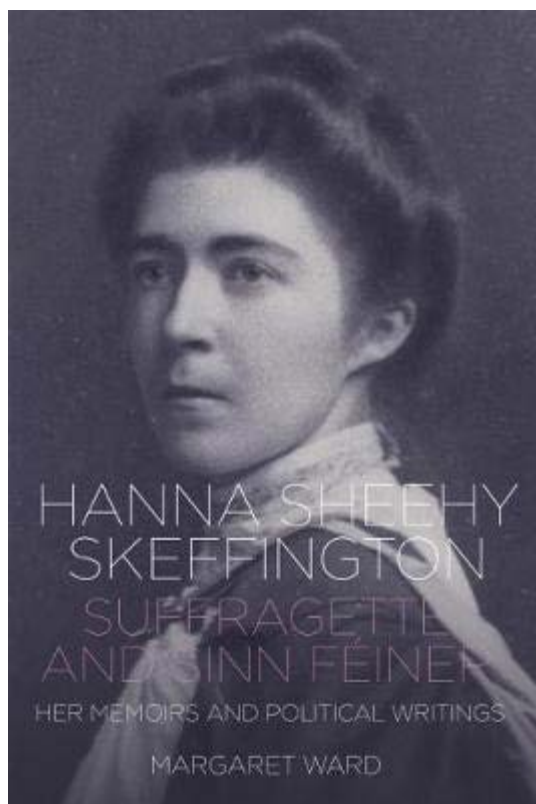


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## Hannah Sheehy Skeffington: A Collection of Her Writings

Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner, Her Memoirs and Political Writings* (UCD Press, 2017, 463pp, €35 HB, ISBN 978-1-910820-14-8)



Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946) is remembered as a feminist and veteran campaigner on progressive issues, and her long life was an extraordinary catalogue of indefatigable engagement: from demanding 'votes for women' in 1902, to republicanism after Easter 1916, to organising aid for republican Spain in 1936, to supporting the Irish Housewives' Association in the 1940s. In the process she helped to found the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Irish Women Workers' Union, and the Women's Social and Progressive League. Together with her husband, Francis, a pacifist murdered during the Easter Rising by a crazed British officer, and son Owen, she made her surname synonymous with liberalism and personal crusades for good causes in twentieth century Ireland. In some respects the Sheehy Skeffingtons were the secular conscience of the nation.

Born Johanna Sheehy, daughter of an Irish Party MP, Hanna's early life was one of privilege, materially and in terms of the opportunities open to her. For all her radicalism, she was a double-barrelled insider. In 1899 she became one of Ireland's first female university graduates, taking a BA in Modern Languages, and, very prestigious in those days, an MA in 1902. Soon, she was one of those 'vivid faces', to borrow Yeats's words, gushing with new ideas in Dublin's cafés and salons. From her family she had acquired an ingrained Fenianism – an indication of how ambiguous the constitutional nationalist tradition actually was – and it was Francis Skeffington who introduced her to feminism. The couple married in 1903. His execution was one of the defining moments of her life. And though it was not something she needed, it won her a calling card as a '1916 widow'. It would be fatuous and facile to counterpose her feminism and nationalism, and, unlike some historians, Margaret Ward never seeks to do so. Hanna saw no contradiction between them and continued to assert the 'woman question', as it was called, throughout the campaign for self-determination. But it's fair to say that while republican before the rising, she prioritised her commitment to the national struggle between 1916 and 1933, playing an important role in canvassing for the Republic in President Wilson's America and in sustaining the anti-Treaty movement after the Civil War. In this she was one of a

number of women catapulted to public prominence by the national revolution.

Perhaps it was because the revolution had been instrumental in their liberation that most took the anti-Treaty side, and a few, like Hanna, identified with socialism too. Counter-revolution brought disillusionment in its train. Disappointed with the status of women in independent Ireland, she devoted more attention to other causes subsequently.

As author of *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life* (Attic Press, Cork, 1997), Ward is well placed to edit this compilation. It features seventeen chapters, including what's publishable of an attempt at writing a memoir (begun in her final year and not much advanced beyond chapter 1), a collection of book and theatre reviews, and a selection of obituaries. In between are fifteen chapters of her letters, her published writings (mainly), and a few interviews and writings about her, arranged more or less chronologically. The titles offer a good summation of the various emphases in her career: women and education; women, the national movement, and Sinn Féin; votes for women; war and pacifism; death of a pacifist; in America; the War of Independence and the treaty; opposing the Free State; Seán O'Casey; travels in Europe; Countess Markievicz; the 1930s; prison experiences; and final years. Each chapter is annotated and preceded by a contextual introduction from Ward, and Ward's introductions are impressively synoptic, judicious, and objective. Though obviously sympathetic to her heroine, she avoids special pleading. As Hanna was a prolific writer and pacifist, who believed the pen should be the only 'sword', Ward has much to choose from. A glaring omission, therefore, is an explanation of how the writings were chosen and how representative they are of her total corpus. The bibliography contains a comprehensive list of books and articles about Hanna, but only a short list of her 'key' pamphlets, journal articles, and book chapters, and nothing on her private papers.

As to the content, Hanna wrote well, in a clear, direct style. A few excerpts are too

short to be of consequence, but the bulk are substantial and will be of undoubted value to scholars. General readers will hardly read it from cover to cover, but will enjoy dipping into it from time to time. Unlike some polemicists, Hanna had a refreshing ability to apply herself to a wide variety of topics without using them to push an agenda or parade her favourite hobby-horses. She is not free of bias, of course. There's a bitterness in her references to the Cumann na nGaedheal leaders, and a sadness in her review of O'Casey's *The Story of the Citizen Army* and her correspondence with O'Casey on the staging of *The Plough and the Stars* in the Abbey Theatre. In the book O'Casey had seized on her husband's death to say he was a better socialist than James Connolly. It was a cheap shot from a cranky genius who could never resist an opportunity to traduce Connolly, and Hanna responded with restraint. The play led to riots in the Abbey for what was seen as an irreverent treatment of the Easter Rising, and here, Hanna comes across as priggish. In many respects it's a pity that the book doesn't offer more of the same, and that its excerpts do not reveal more of person behind the politics.

The production is handsome and a significant contribution to the recovery of Irish women's history in the gestation, birth, and withering away of the national revolution. Yet, one might quibble with the current vogue for celebrating Hanna as a feminist tout court. Feminist she certainly was, but she was also a republican and a socialist.

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Books

1916, Civil War, Labour History,  
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