

## Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (1877-1946)

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Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington died on the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1946 and this year marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her death. She was born in Kanturk, Co. Cork but the family moved to Drumcondra, Dublin in 1887 and Hanna attended the Dominican Convent in Eccles Street. She was a bright student and was one of the few women at the time to receive a third level education. She graduated with a degree and later an MA in 1902. She became a teacher in Eccles Street and also lectured in Rathmines School of Commerce.

She married Francis Skeffington in 1903 and both took each other's surnames. She was a talented orator, well informed in Irish and international affairs and was renowned for her independence of thought and wit. She and Francis were very involved in the suffragette movement and for her entire life she continued to campaign, highlighted anomalies in the new state's legislation if it discriminated against women and fought for women's rights. She never compromised her strongly held views which sometimes left her isolated. She was a liberal and possibly a radical in the increasingly conservative and church bound new state. She was an atheist who refused to see a priest even on her deathbed. She remained a socialist following the beliefs of James Connolly in a society that was becoming more materialistic. When she was imprisoned in Holloway in 1918 Kathleen Clarke widow of Tom Clarke said of her "She was a highly-gifted woman, and one of the straightest I ever met, and I had great admiration for her".



Francis Sheehy-Skeffington  
(1878-1916)

In 1913 she was arrested for throwing stones at Dublin Castle in a feminist march. She was imprisoned but went on hunger strike and was released but was soon rearrested. This was the first of the many times she was arrested for her activities, but it never dented her resolve. She was also dismissed from her teaching job after this incident.

The great tragedy of her life occurred in April 1916 when during the Easter Rising she lost her beloved husband. Along with two other prisoners Francis Sheehy Skeffington was executed without trial by Captain Bowen-Colthurst. Francis was also a pacifist and had no involvement in the Rising but was arrested by Colthurst while trying to prevent looting. She immediately began a campaign for justice and succeeded in forcing the Royal Commission to hold an inquiry. Colthurst was judged "guilty but insane" and spent a period of time in a Canadian hospital but was soon released on an army pension. She refused

compensation of £10,000 from the British Government for the death of her husband.

In December 1916 she undertook a lecture tour of the United States. For the next two years she lectured widely and raised significant funds for the War of Independence. In January 1918 as part of a Cumann na mBan delegation she presented a petition to President Wilson seeking support for Ireland's claim for self-determination. On her return to Ireland in 1918 she was imprisoned in Holloway along with Kathleen Clarke, Countess Markievicz and Maud Gonne. She rejected the Anglo-Irish Treaty and was on the Republican side in the Civil War. She was appointed to the first executive of Fianna Fáil in 1926 but resigned when de Valera agreed to take the Oath of Allegiance in order to enter the Dáil. She objected to many of the elements of the Free State legislation where it discriminated against women. In particular she opposed the 1935 Conditions of Employment Bill which disadvantaged women in the workforce. She also objected to de Valera's Constitution of 1937 with its implied threat to women's right to work outside the home and the state's interference in the family.

A polemic by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington titled "British militarism as I have known it" has been recently acquired by Special Collection and Archives. The pamphlet was banned in England and Ireland for the duration of the First World War, but had a wide circulation in America, Canada, South America and Australia. In this pamphlet which was initially the speech she gave while she was in America outlines in detail the circumstances of her husband's death and her efforts to secure information about his "murder". The next day she endured the ransacking of her home by Captain Colthurst in his search for evidence after the fact. With her young son and maid this was a terrifying experience. She outlines how in July she succeeded in meeting Prime Minister Asquith, she refused compensation or "hush money" as she called it and succeeded in getting him to agree to a Commission of Inquiry. In her conclusion she says "It is the dreamers and the visionaries that keep hope alive and feed enthusiasm – not the statesmen and the politicians". She then appealed to the United States to support Irish freedom as it had declared the reason for entering the war was the "democratization of Europe". In a strangely futuristic last paragraph considering this was written in 1917 while she was in America she writes "At the end of the war we hope to see a 'United Europe' on the model of your own United States, where each state is free and independent, yet all are part of a great federation. We want Ireland to belong to this united Europe, and not be a vassal of Great Britain". Unfortunately it would take another world war for this to happen.

In the general election of 1943 she stood as an independent candidate campaigning for women's issues but failed to get elected. She continued her involvement in public life until her health deteriorated in 1945 and she was forced to slow down. After she died in 1946 an obituary in the Irish Times described her as "the ablest woman in Ireland".

References:

*British militarism as I have known it* by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

UCC – Multitext project in Irish History

*Hanna Sheehy Skeffington* (Life and Times Series no. 5) by Maria Luddy

Wikipedia

Photo of Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington from *Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington: Irish feminist* by Leah Levenson and Jerry H. Natterstad