

Ulster Women's Unionist Council

33 Ocean Building, Donegall Square East, Belfast

33 Ocean Building in Donegall Square East housed the office of the Ulster Women's Unionist Council. The Council had been established on 23 January 1911 as a direct response to the threat posed by the potential introduction of Irish home rule. It was an all-female organisation based primarily in north-east Ulster and became the largest pre-first world war organisation of women in Ireland. The Council's initial purpose was to oppose the introduction of any home rule bill to Ireland. In doing this, the Council established a professional organisation with local branches, a constitution and a paid secretary – a man named Mr. Hamill – on the insistence of the members themselves. There was an affiliation fee of three guineas per year for each branch to fund the activities of the Council.

The Council's popularity grew rapidly, and by 1912, estimates put its membership at between 115,000 and 200,000 women. These women reflected all classes of Ulster society. The involvement of aristocratic women such as the Duchess of Abercorn and the Marchioness of Londonderry gave the newly formed organisation legitimacy and access to leading male unionists. The involvement of many middle- and working-class women allowed the Council to undertake its campaigns in large numbers and with mass enthusiasm. The Council began a propaganda campaign against home rule through speaking at mass rallies and drawing room meetings, undertaking public tours in Britain, publishing pamphlets, writing letters and organising petitions.

The women of the Council were actively involved in organising 'Ulster Day' on 28 September 1912 to create a sense of community and common destiny amongst unionists. Some prominent members of the Council also joined the Ulster Volunteer Force. These women fundraised for the U.V.F. and worked as nurses, ambulance riders and typists, provided medical supplies and deciphered intelligence. However, with the outbreak of world war one, the threat of home rule receded. The Council's work became focused on the war effort through collecting food and clothes, visiting soldiers' families and providing comfort or money where possible.

The Government of Ireland Act 1920 established the state of Northern Ireland and effectively ended the *raison d'être* of the Council. Instead of disbanding, the Council used its influence and membership to become involved in more aspects of unionist society, including the registration of new female voters, political canvassing and working in tally rooms. Furthermore, the Council began to financially support female candidates for Poor Law and municipal elections.

The Ulster Women's Unionist Council demonstrated the ability of women to become involved in political issues to protect their traditions and beliefs. Moreover, it also showed women's ability to evolve and react to major political events in their society.

Ulster Hall

Bedford Street, Belfast

Ulster Hall was built by the Ulster Hall Company, and its opening in 1862 was celebrated with two recitals of Handel's Messiah. It was subsequently sold to Belfast Corporation in 1902. The hall was frequently used for public rallies and meetings that hosted dignitaries such as Charles Dickens, Lord Carson and the Dalai Lama. The hall is still in use today for this purpose.

Ulster Hall has a long tradition of hosting gatherings of women in Belfast. In its earliest days, it was used by the Belfast Ladies Institute as a classroom for cookery lessons. Latterly, in the early twentieth century, it was used by the suffragette movement and unionist women.

The hall became a meeting point for the Ulster Women's Unionist Council after the Council's establishment in 1911. It hosted both the executive council and annual council meetings. It was in Ulster Hall that unionists organised a large rally on the eve of the signing of the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant as a demonstration of their strength and unity. Moreover, the hall was used the following day – 'Ulster Day', 28 September 1912 – for a gathering of unionist women. The text of the Ulster Covenant itself was deemed inappropriate for women to sign. However, to ensure that women could also pledge their loyalty to Ulster and the Union, the Ulster Women's Unionist Council organised an alternative declaration for them. The Council set up signing booths across Ulster on 'Ulster Day' for women to sign this declaration, with the main event being held in Ulster Hall. Consequently, while men signed the official covenant in Belfast City Hall, women went in comparable numbers to Ulster Hall to pledge their loyalty. In total, 234,046 women signed the Declaration, just three thousand signatures fewer than the Covenant signed by unionist men. On 'Ulster Day', Ulster Hall became a symbol for unionist women that they too could be patriotic defenders of Ulster and the Union.

Ulster Hall became a meeting point for the Irish Women's Suffragette Society; the Society's secretary, Blanche Bennett, claimed to have 'filled the Ulster Hall three times' in 1912. The society and its branches frequently met in public venues and held meetings across Belfast. Unusually for a venue so symbolic with unionists, it was in Ulster Hall on 13 March 1914 that the suffragettes declared war on Ulster unionists and publicly criticised Edward Carson for reneging on his promise to expand the franchise to women.

Isabella Tod

71 Botanic Avenue, Belfast

71 Botanic Avenue was the home of Isabella Tod prior to her death in 1896. Scottish born Tod was a pioneer of women's political activism in Belfast throughout the nineteenth century. She was actively involved in campaigns about issues such as female education, the suffrage, temperance and home rule. She began her career as a campaigner by writing anonymously in the *Dublin University Magazine*, the *Banner of Ulster* and the *Northern Whig*.

Tod initially campaigned for better education for girls and to allow them access to university. She was secretary of the Belfast Ladies Institute, which educated upper-class ladies using professors from Queen's University. Todd campaigned to allow ladies take exams to recognise their academic achievements. This led to Queen's setting exams for women from 1869. Ten years later in 1879, thanks to Tod's campaigning, women were permitted to undertake degrees at Queen's. However, they were still taught separately from men.

It was as a suffragette that Isabella Tod gained prominence. In 1871 she established the first suffrage organisation in Ireland – the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society, which changed its name to the Irish Women's Suffrage Society in 1909. The Society had branches across Ulster and was, for a period, linked with the Dublin-based Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association. The organisation proved to be moderately successful in Belfast with women gaining the right to vote in municipal elections in 1887, unlike women in the rest of Ireland, who had to wait until 1898.

Tod was active in Ulster unionism and fiercely opposed the introduction of home rule. She established the Women's Liberal Unionist Association in Belfast as a response to British Prime Minister William Gladstone's attempts to introduce a home rule bill. From this she was selected as the only woman on a delegation to travel around England and speak at public meetings opposing the introduction of Irish home rule. At the time of the second home rule bill, Tod organised a large public meeting for women in the Botanic Gardens to express their opposition. Furthermore, she organised an anti-home rule petition that attracted 20,000 signatures; it was presented to the House of Commons in 1893.



Elizabeth Bell

4 College Gardens, Belfast

Elizabeth Bell was a doctor and suffragette in Belfast in the early twentieth century. She was the first woman in Ulster to qualify as a doctor in 1893. She was a member of the British Medical Association and the Ulster Medical Society.

Bell had a practice in Belfast, which treated women and young children mainly. She was an honorary physician to the maternity and baby home for homeless and unmarried mothers at Malone Place hospital. She also worked for Belfast corporation as a medical officer for its 'Baby Club' welfare scheme. During the first world war, she travelled to Malta and worked as a doctor for the British army in the temporary hospitals for injured allied soldiers.

Bell was active in the suffrage movement and a member of both the Irish Women's Suffrage Society and the Women's Social and Political Union. In 1911 she travelled to London with a fellow suffragette, Margaret Robinson, and was arrested for throwing stones at department stores as part of demonstration activities. She also worked as a doctor for suffragettes who were imprisoned for their activities in Crumlin Road prison in Belfast.

Queen's University

University Road, Belfast

Queen's University was initially established by Queen Victoria in 1845 as part of her Queen's Colleges in Cork, Galway and Belfast. After petitioning by the Belfast Ladies Institute, women were permitted to take arts degrees at Queen's from 1882. While they could register for all courses by 1890, there was no great influx of women students. Queen's Belfast was the first of the Queen's Colleges to enrol women.

Later, in 1908, the colleges were split into the National University of Ireland and the Queen's University Belfast. This made Queen's an independent university governed by an elected senate. The university's charter ensured that it would be non-denominational and give equal status to women, including provision for their election to the governing body. A number of well-known Belfast women were elected to the university's senate, including the educationalist Margaret Byers, philanthropist Margaret Montgomery Carlisle and Celtic studies academic Mary Hatton.

By the academic year 1915/16, women represented one-third of the student population at Queen's. Consequently, the university became a site for female activity in the political and social campaigns occurring in Belfast in the early twentieth century. The university had previously worked with Margaret Byers and Isabella Tod to pioneer the teaching of women in Ireland and to give them the opportunity to access university education. Later, women involved in the suffrage movement began to hold meetings in Queen's. One such meeting in December 1913 was reported to be a 'very rowdy event' and a 'wild scene of pandemonium'.

Female students contributed to the war effort in Belfast during the first world war through the women students' Voluntary Aid Detachment. However, this brought them into conflict with the university. In 1915 the university introduced compulsory ambulance training for all female students to correspond with the compulsory military training male students were required to undertake. Non-participation in the training could result in credits and degrees being withheld. Women students protested at the introduction of such training and claimed they were only bound by the university regulations in place when they entered the university. The result was a standoff until January 1916, when the disciplinary committee of the academic council eventually suspended the requirement after a threat of legal action by the father of a female student whose credits were withheld.

Queen's was also instrumental in the education of many women who gained prominence in the new state of Northern Ireland. These included Eileen Hickey, who studied medicine at Queen's and became the first female president of the Ulster Medical Society, and Irene Calvert, who became the chief welfare officer for Northern Ireland and the first female president of the Belfast City Chamber of Commerce. Both women were elected as Queen's representatives to the Parliament of Northern Ireland in the 1940s.

Julia McMordie

McMordie Hall, Queen's University, Belfast

Julia McMordie (née Gray) was an English-born philanthropist and political activist. She moved to Belfast after her marriage to Ronald James McMordie. Her husband was active in Belfast politics, serving as a unionist M.P. and lord mayor. Julia also became involved in unionist and charitable societies.

McMordie was active in the Ulster Women's Unionist Council from its inception, serving as a vice-chairman and later as vice-president from 1919 until her death in 1942. She was involved in a number of health charities, including the Ulster Hospital for Women and Children and the Cripples Institute. She served as president of St John's Women's Voluntary Aid Detachment for Belfast during the first world war. Health and education issues remained the focus of both McMordie's philanthropic and political careers.

It was through her political activism that McMordie gained prominence. She unsuccessfully ran for a seat on Belfast corporation in 1916 but was elected as the first female city councillor on her second attempt in 1918. In 1920 she was elected as an alderman for the Pottinger ward. She served as an alderman until 1930, when she resigned in protest about the amending of that year's education bill.

McMordie became one of two women elected to the first parliament of Northern Ireland for South Belfast in 1921. This was a noteworthy feat because women, particularly unionist women, were not encouraged to run for election and received little official support. Furthermore, McMordie was sixty-one years of age and had been widowed for a number of years when she decided to run for election. McMordie has been criticised for not making a sustained contribution to the Northern Irish parliament. She did not make her first speech until ten months after her election. However, when she did contribute, McMordie spoke on a range of issues, reflecting her experience in Belfast city politics and interest in health and education. Some of these included female police officers, the education of disabled children, provision for female school inspectors, unemployment and the cleanliness of Belfast's streets. Moreover, she made a number of contributions to the 1923 Education Bill and tabled amendments. She served only one term in parliament but continued to be active in city politics and the U.W.U.C after her retirement.

McMordie Hall in Queen's University is named after her in recognition of her endowment of the university's Students' Union.

Alice Milligan

1 Royal Terrace, Lisburn Road, Belfast

Alice Milligan was born into a middle class, protestant and unionist family in Omagh in 1866. The family later moved to Belfast and lived on the Lisburn road while Alice attended the Methodist College. Despite her upbringing, Milligan became an ardent supporter of Irish nationalism and an active member of the Gaelic League.

Milligan trained as a teacher and began to write fiction. However, the death of Charles Stewart Parnell in 1891 and her introduction to the leaders of the Gaelic Revival movement greatly influenced her nationalist ideas. She began to get involved in nationalist organisations and write for nationalist publications. She was elected vice-president of the Henry Joy McCracken Literary Society and became co-editor, with Anna Johnston, of its journal, *Northern Patriot*. The women later launched a monthly magazine called *Shan VanVocht* (1896-99), which was primarily political but also included writings on history, fiction and poetry. The magazine advertised and encouraged nationalist and cultural meetings. It also spearheaded a political campaign to promote the centenary celebrations of the 1798 Rebellion.

Milligan herself was a prominent figure in the centenary celebrations. She held positions on three of the five sub-committees charged with its organisation, including secretary of the Belfast centenary committee. At the same time she continued to write and in 1904 was appointed as a full-time lecturer for the Gaelic League. Her duties included travelling around Ireland to raise funds for the League by staging plays and shows.

As an active member of the nationalist movement, Milligan set up branches of the Irish Women's Association in Belfast, Moneyreagh and Portadown and promoted it as the 'northern voice of Irish female nationalism'. Although in London at the time of the 1916 Rising, she attended Roger Casement's trial and collected funds for the political prisoners' families. Milligan opposed the treaty and moved to England in its aftermath. She continued to write and publish poetry. Her family returned to Co. Tyrone, where she became active in the Anti-Partition League, wrote radio scripts and fundraised. While Milligan's was one of the most prominent female voices of the Irish cultural revival, her contribution has largely been omitted from the historiography of the movement.

The Ladies Collegiate School/Victoria College

Lower Crescent, University Road, Belfast

The Ladies Collegiate School was founded in Belfast in 1859 by Margaret Byers, a highly influential educationalist, who believed in the necessity for modernisation within the education of young girls. The school was later re-named Victoria College in 1887. The school was initially based at 13 Wellington Place and served thirty-five students. However, due to the expansion of Belfast in the latter part of the nineteenth century and an increased interest in the education of young girls, the popularity of the school grew rapidly. By 1874 it moved to purpose-built premises at Lower Crescent on University Road and catered for over two hundred students.

The school encouraged girls to strive for academic excellence but also taught the skills required for homemaking. Along with Isabella Tod, Byers became a campaigner for girls' education. She petitioned universities for her students to be allowed to take recognised exams. Queen's College, later Queen's University, agreed to this and set exams for the school from 1869. Byers also encouraged girls to go to university and obtain degrees. From 1881, in addition to running the school, she ran a collegiate department within the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Byers's influence was evident through the school's charity and philanthropic work. The school supported missionary causes, and a number of former students became missionaries in the British empire. They fundraised for and had a mentor scheme with the Victoria Homes for orphans and needy children, which was run by a former student. Byers was also involved in the non-violent suffrage movement, the Belfast Women's Temperance Association and the Women's Liberal Unionist Association. Byers died in February 1912, but teachers continued the school in her memory.

Victoria College remained open through the first world war and became the leading girls' school in the country in the Intermediate Board examinations. The college became involved in the war relief by donating school prizes and book money, staging patriotic concerts and knitting socks for soldiers. With the establishment of the Northern Ireland state, Victoria College was included in the remit of the new Ministry for Education and received monetary support from the state for the first time in its history. Victoria College remains a school for girls today, although its location has moved to Cranmore Park.

Winifred Carney

2a Carlisle Circus, Belfast

The youngest of six children, Winifred Carney was born in Co. Down in 1887 to a protestant father and catholic mother. She became a prominent republican, trade unionist and feminist in early twentieth-century Belfast. She was initially introduced to politics through the Gaelic League. However, it was through her employment as a secretary for the Irish Textile Workers' Union that her involvement expanded. She and fellow trade unionist Ellen Grimley worked to improve the employment conditions and wages for female workers in Belfast. She later worked for the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

The nature of the time period and her friendship with James Connolly gave rise to Carney becoming active in the nationalist movement. She attended the first meeting of Cumann na mBan at Wynn's Hotel in Dublin on 2 April 1914. She subsequently became one of the most active members of the Belfast branch of the organisation, working closely with Nora and Ina Connolly. She also joined the more militant Citizens' Army. It was Carney's working relationship with James Connolly that shaped her republicanism. She became his personal secretary and in this role was fully informed of the plans for the 1916 Rising. She was stationed with Connolly in the G.P.O. during the Rising itself, typing dispatches. She also performed nursing duties for him and other wounded soldiers. After the Rising she was interned to Aylesbury prison.

In 1917 Carney became president of the Belfast branch of Cumann na mBan. She then stood as a candidate for Belfast (Victoria) in the 1918 Westminster election. She was the only other female candidate in the country apart from Countess Markievicz. Unlike Markievicz, Carney was unsuccessful and blamed her poor result on a lack of support from Sinn Féin. Moving between Belfast and Dublin, she continued to be active in labour and republican organisations. She opposed the treaty and was known to harbour republicans such as Markievicz and Austin Stack at her home in Carlisle Circus.

In 1928 Carney married George McBride. This was in stark contrast to her republican ideals as he had been a member of the U.V.F. and fought for the British Army in the first world war.

Cumann na mBan Mural Wall

Hawthorne Street, Belfast

The Cumann na mBan mural on Hawthorne Street is one of a number of murals in Belfast that celebrate Belfast women's involvement in the Irish independence movement. Cumann na mBan was set up in Dublin in 1914 with the aim of supporting and assisting the work of the Irish Volunteers. The Belfast branch of Cumann na mBan was established in 1915. It attracted prominent female nationalists in the city, including James Connolly's daughters, Nora and Ina, Winifred Carney, Elizabeth and Nell Corr and Nellie Gordon. Initially the organisation was viewed as merely an 'animated collecting box for men' and an understudy to Connolly's Citizens' Army. However, its role altered significantly after the 1916 Rising. Cumann na mBan then became a much more militant organisation and became involved in the twin issues of suffrage and nationalism.

The Cumann's Belfast meetings were held in the old military huts at Willowbank. The Belfast branch was considered exceptional as members were trained in basic first aid skills, military drills and rifle shooting in a similar way to the Irish Volunteers. It was a particularly active branch during the Rising, with three contingents travelling to Dublin under the leadership of Nora Connolly. Oral history accounts from members of the Belfast branch claim that they were stationed in Liberty Hall and that it was they who went out to find the rebellion leaders to inform them that Eoin MacNeill had called the Rising off on Easter Sunday morning.

Many Cumann members were also members of labour and suffrage associations, particularly in Belfast. However, they were faced with a dilemma between the suffrage and national question. Continuing to campaign for the right to vote from the British government would effectively legitimise its right to legislate for Ireland, a position contrary to the national position. Consequently, many women withdrew from suffrage organisations to pursue the national question first. However, when the vote was granted in 1918, Cumann na mBan campaigned with the Irish Women's Franchise League for the only two female candidates in Belfast, Countess Markievicz and Winifred Carney.

After partition, Cumann na mBan's membership in Belfast declined as many of its prominent members moved to Dublin as a result of political harassment. The organisation was not revived again until the start of the Troubles in the late 1960s.

Nora Connolly

Glenalina Terrace, Falls Road, Belfast

Nora Connolly was the second-oldest child of James and Lillie Connolly. As a child she was immersed in the socialist and political activities of her parents, particularly her father. The family travelled during her youth, living in Scotland, Dublin and America before settling in Belfast in 1911. The family lived in Glenalina Terrace on the Falls Road. Nora ended her formal schooling at age thirteen and began working. In Belfast she worked in a clothes factory in Belfast and became involved in labour and republican movements.

Nora and her sister Ina joined Na Fianna Éireann, a republican precursor to the Irish Volunteers, at a time when it did not yet admit women. They then set up the Belfast branch of Cumann na mBan, which was renowned for being organised and engaged in activities similar to the Irish Volunteers. Separately, Connolly smuggled arms and ammunition for the Belfast branch of the Irish Volunteers. In December 1914 she was sent to New York to convey a secret message to the American leadership of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Prior to the Rising she went to England to accompany the deported Liam Mellows on his covert return to Ireland. On Easter Sunday, prior to the Rising, Connolly led her branch of Cumann na mBan to Dublin even after Eoin MacNeill had revoked the order. She was sent back to Tyrone with her sister on Easter Monday with a counter-order from Patrick Pearse in an attempt to assemble the Northern Division for the Rising. Ultimately their efforts proved unsuccessful. After the failure of the Rising and their father's execution, the Connolly family left their home on the Falls Road. Nora went to America and undertook a speaking tour on the Rising and Irish nationalism. She opposed the treaty and during the civil war, acted as a secretary to Austin Stack, the republican minister for finance.

Due to her father's influence, Connolly was equally committed to the Irish labour movement. She fundraised for the families of participants in the Dublin Lockout. In 1918 she opposed the Labour party because of their stance on the national question, and later she set up the short-lived Worker's Party of Ireland with her brother. She also organised republican workers' clubs in Belfast. She worked as a statistician for the I.T.G.W.U. during the 1930s.

After a fractious relationship with the Irish labour movement, Connolly eventually left the Labour party entirely in 1939 when the party removed the establishment of a workers' republic from its constitution. She eventually became an independent senator on nomination of An Taoiseach in 1957. Connolly is commemorated on a number of murals around Belfast, including one on the Falls Road dedicated to her and her father.

Dame Dehra Parker

Stormont Castle, Belfast

Dehra Parker was one of the most prominent female political activists and politicians in early twentieth-century Ulster. She was a member of both the Ulster Women's Unionist Council and the Ulster Volunteer Force. During the home rule crisis, she was involved in gun-running for the volunteers. Later, during the first world war, she organised nurses' units, assisted soldiers' and sailors' families and worked in the war pensions department.

One of only two women to gain a seat, Parker was elected in 1921 to the parliament of Northern Ireland (which met in Stormont Castle) for Londonderry in 1921. She retained her seat for thirty-five years until her retirement in 1960. Parker was the most successful of all the female M.P.s in the parliament of Northern Ireland. She was the first woman to move the loyal address to the King's speech in 1924. She was the only female to hold senior ministerial office in the parliament of Northern Ireland – she served as a parliamentary secretary for education in 1937 and minister for health and local government in 1949. She was also the sole Northern Irish female privy councillor during her time as a senior minister. During her time in the Department of Education, she helped draft and introduce the 1938 education bill, which made school attendance compulsory until the age of fifteen. Moreover, in her role as minister for health, she introduced the national health service to Northern Ireland.

Parker was a staunch unionist, never once voting against the party during her time in parliament and opposing all issues that she felt would strengthen nationalists at the expense of unionists. She was a leader in the campaign to abolish proportional representation in 1922, defended legislation that encroached upon civil liberties and supported the introduction of promissory oaths for those employed by the government. Parker was not a feminist, although she did support and speak on government measures for women. During the period 1924 to 1929, she was the only female representative in parliament and claimed to speak 'on behalf of the women' of Northern Ireland. However, she refrained from advocating for the active engagement and encouragement of women in politics. When she retired in 1960 on health grounds, her grandson and future prime minister of Northern Ireland, James Chichester-Clark, took her seat.