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January 2019

Margaret Ward (ed), Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Suffragette and Sinn Féiner: Her Memoirs and Political Writings, Dublin: UCD Press, 2017

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Abstract

Book review of Margaret Ward (ed), Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Suffragette and Sinn Féiner: Her Memoirs and Political Writings, Dublin: UCD Press, 2017

Publication Details

Crozier-De Rosa, S. (2019). Margaret Ward (ed), Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Suffragette and Sinn Féiner: Her Memoirs and Political Writings, Dublin: UCD Press, 2017. *Australian Journal of Irish Studies*, 19 143-145.

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. *Suffragette and Sinn Féiner. Her Memoirs and Political Writings*, by Margaret Ward [Book Review], Dublin: UCD Press, 2017 (xxvii + 463pp. Hardback, \$52 approx. ISBN 9781910820148), in *Australasian Journal of Irish Studies*, Volume 19 (2019).

A great many women activists, whatever their cause, were acutely aware that they, their work and their achievements would be written out of the historical record or distorted beyond all recognition. Irish activist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946) was no exception. She feared that her memory, and that of her revolutionary peers, would be 'lost in old newspaper files or dusty museums' (2) or, even worse, would be used and abused by politicians for their own ends. Her observations were astute as she and her fellow female activists were vilified and then written out of Irish history for much of the twentieth century. Hanna may have fallen prey to the very process of omission that she identified, but through undertaking the painstaking process of bringing her vast and scattered body of writing together, renowned historian of Irish revolutionary women's activism, Margaret Ward, has worked to rectify that, letting Hanna speak for herself and in some ways shape her own memory.

Hanna, a university graduate, was a dedicated socialist, nationalist, feminist and pacifist. She formed the Irish Women's Franchise League, Ireland's militant suffragist organisation, and with her husband, Frank Skeffington, co-founded the League's paper, the *Irish Citizen* (committed to equality, she and Frank took each other's names on marriage). She was active in many of early twentieth-century Ireland's renowned events and campaigns including the 1913 Dublin Lockout, the 1916 Easter Rising – during which Frank was tragically murdered by a British Army officer – the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). She tirelessly campaigned for her intersecting causes nationally and internationally, carving out a reputation for herself as an intelligent, uncompromising political activist. During the post-revolutionary years and up until her death in 1946, she remained a dedicated activist – a feminist, socialist and staunch supporter of the revolutionary ideal of a republic on the whole island of Ireland.

The book draws on a wide array of sources including Hanna's unfinished memoirs, fragments of letters, her various pamphlets, and an extensive body of articles that she penned for her own paper, the *Irish Citizen*, as well as for other papers such as the *Freeman's Journal*, the *Irish News*, Alice Paul's and Lucy Burns' *The Suffragist*, and the *Irish World*, a US paper devoted to Irish nationalist propaganda. Ward has arranged Hanna's writings thematically. Chapters include, for example, Hanna's views on women and education, suffragism, pacifism, the 1916 rising, opposition to the Free State, political women's prison experiences, as well as her book and theatre reviews. There are also a small number of interesting and evocative photographs including one of Hanna and her son, Owen, and others depicting her work overseas with organisations like the National Woman's Party, the International Women's Suffrage Congress and the Irish Women's Mission to America.

The entire collection helps to paint a vivid picture of one of Ireland's most remarkable pioneering and progressive political activists; a political advocate who has been too long overlooked. It casts light on the views and experiences of a woman who, for example, has the distinction of being the only early twentieth-century Irish republican who was granted the privilege of meeting with US President Woodrow Wilson. During that visit to America in 1916-17, Hanna also delivered a staggering 250 talks on the Irish struggle for independence and on woman suffrage. Her writings record her views on American culture, its wartime propaganda and political surveillance, and even on Henry Ford's pro-Irish sympathies and criticisms of British democracy.

Parts of this collection also make for a sobering read on the impact of occupied and wartime conditions on men, women and children. Documents like 'British Militarism as I Have Known it' (reprinted numerous times) and a 'Statement of Atrocities on Women in Ireland' (1920) depict scenes of violence and repression: the murder of her husband and the devastating loss of their personal letters during house raids; the shooting of pregnant women and young children by British soldiers; civilian rapes and assaults; military prostitution; and the wholesale arrest of dissidents' female relatives, teachers, university lecturers and nuns – women prisoners who also endured the added indignity and danger of being guarded by drunken soldiers.

Other documents provide rare insight into the nature of women activists' political relationships, especially that between the academic Hanna and the dramatic revolutionary leader, Constance Markievicz (1868-1927). Some insights gathered in this section of the book reveal Hanna's respect for the brave actions and phenomenal achievements of Markievicz (the first woman elected to British parliament and first woman minister in the Irish parliament), as well as a touching concern for her welfare, especially as she endured almost continual imprisonment. Hanna's words form a poignant salute to a woman who, like many others at the time, 'died too young' (289). They also reveal a determination – often thwarted – to preserve the integrity of the memory of fellow women activists. For example, a 1932 *An Phoblacht* article records Hanna's staunch protest against future president of the Irish Republic, Éamon de Valéra's 1932 depiction of his comrade-in-arms, Markievicz, as a mere philanthropist. In her attempt to correct the historical record, Hanna remembered her friend and colleague as 'a rebel, meeting challenge with challenge, giving back blow for blow' (301).

Through collecting and contextualising this impressive body of writing, Ward undertakes a similar task – she protects the integrity of women’s history through restoring this remarkable, formerly overlooked political actor to the pages of history. When attempting to explain why the majority of revolutionary women took the difficult and painful path of opposing the establishment of the Free State and the partition of Ireland, Hanna relied on the words of nationalist politician Michael Davitt (1846-1906) who said: ‘Women are more uncompromising than men’ (192). Certainly, Margaret Ward’s well-informed collection of Hanna’s writing attests to the fact that here is exactly that – an exemplar of an uncompromising brand of Irish womanhood and female activism.

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