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# Review of Margaret Ward's Hannah Sheehy Skeffington by Mary Carolan

Reviewed by Mary Carolan

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's writing has "nothing tentative" about it, it is "bold, sometimes scathing (she abhorred inefficiency and bigoted views), and direct". So Micheline Sheehy Skeffington observes in her foreword to Margaret Ward's scholarly assembly of her grandmother's partial memoirs and political writings.

That boldness and directness make this work a joy to read. Hanna intended to write her memoirs but only began them in 1945, a year before her death. It's not surprising she didn't start earlier. She was a busy woman impatient for change for women and Ireland. There were "always other things that seemed at the time important and urgent that kept me from it – mass meetings, protests.. executions, censorship, prisoners and their dependants, struggling causes.." She left behind a third of the 14 chapters she intended to write, covering the period ending with the establishment of the First Dáil and her work for Sinn Féin. Transcribed as she had written, they provide a wonderful insight into her character and thought.

Hanna Sheehy was born in Kanturk, Co Cork, in 1877 to a family with a long history of rebellion. She recalls paternal uncles "on the run" and her mother Bessie McCoy, after a parish priest refused to say the Rosary for her jailed Fenian brothers, getting the keys of the church and leading a sympathetic packed congregation in prayer herself. Hanna sided with cousins who "scoffed at Daniel O'Connell over his failure to call out the masses at Clontarf", declaring: "When one is young, one is impatient of compromise and some remain always so." Her first visit to jail was to Mountjoy Prison to visit a

favourite uncle, Fr Eugene Sheehy, there for siding with the Land League. She was to become very familiar with prisons, both as inmate and visitor.

Ward's chronology and introductions to Hanna's other writings, letters, and articles provide a comprehensive picture of a fearless activist who lived from 1877 until 1946, a period spanning over four tumultuous decades of revolutionary change before the reactionary conservatism of the new Free State set in. A lifelong feminist, socialist republican, internationalist and outspoken pacifist, she was particularly involved in the campaign for women's suffrage, culminating in the vote being extended to some women for the first time in 1918, and vehemently opposed efforts to have women wait until independence was achieved. She admired Constance Markievicz and served soup alongside her in Liberty Hall during the 1913 lock out, observing: . "Church and State were ranged, as usual, on the side of the big Battalions ready to starve the workers out to break their resistance through the hunger of the children of the slums." Her frank and affectionate memories of Markievicz are poignant.

Hanna's beloved husband Frank, who like her abhorred any "servile lazy acquiescence in injustice", was murdered by a British army officer while trying to stop looting during the 1916 Rising. Hanna was not informed of his death until four days later. Having rejected an offer of £10,000 compensation from then British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, she carried her campaign for a public inquiry into her husband's murder all the way to the US where, during her 18 month trip, she spoke at 250 public meetings. Her success in obtaining an interview with President Woodrow Wilson was a triumph, Ward notes, that no other Irish republican was able to emulate.

Hanna's frustration and disappointment that the great promise of equality and change in the 1916 proclamation was not adhered to in the post-revolutionary years is palpable. She opposed the Treaty and the new Free State. The depth of her dismay at the failure to cherish the ideals of 1916 is evident from her passionate denunciation in 1926 of Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*. That play "held up to derision and obloquy the men and women of Easter Week", she wrote, lamenting that the Abbey Theatre that had helped make Easter Week now "in its subsidised, sleek old age jeers at its former enthusiasms".

She left Sinn Féin to join the newly formed Fianna Fáil but resigned from its executive when it entered the Dáil in 1927. She joined no other party afterwards but retained hope a women's party would be formed and continued to campaign for equality for women at home and abroad, including in addresses to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. In a reflective article for *The Vote* in early 1931, she welcomed achievements of

women such as the aviator Amy Johnson, declaring such successes “blow to pieces” the “cherished male superstitions as to the frailty of women”. But, she cautioned, “socially, woman is still in the pre-middle Ages and when candidates are chosen for parliament, the acceptable party woman is still preferred to the feminist”. A vociferous opponent of the 1937 Constitution, she regarded it contained “fascist proposals endangering women’s livelihood and cutting away their rights as human beings”. Eamon De Valera had shown a “mawkish distrust” of women and had “refused to restore 1916 equal rights and equal opportunities for women”.

She remained determined to continue the fight. In 1943, after a general election in which she was one of four women who stood unsuccessfully as independents, and where just three “obedient party” women were elected, she considered the reasons why. The blame, she concluded, largely rests on the political machines that disregard women “save as mere voting conveniences” and those “smug” women “who declare they have ‘no interest in politics’”.

Her last article, for the *Irish Housewife*, was published after her death in 1946 and summed up her outlook. Admitting she only washed up “in acute domestic crisis”, she applauded campaigns of the Irish Housewife’s Association including against soaring prices. Its example showed women “must organise, must educate themselves in citizenship, must become vocal, if need be, clamorous”.

“Her great heart stopped too soon”, the Irish Press observed in its obituary. “It was worn out in the pursuit of many causes..”. That great heart still beats through her writings and Ward has done a great service in collecting them. The great shame, as Micheline Sheehy Skeffington notes, is why Hanna was never recognised as a key player in the emerging state and never offered a winnable seat in the Dáil. Hanna herself believed women became marginalised after independence because they were “more dangerous and radical than most of the men”. She most certainly was.

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