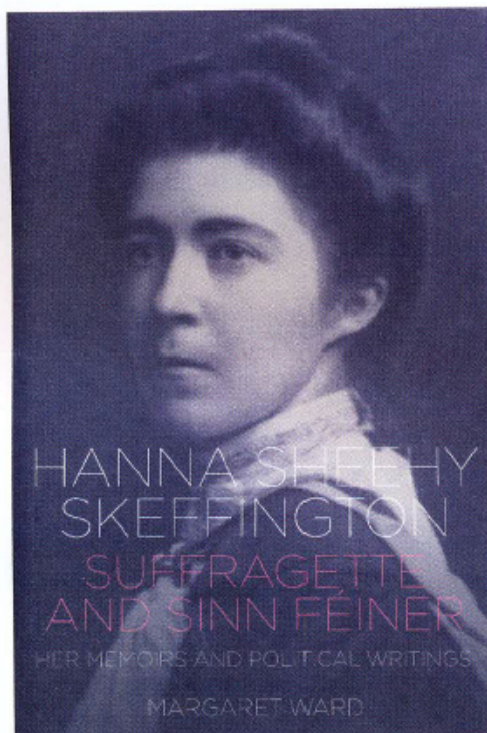


Insight into a pioneering feminist, nationalist and socialist

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *Suffragette and Sinn Féiner: her memoirs and political writings*. Margaret Ward (ed.). University College Dublin Press; 491pp; €35/£30 hb; 23cm; 978-1-910820-14-8.

In the much lauded ‘Decade of Centenaries’, 2018 marks the centenary of women being granted the right to vote in Great Britain and Ireland under the Representation of the People Act (1918), so long as they were over thirty years old and met with certain property criteria. Therefore, the publication of this book is timely. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was a well-known suffragette in Ireland, and this collected edition explores her writings on this subject. We are made aware of the moment when she understood clearly the place that women occupied in Irish society prior to 1918: ‘I was then an undergraduate, and was amazed and disgusted to learn that I was classed among criminals, infants and lunatics—in fact, that my status as a woman was worse than any of these’. From that point onwards, we can see how she fought bravely for women’s rights, despite facing regular hostility from all fronts at times, as this extract from her *Reminiscences of an Irish Suffragette* shows:

‘One memory of a hectic meeting with [John] Redmond in Limerick—I had managed to get on the platform, Limerick being my home town in a sense, when I was recognized too late to throw me off ... I was begged to give a promise of non-intervention, but declined, unless Mr Redmond promised to include Votes for Irishwomen in the Home Rule Bill. So my protest took place duly, and I was pinioned and rapidly hustled down the steps, a



threatening mob accompanying. An infuriated male relative came along, partly to see me off the field, but also to prevent mob violence: his cousinship struggling visibly with his Party feelings. At the gate, the women—they are swift actionists—tore my cap from my head, and the hairpins tumbled down. An elderly ‘bum’ thrust a dirty face close to me and shouted beerily: ‘Are ye a Suff?’ I said, ‘Yes,’ whereupon he spat copiously into my face; my hands were held with cousinly firmness, so I could not ward off the volley. The police intervened to offer ‘protection’—they would take me to the station. Was I being arrested, I asked, and, if so, for what? Oh no, just for my own protection. Being a strong disliker of police by nature, distrustful of protection, I declined with an inspiration: ‘I will not go to the Police Station. I want no police protection from a Limerick crowd,’ I answered. It worked like magic, and I was allowed to go my way in peace, and to clean the spit from my face. Crowds are queer things.’

While 1918 marked a change in terms of women being allowed to vote for the first time in Great Britain and Ireland, in Sheehy Skeffington’s mind, there was still much to be done, and she continued to argue for the rights of women and women’s equality throughout her life.

As its title may suggest, however, Margaret Ward’s book is about more than Sheehy Skeffington as a feminist. It also includes in equal measure writings that explore her position as both a nationalist and a socialist. The book is divided into thematic chapters, making it easy for the reader or researcher to dip in and out according to their interest at that time, although it is beneficial for the chapters to be read alongside each other as some themes and sections may overlap. As editor, Margaret Ward has also helpfully contextualised each theme and section with a brief introduction that sets the scene. In terms of other themes that touch on nationalism or socialism, we learn, for instance, of the pacifist approach that she adopted during World War I. Even these writings, however, heavily feature feminist viewpoints. She pointed out how ‘Women are denied all voice in deciding for peace or war, for arbitration or for massacre; yet it is upon the women that most of the horrors and burdens of war inevitably fall’. While women are left with little choice but to go along with the horrors and burdens of war and must undertake many different tasks that they would not normally be involved in as part of the war effort, it is recognised that ultimately, ‘when the war is over we shall be gently but firmly put back in our place once more—on our pedestals’. Nevertheless, despite the negative connotations of war, Sheehy Skeffington was quick to note that it

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could also produce some promising opportunities for the cause that she wholeheartedly supported:

‘Our guns must be directed not against the Germans ... but against our common enemy—the warmongering politician, the pledge-breaking Government, now so sentimental over the wrongs of oppressed nationalities, while it continues to sweat and bully with impunity the women of the land. These are the enemy: it is these upon whom we wage war until they offer terms.’

Ultimately, she argues that ‘[t]he war makes it more than ever imperative that women must be given a voice in the councils of the nations, that they may exercise a salutary check upon male aggression and militarism’.

Aside from the cause of the suffragettes and the effects of the World War, there were many other political events and situations that exercised Sheehy Skeffington’s mind over time and that are recounted in this work. In 1917 in America, for instance, she spoke out against Home Rule as it was then being proposed, pointing out that ‘the Home Rule act now on the statute book is recognized by the Irish party itself as inadequate and unsatisfactory’, and argued instead for total independence. Throughout her life, she would continue to comment from a nationalist and socialist viewpoint and address milestones such as the War of Independence in Ireland and the establishment of the Treaty, and the creation of the Free State, each of which are dealt with in separate chapters. As she argued in relation to the latter, ‘We have now Partition of Ireland by Britain, dividing the country into the Six-County (or Northern) area and the 26-County (or Free State). We have two



Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

parliaments, both under Great Britain, with British-appointed Governors-General and an arbitrary frontier, settled without consulting the Irish people, either through a referendum or any other way in which a people can be consulted directly’. This was not what she had been aiming or arguing for at all over the course of her writing career and it was met with great disappointment. As she pointed out, ‘I want to stress the fact that the frontier which cuts “Southern” Ireland from “Northern” Ireland is an artificial frontier, presented to us by Britain as *un fait accompli* and in whose making the people had no voice. We in Ireland would like to see one Ireland, because the island is too small to support these two governments and two armies.’

More personal aspects of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington’s life are also explored within this collected edition. For

instance, there are writings which deal with the apparent murder of Hanna’s husband, Francis Sheehy Skeffington, during the Easter Rising, carried out by Captain Bowen-Colthurst, and these clearly outline the effect that his death had on Hanna, as well as the actions that she undertook in order to try and achieve some aspect of justice for him. There are two separate chapters outlining the time that she spent in America and Europe, as well as individual chapters focusing on two well-known contemporaries, Seán O’Casey and Constance Markiewicz. Her prison experiences are recounted in detail and with honesty, and, where appropriate, she outlines ‘the demoralizing and meaningless restrictions of prison’ that she experienced, as well as arguing how ‘[t]he enforced solitude of prison is harsh and spirit-subduing; it finds out the weak joints in one’s armour, and brings into play all one’s philosophy and resourcefulness’. It appears that, despite certain privations, she effectively managed to bring her own philosophy and resourcefulness into play during her numerous periods of imprisonment. Finally, copies of her book and theatre reviews are also included in a separate section.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington died in 1946, having lived through a period of political turmoil in Ireland and two world wars with a feminist, nationalist and socialist attitude, and this collection effectively collates who she was and what she stood for as shown through her writings. Her work indicates that she was an author who wrote clearly and honestly at all times, and often with an individual turn of phrase. This is a thematically organised work that scholars of Irish and women’s history will surely turn to time and again, as well as the more general reader who would like to learn more about one of Ireland’s great female figures, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. ■