

HANNA SHEEHY-SKEFFINGTON

I FIRST met Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington in 1922, just after the signing of the London "treaty." A day or two before I had interviewed Erskine Childers, on one side, and Alice Stopford Green, the historian, on the other. But from no one did I get such a clear impression of implacability, of irreconcilable opposition to anything less than complete national independence. Mrs. Skeffington was not a fanatic, and she did not look like one. She was ready to see the humorous side of any controversy, her eyes had a twinkle, and her soft voice, with its touch of brogue, conveyed the impression of a pleasant cultivated woman who was not likely to push matters to extremes. I asked myself at once how it was that such a woman should be so flintlike and unyielding.

The answer is to be found in history—the history of Ireland—and her own personal history, which is bound with it. Here I am only concerned with that personal history as it fits into the national background. Her father—David Sheehy, M.P.—has a record of service for Ireland. He was returned as a member of Parnell's party when this swept the country in 1886, just as Sinn Féin did in the similar national wave in 1918. Before this he had been a Fenian, and was out in '67. He was in gaol several times, and had experience of hunger strikes. One of Mrs. Skeffington's earliest memories—when she was about four years old—was going to see him in Kilmainham Gaol. She remembered dashing across the prison yard, as other children dash across the playground. He was the author of *Prison Papers*, and, as a youthful friend of William O'Brien, he found a place in the pages of *When We Were Boys Together*. Her uncle, Fr. Eugent Sheehy, was also among those who have given national service. His picture—with its shrewd, whimsical, clear-cut face—hung in her room. Her sisters—Mrs. Cruise O'Brien and Mrs. Kettle—have each in their way made distinctive contributions. The first was known as an exceptionally good Irish teacher and the author of admirable textbooks on Irish. The other was a member of the Dublin Corporation, and was Chairman for some



Photo: J. Cashman.

Madame Despard, on far right, with companions stages a sit-down strike outside Mountjoy Prison while Republican prisoners were hunger-striking inside.

years of Rathmines Town Council. One of her last acts in her official capacity as Chairman was to announce definitely that Rathmines would not fly the Union Jack at some exhibition that was being organised locally. This emphatic statement secured wide publicity in the Irish and English press.

Mrs. Skeffington told me how in 1916, the Tuesday morning of Easter Week, when she went to the General Post Office to take food in, the first person she met, after Connolly, was her uncle, then an old man of eighty.

"My God, Hanna, what are you doing here?" he cried in alarm.

"And what are you doing here?" she rejoined.

"I have come to give spiritual consolation," he told her.

"And I to bring physical sustenance!"

That day was the last day she saw her husband. When the Rising came, she decided that she must help. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was busy checking looting and disorder. They met during the day and had tea together. The next she heard of him was when he had been shot by order of Captain Colthurst.

Mrs. Skeffington was a girl of eighteen when she commenced studying at the University, afterwards merged in the National. Here she took her M.A. and acquired that training which has helped her as a teacher as well as in her writing and speaking on public affairs. But far more than any academic knowledge which she gained was the influence which came into her life when she met Francis Skeffington. When I spoke with her, I found she was far more ready to speak of his life and work than of her own not uneventful career. He it was who first interested her in feminism and gave her that enduring interest in the women's movement to which she has given conspicuous service. He talked to her of John Stuart Mill, whom he made the subject of his Inaugural Address at the University.

Women at this time were not admitted fully to University privileges: they were regarded as a kind of poor relation. They were not allowed to join College societies. Obstacles were placed in the way of their studies. Skeffington saw the injustice of this, and threw himself into the struggle. In 1903 he married Hanna Sheehy, and—true to their feminist principles—they retained both names. That year he was appointed first lay registrar of University College. But the following year he resigned his post owing to differences due to his advocacy of equal rights for women students. Both Trinity and the National Universities have since given women full rights, long before English universities took this step. Skeffington's untiring and self-sacrificing work

doubtless hastened this. It is not surprising that later both Mrs. Skeffington and her husband took a great part in the suffrage agitation, both going to prison for it.

The Irish Women's Franchise League—with its organ, *The Irish Citizen*, edited by Sheehy-Skeffington, and later by his wife—formed a rallying point for all the best and most progressive elements in Dublin. In its pages the anti-Conscription struggle, and other vital issues, received attention. The organisation used the same offices—the Antient Concert Rooms—as the Irish Socialist Party, founded by Connolly. Madame Markievicz, Connolly, Pearse, MacDonagh, and many other pioneers of the Rebellion, used the platform of the Franchise League to express their views.

Side by side with this, suffrage militancy continued. Mrs. Skeffington was the outstanding champion of women's rights in Ireland. At this time she went to a large Belfast meeting—at which Winston Churchill spoke—to demand that women should be treated as citizens and that the prison outrages on women should cease. At the meeting she was seized by a cluster of hooligans and hustled to the top of a steep flight of stone steps at the entrance. "Throw her down!" cried one ruffian. Without a moment's hesitation Mrs. Skeffington gripped him firmly by his coat lapels. "If you throw me down, you come, too!" she said. He hurriedly discovered that perhaps they had better not. Her swiftness and decision in seizing the situation—and the lapels—are revealed by that little incident.

In her university days she and Skeffington were often ranged on the National side. There was the yearly struggle over the playing of "God Save the King" on the College organ when Degrees were conferred. This was, too, a time of general Irish revival, of the beginning of interest in the language and drama, when the Abbey Theatre began and the Celtic Twilight school of writers did their best work. During the Boer War there was a big pro-Boer movement among the students, who wore "Boer Buttons" to show their sympathies. All this was part of the formative influences of university life.

The suffrage movement remained a big interest. When a Home Rule Bill was talked of by Redmond, Mrs. Skeffington at once demanded that Irish women should have citizen rights. Redmond would not hear of this. The Irish Women's Franchise League took its rise directly out of these conditions, being formed in 1908. Its organ was published up till 1920, when the type was smashed by the Black and Tans. The influence of the suffrage agitation—carried on mainly by the Skeffingtons—was revealed in the National Proclamation of 1916. Mrs.

Skeffington recalls that, just before the Rising, Connolly said to her: "You will be glad to know that in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic we are including equal citizenship for women!"

"I know who is responsible for that!" she replied, being fully aware of Connolly's views.

"We were practically unanimous," Connolly told her. "Only one questioned it!"

Actually the Skeffington's were more responsible than anyone else, for their ceaseless agitation had kept the question to the front. It is probably their initial work which has resulted in equal suffrage being part of the constitution in Ireland to-day.

"If you are interested in developments," Connolly went on, "I would not advise you to go away on holiday just now."

This was on the Saturday before the Rising.

The anxious days immediately following were spent by Mrs. Skeffington in taking food and messages where they were needed. Bags of bread and Oxo had to be taken to the Royal College of Surgeons, where Commandant Michael Mallin was in control. Connolly sent an unobtrusive armed guard in front and behind the women to prevent molestation by "separation women"—hangers-on of the British troops. With their sacks of potatoes and other goods they were taken for looters by many of the onlookers. But this, as Mrs. Skeffington said, was their best protection. From the College of Surgeons she went to get medical attention for a wounded man who seemed to be bleeding to death. No doctor would come. At one hospital two were willing, but the House Surgeon would not allow it. This attitude may be contrasted with Sheehy-Skeffington's going to the front of Dublin Castle to rescue a wounded British officer there, when no one would dare go near. On being remonstrated with for risking his life, he said: "I would never allow anyone to bleed to death while I could help."

Now came the central personal tragedy of Mrs. Skeffington's life. Skeffington had been busy trying to keep the lawless elements in check. In this he was absolutely fearless. He wanted to form a Citizens' Committee to carry out this work. But he had to do it alone. Coming homeward on Tuesday evening, he was arrested and taken to Portobello barracks. He was asked if he were a Sinn Féiner. He replied that he was opposed to militarism, but was in sympathy with the aims of the National movement. He never concealed his views. Captain Bowen Colthurst first took him out with a raiding party, as a hostage. That evening they murdered an inoffensive boy of seventeen, named Coade, smashing his jaw with the butt end of a revolver and firing at him on

the ground. Skeffington—his hands bound—protested. He was told by Colthurst that he would likely be the next. The blood-lust of this creature was not satiated till he had murdered Skeffington and at least three others, including an unarmed prisoner, whom he shot in the lung, and who died in great agony. The British military authorities not only concealed these crimes, but actually promoted Colthurst after he committed them, giving him the position of Sir Francis Vane, a British officer, who, to his honour, had protested.

After two or three days, rumours reached Mrs. Skeffington, and she tried in vain to find out the truth. Her sisters, Mrs. Kettle and Mrs. Cruise O'Brien, went to the barracks to inquire. They were put under arrest. Captain Colthurst questioned them, and told them he knew nothing whatever of Skeffington. They were marched out of the barracks under armed guard, and forbidden to speak. Then, having decided that Skeffington's murder could no longer be concealed, Colthurst tried to secure some "evidence" to justify the act. Shortly after six, when she was putting her small son, Owen, to bed, soldiers lined up round Mrs. Skeffington's house. Suddenly a volley was fired at the front windows, and soldiers smashed in what were left, with the butt ends of their rifles. Captain Colthurst dashed in, leading men with fixed bayonets, to confront Mrs. Skeffington, Owen and the maid. As he came, he yelled "Hands up!" With her arm round the boy, Mrs. Skeffington said: "These are the defenders of women and children!" Perhaps Colthurst was ashamed, or perhaps it was not his custom to commit murder before so many military witnesses (there were forty men in all). He placed them under guard in the front room, with orders to be shot if they stirred, and proceeded to rifle the contents of the house. These they took to the barracks in a commandeered motor car. Colthurst even brought Skeffington's keys, stolen from his dead body, to help him steal these possessions. Very few of them were ever returned. But this was a time when British soldiers were selling their loot in the streets of Dublin. Later another raid was undertaken, and the maid was placed under arrest for a week. One British officer publicly regretted that they had not shot Mrs. Skeffington while they had the chance.

Mrs. Skeffington's own account of these days might pardonably have contained some exaggeration of the horror. But when I came to read Sir Francis Vane's story given in his reminiscences (*Agin' the Governments*), it seemed even more brutal and horrible. He was second in command in Portobello. Stung at accusations of murder, made contemptuously even by the newsboys of Dublin, he demanded an inquiry.

For answer he was deprived of his position and Colthurst was promoted in his place. Vane was warned that he must not associate with Mrs. Skeffington. He had gone to her to find out the truth. At the inquiry which Mrs. Skeffington—with the help of Vane—forced, they tried to make out that Colthurst was crazy, and pretended to punish him, though he retained his rank and drew half-pay for several months. He was detained for a time as a "patient" in an asylum in England till he was "cured," and the matter blew over. On the other hand, Vane was deprived of his rank, dismissed from the service, and refused a hearing at the courtmartial. Colthurst was only crazy in the same way that the rest of the higher command in Dublin were crazy—their fear and hatred of the people of Ireland had turned them into irresponsible brutes.

With magnificent spirit, Mrs. Skeffington set out for London to force a real inquiry and reveal the truth. The military courtmartial was merely a farce. She saw Asquith in a drawing-room at Downing Street, and he told her that he regretted that in war time an adequate inquiry could not be held. He had previously promised this inquiry when John Dillon read Mrs. Skeffington's statement in the House of Commons. At this interview Mr. Asquith suggested "adequate, and even generous," compensation, instead of an inquiry. This pitiful attempt at bribery fell through when Mrs. Skeffington told him that the only compensation she wanted was a full inquiry into her husband's murder. He was reluctantly compelled to grant a Commission of Inquiry, with Sir John Simon at its head. It was the impartial Simon who said to Sir Francis Vane: "You seem to imagine that you can say what we don't want you to say!" This same Simon has been used in other inquiries since, though the Indians wisely told him to go back. The scope of the inquiry was limited: Colthurst was not even summoned. Yet, in spite of all this, truth came out.

More than anyone else Mrs. Skeffington is responsible for the world hearing about this deed of British militarism. She determined to go to America and tell the story there. The sympathetic Asquith refused her a passport, except on condition that she did not discuss Irish affairs. She informed Dillon that the only pledge she would give was to tell the truth. He flung up his hands in mock horror. "Tell the truth in war time!" he cried. "It's the last thing they want!" Mrs. Skeffington defied the British Government, and beat them. She went to America without a passport and lectured on what had happened in Ireland. She saw Roosevelt and other prominent Americans, and her story made a profound impression. It did much to counteract British war

propaganda. On coming back, she was arrested and told she must stay in Liverpool for the "duration of the war." She refused again, and crossed over to Ireland in a coal boat. In 1918 she was re-arrested and taken to Holloway, where she hunger struck and forced her release. After this she was raided and arrested frequently in Ireland. Her resolution and firmness of character were subjected to severe tests.

She served on the Sinn Féin Executive, on the Dublin Corporation—till it was temporarily abolished—and during the Black and Tan days she acted as secretary for Sinn Féin. In 1922 and '23 she was back in America once more. During these stormy years, Mrs. Skeffington—like her husband—never hesitated to choose the hard path when she thought it right.

Francis Sheehy-Skeffington has been a great inspiration to her since his death. And no one can realise the nobility of the man without feeling that this was bound to be so. He was so honest, simple, fearless and sincere, that he can be truly described as a saint among men. It is one of the ironies of existence that a mad dog can destroy something fine. And the world could ill afford to lose him. His wife has said:—

"F. Sheehy-Skeffington was an anti-militarist, a fighting pacifist. A man gentle and kindly even to his bitterest opponents, who always ranged himself on the side of the weak against the strong, whether the struggle was one of class, sex or race domination. Together with his strong fighting spirit, he had a marvellous, an unextinguishable, good humour, a keen joy in life, a great faith in humanity and a hope in the progress toward good."

Speaking in America, she proudly proclaimed:—

"Francis Sheehy-Skeffington could not have imagined any more damning exposé of the militarism he detested and under which he perished, no writer of fiction could have imagined a more harrowing story of unrelieved brutality than may be found in the cold and lawyer-like language of the Simon Report. . . . A martyr fights in death more terribly than many warring saints. He is entrenched; you cannot reach him with your heaviest shot. My husband would have gone to his death with a smile on his lips, knowing that by his murder he had struck a heavier blow for his ideals than by any act of his life. And I am willing to give him up on the altar of sacrifice, for I know that his death will speak trumpet-tongued against the system that slew him."

Not many could so proudly rise to the situation and put behind them their personal sorrow. But it is not many who have such an heroic story to tell—or could tell it so heroically. Mrs. Skeffington concluded:—

“It is the dreamers and visionaries that keep hope alive and feed enthusiasm—not the statesmen and politicians. Sometimes it is harder to live for a cause than to die for it. It would be a poor tribute to my husband if grief were to break my spirit. It shall not do so. I am not here just to harrow your hearts by a passing thrill, to feed you on horrors for sensation’s sake. I want to continue my husband’s work so that, when I meet him some day in the Great Beyond, he will be pleased with my stewardship.”

Here we have the secret of Mrs. Skeffington’s strength. What need had she to seek the approval of lesser men and women, if out of the shades she could see her husband’s eyes smiling encouragement as she carried on their joint work. There are moments in life when the strongest of us despair of the coming day, when evil appears to triumph and those who strive for a better human order seem to be wasting their lives. Yet if we look at matters straightly, we see that their lives are the least wasted of all. Looking back, we measure our lives by what we have tried to do that was worth doing, and, judged by this measure, the Sheehy-Skeffingtons, whose work cannot be separated, easily pass the test.

They have opposed militarism. Skeffington made his meaning plain in his *Open Letter to Thomas MacDonagh*, where he said, in passing: “You know I am personally in full sympathy with the objects of the Irish Volunteers.” And what is militarism? It is just that dark bestiality which Colthurst and his kind represent. The brute who kills without having a mind to reason with, the soldier who merely obeys orders and shoots—these are the enemies. National freedom, internationalism, anti-militarism, feminism—these are ideas of light. I think it is true to say that the Skeffingtons always stood for a wider interpretation of Ireland’s struggle than that of merely breaking away from England. They have the right to speak, for both have given their lives and thought for Ireland’s liberation. They bring a message for Irish womanhood—and for Irish manhood as well. Not merely a defiant gesture, but constructive thought; not only strength, but gentleness; not only the escaping from the tyranny of Empire, but from the tyrannies of militarism, of class and of sex. They ask all to think about

the Ireland they want to build as well as the bonds they want to break.

I shall always remember one meeting at which Mrs. Skeffington spoke. It was at the Mansion House in Dublin on the occasion of a public meeting called by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, who were holding their International Congress in the city. Pacifist women from Britain poured out a gospel of peaceful submission to the Empire—a travesty of honest pacifism as understood by the Skeffingtons. In their defence, it may be urged that many of them had crossed to Dublin, without understanding in the least degree what Empire meant there. One dared to invoke the name of Skeffington. Mrs. Skeffington replied. She told of Skeffington’s lifelong opposition to Imperialism in Ireland; his militant crusade which was only cut short by death. She quoted Pearse: “Ireland unfree will never be at peace,” and ended with a passionate plea for peace and freedom. The audience rose to her, for she spoke as one inspired.

Looking round the quiet room in which I talked with her, I noted the pictures—Madame Markievicz, Madame Gonne MacBride, Fr. Eugene Sheehy, a big picture of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington over the mantelpiece—painted by Miss Harrison after his death. This was not so alert, vivid and combative as Skeffington’s photographs reveal him. He was wearing his *Votes for Women* badge—stolen by an officer—and a ribbon in the Suffrage — which were also the National — colours. Underneath, on the mantelpiece, in a glass case, was the white death mask of Robert Emmet.

“We had to hide this carefully when the Black and Tans came,” said Mrs. Skeffington, with a smile.

Yet, whatever destruction the reactionaries have been guilty of, her spirit is one which they were never able to break.