



*Leabharlann
Náisiúnta
na hÉireann*

National Library
of Ireland

Revealing History

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington
Feminist, Nationalist, Activist



Introduction

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington was a prominent activist and politician in Ireland and abroad before, during, and after the Irish revolutionary period. She worked for multiple causes including women's suffrage, Irish nationalism, socialism, and gender equality. Hanna undertook successful speaking tours of the USA promoting Irish independence and helping to raise relief funds for the families of republican prisoners. An influential Sinn Féin party member and Dublin Corporation councillor, Sheehy-Skeffington was also a judge in the republican courts during the Irish War of Independence. She was one of only four women appointed to the executive of the new Fianna Fáil party in 1926 but later opposed de Valera over the 'anti-women' 1937 constitution.

Digitisation of NLI Primary Sources

This PDF draws from primary source material held in the National Library of Ireland newly digitised to mark the Irish Decade of Centenaries (1912-1923). These documents range from personal letters, memoirs, and official papers to contemporary handbills, maps and photographs and help contextualise the decisions and motivations of the men and women, including Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, who helped shape the revolutionary period in Ireland.

Key Moments

1903

Marries Francis (Frank) Skeffington

Hanna Sheehy married Francis (Frank) Skeffington. The couple took each other's surnames to symbolise the true equality of their relationship.

1908
-1912

Helps establish the Irish Women's Franchise League

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington helped establish the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), a militant female suffrage group that by 1912 was the largest women's suffrage group in Ireland. She also co-founded *The Irish Citizen* newspaper co-edited by her husband the same year.

1917
-1918

Cumann na dTeachtaire

Sheehy-Skeffington was an important figure in Cumann na dTeachtaire (The Association of Women Delegates) which pressed for greater representation of women in Irish politics.

1916
-1917

Public-speaking tour of America

Her husband Frank was murdered by British Army captain J. C. Bowen-Colthurst during the 1916 Easter Rising. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington embarked on an extensive public-speaking tour of America to highlight her husband's killing and to promote the cause of Irish independence.

1919
-1921

Sinn Féin's Director of Organisation

Elected to Dublin Corporation for Sinn Féin. Appointed as Sinn Féin's Director of Organisation and elected onto its ruling Standing Committee.

1922
-1926

Appointed to Fianna Fail

An opponent of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Sheehy-Skeffington travelled right across the United States fundraising for anti-Treaty prisoners and their families during the Irish Civil War. In 1926 she was one of only four women appointed to the Fianna Fáil party executive.

1946

Death in 1946

Having suffered for some time with poor health, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington died of heart failure on 20 April 1946. She was buried beside her husband Frank in Dublin's Glasnevin Cemetery.

1937

Fought for Womens Rights and Issues

Sheehy-Skeffington campaigned against the 1937 Irish Constitution which she viewed as "anti-women". She helped establish the Women's Social and Progressive League (WSPL) to fight for women's rights and issues.



Scholar, Wife and Partner

Hanna (Johanna) Sheehy was born on 24 May 1877 in Kanturk, County Cork to David Sheehy, Irish Parliamentary Party MP, and Elizabeth Sheehy (née McCoy). Part of the first generation of Irish women admitted to university on the same terms as men she graduated with an honours BA in modern languages from the Royal University of Ireland in Dublin in 1899 before receiving her MA in 1902. Having met her future husband Frank Skeffington while they were both studying, they married on 27 June 1903 becoming the Sheehy-Skeffingtons. Their only child, Owen, was born in 1908.

Self-consciously an equal partnership between husband and wife the couple dedicated themselves to causes ranging from women's suffrage and pacifism to socialism and Irish nationalism. A couple working together was unusual in this era and their distinctiveness was often used against them personally and against their political campaigns.



A satirical newspaper cartoon from 1912 and a poem entitled 'The Evolution of Skeffy' depicting Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and implying he was dominated by his wife, Hanna. You can learn more about this at <https://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo636185>

Activist

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington advocated for many causes during the Irish revolutionary period in a variety of ways from political protests, including hunger strikes, to publishing articles, and making many public speeches. Prominent in Ireland, Sheehy-Skeffington was also well known abroad. She was invited to be a delegate at the first Congress of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in 1915 but was refused a passport by the British government. Sheehy-Skeffington continued to be part of women's suffrage and peace groups during and after World War I ranging from the American National Woman's Party and the National Council of Women of the United States to the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom of which she later became vice-president.

Suffragette

The struggle for the right of women to vote and run for office was an important part of Sheehy-Skeffington's activism. She joined the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA) led by Anna Haslam in 1902. Despite their political differences - Haslam was a Unionist and Sheehy-Skeffington an Irish nationalist - they worked closely together on women's suffrage campaigns including petitioning the British government, holding public meetings, and organising educational lectures.

By 1908, however, she had become disillusioned with the moderate methods of the IWSLGA and formed a new group with fellow suffragette Margaret Cousins, the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). This more militant grouping staged public protests which sometimes led to violence and to the arrests of activists. On 13 June 1912, eight members of the IWFL, including Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, protested the lack of women's suffrage provisions in the new Home Rule Bill by smashing the windows of government buildings in Dublin. As a result, she served two months in Mountjoy Prison. While imprisoned she successfully achieved political prisoner status for herself and went on hunger strike to protest the treatment of two English suffragettes. Hunger strikes would become a favoured tactic of Irish suffragettes and later Irish nationalists like Austin Stack. *The Irish Citizen* newspaper, founded by the Sheehy-Skeffingtons in 1912 to promote IWFL campaigns, became the 'voice' of the suffrage movement as a whole.



A photograph of Hanna perhaps taken on her tour of the USA in 1916. You can find out more about this photo (NPA SHE25) here at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo669995>

**Irish Women's Franchise
LEAGUE.**

MISS
CHRISTABEL PANKHURST, L.L.B.,
ROTUNDA.

Friday, March 11th,
8 p.m.

Tickets, 2/- (Reserved) 1/- & 6d.

Tickets can be obtained at Messrs. Cramers' Westmoreland St., The Library, 34 Wicklow St., and at the League Offices, 42 Gt. Brunswick Street.

VOTES FOR WOMEN.

M. Quirk, Printer Irish Paper,

A poster promoting a public lecture in Dublin by Christabel Pankhurst on 11 March 1910. Committed national organisations like the IWFL raised awareness for the cause of women's voting rights mainly through such meetings. You can find out more about this poster (EPH B154) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo50894>

Widow

During the 1916 Easter Rising Frank Sheehy-Skeffington tried to organise small groups of civilians to patrol the streets and prevent looting. Returning home on the evening of 25 April 1916 from handing out leaflets, he was arrested by British soldiers and taken to Portobello Barracks in Dublin. He was put in the custody of Captain John Bowen-Colthurst who used Frank as a hostage during a raid. The following morning, 26 April, Frank and two other civilians, Patrick McIntyre, and Thomas Dickson, were shot without trial on Bowen-Colthurst's orders. That evening Bowen-Colthurst raided the Sheehy-Skeffington house seeking evidence of 'treason' to justify his actions.

Bowen-Colthurst was eventually court-martialled and found guilty but insane. Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington felt that the court martial and the official British inquiries into Frank's death were completely inadequate. The British attempts to deny her husband was murdered convinced Hanna to devote herself fully to the struggle for Irish independence.

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington felt that the court martial and the official British inquiries into Frank's death were completely inadequate

Copy
I have accounts for her
to send to you fine asked
I suppose that about 4 weeks
H.S.S.



11 PARLIAMENT STREET,
DUBLIN, June 13th, 1916.

I put this in on
5th 7th
is worth getting
material on
it was too
for me to
write about
of Henry Skeffington

SIR
As Solicitor for Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington—for whose husband's murder, on 26th April, Captain Bowen Colthurst has been adjudged guilty—I have the honour to inquire when the promised Public Inquiry will be held?

My client is profoundly dissatisfied with the limited information afforded at the Court-martial, when the insanity of the accused was suggested.

While she abhors the idea that fresh blood should be spilt, my client is equally resolute that the truth should be known, so that the people of the three Kingdoms may determine whether the same measure of justice has been meted out to all parties affected by the rebellion.

That there were circumstances giving rise to anxiety connected with the recent trial will be evident from the following facts:—

Lieutenant Wylie, K.O., who had prosecuted to conviction other men recently executed, was released from the Court-martial and an English Counsel, not fully acquainted with the facts or imperfectly instructed, was appointed. Although no plea of inability to plead was entered for the accused, the question of his sanity was raised from the outset. Yet the manner in which he effected the arrest of the other murdered men (Messrs. Dickson and McIntyre) was not proved, nor the process by which he selected them for execution from amongst eight prisoners. Nevertheless, it was within the knowledge of the Military Authorities that Messrs. Dickson and McIntyre were taken into custody on the premises of Alderman James Kelly, ex-High Sheriff, by the accused, under the idea that the shop belonged to Alderman Thomas Kelly, a person of wholly different politics. They also knew that Colthurst threw a bomb into the premises and subsequently "planted" Mr. Dickson's trunk thereon to give rise to the suspicion that Mr. Dickson had been harboured by Alderman James Kelly who was also lodged in Portobello Barracks. Nor was the Court informed that two sisters of Mrs. Skeffington, viz.: Mrs. Kettle (wife of Lieutenant Kettle), and Mrs. Cullhane (widow of a public official lately deceased) called at Portobello Barracks on Friday, 28th April, after the murders, and, on inquiring for their brother, Lieutenant Sheehy, were put under arrest and brought before Captain Colthurst, and that he denied all knowledge of Mr. Skeffington and was perfectly calm and collected in his demeanour and falsehoods. Similarly, the tribunal was not made aware that on the evening after his examination of these ladies, Captain Colthurst ordered a search of Mrs. Skeffington's house; that his soldiers first fired into her dwelling, and then, producing a key taken from the body of the murdered man, opened his locked room and removed documents to try to furnish the accused with ex post facto justification for his crime. The second raid on the widow's house by Colthurst's orders on the following Monday, as well as the fact that one of the soldiers who took part in it was the Sergeant left in charge of Dickson's trunk at Alderman James Kelly's, was also left unmentioned. There was an equally significant silence as to the protests of the murdered men on the morning of their execution, and as to the accused's refusal of spiritual solace to them in their last moments. The Court-martial were likewise unaware that Captain Colthurst was allowed to remain at large by his superiors until the 6th May—nearly a fortnight after the murders—while the non-production of Major Sir Francis Vane, his Senior Officer, disabled it from learning that on the 1st May (a week after the murders) the accused was promoted to the charge of the Defences of Portobello Barracks. His conduct in shooting the lad, Coade, on Rathmines Road previous to the three murders, was not introduced, although Coade's father immediately lodged information at the Barracks. None of the soldiers who formed the firing party were called to testify as to the nature of the accused's conduct on 1st December, or explain how Mr. Skeffington came to be taken from a locked cell without authority. The added tragedy which led to a second squad of soldiers being called out to fire at the prostrate body of Mr. Skeffington would not have become known (although proved at the private preliminary inquiry) but for the candour of the noble President of the tribunal, Lord Chylesmore. As for the attempt to fasten complicity with the rebellion on Mr. Skeffington by the production of a document published previously by Alderman Thomas Kelly (which deceased, as a journalist, kept in his house)—it stands in strange contrast with the silence preserved concerning the innocence of the other slaughtered men and the Court was not even told who or what they were. The admission of this document after Adjutant Morgan, who produced it, had sworn that it was not found on Mr. Skeffington, may have been due to inadvertence, but the cunning of the untruthful endorsement on it by the accused to the effect that it was found on the body, seemed to call for observation on the issue of sanity, as corroboration of the fact that Captain Colthurst from the date when he knew the murders were discovered, was engaged in the manufacture of evidence to palliate his guilt.

I therefore have to ask that in view of the promised Inquiry you will make arrangements with the Military Authorities to have in attendance thereat, in addition to the witnesses called on behalf of the prosecution at the late Court-martial, the following persons:—

- 1.—The soldiers under command of Lieutenant Wilson when Mr. Skeffington was marched out of his cell into the street to serve as a hostage.
- 2.—The soldiers who composed the first and second firing parties.
- 3.—Lieutenant Colonel McCannond, who was in command of the Royal Irish Rifles.
- 4.—Major Sir Francis Vane, 2nd in Command.
- 5.—Lieutenant Tooley and Lieutenant Gibbon.
- 6.—The officers and soldiers who were sent after the murder to search Mrs. Skeffington's residence on two occasions—especially Sergeant Claxton.

Of course, the names, regiment and regimental number of all the proposed witnesses should be supplied to me some days before the Inquiry, unless the Government undertake to call them for examination.

I should also be furnished the Notes of the preliminary Inquiry which the Court-martial were supplied with. In addition I request that all documents, etc., taken from the person of Mr. Skeffington, or seized at his residence, should be returned, and if this is refused that copies should be supplied to me.

I should likewise be afforded an opportunity of examining and taking copies of any reports or entries dealing with the circumstances attending the arrest or execution of Mr. Skeffington, or the searches at his residence.

I shall feel obliged by an intimation of an early decision.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

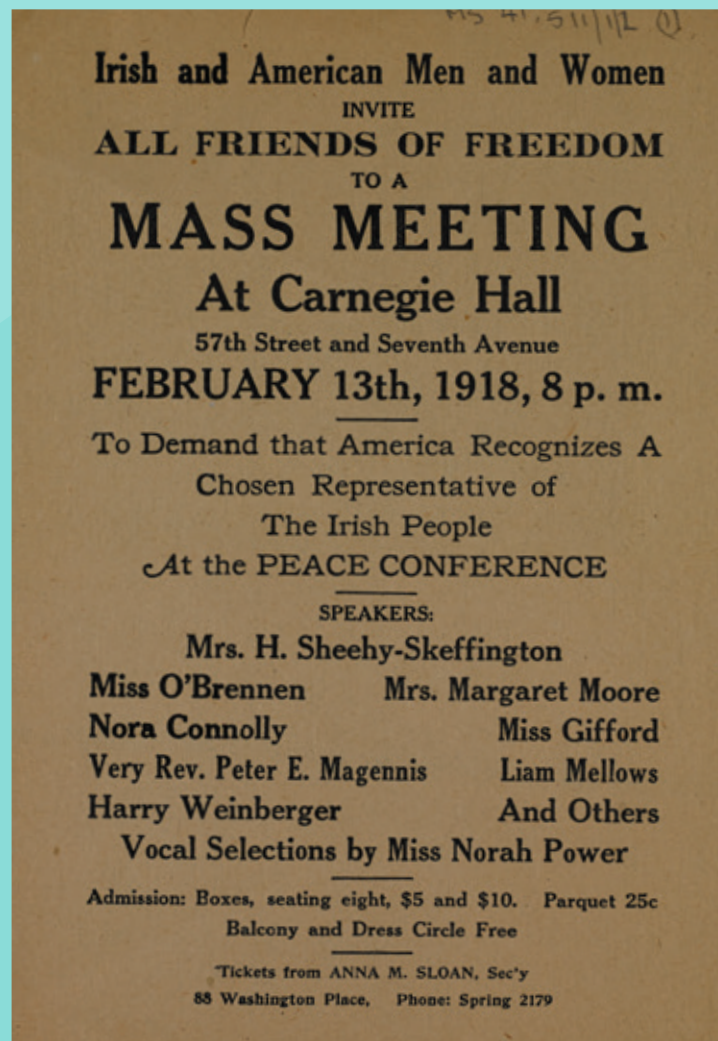
HENRY LEMASS.

To,
THE RIGHT HON. H. H. ASQUITH, K.C., M.P.,
Prime Minister,
10 Downing Street, London, S.W.

A public letter of 13 June 1916 to British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith from Henry Lemass, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington's solicitor, demanding a public inquiry into her husband's death. You can find out more about this document (EPH E143) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtl5000506612>

Public Speaker

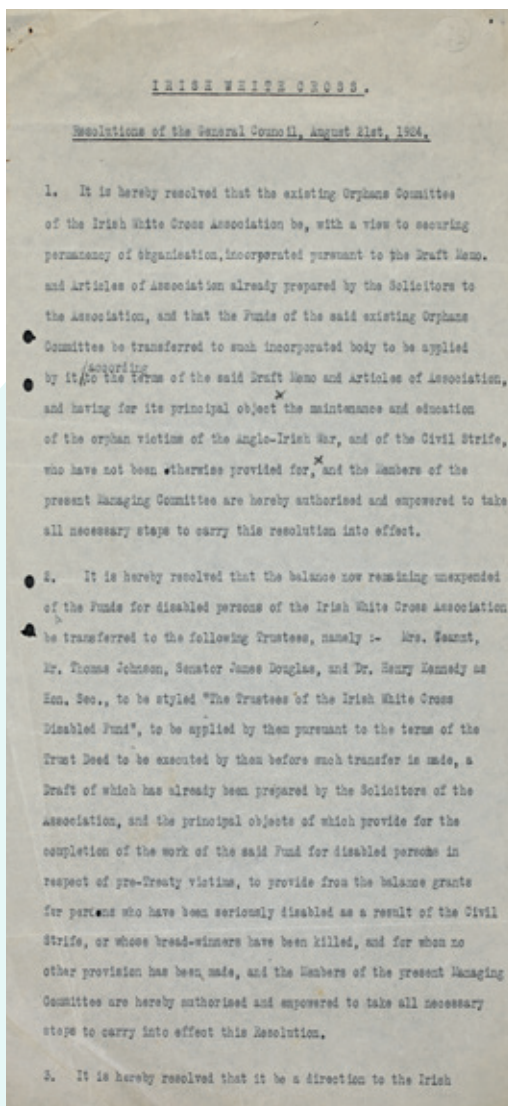
Refusing offers of compensation from the British government, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington decided to publicise the circumstances of Frank's death in America. At the invitation of the Friends of Irish Freedom, she undertook a public speaking tour of the USA from October 1916 to August 1918, speaking at over 250 meetings. Hanna was an excellent orator and her speeches proved very popular, particularly with an Irish-American audience sympathetic both to her personal plight and to Irish nationalism. In all Sheehy-Skeffington undertook four American lecture tours during the Irish revolutionary period. She also would travel around Ireland to speak at large public meetings during the War of Independence.



A poster advertising a public meeting about American recognition of Irish independence to be held on 13 February 1918 in New York's Carnegie Hall. Hanna was the headline speaker. You can learn more about this document (MS 41,511/1/2) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo609143>

Charity Organiser

Established on 1 February 1921 the Irish White Cross distributed funds raised by the American Committee for Relief in Ireland (ACRI). The ACRI wanted to provide financial assistance to Irish civilians who had been injured or had suffered severe financial hardship because of the War of Independence. This new organisation directed financial assistance towards school meals for children and to workrooms where the dependents of those who had suffered in the conflict were paid to make clothes. A special committee was also set up to look after orphans. Hanna was on the original executive committee of the Irish White Cross working with other leading female Irish nationalists like Kathleen Clarke and was heavily involved in the organisation's fundraising activities. In 1928, the Irish White Cross was finally wound up having disbursed some \$5 million worth of aid in Ireland.



A typescript copy from 21 August 1924 of the Resolutions of the Irish White Cross General Council. The document refers to Hanna's crucial role as one of the original committee members of the society. You can find out more about this document (MS 49,581/56/12) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo786669>

Party Politician

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington came from an already political family but her strong belief in an Ireland free from British control inspired her to join Sinn Féin in 1918. Her experiences of unequal treatment within the party informed her work with Cumann na dTeachtaire a group which actively campaigned for greater female representation in Sinn Féin.

Sheehy-Skeffington was elected to Dublin Corporation in 1919 and became the Chair of the Public Libraries Committee. Her political prominence led to her appointment as a judge in the republican courts in Dublin while also ensuring her participation in the peace negotiations at Dublin's Earlsfort Terrace during the summer of 1921. In addition to her appointment as a Director of Organisation for Sinn Féin after the Truce of July 1921, Sheehy-Skeffington was elected to the highest level of the party, the Standing Committee. She used her new position to continue to press for greater opportunities for women within the party.

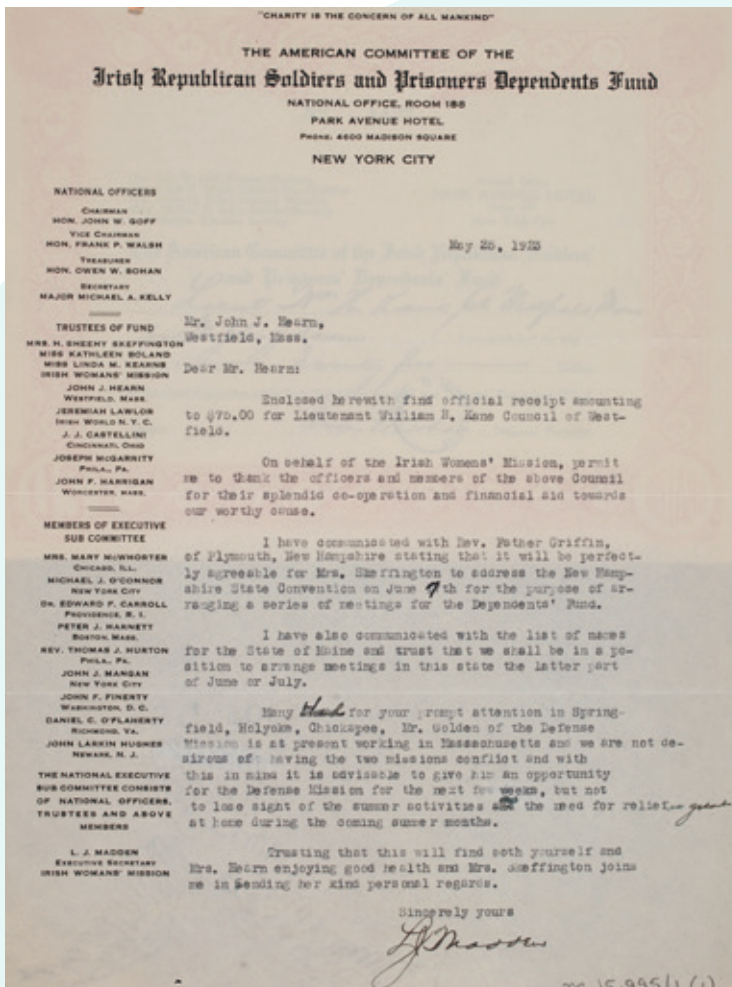
Anti-Treatyite

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington took the anti-Treaty side when the Dáil split in 1922. The same year she travelled to the USA to raise funds for the relief of the families of Irish republicans imprisoned by the Irish Provisional Government. There she built on the existing connections she had made with important members of the Irish-American community like Joseph McGarrity during her earlier American public-speaking tours.

Hanna helped form the Women Prisoners' Defence League (WPDL) in 1922 with prominent anti-Treatyites like Maud Gonne McBride to raise funds for the anti-Treaty side and she was active in anti-Free State propaganda campaigns. In August 1923, she was sent to Paris by Éamon de Valera to persuade the League of Nations that it should not recognise the legitimacy of the new Irish Free State but was unsuccessful.



A photograph from 21 February 1921 of the Sinn Féin standing committee group at the party's Ard Fheis in Dublin. Hanna is seated at the far right. You can learn more about this photo (NPA KOS) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo671627>



A letter of 25 May 1923 from L.J. Madden to John J. Hearn discussing Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington speaking at the New Hampshire State Convention to raise funds for republican prisoners and their families. You can find out more about this document (MS 15,995/1) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsooo781522>

Feminist

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington continued her international activism after the Irish Civil War as a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Domestically she was one of four women appointed to the executive of the new Fianna Fáil party in May 1926 although she left the party when de Valera entered the Dáil in 1927. She campaigned vigorously against the 1937 Irish constitution and helped establish the Women's Social and Progressive League (WSPL). In 1945 her health deteriorated and she died of heart failure on 20 April 1946. She was buried beside her husband Frank in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery.



A photograph from 1 September 1929 of a 'Meeting of the Women's League for Peace and Freedom' in Dresden in Germany. Hanna is standing second from the left. You can find out more about this photo (NPA SHE86) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtlsoo0671143>

Conclusion

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington worked energetically for women's suffrage, for equal rights and for Irish independence. A leading radical suffragette in Ireland, she also embraced the cause of Irish freedom. An effective public speaker she contributed greatly to fundraising for republican prisoners and their families as well as helping to raise the profile of the emerging Irish republic in Irish America. An influential Sinn Féin politician despite never being offered a winnable seat, Sheehy-Skeffington remained active politically for the rest of her life working particularly for equal rights for women.

Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington worked energetically for women's suffrage, for equal rights and for Irish independence.

IRISH CITIZEN

AUGUST 15, 1914. - ONE PENNY

VOTES FOR WOMEN

NOW!

DAMN

YOUR WAR!

A handbill of 16 August 1914 advertising the Irish Citizen newspaper. This leaflet was controversial not only because it prioritised women's suffrage over the war effort (World War I had just broken out), but because of its use of the word 'damn'. You can find out more about this handbill (EPH B45) at <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtl5000506672>



*Leabharlann
Náisiúnta
na hÉireann*

National Library
of Ireland

Find out more about the *Revealing History* programme at:
nli.ie/RevealingHistory.aspx