DIVISIONS AND DEBATES: THE IRISH SUFFRAGE EXPERIENCE

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**Historical Context**

After long years of struggle, Irish women over 30 years of age gained the right to vote in 1918; it was another four years before full equality with men was achieved in the Irish Free State, and ten before women in the newly formed state of Northern Ireland achieved similar rights. Because the struggle for the female vote in Ireland, as elsewhere, did not take place in a vacuum, I begin by very briefly outlining the social and political circumstances that formed the background to, and determined the shape of, the Irish suffrage campaign.

The population of late 19th century Ireland was largely Catholic, rural, and both socially and politically conservative; however, power was exercised by a small Protestant minority, with the British parliament at Westminster controlling Irish affairs.¹ The movement for Irish independence had been stimulated by the mid-century famine during which approximately a million people had died, and for which Irish nationalists blamed British rulers. Smouldering resentment was reinforced by the British landlords’ evictions of smallholders, exacerbating poverty and leading to mass migration. Although towards the end of the century the Liberal government under W. E. Gladstone began a process of conciliation by, for example, a gradual transference of land to the peasantry, it was a case of too little, too late. While Irish representatives at Westminster began to argue for a measure of independence—some kind of 'Home Rule' for Ireland—a growing republican movement increasingly resorted to violent methods to achieve complete separation from Britain. Movements for independence or self-determination were, of course, common in this period, but the Irish situation was complicated by the concentration of Protestants in the industrialised north-eastern counties of Ulster who were linked to Britain by culture and religion, and for whom the Union was a sign of strength and progress. The scene was thus set for confrontation between competing nationalist and unionist political and

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¹ The act uniting Great Britain and Ireland came into effect in 1801.
paramilitary movements, the former seeking to break constitutional links with Britain, the latter determined to maintain them. Thus, although the campaign for female emancipation in Ireland can be seen in the context of the progressive expansion of democracy across the United Kingdom, that it simultaneously came to prominence alongside the wider movement to determine Ireland’s political future would prove a complicating factor.

The legal situation of women in 19th-century Ireland mirrored that of their British counterparts: up to 1870 they had no vote in local or parliamentary elections and could not sit on public boards or local authorities; any property owned by women passed into their husband’s name on marriage; and mothers only had legal custody of their children until they were seven years old. Moreover, women were discouraged from entering paid employment, and female academic education was considered both unnecessary and undesirable. Throughout the final decades of the 19th century, a small minority of British and Irish women mounted campaigns to redress all of these issues; mostly middle class, Protestant or Quaker, and experienced in charitable or philanthropic endeavours, they achieved a significant degree of success. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, for example, permitted divorce through the law courts rather than by the prohibitive route of parliamentary legislation, and from 1873 on women separated from their husbands were granted access to, and in some circumstances custody of, children up to the age of 16. Acts passed in 1870, 1874, and 1882 addressed the issue of married women’s property, while significant strides were taken in the area of female education, facilitating better teaching standards, the opportunity to take competitive exams, and, from 1879 on, access to university. Historians agree that the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, led by Josephine Butler in England, was particularly important in bringing women into the public arena and encouraging collective organization. Branches of the Ladies National Association were formed in Belfast, Dublin, and Cork, and

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5 The Ladies National Association was formed by Josephine Butler in 1869 to campaign for the abolition of The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869 which, enforced in garrison towns, subjected suspected prostitutes to forcible examination to determine whether they had venereal disease; if found to be infected, they could be arrested and placed in a ‘lock’ hospital. The international campaign launched by this association