

## **THE POLITICAL CAREER OF HANNA SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON – CHALLENGING FEMINISM AND REPUBLICANISM**

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Despite the events of the past century, republicans in Ireland have yet to develop any real insight into the meaning of a national identity for women or to acknowledge fully the ways in which women have both challenged traditional discourses on nationalism and worked for nation-state formation in Ireland. One woman, whose writings and actions confronted the difficulties inherent in developing a personal credo based upon a desire to secure the emancipation of women in tandem with national freedom, is the Irish suffragist, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877– 1946).<sup>1</sup> She was a woman whose family history and whose own experiences engendered her with a profound understanding of the conflicting traditions in Irish political life and the extent to which women had been marginalised by all movements.

It is impossible to disentangle the personal life history from the political journey towards committed feminist republicanism. Feminists have always strongly maintained that ‘the personal is political’, a maxim which certainly defines the career of the woman who became Ireland’s best known suffragist. Her experience of fighting for the vote was to lead to disillusionment with constitutional nationalism, propelling her towards militancy and support for non-parliamentary means of achieving change. Her political philosophy and political practice underwent considerable evolution between the first years of suffrage campaigning to the intensity of the period between the outbreak of the First World War and the watershed of the Easter Rising. Her views continued to evolve, influenced by experience of the hostility of the British state to women’s demand for citizenship, by the betrayal of women’s interests by the Irish Party, by the opportunities that the republican challenge was to open up for women and, finally, by the disillusionment of partition and the Free State. What remained constant, however, was her insistence on measuring the degree of commitment to radical principles of a movement through assessment of its policies on women’s rights. It was her original motivation for becoming a political activist and it remained a core principle until her death. She was an Irish feminist, living in a country under colonial domination. She challenged both the imperial connection with Britain and the patriarchal domination of women in Ireland with great courage and consistency.

Her father, David Sheehy, was an Irish nationalist MP. The young Hanna Sheehy grew up in an environment in which the achievement of Catholic emancipation was still a notable victory. Possession of the franchise was a significant marker of citizenship; those without were not fully part of the nation. Through the testimony of family members she learned how women of her mother’s generation had been dismissed as political actors by Irish parliamentarians after their valiant work in the Ladies’ Land League, fighting landlordism during the Land War. Unusually, however, her uncle Eugene Sheehy, the ‘Land League priest’, was a strong supporter of the women. He had once shared a platform with Anna

Parnell and had called on Irish women to join the Ladies' Land League. Later, he urged his niece to write up the history of those whom he described as 'illustrious ladies'. In her autobiography, Sheehy Skeffington describes an early childhood memory when, 'as a chit of 4', she visited her uncle in jail. As a suffragist, this past history undoubtedly reinforced her determination to fight for the vote. After all, if women had had the vote, the Irish Party would not so easily have been able to insist that they disband their organisation.

In 1902, the year of her graduation with a first class MA from the Royal University, she signed a suffrage petition circulated by women graduates in Britain and Ireland. She then discovered that, despite her qualifications, she was unable to secure more than part-time teaching, a consequence of the Catholic Church's control of the education system. Female lay teachers were employed on temporary contracts and low rates of pay, to be replaced when a suitably qualified nun appeared. When she began to question the rationale for this situation, she would find herself becoming estranged from the social and political institutions she held responsible for supporting such inequalities. Politically, from 1904 until 1912, when she eventually severed all links with constitutional nationalism, she was a member of the Young Ireland Branch of the Irish Party. This was a youthful, radical wing, essentially a recruiting ground for talent – male talent. Were it not for the fact that some of the young men supported the women's struggles for admittance to membership, their application would not have succeeded. As voteless people, Sheehy Skeffington came to realise women's irrelevancy to the plans of the parliamentarians.

In 1903 she married Frank Skeffington, her intellectual, political and emotional partner. They joined their names in symbolic expression of the equality of their relationship. Both joined Ireland's only suffrage organisation, the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association. For Hanna, and her particular background, this was a logical stage in her political evolution. Her father was the oldest surviving member of what had been Parnell's great party, and the prospect of a separation from Britain being achieved peacefully by means of an act of parliament was regarded as an imminent prospect following the return to power of a Liberal government. We must remember that even Pearse was a 'home ruler' until 1912. However, the IWSLGA was essentially upper class and most favoured a continuation of the union. It was also non-militant. By 1908 Hanna was, as she said, 'in a hurry for reform', inspired by the British example of the Pankhurst-led Women's Social and Political Union. The Sheehy Skeffingtons and their close friends, Margaret and James Cousins, set up the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) as an independent, Irish-defined, militant suffrage organisation. Margaret Cousins recognised that the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland would determine the strategy of the Irish militants. They needed to develop a programme of action which would be 'suitable to the different political situation of Ireland as between a subject-country seeking freedom from England, and England, a free country.'<sup>2</sup>Crucially, they declared they wanted 'Home rule for Irish women as well as Irish men' and refused to subordinate women's campaign for the vote to the parliamentary campaign for Irish home rule.

As the IWFL organised deputations to politicians and examined the attitudes of the Irish Party members to women's enfranchisement, they began also re-evaluate their attitudes towards the parliamentary mainstream that at the time dominated nationalist political life.

For Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, whose father voted consistently against all bills for female suffrage, at stake were acute personal and political considerations.

The final rupture between militant suffragists and constitutional nationalists came as a consequence of the aftermath of Home Rule Day in March 1912, when nationalist Ireland took to the streets in celebration of the fact that the Home Rule Bill would soon pass into law. Suffragists attempted to insert their demands into a public space assumed to be occupied by a united people. Defiant reminders that ‘votes for women’ would not be part of this new order, leaving women without the rights of Irish citizenship, were chalked up on walls and hoardings around O’Connell Street. Feminists posed an unambiguous challenge to the male hegemony of political life and male reaction was brutal. Women had their sandwich boards torn off their shoulders and fights broke out as they struggled to hold on to their placards. Hanna said that Irish women were not passive resisters and when she was struck she was inclined to hit back. At a meeting called to discuss what had happened and to re-think tactics she declared that the women of Ireland would ‘break the power’ of the Irish Party.<sup>3</sup> Soon, in an explicit rejection of constitutionalism, she would describe the House of Commons as a ‘den of thieves’, the members of which had ‘overreached themselves in their chicanery towards the women’s cause.’<sup>4</sup> The parliamentary road was seen to be a continuation of patriarchal power and control. What was not yet articulated was what would replace that in the political allegiance of the most militant suffrage tendency.

A few months after Home Rule Day a proportion of Irish feminists did more than simply reject the Irish Party. By their actions they symbolically smashed male power in Ireland - and the British imperial connection - by smashing windows in Dublin Castle, the United Irish League and other bastions of male power. Sheehy Skeffington insisted on having Dublin Castle as her target, ‘avenging the treasured wrongs of fifty years.’<sup>5</sup> In the words of IWFL member Meg Connery, the women were ‘outlaws’ because they were excluded from the rights of citizenship. The analysis of Sheehy Skeffington on the eve of her first imprisonment was explicit in its insistence that this was the beginning of a militant feminist revolution aimed at bringing to an end the social, political and economic subordination of Irish women. Their actions on 13 June 1912 were historic, the first time that women in Ireland had fought on their own behalf. Women were resorting to violence, not in furtherance of ‘male liberties’ but for themselves. In sarcastic tones she talked about this ‘unwomanly selfishness’ that was ‘repellent to the average man...who only applauded the stone-thrower as long as the missile is flung for them and not at them.’ The militants were fighting to end the injustices and abuse suffered by so many women, ranging from the sweatshops of Belfast, prostitution on Dublin streets and the sordid institution of the ‘bargain marriage’ contracted to keep farms together and which had banished love from the Irish countryside. These were important targets – how could there be a free Ireland while women remained oppressed? This tactic was also undertaken in the knowledge that women had a history of political struggle, hurling stones during the Siege of Limerick and defying landlords during the Land League times.<sup>6</sup> While speaking at a suffrage meeting in Phoenix Park, just before her imprisonment, Hanna made it plain that she saw her actions in the context of the Irish struggle for national freedom.

If Wolfe Tone, Emmet and Davitt had not stood in the dock and suffered death and imprisonment those at the meeting might not be present that day but very likely would be in the colonies. If she had to go to Mountjoy Gaol she was exceedingly proud, for her father had to go to Mountjoy Gaol before her, and her uncle was the first priest who was sent to Mountjoy Gaol in the Land League days for Irish freedom.<sup>7</sup>

The appeal to a nationalist constituency was deliberate. Suffragists were deeply unpopular for their supposed interference with the home rule issue and her speech attempted to recoup some lost sympathy. However, there was much more to the suffrage endeavour than simply inserting women into the nationalist panoply of martyrdom, important though this was. Historians of the international suffrage movement have argued convincingly that the militants wanted more than simple reform of the franchise. For example, Susan Kingsley Kent states that ‘Their ultimate goal was to bring about a profound transformation in the sexual culture of Britain, to create a society based upon reconstruction of masculinity and femininity, and of male and female sexuality.’<sup>8</sup> We know from the personal lives of the Sheehy Skeffingtons and the Cousins the extent to which they did reject traditional gender roles and the suffrage paper edited by the two husbands, the *Irish Citizen*, was explicit in its conception of the ultimate goal of the feminist revolution. Its masthead declared ‘For men and women equally the duties of citizenship. From men and women equally the duties of citizenship.’ As James Cousins explained, the paper was to be ‘the organ of human relationship, of adjustment between the needs of the community; in short, of citizenship; and not merely of citizenship as an academic idea but of social reconstruction in which the feminist and masculine sides of humanity should share equally the work of life and enjoy equally the products of their work.’<sup>9</sup>

While the rhetoric of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in 1912 equated feminist struggle with nationalist sacrifice, this was not a new departure for her in terms of making links between the two causes. She had, from her earliest writings, continually linked the goals of feminism and nationalism, while criticising nationalists for their failure to support the feminist cause. ‘Until the women of Ireland are free, the men will not achieve emancipation’, she had said in 1909, adding that Irish women of every political persuasion should ‘refuse any longer to be the camp followers and parasites of public life, dependent on caprice and expediency for recognition. It is for Irishwomen to set about working out their political salvation.’<sup>10</sup> She always retained the conviction that women should participate only in organisations that contained equality of citizenship within their objectives and, equally importantly, which included equality between the sexes as a defining principle. She would therefore never become a member of Cumann na mBan. The exclusion of women from the Volunteer executive and their seemingly secondary status within Cumann na mBan, an auxiliary organisation, were particularly contentious issues in the period before the Easter Rising.

In terms of an articulation of gender roles, there are clear differences at this period between feminists and republicans and this is encapsulated most of all in their different attitudes towards the status of women in the nationalist movement. Sheehy Skeffington was vocal in her dissent. Her hostility towards Cumann na mBan was very public and

stemmed, I feel, from disappointment at this wasted opportunity for women rather than from disagreement with the objectives of the Volunteer movement. Her heckling of the inaugural meeting of Cumann na mBan created uproar and cries for the 'insolent one' to be put out, at least in her retelling of the event. She summed up the scene with understandable bitterness. By 1914 she had undergone two periods of imprisonment and hunger strike as a consequence of her fight for women's citizenship, yet men were unable to buy a rifle unless women collected the money, 'women the ministering angel of the ambulance class, who provides the pyjamas and the lint, but who sinks below the human the moment she asks for a vote.'<sup>11</sup>

Republicans, even those with known pro-suffrage views, refused to articulate their position on the franchise, for fear of splitting the Volunteer movement - nation came before gender. Frank Sheehy Skeffington's famous *Open Letter* to his friend Thomas McDonagh, Director of Training, encapsulated some of the feminist objections, 'Why are women left out? Consider carefully why; and when you have found and clearly expressed the reason why women cannot be asked to enrol in this movement, you will be close to the reactionary element in the movement itself.'<sup>12</sup> It has been assumed that Skeffington was simply articulating an anti-militaristic argument in his objection to the volunteers - that is, because they were committed to a physical force solution to the Irish question, they could not have women in their ranks. There was more to it than that. Let us consider what the Volunteers would have been like if they had accepted women on equal terms as men. Would it have been just the same organisation, albeit with female colleagues, or would women's presence have influenced the movement in terms of its wider policies? For a start, it would have had to take a stand on the question of citizenship for women. It would most likely have had repercussions in other areas too. Gender roles in the Volunteer movement were - in the telling words of Nancy Curtin, who coined a phrase to describe the United Irishmen - 'a military hierarchy, based on gender.'<sup>13</sup> If women had equal status within the movement, then those women close to the male leadership could not have remained 'heroic subordinates' - prepared to see their husbands and sons sacrificed, prepared to work in an important but subordinate capacity, forbidden to march out with their men on Easter Monday. They would at least have had some choice of action. Kathleen Clarke's testimony was that she begged permission from her husband to march with him but was told that her duty lay elsewhere. Instead she disbursed funds to the surviving relatives, her role that of patriot widow.<sup>14</sup> What has been difficult is for women to claim agency when confronted by a hierarchical, male-defined movement that determined policies.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's position in this is interesting. While she made it plain that she would not join Cumann na mBan, she did not condemn the nationalist endeavour. In the period before the Rising, as republicans grew more militant, so too did feminists, and there was a certain convergence between radical feminists and some republicans. By 1913 Sheehy Skeffington was writing that she wanted 'militant militancy' because the 'reasonable militancy' used up till that point was ineffective in a context where society was 'rotten at the core' because a corrupt bureaucracy denied the rights of half the community. She wanted, she said, no more resolution passing or petition-presenting, 'desperate diseases need desperate remedies and if the vote is wrested from Government

by methods of terrorism when five and forty years of sweet and quiet reason produced only seven talked-out or tricked-out suffrage bills, why who can say it wasn't worth a mutilated letter, a cut wire, a Premier's racked nerves?'<sup>15</sup>

However, while this angry prose might appear to parallel republican militancy, there was a great difference between it and the remarks of Thomas McDonagh, made at a suffrage meeting in 1915 which was called to protest the exclusion of Irish suffragists from the women's peace meeting at the Hague, an initiative to mobilise the international women's movement against world war. There were two motions passed by the meeting, first 'That this meeting of Dublin citizens protests against the actions of Mr Asquith's government in preventing any Irish delegate from attending the Women's International Peace Conference at the Hague.' The second motion 'That this meeting declares its approval of the objects of the Women's International Congress and general endorsement of the decisions arrived at by Congress.' was seconded by McDonagh. He was in a difficult position and he made an extraordinary speech. Here was a man, a university lecturer, part of the radical Dublin intelligentsia, supporter of the militant suffragists and a leading Volunteer, even though that movement continued to refuse to state whether or not it supported the cause of votes for women. Uproar had already been created in the meeting when a message by Pearse was read out. Unable to attend, he sent the following words of support, 'The present incident will do good if it ranges more of the women definitely with the national forces', to which Meg Connery, chair of the meeting, took great exception, retorting 'The letter was a very masculine inversion. The incident ought to have the effect of ranging the national forces on the side of women.' McDonagh, in his opening remarks, addressed this 'masculine inversion' of Pearse's, stating that 'he would also associate himself with what the chair had said in reply to his colleague Mr Pearse: this incident did show that they should range the forces of Nationalism on the side of the women. He hoped, as a Volunteer, that he would have a better opportunity than voting to show that by 'people' he meant the women as well as the men of Ireland.' He then made an unheard-of admission concerning his role as Director of Training with the Volunteers:

He was one of the 'quintette' of the Volunteers who had been charged with running that organisation. He had devoted a considerable amount of time to the study of military subjects and of military training. It was part of his duty to instruct men how to bayonet their fellow-man and how to put their foot on his body and pull out the bayonet afterwards. It was disgusting and nobody could hate it more than he did. He was an advocate of peace because everyone was being exploited by the dominant militarism. He had helped to arm tens of thousands of Irish men for defence because the only justification of war was to end age-long wars such as that in this country. ... All the resolutions of the Hague Congress would be endorsed by everyone he knew, but they were all helpless under the ruling oligarchies. That was the reason some of them had armed. If women did take over the democratic control of the state, that would be a revolution which would end war. If they would get enough people to take possession of the state, they would end war.<sup>16</sup>

Sources like the *Irish Citizen* show us the complexity of the situation in the months before the rising. There were all kinds of discussions on the moral and political

imperatives facing activists. There was interaction between some feminists and nationalists and a debate on choosing the militaristic path. There was ambiguity in the position of some feminists on this issue, because not all women fitted the stereotype that equated feminism with pacifism. Hanna's contribution to the meeting was in no sense pacific, as she articulated a clear link between nation and gender, 'They would send from that meeting a message to Asquith and McKenna that Ireland was still alive; and apt to kick them now and then. If they had had votes they would not have been so humiliated.'

Louie Bennett, of the Irish Women's Reform League, who held very strong pacifist views, had proposed the resolution seconded by McDonagh. She had then been forced to sit in appalled silence as he continued with his description of his duties as director of training. Later, Bennett wrote in angry terms to Sheehy Skeffington, 'to let you know that I shall in future take no part in peace meetings which put Irish nationalism above international tolerance and which are embittered by anti-England feuds.'<sup>17</sup> What is of interest to us, in assessing the relationship between feminism and republicanism, is the reply, which reveals a position more in line with McDonagh than with Bennett, her feminist colleague:

A terrible war for reasons of commercial jealousy admits of no defence...But there are other pacifists (and I am one of them) who hold that while war must be ended if civilisation is to reign supreme, nevertheless there may still be times when armed aggression ought to be met with armed defence...If I saw a hope of Ireland being freed for ever from British rule by a swift uprising, I would consider Irishmen justified in resorting to arms in order that we might be free. I should still be radically opposed to war and militarism...But I hold no such hopes.<sup>18</sup>

From this period, in her speeches and by her actions, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington revealed her conviction that citizenship was not only gendered but raced. While negotiations were underway regarding which women would attend the Hague Conference, she had succeeded in having the IWFL officially represented as an organisation, with the freedom to put forward a separate resolution to Congress. This was a great advance, as Irish women were customarily included in British delegations, and Hanna hailed this as a victory for the nation as well as for women, 'For the first time...Irish delegates take their place as representatives of their own country. It is the hour of small nationalities. Long live the small nationalities of the earth!' The IWFL resolution to be tabled at the Congress was also explicitly nationalist in the way in which women's right to citizenship was framed, 'the government of one nation by another is a frequent cause of war...all subject people shall have the power, by plebiscite of their men and women effectively to declare whether they are contented with their lot or would prefer a change of government.'<sup>19</sup> When the Irish women were prevented from attending the Congress, because the British government closed the North Sea to all shipping, her denunciation concentrated upon the nationalist rather than feminist implications of the ban, the government was 'afraid to let Ireland's voice be heard on the rights of small nationalities.'<sup>20</sup>

The Sheehy Skeffingtons had drawn increasingly close to James Connolly. Connolly had endeared himself to the whole suffrage movement by declaring that there were no acts of

suffrage militancy that he would not support. In the difficult summer of 1912, when suffragists had to endure AOH-instigated violence when they attempted to hold open air meetings, he had travelled from Belfast to speak in solidarity at a Phoenix Park meeting, which ended with Connolly and Frank Skeffington being forced to retreat to Dublin zoo. After Connolly's death Hanna praised him as 'one of those all too rare revolutionaries whose doctrines of freedom apply all round.'<sup>21</sup> Pacifism, feminism, socialism and a belief in a workers' republic co-existed in the personal philosophy of Frank Skeffington. However, his conception of non-violence entailed vigorous pursuit of social and political justice. For example, he supported the formation of the Irish Citizen Army and its arming, on the grounds that Irish workers needed to defend themselves against the tyranny of the capitalist class. While republicans saw the First World War as an opportunity to mobilise forces against the British, Skeffington endured prison and hunger strike as a consequence of his anti-war activities. A public debate between himself and Constance Markievicz on the question 'Do we want peace now' was held in February 1916. Skeffington argued a strong pacifist case and appeared to win the audience until Connolly intervened at the end with a powerful speech. Bennett's comment on the event portrayed Connolly as 'the centre of danger'.<sup>22</sup> Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, writing a report for the *Irish Citizen*, drew a very different picture, writing warmly of Connolly's twinkling eyes as he said 'I was afraid you might get the better of it Skeffington. That would never do.'<sup>23</sup> There is no doubt that on this issue, she was closer to Connolly than to either her husband or the wider feminist movement.

The hope that Ireland could be included as a small nation in any peace negotiations following the conclusion of war was one harboured by all nationalists and was part of the impetus behind the Easter Rising. During the weekend before Easter 1916 Hanna met Connolly, who apparently said 'if you are interested in developments, I would not advise you to go away on holiday just now.' He also said that women had been given equal rights and equal opportunities in the Republican Proclamation.<sup>24</sup> She was obviously in the confidence of at least some of the leadership, which we know because they selected her to act as a member of a civil provisional government to come into effect if the rising was prolonged. On the second day of the rising she went to the GPO to offer supplies of food and to give assistance as messenger between the outposts. One of the first people she saw was her elderly uncle Eugene, there as confessor to the insurgents. Connolly sent her to the College of Surgeons, where Markievicz was a member of the garrison. The latter wrote about the members of the IWFL 'who had collected a store of all manner of eatables from their friends, to bring them to us through the bullet-swept streets... I have nothing but pleasant and happy memories of the Sheehy-Skeffingtons. They always instinctively took the right side and were always ready to help.'<sup>25</sup>

It is obvious that the attitude of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to the British state was not a consequence of the subsequent murder of her husband by a British officer during the rising, during which Frank had been attempting to organise a citizen's militia to prevent the looting that he feared was discrediting its ideals. Ideologically, he and Hanna were in agreement over their support for insurrection, but they disagreed over the methods to be used. Frank had hoped a civil disobedience campaign would force British withdrawal from Ireland. The evidence of her actions during the rising would indicate that his wife

was closer to the republicans. There has been speculation on the reasons why she did not join the egalitarian Citizen Army, which accepted women on the same terms as men, but as it was only after the watershed of the rising that she would define herself as a republican and she would never take the step of joining an organisation committed to armed struggle. However, from Easter 1916 onwards, she made it plain that the rising had her full support. In her tour of America, initially undertaken to publicise her husband's murder, she described herself as a Sinn Féiner and worked tirelessly in an eighteen month crusade to convince the American public to support the Irish cause:

I knew the Irish Republican leaders and am proud to have known them and had their friendship. They fought a clean fight against terrible odds – and terrible was the price they had to pay. They were filled with a high idealism... The lesson of the Irish Rising and its suppression is that our small nation, Ireland has a right also to its place in the sun.<sup>26</sup>

When seeking support for the Irish cause from the British feminist movement, she would stress the significance of the revolution for international feminism, 'It is the only instance I know of in history where men fighting for freedom voluntarily included women.'<sup>27</sup>

On her return to Ireland in 1918, Sheehy Skeffington found herself inundated by requests to join organisations ranging from the Socialist Party of Ireland to Cumann na mBan. She joined Sinn Féin, but equally significantly, she resumed (in uneasy partnership with Louie Bennett) the editorship of the *Irish Citizen*, the most visible symbol of Irish feminism. Within Sinn Féin she worked actively to promote women's interests, linking up with republican women who were also applying pressure on the leadership to affirm a commitment to the equality of women and men within the organisation. I think the continued existence of the *Citizen*, and the existence of the IWFL, even though in practice it was a much reduced organisation, were of great importance. It meant that the autonomous women's movement still had an existence (obviously there were more groups than that still in existence, but here I am concerned only to locate Sheehy Skeffington within the feminist spectrum) and therefore women still had the ability to articulate their concerns. As a member of Sinn Féin, she was more circumscribed publicly by the nature of party membership. For example, in the elections of 1918, the IWFL independently campaigned for Constance Markievicz, in protest at what they considered to be the half-hearted attitude of Sinn Féin. While Sheehy Skeffington had wanted to be selected as a candidate, she was only offered a seat she had no chance of winning, and that she rejected. Publicly, she could say nothing about this, but in her role as editor of the *Citizen* she felt free to comment on events, inserting a feminist view into what was becoming increasingly a monolithic nationalistic landscape. As the war of independence began, women's issues again took a back seat, yet an editorial in October 1919 made a bold statement on the importance of retaining an independent women's voice:

(as a) distinctively feminist organ devoted primarily to the advancement of women and holding a watching brief for their interests. It is obvious that such a paper must not belong to any party ... We stand for the rights of all Irish women as women,

independent of party or sect...No party, unhappily, is yet quite free from sin where women are concerned. It is to hold the mirror up to the failings and shortcomings of each in turn that the *Irish Citizen* exists, and we reckon it a sign of grace that we are blamed in turn by each party for not becoming mere camp-followers of this or the other side.

From 1921-22 Sheehy Skeffington was, perhaps surprisingly, Director of Organisation for Sinn Féin. In this capacity she made great efforts to ensure that women were admitted to membership and not shunted off to Cumann na mBan, as a great many men in rural areas tried to do. Her mark is very evident, in such instructions as 'every effort should be made to ensure that women shall not only be on the roll of members but take an active share in the work of...the Sinn Féin movement generally.'<sup>28</sup> Her attitude towards government clearly favoured a greater radicalism than that being implemented in the First Dáil. She rejected the cabinet system and parliamentary procedures as 'tosh and piffle' and favoured a committee system which did not concentrate executive power in the hands of a few ministers. Arthur Mitchell, in his assessment of the First Dáil, noted that she was one of a small group within Sinn Féin who attempted to insist that some assessment of the political direction being adopted by the republican movement was essential.<sup>29</sup>

On republican and on feminist grounds Sheehy Skeffington made it plain that she opposed the Treaty, recognising that those who would vote for acceptance were 'the moderates and the "safe" people with stakes in the country.'<sup>30</sup> Her views were expounded through newspaper articles and letters, the mark of a committed polemicist and activist, anxious to influence opinion, with little time for more lengthy reflection. One major reason for her distrust of those who favoured an immediate vote on the issue was that they were prepared to act before a new electoral register could be compiled. The younger generation would be excluded and, if the Dáil did not agree on reform, so too would women under the age of thirty. Not surprisingly, she was instrumental in campaigning for the vote to be extended to women over twenty one before the Treaty was voted on. Dáil deputies were leafleted by an alliance of women from a number of organisations demanding 'Justice for Irish Women' and Hanna wrote to a friend, 'the fight for this absorbed all my energies and it seemed like old suffragette times again.' After the defeat of that campaign she commented with bitterness 'We may not vote for the Free State or the Republic, but we may vote later when others have voted us into the Free State.'<sup>31</sup>

During the civil war she acted as publicist for the anti-treaty side and travelled around America, fund-raising and urging support for the republicans. Within Sinn Féin her instructions for the organisation included urging that a particular emphasis be placed on women's issues, 'special stress should be laid on the imprisonment of women and the treatment of women prisoners.' She was prescient in this, as the numbers of women imprisoned by the Free Staters vastly exceeded the numbers imprisoned by the British. They were also treated in a more brutal manner. Publicity surrounding hunger strikes and the North Dublin Union riots, when women prisoners resisted removal from Kilmainham, were given prominence in the republican press, helping to mobilise

sympathy for the anti-treaty cause.

For the next decade, the necessity of maintaining a visible republican opposition during the early years of the newly formed state determined the political allegiances of Sheehy Skeffington. The state was anti-republican and anti-woman and she tried always to emphasise the connection between the two. She was elected to Dublin County Council in 1925, along with other republicans, including Constance Markievicz and Dr Kathleen Lynn, and was delighted that ‘fearless and independent critics of the present regime’ would be in a position to ‘form a strong bulwark against further onslaughts upon democratic control’.<sup>32</sup> In addition, she worked with the Women’s Prisoners Defence League, the organisation started by Maud Gonne, which was a vehicle for some independent republican women activists. When the Sinn Féin policy of abstention became frustrating to those wanted to challenge Cumann na nGaedheal more effectively, she was one of a group of women who, in 1926, joined the first executive of Fianna Fáil. It was an uncomfortable relationship, in an organisation dominated by male camaraderie and underpinned by the well-known antipathy of de Valera towards female involvement in public life. Objections to the newly elected Fianna Fáil deputies taking the oath of allegiance in order to enter the Dáil provided her with an excuse to tender her resignation. After that Sheehy Skeffington drew close to Peadar O’Donnell and Frank Ryan and helped to edit *An Phoblacht* in its hey day of radical republicanism. Indeed, when Free State repression led to the jailing of Ryan and the suppression of *An Phoblacht*, she single-handedly was responsible for the publication of *Republican File*, its successor. As a feminist, she believed that Irish women could only make progress through returning to the ideals of what had, in its earliest years, been a revolution, because ‘What was given at first with gladness has been gradually filched away. Equality has ceased to be accorded to us, save on paper.’<sup>33</sup>

When Fianna Fáil became the new government in 1932, republicans no longer had to devote their energies in fighting repression and debates that had been suppressed were again voiced. For Sheehy Skeffington, feminist concerns were back on the agenda. Her assessment was that the Free State was ‘rapidly becoming a catholic statelet under Rome’s grip – censorship and the like, with a very narrow provincial outlook, plus a self-satisfied smugness. Result of a failure in revolution really. I have no belief in de Valera... essentially conservative and church-bound, anti-feminist, bourgeois and the rest.’<sup>34</sup> When women came under attack, she remained at the forefront of resistance but without compromising her republican convictions. In 1933 she received a month’s imprisonment from the Unionist government for crossing the border as a banned person, to speak on behalf of republican women prisoners. Her speech of defiance on release declared ‘They had got to break down the border and cut the last link that bound them to the British Empire.’<sup>35</sup>

Internationally, she travelled to Soviet Russia and spoke in support of the revolution. She supported the Spanish republican side in the Spanish Civil War and chaired the Women’s Aid Committee. Her feminism continued to define her political beliefs and actions. Inevitably, she was a leading figure in the opposition to the 1937 Constitution,

at which time she called repeatedly for the formation of a woman's party. When she stood, unsuccessfully, as one of four women candidates to the Dáil in 1943, hoping that this would herald the beginning of a resurgence of feminist politics, she declared herself both a feminist and someone who supported Connolly's conception of a worker's republic. This she based in part on the Republican Proclamation, where 'Irish women were given equal citizenship, equal rights and equal opportunities but subsequent constitutions rendered all this meaningless.'<sup>36</sup> That last fight took place three years before her death. Her final action was to write in support of the newly-formed Irish Housewives League, of which her daughter-in-law was a founder member. She hated the name, but supported their aims of encouraging a new generation of women into public life.

In assessing the overall significance of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, I would maintain that she was the first to grasp the significance of the Easter Rising as a seminal moment in the long campaign for women's citizenship, the point in time where republicanism and feminism connected. Her political career before 1916 was engaged in trying to work out these points of contact, as she came to discard unrepresentative constitutionalism in favour of radical and direct action that engaged the talents of both sexes. We have seen that while she remained a republican she never compromised her feminist beliefs and worked for the Irish revolutionary cause and for the cause of women, always insisting on the necessity for an autonomous women's political organisation, even though there were periods when a semblance of a women's movement struggled to maintain an existence. She worked too on the international scene, as a member of transnational feminist organisations. Her Irish republicanism did not affect the cordial nature of her relationship with British feminists. The gendered nature of nationalism and the difficulties in developing a relationship between feminism and nationalism are complex questions, to which she did not have all the answers. What Hanna Sheehy Skeffington did do, throughout her life, was to confront forces of reaction wherever she found them, fighting for a non-patriarchal society where women could participate fully in social, economic and political life.

- 1 For biographical details of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington see, Margaret Ward: *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, a life*, (Attic/Cork University Press, 1997); Margaret Ward, 'Hanna Sheehy Skeffington' in (eds.) Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy, *Female Activists: Irish Women and Change 1900-1960*, (Dublin: Woodfield Press, 2001).
- 2 J.H. and M.E. Cousins, *We Two Together*, (Talbot: Madras, 1950), p.85.
- 3 *Votes for Women*, 12 April 1912.
- 4 *Irish Citizen*, 1 February 1913.
- 5 *Irish Citizen*, 22 June 1912.
- 6 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'The women's movement – Ireland', *Irish Review*, July 1912.
- 7 *Votes for Women*, 21 June 1912.
- 8 Susan Kingsley Kent, *Sex and Suffrage in Britain 1860-1914*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.212.
- 9 J. H. and M. E. Cousins, *We Two Together*, (Madras: Talbot, 1950), p.204.
- 10 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *Bean na hEireann*, November 1909; reproduced in Margaret Ward, *In Their Own Voice ,women and Irish nationalism*, (Dublin: Attic Press, 1995), pp.32-34.
- 11 *Irish Citizen*, 9 May 1914.
- 12 *Irish Citizen*, 22 May 1915.
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- 14 Helen Litton (ed.), *Revolutionary Woman: Kathleen Clarke 1878-1972*, (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1991), p. 78.
- 15 *Irish Citizen*, 4 January 1913.
- 16 Full details of the meeting are contained in *Irish Citizen*, 22 May 1915.
- 17 Louie Bennett to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 12 May 1915, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, MS 22,675, National Library of Ireland.
- 18 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to Louie Bennett, undated fragment, Sheehy Skeffington Papers, MS 24,134, National Library of Ireland.
- 19 *Irish Citizen*, 8 May 1915.
- 20 *Irish Citizen*, 22 May 1915.
- 21 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'Memories of the Suffrage Campaign in Ireland', *The Vote*, 30 August 1929.
- 22 R. M. Fox, *Louie Bennett, Her Life and Times*, Talbot Press, 1958, p.48.
- 23 Quoted in Jacqueline Van Voris, *Constance de Markievicz in the Cause of Ireland*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1967, p.160.
- 24 R. M. Fox, *Rebel Irishwomen*, Talbot Press, 1935, p.76.
- 25 *Irish World*, 3 May 1924.
- 26 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism as I have Known It*, (New York: Donnelly Press), 1917, p.18.
- 27 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'Memories of the Suffrage Campaign in Ireland', *The Vote*, 30 August 1929.
- 28 Sinn Féin: Instructions to Sinn Féin Cumainn Regarding Programme of Work 1921-22, pamphlet P 2272, National Library of Ireland.
- 29 Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland*, Gill and Macmillan, 1995, p.46.
- 30 *Freemans's Journal*, 10 May 1922.
- 31 For references and further details, see my chapter in Cullen and Luddy, pp.106-108.
- 32 *Irish World*, 4 July 1925.
- 33 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, 'Irishwomen's Place in the Sun', *The Vote*, 15 August 1930.
- 34 Hanna Sheehy Skeffington to Esther Roper, n.d. Sheehy Skeffington papers, MS 24,134, National Library of Ireland.
- 35 *Irish Press*, 22 February 1933.
- 36 Maria Luddy, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, (Dundalk: Dundalgen Press, 1995), pp.49-50.