

A clear, distinctive voice on feminism and nationalism

Margaret Ward adds to her 1997 biography of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington an edited and contextualised volume of her writings

Catriona Crowe

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

By Margaret Ward
UCD Press, 300pp, €35

Next year will be the centenary of the British Representation of the People Act, 1918, which granted the franchise to women over the age of 30 who met certain marriage, property or educational criteria, and to the 40 per cent of men over 21 who had previously been excluded from voting by property qualifications. Irish women had to wait until 1922 to achieve universal suffrage for those over the age of 21 (English women had to wait until 1928).

The Act was passed by the British parliament in June, and in November, the Parliament (Qualification of Women) Act, 1918, allowed women to stand for parliament. Famously, Constance Markievicz was the only woman returned to parliament in the December 1918 election, and she refused



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One of the people most involved in the militant campaign for female suffrage in Ireland was Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, daughter of middle-class Irish Parliamentary Party MP, David Sheehy; founder of the Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908; imprisoned for breaking windows in 1912-13; campaigner for women's education; member of Sinn Féin and later, Fian-na Fáil; wife and partner of Francis Skeffington, who was murdered by a British officer in 1916 as a result of Skeffington's attempts to stop looting during the Rising; prolific journalist; Dublin City councillor; and mother of Owen Sheehy Skeffington.

She was also an assiduous keeper of documents. The reason we know so much about Hanna (there are three biographies and countless articles and book chapters) is that she kept correspondence, posters, leaflets, newspapers and photographs, and this significant archive was given to the National Library by Owen and his wife Andrée.

Timeline

Margaret Ward, a pioneer in the history of Irish 20th-century nationalist revolutionary women, now adds to her 1997 biography of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington an edited and contextualised volume of her writings, a very useful array of the work of a fine polemical writer.

The book covers Hanna's unpublished memoir material, and her pieces on women's education, women and the vote, women and nationalism, war and pacifism, her work in America after the Rising, her reflections on feminism and the new Irish State, her public row with Sean O'Casey over *The Plough and the Stars*, her memories of key personalities, her book and theatre reviews, and obituaries after her death in 1946. Ward introduces each section with a helpful overview of what it contains, and also provides a timeline of Hanna's life and activities.

The section on Votes for Women – most of the pieces taken from *The Irish Citizen*,

the journal of the Irish women's Franchise League (founded by Hanna, among others) – is a vibrant, rollercoaster account of the Irish militant suffrage campaign from 1912 to 1914, contextualised by Hanna's *Reminiscences of an Irish Suffragette*, written in 1941. The value of this kind of volume is demonstrated by the immediacy, passion and humour of the prose, happening in real time when no one knew the outcome.

There is a wonderful moment where Hanna describes Anna Haslam, the grande dame of "constitutional" suffragism, visiting her in Mountjoy, where she was imprisoned for breaking government windows: "Mrs Haslam came, with a differ-

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ence: 'Don't think I approve – but here's a pot of verbena I brought you. I am not here in my official capacity, of course – the Irish Women Suffrage and Local Government Association strongly disapprove of violence as pulling back the cause. But here's some loganberry jam – I made it myself... I appreciated and understood.'

This exchange perfectly encapsulates the big debate between non-violent and militant approaches to suffragism, a debate which still divides analysts. Hanna's obvious affection for a woman who devoted her life to achieving votes for women, in spite of their tactical differences, matches

the affection Haslam obviously felt for her.

Perhaps the most poignant document reproduced here is Hanna's account of her discovery of her husband's murder in Easter Week, 1916, and her efforts to find out what had happened. Frank, a more convinced pacifist than his wife, had come to the aid of an injured British soldier, and had attempted to stop looting in the city centre (an event described by Hanna as "Dublin's slum on holiday"). He was arrested by a patrol from Portobello Barracks, where he was shot dead without trial, with two other journalists, by order of Capt Bowen-Colthurst, later found insane by court-martial. This happened on the Wednesday of Easter Week; Hanna received no confirmation until Friday. In the meantime her house was ransacked by the British army and many documents taken away, some never to be returned.

Self-control

She was, of course, heartbroken, but set out to achieve an inquiry into her husband's death, and did so – the Simon Inquiry reported in November 1916, exposing many British army crimes during Easter Week. Hanna then wrote up her experiences in a pamphlet titled *British Militarism as I Have Known it*, which built on the speech she had made on her tour of the US during 1916.

She describes her husband thus: "Francis Sheehy Skeffington was an anti-militarist, a fighting pacifist, a man gentle and kindly even to his bitterest opponents, who always ranged himself on the side of the weak against the strong, whether the struggle was one of class, sex or race domination... He had a marvellous, an inextinguishable good humour, a keen joy in life,

■ From left: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Shannon and Kate Sheedy, in their graduation robes and mortar-boards, carrying a banner saying "Votes" (for women)

great faith in humanity."

It must have taken immense self-control and willpower to suppress her grief at so terrible a loss and turn her husband's murder into a highly effective propaganda tool against the British. In an obituary of Hanna reproduced here, Cathal O'Shannon describes her as "the most determined and most self-willed woman in any of the movements she took up".

There are touches of the jolly hockey sticks mindset in Hanna's writing; she tells us more than once that "Suffs were good sports", and gets seriously pompous in her battle with O'Casey over *The Plough and the Stars*, which she took to be a disgraceful attack on the heroes of 1916. Overall, she is a refreshing, clever, skilful writer, who can bring the reader directly into whatever activity she is engaged in, whether it's suffrage or national independence campaigns, vivid prison experiences (her description of smelling a grilling rasher while on hunger strike is masterful), memories of friends like Constance Markievicz, travels and lecture tours in Europe and America, or worrying terribly and increasingly despairingly about her husband's fate.

Margaret Ward has done us a service in assembling these writings carefully, so that a clear and distinctive voice can be heard in her own words.

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