journal, 6 April 1907.
- [37] ISW, 18 January 1908, p. 684.
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] ISW, 18 January 1908, p. 684
- [40] See, INTO Congress Programme 1906 (Dublin: INTO Head Office) and The Annual Directory of the INTO for the year 1909 (Dublin: INTO Head Office).
- [41] ISW, 16 May 1908, pp. 419-421.
- [42] See ISW, 4 July 1908, pp. 666-66; 11 July 1908, pp. 691-692; 1 August 1908, p. 749; 19 September 1908, p. 143; October 1908, pp. 251-252; 28 November 1908, pp. 460-461.
- [43] These figures were given as part of a parliamentary return issued in 1906. See (1908) INTO Congress Programme 1908, p. 60 (Dublin: INTO Head Office).
- [44] See, O'Connell, One Hundred Years of Progress, pp. 155-163.
- [45] See, Minutes of the Commissioners of National Education 1908 (Dublin: National Library of Ireland).
- [46] Assistant teachers were qualified teachers, the term simply denoted that they were not the principal of a school.
- [47] See ISW, 18 January 1908, p. 694; 25 January 1908; March 1908, p. 106; 14 March 1908, p. 140; 28 March 1908, pp. 209-210; 4 April 1908, p. 230.
- [48] ISW, 13 June 1908, p. 547.
- [49] Hansard (1908) 4th Series, 190, p. 1267.
- [50] The exclusion of schools with an average attendance below thirty five pupils was part of Treasury policy to discourage the continuance of small schools.
- [51] ISW, 4 July 1908, pp. 666-667.

- [52] Hansard (1908) 4th Series, 191, pp. 1064-1065.
- [53] See ISW, 1 August 1908, p. 765.
- [54] Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners of National Education, 1906-1907, pp. 33-34 (Dublin: CNEI). See also, Seventy-fifth Report of the Commissioners of National Education for 1908, H.C. 1909 (Cd. 4873), XX, p. 627.
- [55] ISW, 13 July 1907, p. 703.
- [56] ISW, 31 October 1908, p. 336.
- [57] ISW, 12 December, 1908, p. 542; 19 December 1908, p. 572; 6 February 1909, p. 792; 8 May 1909, p. 361; 3 July 1909, p. 617; 7 August 1909, p. 780; 6 November 1909, p. 355; 20 November 1909, pp. 424, 446; 25 December 1909, p. 587.
- [58] ISW, 24 July 1909, p. 733.
- [59] ISW, 27 March 1909, p. 165.
- [60] ISW, 2 January 1909, p. 622. It is unclear whether Roche was a member of a suffrage organisation but her advocacy of equal rights would suggest that she was.
- [61] See, Vice-Regal Committee of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland) 1913, H.C. 1914, (Cd. 7235), XXVIII.
- [62] ISW, 22 May 1909, pp. 441-442.
- [63] ISW, 6 November 1909, p. 355.
- [64] ISW, 20 November 1909, p. 446
- [65] ISW, 2 October 1909, p. 213.
- [66] Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners of National Education, 1909-1910, pp. 32-33 (Dublin: CNEI).
- [67] Ibid.
- [68] Seventy-seventh Report of the Commissioners of National Education for 1910-1911, H.C. 1911 (Cd. 5903), XXI, p. 11.
- [69] Seventy-eighth Report of the Commissioners of National Education for 1911-1912, H.C. 1913, (Cd. 6986) XXII, p. 15.
- [70] Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners of National Education 1910-1911, pp. v. and 106-107 (Dublin: CNEI).
- [71] See Vice-Regal Committee of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland) 1913, H.C., 1914 (Cd. 7235), XXVIII.
- [72] Freeman's Journal, 20 July 1909.
- [73] Freeman's Journal, 23 July 1909.
- [74] Dr Starkie subsequently banned other members of the February 6th deputation. See, Vice-Regal Committee of Inquiry into Primary Education (Ireland) 1913, H.C. 1914 (Cd. 7235), XXVIII.
- [75] Ibid.
- [76] ISW, 12 November 1910, p. 1196.

- [77] ISW, 22 April 1911, p. 60.
- [78] ISW, 22 July 1911, p. 464.
- [79] Vice-Regal Committee of Inquiry into primary Education (Ireland) 1913, H.C. 1914 (Cd. 7235) XXVIII, p. 927.
- [80] Rules and Regulations of the Commissioners of National Education, 1911-1912, p. 24 (Dublin: CNEI).
- [81] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- [82] ISW, 29 April 1911, p. 86; 15 July 1911, p. 423; 2 March 1912 (Supplement), p. 2; 15 June 1912, p. 1911; 14 September 1912, p. 214.
- [83] See O'Connell, *One Hundred Years of Progress*, pp. 275-279.
- [84] ISW, 19 October 1912, p. 444.
- [85] Neither Larmour nor McNeill were on the following year's Executive. McNeill decided she would not go forward for election in 1914 and Larmour was defeated by Maisie Mangan for her place on the Executive.
- [86] ISW, 23 November 1912, p. 592.
- [87] O'Connell, *One Hundred Years of Progress*, p. 311.
- [88] ISW, 16 November 1912, p. 557.
- [89] ISW, 4 January 1913, p. 779.
- [90] ISW, 21 February 1914, p. 657.
- [91] ISW, 20 November 1915, p. 1045.
- [92] ISW, 8 January 1916, p. 29.
- [93] O'Connell, *One Hundred Years of Progress*, p. 413.
- [94] *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- [95] The NUT in England, after years of fractious debate, voted to accept equal pay as part of union policy in 1919. See Patricia Owen (1988) *Who would be free herself must strike the blow. The National Union of Teachers, equal pay, and women within the teaching profession*, *History of Education*, 17(1), pp. 83-89.
- [96] ISW, 23 September 1916, p. 219.
- [97] ISW, 30 September 1916, p. 247.
- [98] *Freeman's Journal*, 27 October 1916.
- [99] ISW, 28 October 1916, p. 340.
- [100] *Irish Independent*, 20 October 1916; ISW, 28 October 1916, p. 338.
- [101] *Ibid.* Ramsay was probably responsible for recruiting Carson in support of the teachers' demands.
- [102] *Irish Independent*, 27 October 1916.
- [103] *Freeman's Journal*, 24, 26, 30 October; 4 November 1916; *Irish Times*, 24 October 1916; *Irish Independent*, 27, 28 October; 1 November 1916.
- [104] Owen, 'Who would be free', pp. 83-89.
- [105] ISW, 25 November 1916, p. 436.

[106] ISW, 2 December 1916, p. 459.

[107] O'Connell, One Hundred Years of Progress.

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