

Ireland's best-known suffragette: Munster woman Hanna Sheehy Skeffington

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Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Ireland's best-known suffragette, was a Munster woman, although most of her adult life was lived in Dublin, writes **Margaret Ward**.

She was born in Kanturk, Co Cork, and her father, David Sheehy, was a mill owner. When she was three the family moved to the site of another mill, at Loughmore, Co Tipperary, where they lived until Hanna was 10.

“My earliest memories are of an old mill in County Tipperary between Templemore and Thurles,” she wrote. “My father owned it, having spent a lot in installing machinery. We had a bakery also and shops in Templemore and Thurles. There was always the smell of newly baked bread and the delight of the old mill race by the Suir where we used to bathe; of the orchard where black cherries grew; of the grove behind the mill, of the doves that came after the grain.”



From left: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Kathleen Shannon, and Kathleen Sheehy at the 1908 founding of the Irish Women's Franchise League, which campaigned for voting rights for women.

Her Munster connections were a source of great pride and, not long before her death Hanna recalled her “rebel background on both sides”. Hanna remembered hearing her father say that there were three Sheehy (then MacSheehy) brothers in Limerick after the 1690 siege. One went with Sarsfield and the Wild Geese, a second brother went on the run in the Tipperary mountains and the third Sheehy brother, her ancestor, elected to stay in Limerick. David himself was a Fenian who suffered numerous periods of imprisonment.

Hanna's mother, Bessie McCoy, was a fighter too. When her two brothers, Pat and Dan, were arrested as Fenians and lodged in Mountjoy, the people of Ballyhahill were sympathetic, but the old parish priest was bitterly hostile to their cause. He refused a request from parishioners to have the rosary said at evening devotion in the church but, as the congregation was dispersing, the young Bessie McCoy stood up and announced that the rosary would be said at 6pm.

Hanna was full of admiration for her spirit: "How she managed to get the keys I never learned, but enter she did, and said the rosary to a packed congregation."

Her grandmother on her maternal side was Margaret McCoy, nee Mulcahy, who had known Daniel O'Connell because he used to stay in her father's hotel (Mulcahy's) in Rathkeale: "The children liked him; he was boisterous in manner, with a breezy, open handed hail-fellow sort of a way."



To mark the centenary of women getting the vote in Ireland, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, the granddaughter of Irish suffragette Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, re-enacted her grandmother smashing the windows of Dublin Castle to highlight women's disenfranchisement. Picture: Julien Behal

A paternal great-great-grandmother, whose maiden name was Fitzmorris, came from the Kerry border. She lived to be 106 and was noted for having known the young Lord Edward Fitzgerald, who used to visit her father's home and hunt and fish with her brothers when they were boys. Hanna recalled:

"She used to call Lord Edward 'the boyo' because of his high spirits and love of boyish pranks... I saw her when I was about four, about a year before she died... She was tall and spare and wore a stiff white cap with strings, and had a stick, though her hair was still reddish."

Hanna's uncle, Fr Eugene Sheehy, was known as the 'Land League priest'. His first curacy was in Kilmallock, Co Limerick, where he became president of the local branch of the Land

League. As a result, Fr Eugene was imprisoned in Kilmainham with Parnell and other leaders in 1881. One of Hanna's earliest memories was visiting the jail with her aunt Kate Barry, a member of the Ladies' Land League, bringing lunch baskets to the prisoners. She "ran across the huge reception hall to acclaim my uncle, walking soberly at exercise with tall John Dillon".

Hanna and her brothers and sisters were brought up in a political household, which influenced even the games they played.

"In our youth, we played at evictions and emergency men," she write. "It was hard to cast any one for the part of bailiff or peeler; all wanted to be the evicted family guarding the home [it was an outhouse in the mill] against the crowbar, and fortified with water, hayforks and other means of defence."



Countess Markievicz in the uniform of captain in the Citizen Army.

David Sheehy went on to become an MP for the Irish Party, while Fr Eugene, a close friend of Tom Clarke's, remained a rebel, even going to the GPO at the start of Easter Week 1916 to lend his support.

By then Hanna, who had married Frank Skeffington in 1903, had endured two periods of imprisonment because of her campaign for women's right to the vote. She would, to her astonishment, bump into her uncle, Fr Eugene, in the GPO when she went to deliver supplies and to offer her assistance to the insurgents.

The following day, Frank Skeffington, a campaigner for peace and social justice, would be murdered by Captain Bowen-Colthurst.

Hanna, his widow, spent the next 30 years continuing her fight for justice and national liberation.

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