



A woman whose philosophy stood the test of time

HISTORY

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner

By Margaret Ward
UCD Press, €35

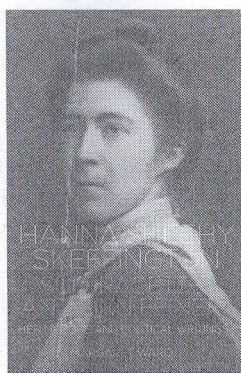


CATHERINE HEALY

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was a woman well used to hostility. Suffragette, republican and polemical journalist, she had a knack for making enemies among the political establishment.

In one of many colourful anecdotes from a new collection of her writings, she recalls managing to sneak onto the stage at a Limerick rally hosted by nationalist leader John Redmond. She refused to climb down unless a commitment was made to include women's votes in the Home Rule Bill, but was duly hustled away by a "threatening mob" and spat at in the face by an elderly man.

No amount of force could quell such a remarkably vigorous campaigner, as this latest book from historian Dr Margaret Ward makes clear. Born in 1877, the first daughter of Irish Parliamentary Party MP David Sheehy, Sheehy Skeffington was handed her first prison sentence at the age of 35 after smash-





Main picture: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington with her husband Francis; above: with her son Owen; left: a press cutting from the court-martial of Captain John Bowen-Colthurst for the execution of Francis Sheehy Skeffington during the Rising
NATIONAL MUSEUM/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ing windows in Dublin Castle, the then seat of British power.

She was a founder of the Irish Women's Franchise League along with her husband, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, a pacifist who shared her surname as a mark of equality, and was killed by a British firing squad during the 1916 Rising. A leading member of Sinn Féin, then Fianna Fáil, she resigned from the latter party after it entered the Dáil, but remained politically active until the end of her life.

Ward, a leading authority on the history of Irish rebel women, provides a contextualised guide to these and other events in this volume. It encompasses Sheehy Skeffington's unpublished memoirs along with letters, articles and speeches on the suffrage and nationalist movements, female education, war and imperialism, the formation of the Irish Free State, travels across Europe and the United States, and her thoughts on books and plays (including Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, which she detested).

What is striking is how fresh Sheehy Skeffington's voice still seems, particularly on the long campaign for women's rights. She argues for equal pay, reflects on the burden of housework, calls attention to sexual assault, and complains of politicians who "temperamentally are wont to ignore women save as ornamental social factors". Eamon de Valera possessed a "mawkish distrust" of womenfolk, she remarks, while Michael Collins had "the usual soldier's contempt of civilians, particularly of women, though these often risked their lives to help him".

The book is particularly vivid in charting the struggle for suffrage – a timely subject ahead of next year's centenary of (some) women gaining the vote. Sheehy Skeffington was a well-connected activist with influential feminist friends in Britain and the continent, and she formed part of an Irish delegation to Russia in 1930, along with other female radicals. She was keenly aware of condi-

tions outside Ireland, and her writings highlight the often overlooked trans-nationalism of this broad movement.

Despite deep divisions over strategy, suffragette networks shared a great sense of camaraderie. Sheehy Skeffington remembers an ex-prisoner at one social event "recounting the fact, as the clock struck 12, that she was in Mountjoy on that day 12 months ago. The table rose and toasted her 'Many Happy Returns!'".

Wider public opinion is also memorably chronicled. During a tour of the midlands, to give an example, Sheehy Skeffington and fellow members of the IWFL found themselves subject to a boycott by Carrick-on-Shannon residents, not even able to buy a few planks for a platform in the wake of clerical denunciation. Protesters gathered in front of their hotel, Sheehy Skeffington writes, "creating a pandemonium for over two hours with motor-bombs, savage yells, obscene jeers [and] mock 'suffrage' orations".

Sheehy Skeffington received a warmer welcome in the United States, where, newly-widowed, she addressed more than 250 meetings over the course of an 18-month stay. Her lectures highlighted atrocities committed by the British on Irish soil, including her husband's unlawful execution at Portobello Barracks, which had been ordered by the notorious British Army officer John Bowen-Colthurst. Proving more than capable of holding her own at the highest levels, she also met US president Woodrow Wilson in January 1918 – an achievement no other Irish republican was able to emulate, Ward notes – and presented him with a petition in support of Irish independence.

The final years of Sheehy Skeffington's life were beset by disappointment. She ran unsuccessfully for the Dáil in 1943 as an independent, winning only 917 votes in South Dublin. She was never recognised as a key figure in the emerging state, as her granddaughter, Dr Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, writes in the foreword to this book; nor in the republic where she and so many others saw little progress on feminist goals.

And yet Sheehy Skeffington's legacy lives on, not only in the rich body of work she leaves behind, but also in the efforts of a new generation of women campaigning for equal rights. A fitting case in point is provided by her granddaughter, an academic who won a landmark equality case in 2014 against NUI Galway after missing out on promotion. As Ward's book was launched in Dublin earlier this month, Micheline had just landed in the US to retrace Sheehy Skeffington's nationwide tour, 100 years on. Hers was a journey that deserves commemoration, and this new collection does so with gusto and authority.