

Extracts from address on 'Francis Sheehy Skeffington, A Militant Pacifist' to PANA meeting October 20th 2014

By Mary Carolan (on behalf of Sheehy Skeffington School on Human Rights and Social Justice)

The lives of Frank and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington were the inspiration for our school which aims to promote inclusive debate on how best to use human rights discourse and mechanisms for the objective of achieving a fairer society. We want to help bridge the gap between academia and activism to work towards a socially just society based on equality of esteem and respect for human dignity.

The Sheehy Skeffingtons were people of ideas and ideals, Irish and internationalists, fearless feminists and selfless socialists with no interest in personal wealth but great interest in abolishing extremes of wealth and poverty and improving life for everyone. Most of all they were activists who urged citizens, via the masthead of their *Irish Citizen* newspaper and elsewhere, not just to demand their rights but to exercise their responsibilities. They are truly inspiring figures from whom we can learn a lot.

In this year marking the centenary of the 1914-1918 war, in which tens of thousands of Irish were among the millions slaughtered, it's vital to recall those in Ireland who objected to that war. It's particularly important because the voices and activities of the dissenters were generally excluded from or downplayed in the mainstream Irish media of the day, giving a distorted picture of Irish attitudes to the war.

Frank Sheehy Skeffington was among the most vociferous opponents of the war and I want to focus on his own record of the reasons why. Even a small flavour of his own writings gives a good idea of the man who answered accusations of being a crank by declaring: "A crank is a small instrument that makes revolutions."

Frank was a pacifist but he was no passive pacifist. He was a sometimes militant, and always passionate, pacifist activist. He regarded militancy as representing the dominance of will in the personality, while non-militancy represented dominance of the intellect. The day after John Redmond pledged the support of the Irish Volunteers for England's war effort, a poster in the *Irish Citizen* proclaimed: "Votes for Women Now! Damn Your War!" There were so many orders for extra copies, there was a reprinting of the edition. There were a few objections - mostly to the use of the word Damn.

An August 22nd 1914 editorial in the *Citizen* gives a clear reflection of his thinking. Entitled "The Crime of War", it declared the war drums "are rattling Europe back to barbarism". When to the horrors of war is added "the horrible truth, that the men concerned in the actual fighting have in almost every case no clear conception of what they are fighting for..then the only conclusion one can arrive at is that the man, or group of men, responsible for promoting war – any war – ought to be branded as criminal lunatics."

In another *Citizen* editorial of August 1914, he declared “war and antifeminism are branches of the same tree – the disregard of true life values. It is not a coincidence all the countries concerned in the war don’t recognise women as citizens and that those which are most aggressively and unscrupulously war like are precisely those in which women are held in the least regard. It is no mere coincidence it is those who support women’s claim to freedom who are, in every country, the most active in trying to prevent war and limits its consequences.”

Frank was a founder member of the Irish Neutrality League and it, the Irish Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers formed a plan to take over the Mansion House by force for an address by Asquith to recruit for the British Army on August 25th 1914. Such was the military presence around the Mansion House the plan was called off and Frank was brutally beaten by police when he tried to preach an anti-war message on Dawson Street.

In a September 1914 *Irish Citizen* article, he described this war, and all wars, as the product of a system constructed by men which deliberately accepted war as a permanent factor in the adjustment of international relations and a satisfactory method of settling disputes between nations. There had never been an honest attempt made to ensure peace and women’s emancipation was vital to construct an alternative social system based on peace and co-operation, he argued.

He dismissed arguments by HG Wells and others this was a war to end all wars. “War can breed nothing but a fresh crop of wars. By accepting this war, in any degree whatsoever, we are helping to perpetuate war. If we want to stop war, we must begin by stopping this war. The best way to do that is to stop recruiting.”

He had seriously considered joining the Irish Volunteers in September 1914 after they ousted the Redmondites but considered they lacked courage in their stand on women, In an open letter to Thomas McDonagh, whom Frank greatly respected, he lamented the Volunteers had failed to state directly they stood for the liberties of the people of Ireland without distinction of sex, class or creed. He was not blind to the merits of the Volunteer movement which he described as militarism at its best, he insisted. “But it is still militarism and is organised to kill and that is repellent to me”, Frank wrote.

Frank stressed he was not advocating “any servile and lazy acquiescence to injustice”. What he wanted to see was “the age long fight against injustice clothe itself in new forms, suited to a new age”. “Can you not conceive an organisation of men and women banded together to secure the rights and liberties of the Irish people, a body animated with a high purpose, armed and equipped with the weapons of intellect and will that are irresistible, an organisation of people prepared to suffer and die rather than abandon one jot of their principles?” he asked McDonagh. Those principles must include the fundamental principle this movement would not kill others. This was not an impractical plan once there was the vision to conceive it and the will to execute it.

“This is the only way we the oppressed and exploited can reconcile our hatred both of oligarchies and organised bloodshed,” he argued.

Frank held meetings at Beresford Place every Sunday for 40 weeks on behalf of the Socialist Party where he persuaded many to sign pledges to passively resist any effort to impose conscription. In late May 1915, he was charged under the Defence of the Realm Act with making statements likely to be prejudicial to recruiting. There had been similar prosecutions but juries had acquitted all. However, Frank and two other men were denied the right to jury trial and were convicted by a magistrate.

In a speech from the dock, Frank demanded to be treated as a political offender and protested against being denied the right of trial by jury. He had a constitutional right to preach passive resistance to conscription and would go on hunger strike as a protest until he was freed, he warned.

Edward Carson, who had by then been made Attorney General for England, had preached active and militant resistance to home rule, Frank noted. If Carson, as a reward for saying he would break every law possible, gets a Cabinet appointment, what was the logical position as regards myself, who only advocated passive resistance to conscription? he pointedly asked to laughter and applause in court.

He said he perfectly understood why British military authorities exercising absolute military despotism in Ireland in pursuit of their war against German militarism had chosen not to bring his case before a jury. The authorities recognised it was not possible to get a Dublin jury to make themselves “the most amenable instruments” for the enforcement of DORA.

Frank said he would agree with those who argued participation should be left to the free decision of individuals if that was “really free. When every force and influence in the press and platform and every kind of social and economic pressure is being applied on men of military age to join the Army, it’s the “right and duty” of every one of articulate speech to do what they can to provide contrary pressure so people have real freedom of decision, he insisted.

That was true in England and even more so in Ireland where the people never at any time gave the slightest authority or mandate to their leaders or representatives to commit them to a European war, he stressed.

The war was being justified by an “infamous cascade of lies” about so-called German atrocities in Belgium and elsewhere and the humbug of the saying Ireland had a special right to fight for Catholic Belgium, he said. If it was true Ireland had a right to fight for Catholic Belgium then it is true Ireland had a right to fight for Catholic Galicia against the Russians, he said. Ireland, depopulated and impoverished, requires peace more than any other nation in Europe and had no direct quarrel with Germany, he urged.

Frank said he had advocated passive resistance because he believed that was sufficient to smash any Compulsory Military Service Act that may be put in force. Such was the popular opposition to conscription, the British ultimately decided against any move to introduce it.

The Magistrate concluded Frank not only admitted this “grave” offence but gloried in it and was likely to do it again. He sentenced Frank to six months hard labour in jail after which, unless he paid bail of £50, he would serve another 6 months.

To loud cheers, Frank declared: “I will serve no such sentence, I will eat no food from this moment and long before the expiration of the sentence I shall be out of prison, alive or dead.” He was freed a few days later under the Cat and Mouse Act, having collapsed on the seventh day of his hunger strike.

It was highly likely he would be sent back to jail once he was physically strong enough so off he went to America on a lecture tour. He said it was to raise funds for the Irish Citizen, then struggling to stay afloat for reasons including its anti-war stance. In the US, he visited many states and spoke at endless meetings. His close friend, Long Island based JF Byrne claimed the purpose of the US trip was to carry out an underground assignment for the Irish Neutrality League, namely contact with Germany.

Frank told the Boston Traveller most Irish people don't want to fight for England because they consider it their enemy and that was the only sense in which Ireland was pro-German. He believed the war would result in deadlock and they would all have to sit around a table and settle it as they could have done in the beginning. “War never settles anything,” he said.

In a letter to Hanna from America, Frank said he was disgusted with “the Irish Jingoists and Militarists” in the US who were “more rantingly pro-German than the Germans”. He supported the Neutral Nations idea that neutral nations would not trade or communicate with the belligerent war nations. He also wrote to President Wilson seeking US support if Ireland demanded a plebiscite on independence. If Ireland continued to be regarded as an English province, Irish nationalists would conclude only force would win them freedom, he warned. In a January 1916 lecture in Dublin, he also spoke of his dislike for the mammonised condition of the US and the subordination of everything to the power of wealth.

In the militant atmosphere leading to the 1916 Rising, Frank continued to urge peace and preach pacifism. When told by some friends pacifism was not a popular stand, he said: “If I thought I was in danger of becoming popular, I would examine my conscience.” He also warned in a letter to British newspapers, ignored by all but the New Statesman which published it shortly after Frank's death, that the British military were trying to provoke an explosion in Ireland and knew the Volunteers and Citizen Army would resist them with guns. Irish pacifists who have watched the situation closely are convinced this is precisely what the British militarist do want, to have a whack at the Sinn Feiners. “Once bloodshed is started in Ireland, who can say where or how it will end?”

Frank's sympathies when the Rising did break out were with the rebels but he maintained his belief the world's problems can't be solved by bloodshed. On Easter Monday 1916, Frank went to help a wounded British officer bleeding to death after the first flurry of shots was fired outside Dublin Castle. When Hanna remonstrated with him about risking his life, he said: "I could not let anyone bleed to death while I could help."

Frank went to the GPO and was upset by the looting around him, concerned it would support media descriptions of the rebels as a mob. He decided to organise a Citizens Defence Force but with little success. Hanna last saw him in the city on Tuesday evening before she went home to Rathmines. It was two more days before she finally established he was unjustifiably executed with two other innocents on the Wednesday morning by a psychotic British officer, Captain Bowen Colthurst, at Portobello Barracks where the 3 were detained despite not being charged with anything. Bowen Colthurst had just months earlier been returned to Ireland after being wounded and suffering a mental breakdown in France and had a known record of instability and religious fanaticism. The British tried to cover up all 3 deaths and might have succeeded had one of the dead not been married to Hanna who ultimately forced them to admit the truth.

Monk Gibbon, a Dublin born British Army officer who was in Portobello on the Wednesday morning recalled initially perceiving Frank as a tweedy male suffragette and figure of fun. Gibbon later wrote: "Second impressions efface the earliest ones and I see only his dignity, the quiet dignity of a man in a terrible position meeting it quietly. "

Frank defined democracy as "the fairer distribution of the goods of this earth among the dwellers thereon – the elimination of the very rich and the very poor". He favoured a humanised socialist party which should concentrate its immediate efforts upon practical reforms instead of propagation of a creed. He had concerns nationalist parties were too often led by men of the petty privileged classes, who desire to be free from any controlling power so they may be able to give freer scope to their own will. He wanted a free Ireland but considered it would not be truly free if it represented only the privileged class. In politics as elsewhere, honesty is the best policy in the long run, he stressed. He also warned the party which is reactionary in its foreign relationships will inevitably find itself drawn into the maintenance of reaction at home.

Remain faithful to the spirit of liberty, truth and justice, he urged, and don't cling to the legacy of dead heroes but instead see their influence as a living force. "It is only the commonplace man who grows cold and conservative with age: the rare spirits who have made the world worth living in widen their outlook and strengthen their faith in progress year by year." Frank and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington are among those rare spirits, we would do well to make their influence a living force.

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