

Ireland's super-

POLITICS/ HISTORY

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington — Suffragette and Sinn Féiner, Her Memoirs and Political Writings

Edited by Margaret Ward

UCD Press, €33.99



JUST days before the Easter Rising, James Connolly met with Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in Dublin. “You will be glad to know that in the Proclamation we are including equal citizenship for women,” Connolly explained.

In the event of the rebellion succeeding, the feminist, public activist, pacifist, and journalist had been selected to be a member of a civil provisional government.

Like most key junctures in modern Irish history, however, tragedy awaited.

By the end of the events that began on Easter Week, James Connolly — and his vision of an egalitarian Ireland — was dead. So, too, was Sheehy Skeffington’s husband, Francis.

The committed pacifist and feminist was arrested and shot without trial. The British government covered up the killing.

As this insightful book of memoir and political writing demonstrates, the murder was a turning point in Hanna Sheehy Skeffington’s life.

“It would be a poor tribute to my husband if grief were to break my spirit,” Sheehy Skeffington writes in *British Militarism As I have Known It*: a pamphlet banned in Britain and Ireland during World War I, but widely distributed in Latin America and throughout the Commonwealth.

It was Francis, after all, who made Sheehy Skeffington a true follower of feminism. In 1901 he had co-published a pamphlet arguing for co-education in Ireland, with a rising and ambitious young novelist, James Joyce.

What’s most striking about Sheehy Skeffington’s prose is its sheer resilience, nobility, and belief in the concept of justice at all costs: even in the face of despair, grief, and anguish. Francis and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington co-founded *The Irish Citizen* in 1912: the newspaper’s main themes were feminism, pacifism, socialism, and nation-

alism. But giving women a democratic vote in parliamentary elections was always its primary cause; something Sheehy Skeffington would even spend time in prison for.

She served sentences at Mountjoy, Holloway, and Armagh respectively. Her most famous stint came in 1912, for breaking window panes at Dublin Castle in the name of suffrage militancy.

I would place these prison diaries alongside writing from other political figures who penned some of their best work behind bars, such as Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, and Indian pacifist Mahatma Gandhi.

Sheehy Skeffington clearly understood how to use propaganda effectively — and documents in detail the physical and mental process of hunger striking, which she firmly believed in as a political tool.

Articles do appear here about the power of force and violence as early as 1913. But one suspects the trauma and horror of Easter week really did bring about ‘the death of a pacifist’, as the editor of this volume, Margaret Ward, aptly names one chapter.

Ward provides insightful background information to the reader before each of

‘Once independence was gained, women were treated as second class citizens...’

the 17 chapters here, which she arranges thematically.

We’re informed, for instance, that Sheehy Skeffington travelled to London in July 1916 to demand a full public inquiry into her husband’s death. She met with Prime Minister Asquith in Downing Street, who offered her £10,000 compensation in ‘hush money’.

Reaching the conclusion that the British government was not going to admit to its complicity in a politically motivated murder, Sheehy Skeffington then embarked on an 18-month lecture tour of the United States under an assumed identity: its purpose was to inform audiences about British imperialist state-sponsored violence.

This culminated in a meeting with President Woodrow Wilson at the White House in January 1918, whom Sheehy Skeffington presented with a paper smuggled over from Cumann na mBan discussing an Irish claim to self-determination. Other highlights of Sheehy Skeffington’s career included her

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progressive suffragette

Hanna and Francis Sheehy Skeffington



role as director of organisation for Sinn Féin; she also held the position as vice president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

Sheehy Skeffington opposed the Anglo Irish Treaty and the Free State: siding with Eamon de Valera and more hard-line republicans for a time, too.

However, she left Fianna Fáil in 1927 over the issue of an oath of an allegiance, and never joined a political party again. She would become an ardent critic of de Valera's 1937

constitution, clearly viewing it as a bad deal for women's rights.

Until her death in 1946, her journalistic output remained prolific, and she continued writing for various newspapers across the globe on issues such as arts and culture, prison reform, the rights of prostitutes, and other topics on social justice.

Reading the final chapters of this book, one is reminded of the founder of the Land League, Michael Davitt, in his latter years: a lone internationalist marginalised to the

confines of Irish public life, whilst struggling to make a living.

Sheehy Skeffington's politics were probably just a tad too radical for Irish society: especially considering its attitude towards women. They were — as this book continually reminds us — treated as second-class citizens once independence was gained. Unfortunately, this trend of discrimination continued for many decades thereafter.