

[Lawlor on Ryan, 'Winning the Vote for Women: The Irish Citizen Newspaper and the Suffrage Movement in Ireland'](#)

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Louise Ryan. *Winning the Vote for Women: The Irish Citizen Newspaper and the Suffrage Movement in Ireland.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018. 200 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84682-701-3.

Reviewed by Padraig Lawlor (Purdue University) **Published on** Jhistory (February, 2020)
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Lawlor on Ryan, *Winning the Vote for Women*

In *Winning the Vote for Women: The Irish Citizen Newspaper and The Suffrage Movement in Ireland*, sociologist Louise Ryan explores how the Irish suffrage movement was not merely a campaign for votes, but a movement that also offered a feminist critique of the plight of Irish women in early twentieth-century society. Ryan examines how the actions, speeches, and writings of suffragists help contest, as Linda Connolly stated, the “truism that prior to the 1960s, Irish women were passive victims of Catholicism” (p. 209). Instead, Ryan posits, their efforts exhibited ingenuity, courage, and determination to combat oppression in both the public and private spheres. Furthermore, the author seeks to correct the underrepresentation of feminists in history books, which has denied readers a thorough awareness and understanding of the legacy of feminism. To do so, Ryan supports her analysis by employing excerpts from the *Irish Citizen* newspaper, which stands today as a record of the women and men who campaigned not only for the vote but for the feminist movement in Ireland. Published in Dublin from 1912 to 1920, the newspaper sheds light on the philosophy of Irish suffragism. It is here that Ryan’s analysis shines as her inclusion of writings from lesser-known Irish suffragists, such as Meg Connery and Marion Duggan, is a highlight in her exploration of the how feminist campaigners tackled numerous forms of inequality and oppression, or “ventilating evil,” as described by Connery (p. 209).

Before delving into the main chapters, Ryan outlines the newspaper’s contextual background and affirms that the paper stands today as a testimony to the courage and conviction of Irish women and men. The newspaper, she adds, provides us with a vivid portrayal of the issues that concerned suffragists during a period plagued by warfare. Structured thematically, the book depicts how the suffrage movement encompassed a wide range of issues, including morality, work, trade unionism, pacifism, war, and politics. In the opening chapter, “Feminism and the Vote,” Ryan explores how suffragists believed that giving women the vote would provide them a path to political power. This enfranchisement would, in turn, bring women with different qualities into the political sphere. The struggle for the vote, therefore, was linked to many campaigns for equality in the workplace, in the legal system, and society generally. Ryan supplements this analysis with opening commentary highlighting the themes and topics in the chapter’s extracts, making it accessible and broadening the audience to include non-academic readers.

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The second chapter explores how Irish suffragism had powerful links with campaigns for social purity. Suffragists believed that women would bring novel, enhanced qualities into public life that would raise moral standards and tackle various social evils. Such arguments, she asserts, “usually highlighted the caring, mothering role of women” (p. 61). One way early activists sought to increase women’s public role was by becoming poor-law guardians to demonstrate that women were well suited to tackling many of the evils sweeping throughout society. Ryan’s selection of extracts from the *Irish Citizen* serves this examination well as some suffragists argued that women were morally superior to men. Others, however, made their argument based not on moral preponderance, but on the grounds of equality between the sexes.

In chapter 3, “Feminism, Pacifism and the War,” Ryan utilizes the *Irish Citizen* to examine how the suffragists analyzed the war and worked for peace. By placing the Irish suffragists in the broader context of international pacifism, she asserts that “one can see how the suffragists were not only influenced by the dynamics of Irish society but also how they engaged with suffragists in other countries, exchanging shared experiences” (p. 89). The *Irish Citizen* not only represented a drive for feminism in Ireland; it was also a firm advocate for peace. Nevertheless, the debates in the newspaper also illustrated the divisions within the suffrage movement, as pacifism was by no means the only position held by suffragists in Ireland. In addition, the attitudes towards war expressed in the paper reveal that some suffragists’ assumptions about the innate differences between men and women persisted throughout the period. At first, some of these beliefs may appear ill-informed and even naive. However, as Ryan explains, suffragists drew on a varied mix of assumptions and theories to analyze women’s position in society.

The penultimate chapter, “Women, Work, and Class,” examines suffragists’ attitudes about work, class wages, and trade unions, as presented through discussions in the *Irish Citizen*. Ryan’s selections expose how perceptions of issues around class and waged work were by no means definite. Such division is evident in earlier chapters, as reflected in the cases of Margaret McCoubrey and Marion Duggan, both of whom held radical socialist attitudes toward class and sharply criticized the middle-class prejudices of their fellow suffragists. However, here the newspaper extracts offer hints of more condescending attitudes toward the working classes and attempts to justify the middle-class base of the suffrage movement. These disputes, recorded for posterity in the pages of the *Irish Citizen*, provide readers today with compelling insight into the many different perspectives among women who were active in the suffrage movement.

Ryan begins the final chapter, titled “Feminism and Irish Politics,” by noting the growing interest among researchers about the relationship between women and nationalism in Ireland. Furthermore, the recent commemorations of the 1916 rising have inspired several new publications on women’s activist role in nationalist movements. In response, Ryan’s final chapter seeks to contribute to the broader analysis of nationalism and feminism by using the *Irish Citizen* to explore some of the crucial debates between suffragists and nationalists. The selected extracts not only reflect a wide array of perspectives but represent the changing stance of the *Irish Citizen* editorials over time. Subsequently, the *Irish Citizen* emerges as vital because it does represent the relatively small and minority voice—the voice of Irish feminism. This highlights an alternative voice that confronted the dominant views of the church, the state, and the law. Thus, it offers a diversified understanding of Irish society in the early years of the twentieth century.

In short, Ryan successfully demonstrates that the Irish suffrage movement was indeed a complicated campaign that incorporated men and women of differing political and social backgrounds as it sought to create roles for women in public life, through the vote and in other areas such as work, the law, social reform, and politics. Ryan successfully builds upon the first edition of her 1996 book, *Irish feminism and the vote: an anthology of the Irish Citizen newspaper, 1912-20*. Nestled within the book is a selection of primary excerpts that reveal how suffragists discussed problems that are still part of Irish society in the early twentieth-first century. Such analysis is complemented by a rich array of secondary literature surrounding the topics and adds to the excellent work of Rosemary Cullen Owens, Margaret Ward, and Cliona Murphy, among others, ultimately strengthening our understanding of the Irish suffrage movement. Indeed, Ryan presents a sophisticated feminist analysis drawing on a range of arguments and philosophical insights inspired by diverse writers and theorists, which ultimately supports her assertion that “Irish suffragists illustrate that Irish women were not just active agents in our history but that they offered a different understanding of that history” (p. 209).

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