

BOOKS



A CLASS ACT
Tom Hanks' first
foray into fiction p18

Born fighter

Suffragette, human rights campaigner and nationalist, Irish feminist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's life played out as a series of battles against injustice, writes **MARTINA DEVLIN**



Long campaign:
Hanna fought
the British
state's attempt
to cover up the
murder of her
husband by an
army officer

NON-FICTION

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Suffragette and Sinn Féiner

Margaret Ward



UCD Press, hardback, 300 pages, €35

There was a dreary similarity to prisons wherever they were, observed the feminist campaigner Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. It was one of her specialist subjects, after serving time in Dublin, Armagh and London for political offences over a 20-year period — including a window-smashing spree as a suffragette.

She went on several protest hunger strikes, and wrote about warders leaving meals all day in her cell in case she weakened. Her willpower was never in doubt, and while she dreaded force-feeding, she was determined to resist it. Fortunately, it wasn't imposed on her, although other suffragettes suffered physical and psychological damage from the experience.

Hanna was arguably the most able, committed and articulate Irish feminist of the 20th century. From the struggle for voting rights for women, to her part in the 1913 Lockout, to her battle to confront the British state over its attempted cover-up of her husband's murder in 1916, to her nationalist activities as an orator for Sinn Féin in the early years of the Free State, she was as principled as she was radical. Her story encompasses the feminist, nationalist and labour movements. But it was woman's inequality which concerned her most.

Clearly, here was a woman of much importance. Her life was a series of battles fought against injustice, in the course of which she lost a series of teaching jobs that were much-needed, as a widow with a young son.

Hanna was born in Kanturk, Co Cork, in 1877, the daughter of David Sheehy, a Land Leaguer and Irish Parliamentary Party MP, colleague of Parnell and Davitt. In 1903, she married

Francis Sheehy Skeffington, who lived up to his feminist credentials by taking her name — as she took his.

Teacher, journalist, local politician and activist, Hanna pushed against boundaries and ridiculed the idea of a woman's place, saying some men thought women were born with a needle in one hand and a rolling pin in the other, but no one spoke of a man's natural sphere.

In 1908, she helped to found the Irish Women's Franchise League, regarding the vote as the cornerstone of democracy and a vital part of citizenship. She realised that if women had the vote, they could influence legislation.

But suffrage activities were "dangerous service" because they could lead to imprisonment. Impatient with being fobbed off by patriarchal politicians, suffragettes embarked on direct action.

In 1912, Hanna served her first prison term for smashing windows in Dublin Castle to highlight women's disenfranchisement. On the day she was handed a two-month jail term, she noted that a wife-beater received a lighter sentence.

The suffragettes finally made their voices heard, and almost a century ago, in 1918, Westminster introduced votes for women in Britain and Ireland provided they were over the age of 30 and satisfied a property qualification.

If there was one characteristic which defined Hanna, it was her refusal to allow the hard questions to go unasked. After the 1916 Rising, she highlighted the British establishment's attempts to camouflage her husband's murder by an out-of-control army captain, John Bowen-Colthurst of Dripsey Castle in Cork (the writer Elizabeth Bowen was a relative).

Skeffington was a pacifist and an idealist — James Joyce, a UCD friend, called him "Hairy Jaysus". During Easter Week, Skeffington was attempting to stop looting when taken into custody. Bowen-Colthurst ordered him before a firing squad without either charge or trial, and afterwards lied to and bullied Hanna's sisters when they called to Portobello Barracks inquiring for Skeffington. Two other men innocent of any crime were killed at the same time.

Blocked by the military authorities, Hanna took her case to the highest political level, helped by an honourable army officer, Sir Francis Vane, who

was horrified at Bowen-Colthurst's rampages. She rejected £10,000 "hush money" from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and pushed for a Commission of Inquiry, where she had her say in public.

In her frequently republished pamphlet 'British Militarism As I Have Known It', she told how Skeffington was buried secretly in Portobello Barracks' yard, and fumed — with justification — about the body being exhumed and handed over to her father-in-law without her knowledge, "on condition not to allow any 'demonstration'". She also told of her husband's walking stick being carried back to Belfast by the regiment as a souvenir, while his Votes for Women badge was taken from his dead body but later retrieved.

She also described how Bowen-Colthurst led a raiding party on the house while Hanna and her young son Owen were there, attempting to find post-facto incriminating evidence against Skeffington. Subsequently, the officer was court-martialled, found guilty but insane and sent to Broadmoor asylum in England. After 18 months he was miraculously cured and released.

These accounts are all included in a fascinating collection of Hanna's writing compiled and contextualised

by feminist historian Margaret Ward, author of the classic text *Unmanageable Revolutionaries — Women and Irish Nationalism*.

The collection, which also comprises Hanna's unpublished memoir fragments, is an important addition to our understanding of a woman ahead of her time. Excellent use is made of historic photographs, which incidentally highlight her love of hats, showing a human side to the dedicated activist. Other images include a suffrage poster for a 'Great Protest Meeting Against Cat and Mouse Act... Down with Prison Torture and Government Coercion'. A foreword by Hanna's granddaughter, Micheline Sheehy Skeff-

Hanna called 1916 'the revolution that missed' because it didn't free women and she was an outspoken critic of the 1937 Constitution

ington, contributes to the whole. After independence, the anti-woman ethos of the new Free State was a disappointment to Hanna and other campaigners. She called 1916 "the revolution that missed" because it didn't free women and was an outspoken critic of the 1937 Constitution, recognising how it rolled back the Proclamation.

She was also a critic of Partition. Served with an order in 1926 banning her from entering the North, she nevertheless travelled there in 1933 to speak on behalf of republican prisoners in Armagh. At her trial there, she said: "I recognise no partition. I recognise that it is not a crime to be in my own country."

In 1946 she ran unsuccessfully for the Dáil with the Women's Social and Progressive League. Her forthright manifesto was typical of Hanna: "Under the 1916 Proclamation, Irish women were given equal citizenship, equal rights and equal opportunities, and subsequent constitutions have filched these, or smothered them in mere 'empty formula'."

On the question of Ireland first versus women first — used repeatedly to deter women from being militant in case they undermined the nationalist movement — she was always on the side of women. No better champion.



IMAGE COURTESY OF THE SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON FAMILY