

HANNA SHEEHY SKEFFINGTON – A WOMAN FOR OUR TIMES

I want to thank the Sheehy Skeffington School for inviting me to talk on Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who was, with her husband Frank, the inspiration for the School. She is also a woman I admire greatly. She was, without doubt, one of the most notable women ever to have come out of Ireland - a feminist icon, an unrelenting fighter for causes that ranged from women's right to citizenship, Ireland's right to national freedom, everyone's right to religious freedom, or atheism, women's right to control their fertility, support for Russian and Spanish revolutionaries - the list of her causes is vast and I know she would have made many connections with people in this room today.

But the woman herself was more than a life dedicated to endless causes. She was a profoundly human and humorous individual, who struggled to free herself from the influences of her upbringing, who was widowed in the most brutal of circumstances, but a woman who never lost the humanity that made her such an attractive individual and such an exemplary role model. At the age of 56, after her last prison term – one month in Armagh for crossing the border to speak on behalf of republican women prisoners, defying a Unionist-imposed banning order, she wrote of her experience for *An Phoblacht*

If ever you are in jail – as well you may, reader of *An Phoblacht*, whatever else your jailers may take away from you, do not let them deprive you of your sense of humour. For you will be sure to need it in jail more than anywhere else. I was always glad to have kept mine – in Armagh, in Mountjoy, in Holloway and in various bridewells, barracks, and police stations.

Hanna Sheehy was an Irish woman born in 1877, when Queen Victoria was still on the throne, but in her openness to new experiences, her acceptance of a diversity of views, her willingness to challenge orthodoxies, she remains inspirational.

When she was in America in 1917, publicizing the death and the subsequent government cover-up of her husband's murder, and organising support for the ideals of the Easter Rising, a small group of American feminists were quick to see that she was one of them. They invited her to become a member of the Heterodoxy, an extraordinary lunch club that met on Saturday afternoons for over 20 years. The members were feminists, socialists, peace advocates during the 1st world war, modern women with bobbed hair and unorthodox living arrangements; some were openly lesbian. The qualification for membership was the fact that the individual had in some way stepped outside of convention. They stood on street corners and handed out birth control literature, they helped organise strike committees - sometimes they were arrested. Members included the socialists Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Crystal Eastman, as well as suffragists who formed the Women's Peace Party. Membership of the Heterodoxy was always a proud boast of Hanna's –she loved to say that she was a member of a club that only accepted the nonconformist.

In her own family she could trace a continuity between different generations who had struggled for freedom. She could boast that her great grandmother had known Lord Edward Fitzgerald, the United Irelander killed in action in 1798 – ‘she was 106 when she died, so I actually touched the withered hand that had clasped his.’ Her father and uncle had both been Fenians and her Uncle Eugene was famous as the Land League priest, once sharing a platform with Anna Parnell and always a strong supporter of the Ladies’ Land League. As a young child, a ‘chit of four’ she called herself, Hanna visited her uncle when he was imprisoned in Kilmainham. Twenty years later Uncle Eugene hoped she would write an account of the Ladies Land League – and her earliest writings show that she was well aware of the forced dissolution of the women, when their radical path was not to men’s liking. Her emphasis was on women’s readiness to take the militant path.

Hanna and two of her sisters – encouraged by their mother – were among the tiny numbers of women to enter university – it was then she realized that although women could do better than men in exams, they could not vote, and were therefore denied citizenship. When being asked to sign a petition for the vote that was being circulated to women students in Britain and Ireland, she later said ‘I was amazed and disgusted to learn that I was classed among criminals, infants and lunatics – in fact that my status as a woman was worse than any of these. Naturally I signed and became a conscious suffragist from that hour on.’

It was at university that she met Frank Skeffington – their marriage united their two surnames, symbolizing a commitment to equality within the relationship. But a new life as an emancipated young woman did not come that easily. Sexual love was a difficult area for young women of her background. Before her marriage she had turned to the nuns who had taught her for guidance, but by the end of that first year as a married woman she had bought Marie Stope’s *Married Love*, a book considered immoral and obscene by most authorities and of course by the Catholic Church. (It probably still does) A life determined by their own intellectual and moral convictions was well underway. When their son Owen married in 1935 one of Hanna’s acts as mother-in-law was to buy *Married Love* for the young couple. It was partly a small act against censorship as the 1934 Criminal Law Amendment Act now banned the importation of contraceptives to the Free State. She had already dismissed those who imposed the Censorship of Publications Act – which she said was ‘a ridiculous law imposed by prudish men’. I like her blunt, straightforward way of speaking. I think we can tell what her reactions would be to current issues here, such as abortion and marriage equality.

Owen said his parents ‘thought themselves’ out of religion. They took a conscious moral decision to reject the tenets of Christianity. Owen was not baptized. This was difficult and painful, with estrangement from families and no more work teaching in convents. We can see Hanna’s struggles when in 1912, during her first imprisonment, she contemplated confession before embarking on hunger strike - and admitted this to Frank. He smuggled in a furious letter to her:

I don't see how you could ever have contemplated confession. Let them associate suffragism with atheism if they like – they will be right! This is one of the things on which I am drastic and can't understand compromise.'

Hanna never capitulated to religious convention again. While dying she urged Owen to remember that she had no religion, 'I am an unrepentant pagan' she declared.

I like to think of Hanna, a woman who loved flowers and gardens, who was aware of Ireland's Celtic past and tradition of strong women, defining herself as pagan. It sums up a woman who rejected artificial, man-made pomp and ceremony, the main function of which was to ensure the continued dominance of patriarchal authority.

How did her political activism begin? In 1908 she and Frank, together with their friends Margaret and James Cousins, had set up the Irish Women's Franchise League as a militant campaigning group for women's right to vote. 'Home Rule for Irish Women as well as Irish Men' was one of their slogans. By 1912, with women being left out of the Home Rule Bill then going through parliament, Hanna and her colleagues in the Irish Women's Franchise League felt they had no alternative but to take the path of suffrage militancy. She chose the windows of Dublin Castle as her target because it was the seat of British rule in Ireland and she wanted to emphasise the 'wrongs of many years'. She clearly saw a connection between women's emancipation and national self-determination. The suffragettes saw themselves as 'outlaws' as they had no say in the making of law. She declared she wanted 'militant militancy'

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 was not worth a mutilated letter, a cut wire, a premier's racked nerves?

By the outbreak of the first world war Hanna had become a gifted polemicist, an outspoken opponent of imperial rule

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If male statesmanship after all these centuries has nothing better to offer by way of adjusting differences than a universal shambles, then in heaven's name let men allow women to lend a hand, not at mopping up the blood and purifying the stench of the abattoir, but at clearing away the whole rotten system. Until then it is our duty to press on with unabated energy, to increase our activities at this crisis, to preach peace, sanity and suffrage.

Frank's opposition to war led to imprisonment and a hunger and thirst strike before he won his release. Through Hanna's efforts Irish women were to be a separate delegation to the Women's International Peace Conference in the Hague in April 1915 – 100 years ago – she had pressed for Ireland to be recognised as an independent small nation, not part of a British section. It was an historic recognition – despite the fact that the British government prevented Irish and British women from attending by closing the North Sea to shipping.

In those tumultuous times, Hanna was growing closer to the political views of James Connolly. She wrote to Louie Bennett, a suffragist colleague who took a pacifist line on the question of war:

If I saw a hope of Ireland being freed for ever from British rule by a swift uprising, I would consider Irishmen justified resorting to arms in order that we might be free. I should still be radically opposed to war and militarism.

Connolly had informed her that she had been nominated a member of a civil provisional government that would have come into existence if the Rising had lasted for a longer period of time – an indication of the esteem in which she was held by the revolutionaries. In the first days of the Rising she brought supplies to some of the outposts. The murder of Frank - arrested while on his way home after unsuccessfully trying to organize a citizen's militia to prevent looting, then brought to Portobello barracks, and shot and buried in the barrack's yard, his family not informed of his death - completed Hanna's alienation from the British state and prompted her growing commitment to republican ideals.

In publicizing her husband's murder Hanna found her home ransacked by soldiers, her son terrified, his drawings confiscated as evidence of pro-German sympathies, her maid arrested, Frank buried secretly without her knowledge. By force of will, and using all the contacts she and Frank had built up over years of political activity, she met Prime Minister Asquith and made the British government agree to a Public Inquiry. Despite her efforts there was a cover-up by military and politicians and Bowen Colthurst, the perpetrator, was able to settle down in Canada, while Sir Francis Vane, the officer who had done so much to help Hanna in her efforts, was dismissed from the army.

Hanna refused the British offer of compensation for the murder and decided to travel to America to publicise Frank's murder and the events of 1916. Her experience is very similar to that of Geraldine Finucane, who is still valiantly campaigning for a public inquiry into the murder of her lawyer husband Pat and who also travels to America to publicise her campaign. Hanna was now hounded by the British state, refused a passport to travel and had to smuggle over herself and Owen using assumed identities. While in America she was tailed by secret service agents who reported on her meetings and what she said. Despite everything, she succeeded in gaining an interview with President Wilson. By the time she was ready to return home to Ireland in July 1918 she described herself as a Sinn Feiner, ready to take her part in the new national movement. After docking at Liverpool, she discovered that permission for her to continue onto to Ireland was refused. She went to London, petitioned politicians, exhausted her patience and smuggled herself home, dressed in overall, hiding in a ship's hold. Not long after she arrived home, she was arrested as an illegal immigrant, and sent back to England, to Holloway jail, to join Maud Gonne and Kathleen Clarke. She immediately went on hunger strike and was soon back in Ireland, a leading member of Sinn Fein, their Director of Organisation.

In the years she was involved with the organization it is possible to trace her influence, as tangible and as unique as a fingerprint left on documents. For example, in 1921-2 'An impression exists in some districts that membership of Cumainn is confined to men. This is a mistake and 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 Cumainn and the Sinn Fein movement generally.' - Quotas for women in political parties would surely have received her full support.

She opposed the Treaty and campaigned hard for women over 21 to have the vote so they would be able to vote on the issue – writing to an old friend she said 'The fight for this absorbed all my energies and it seemed like old suffragette times again.' When in 1933 the northern authorities arrested her for speaking at a meeting in Newry she made a defiant speech from the dock, 'I recognise no partition. I recognize that it is not a crime to be in my own country. I would be ashamed of my race. I would be ashamed of my murdered husband if I admitted that I was an alien in Armagh, Down, Derry or any of the 32 counties.' Thousands came to meet her in Dundalk, Drogheda, and Dublin as she made a triumphal motorcade tour on her release.

In later years she said that one need not become elderly minded, and she hoped she never would. She never did. In 1943, at the age of 66, she stood for the Dail, one of four independents who hoped their example would led to the formation of a women's party. Her election manifesto was a declaration of the principles by which she had lived her life:

There can be no true democracy where is not complete economic and political freedom for the entire nation, both men and women. How can there be effective administration where the political machine is entirely controlled by one sex only... nationally I stand for the complete independence of Ireland and for the abolition of partition... Under the 1916 Proclamation Irish women were given equal citizenship, equal rights and equal opportunities, and subsequent constitutions have filched these or smothered them in mere 'empty formulae'.

The very last article she wrote was published after her death. While it was written in support of her daughter-in-law Andree, a co-founder of the Irish Housewives League, Hanna made it plain how much she disliked the word housewife:

These clumsy man-made words remind us how little free we really are, so 'housewife is accepted more or less meekly by most women as we accept men's names in marriage and live in their inconveniently-constructed houses'.

For me, it is impossible not to love and admire someone with that outspoken spirit. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, a woman whose political and personal life still has resonance and relevance. A woman for our times.

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