

Mary McAuliffe

Margaret Skinnider

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Ireland's decade of centenaries, which included the 1913 Dublin lockout, the 1916 Rising and the creation of the Irish Free State, was more than just a collection of commemorations. It also facilitated a greater recognition of the countless individuals and groups who had helped lay the foundations for an independent Ireland. It particularly highlighted the vital role that women played in the ongoing Irish revolution. One such woman was Margaret Skinnider. She was born in the industrial town of Coatbridge, Scotland, dubbed 'Little Ireland' due to its large Irish population. The family later moved to the nearby city of Glasgow. Her father had arrived from Monaghan, Ireland, in the 1870s while her mother was of Irish descent. While Ireland was to become 'her country' she always spoke of Scotland as 'her home' (p20). It was to be an incubator for Skinnider's lifelong militancy, with its feminist, socialist and Irish nationalist politics. Her compatriot, Edinburgh-born James Connolly, was twelve years her elder but they became comrades in arms in 1916 and his presence was with her for the rest of her life, not least in the close friendship with his daughter, Nora Connolly O'Brien.

McAuliffe sees 1912 as a pivotal year. When just twenty, Skinnider threw herself into suffrage activism in Glasgow, becoming a 'known participant' to the authorities. By 1915, however, she was becoming increasingly active in Irish organisations and militant nationalism. This would lead to her enduring friendship with Constance Markievicz, to the paramilitary Cumann na mBan (the Republican Irishwomen's Council), to Connolly, the Irish Citizen Army and the 1916 Rising. The seeds of her trade unionism were also being sown when the 1913 Dublin lockout brought Jim Larkin to Scotland seeking support.

While McAuliffe's stated aim is to provide a fuller account of Skinnider's activist life - and in many ways she succeeds in that - it is her involvement in the events of 1916 and its aftermath that remain a compelling focus for the reader. Indeed, they may well have been the defining events in her life, telling a story of huge commitment and almost reckless courage, characteristics that were to renew themselves throughout the rest of her life. The main facts are generally well known, with Skinnider giving her own account in a 1917 memoir,

Doing My Bit for Ireland. It was written during a propaganda speaking tour across America with other Irish Republican women, where she would also meet Nora O'Keeffe who would become her 'life-long partner'.

Skinnider was with Connolly's Irish Citizen Army contingent in the Rising, first acting as a despatch rider and scout, and then in a unit with Markievicz sent to occupy the Royal College of Surgeons (RCSI) building on St Stephen's Green. But while leading a small group to take out enemy sniper positions, she was severely wounded three times – the only woman to be so in combat – but remained at the RCSI until the surrender. She recuperated in Scotland but returned to Dublin in 1919, when the 'war of independence' was underway, and set up home with O'Keeffe.

With the bloody civil war from 1922-23, Skinnider was again in the thick of it, this time with the anti-Treaty forces. As for so many others, the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty was seen as a betrayal of the revolution and the Proclamation of Independence. This time, Skinnider applied her organisational abilities to strategic co-ordination and gun-running. She was also in charge of Cumann na mBan during the attack on the Four Courts which ignited the conflict and became Paymaster General of the anti-Treaty IRA before being arrested in late 1922. Throughout these events, Skinnider and other women were able to use gender stereotypes to their advantage, though famously in 1915 she also posed as a boy to evade detection. Women were generally not suspected of such 'masculine' activities and, therefore, used their gender as subterfuge. However, using a Red Cross ambulance to distribute weapons is more questionable, with the safe carriage of wounded in a conflict zone depending upon perceived neutrality.

McAuliffe does, however, paint a compelling picture of the difficulties and disappointments encountered in the Free State during the years that followed. 'Life was not easy personally, financially or politically' for Skinnider and O'Keeffe, she notes (p78). Skinnider was unjustly denied a military pension for many years, eventually receiving a 'wounds pension' in 1938. She was seen, like many other women, as an enemy of the new state and dismissed as one of the untrustworthy 'furies'. But these were also the years when McAuliffe sees her striving for a new sense of purpose. It was eventually to be fulfilled largely through the union movement and against a backdrop of 'gendered' legislation.

After some difficulty she found her way back into teaching and into the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO). Not only was she 'an innovative and engaging teacher' (p104), with a passion for the welfare of her profession, but she campaigned for equal access and opportunities for all children, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Her influence on future generations is incalculable. One of her enduring causes was abolition of the bar on married women teachers. By 1945, however, with pay cuts being imposed, she was a key figure in the strike of Dublin teachers which lasted for seven months.

Skinnider also joined Clann na Poblachta, a new political party led by former IRA Chief of Staff, Sean MacBride, which appealed to a swathe of voters and Republicans disillusioned with the prevailing parties. She was an unsuccessful candidate in the 1950 Dublin Corporation elections, but was later elected to the party's National Executive. Though the party was something of a broad church politically, Skinnider's own underlying political commitment was always to the Republican socialism of James Connolly.

She was also rising through the ranks of INTO, being elected Vice-President in 1955 and President the following year. She stood down in 1959 after thirty years of service, shortly after the marriage bar on women teachers was finally lifted. Never one to sit back, she soon became chair of the newly established Women's Advisory Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). She was soon alone, however, with O'Keeffe's death in 1961, but through to her own death in 1971 she remained politically active with her old 'fire and fury'. One of the most moving in a small collection of fascinating photographs in the book is of a smartly dressed woman of seventy-four standing upright at a table, proudly wearing her revolutionary medals. It is Margaret Skinnider in 1966, addressing an audience on the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising.

Underscoring McAuliffe's narrative, however, is Skinnider's near fifty-year relationship with Nora O'Keeffe. She describes it as a 'life-long partnership' and the pair as one of the 'female same-sex couples of the revolutionary period' (p115). But she is unfortunately denied any more certainty about the emotional depth of the relationship by the absence of Skinnider's extensive diaries due to their destruction by her executor, much to the frustration of McAuliffe who argues that 'private lives and choices (are) central to a reassessment' of people's lives.

Archive material of their friends, however, portrays them as a couple but it was, acknowledges McAuliffe, a relationship that remained hidden from the broader public, though not perhaps at their own instigation. No mention was made of Skinnider in obituaries for O’Keeffe. Perhaps, the censorious nature of the Free State prevented anything else. But it was undoubtedly an enduring relationship and arguably the rock which helped sustain Skinnider’s unwavering commitments and, indeed, those of O’Keeffe as well. They not only shared a home but also political and social activism with all the consequences that came with it.

Finally, it might be asked why Skinnider’s life story should be singled out. The answer, in the pages of McAuliffe’s biography, is surely because Skinnider’s life was one of total commitment to her causes that first evolved in Scotland. ‘She began’, observes McAuliffe, ‘as a militant suffragette in Glasgow in 1912 and remained a feminist to the end’, fighting for the rights of women, all workers and the cause of Irish freedom. She was accorded the highest recognition for her commitment to that cause by being interred in the Republican plot in Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, with full honours and alongside her old friends and comrades, Constance Markievicz and Nora Connolly O’Brien. Both the President and the Taoiseach were represented at the funeral. She is also remembered in her home town of Coatbridge in the Margaret Skinnider Heritage Centre. It is a reminder, alongside this compelling book, of a remarkable woman.

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Ian Gasse

***Something to Build On: The Co-operative Movement in Dumfries
1847-1914***

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Ian Gasse has filled an important gap in the labour history of Dumfries with this book, charting how its co-operative movement emerged and eventually grew to become a major institution within the town by the First World War. His achievement is more impressive in that the original source material is sparse, with no jubilee histories to refer to and no minute books available for much of the period. In their place, he has meticulously combed local newspaper files to put together the