

Review of Mary McAuliffe's *Margaret Skinnider* by Elaine Callinan

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In recent times, we have seen a welcome and healthy growth of historical and political research on women in Irish history and society. Just when you thought you had substantial knowledge about women and the Irish revolution, this gem by Mary McAuliffe arrives to give a fascinating insight and close study of a revolutionary woman, Margaret Skinnider, who campaigned for independence, women's rights and the working classes.

Chapters one and two take us on the journey of Skinnider's early life to show that she was driven from an early age to the cause of Irish independence and also to the suffrage and workers movements. Skinnider was born in Scotland and lived amongst the Irish diaspora in Glasgow, where she gained access to Irish cultural and political organisations and was kept informed on Irish politics. These Irish links and activism eventually led her to join Cumann na mBan. She swiftly moved into militant nationalism and joined the rifle practice clubs in Scotland at the outbreak of the Great War, intending to use these skills to 'defend my own country [Ireland]' (p. 16). This led Skinnider down the path of planning, arming and organising militant Irish nationalism. She participated in raids on 'shipyards and mining facilities' in the West of Scotland for arms, explosives and ammunition and secreted these weapons into Ireland (p. 18). In these early chapters, McAuliffe paints a powerful picture of Skinnider's suffrage and revolutionary life in Scotland and later in Ireland to reveal her intelligence work for separatist nationalists and her dangerous and life-threatening transportation of dispatches. Skinnider developed and advocated for a socialist and nationalist ideology and, like Constance Markievicz, was unusual in that she often behaved contrary to gender expectations. What is striking and most interesting, is Skinnider's use of dress to disrupt the traditional gender order. She and Markievicz regularly changed clothes for the different roles they played in their revolutionary deeds, showing a heightened comprehension of the complexity of gender in this era and an understanding of masculinity and militarism.

The post-rising chapters are equally informative. In chapters three and four the focus turns to Skinnider and Nora Connolly's propaganda tour in the USA from December 1916 to June 1918 where they promoted the advanced nationalist ideology and fundraised for those who had been directly affected by the Rising. Upon returning to Ireland, and as the War of Independence intensified in 1920 and 1921, Skinnider continued her activities in Cumann na mBan. By now Dublin Castle and the British Crown Forces had become aware of how important the women of Cumann na mBan were to the success of IRA campaigns. The raids and reprisals suffered by women because of their intelligence and dispatch work are vividly described, including the brutality of physical and sexual assaults. Because Skinnider was an anti-Treaty supporter the focus of the book from chapter five turns to the role of the 'irregulars' in the Civil War, and Skinnider's co-ordinating skills and gun-running expertise came to the fore once again. Skinnider found herself on the losing side after the Civil

War. Women, like men, had divided into pro- and anti-Treaty camps showing the diversity of women's views during these transformative years in Irish history.

With the war over and the new Irish Free State established, Skinnider and others had to find – as chapter six's title states – 'a new sense of purpose' (p. 77). They faced many difficulties because having fought for a Republic which had pledged equal citizenship for women, they found that in the new Irish Free State the 1916 Proclamation promises did not ring true. Conservative politicians and the Catholic Church hierarchy compacted women's roles into those of wife and mother. McAuliffe explores the many ways that the new state introduced gendered legislation that chipped away at the civil rights of women, despite the new Irish Free State Constitution granting full suffrage. Chapter seven delves into Skinnider's involvement with the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO), which was the primary focus of her activism for the rest of her working life. The research and exploration of Skinnider and her activities in INTO provide a detailed insight into the development of education in Ireland, and into her many challenges against unjust rules that were imposed on women, such as her campaign to overturn the 'Marriage Bar'. These chapters are particularly interesting as they bring to life Skinnider's post-revolutionary activism that spanned many years.

McAuliffe also refers to the archival material and letters to comment on Skinnider's hidden personal life and relationship with Nóra O'Keefe. She points out that 'her [Skinnider's] friends, [Hanna] Sheehy Skeffington and [Nora] Connolly O'Brien among them, regarded Margaret and Nóra as a couple' (pp. 114-15). The exploration of women's personal and intimate lives often provides context and gives insight into the convictions of women on all sides and none in the revolutionary era, and it would have been interesting to have learned more on Skinnider in that context. Certainly, there's scope for more research on this for future scholars.

This study of Margaret Skinnider brings to life all the diversity and complexity of women's roles in the pre- and post-independence movements. Skinnider's long life and continued activism spanned the years that separated the first and second wave feminist movements. This excellently researched work is a must read, and it is written in a manner that is accessible to academics and the wider public. This is an important assessment of one woman's role, experiences and interactions with other women in the Irish revolution that until now has gone virtually unknown, and the author has demonstrated a comprehensive analysis of her public and personal life. Skinnider was part of a generation of women that battled for equality and freedom and for the rights of future generations. This book will inspire others to write biographies about the diverse opinions and roles of Irish women in the revolutionary era and in the early decades of the Irish Free State.