

A century of protest: Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in the US



Francis Sheehy Skeffington was shot by British firing squad during the 1916 Easter uprising in Dublin. As a well-known pacifist opposed to the use of violence, and who had spoken out regularly against recruitment by the British army, his murder became one of the biggest scandals of the British response to the uprising.

Frank's widow, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, was herself a prominent feminist and suffragist. She supported the rising, and was in line to be a member of a five-person interim government had the rising succeeded. Following Frank's murder, she successfully lobbied for an independent inquiry into his death, but while it established his innocence, she was dissatisfied that the officer who had ordered Frank's murder was ruled insane. Hanna refused £10,000 hush money from the British Prime Minister (US \$1m today) and instead sailed to the US with her son Owen using false passports, to ensure that the full truth behind Frank's murder and the reality of the British Empire's actions in Ireland would emerge.

Hanna toured the US over 18 months, giving over 250 speeches and filling venues such as Carnegie Hall, and the even larger Dreamland Auditorium in San Francisco. She was the only Irish representative to meet President Wilson to put Ireland's case for independence. During the tour the

British did all they could to silence her, even trying to abduct her. On her return, Hanna was arrested and imprisoned.

John Devoy, head of Friends of Irish Freedom in the US wrote "Mrs Skeffington has done more real good to the cause of Ireland during her short stay in America than all the Irish orators and writers...[over] the past twenty-five years." Back in Ireland, Hanna joined the Sinn Féin Executive in a rapidly changing Ireland. Today, while Hanna Sheehy Skeffington is known as the most prominent Irish suffragette, her contribution to the struggle for Irish freedom through the courage and tenacity of her US tour is largely forgotten.

From Sept 2017, 100 years later, Hanna's granddaughter, Micheline Sheehy Skeffington, will repeat Hanna's tour and will visit cities she spoke in, including Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco. Micheline is available to speak to Irish American associations and others with an interest in Irish or women's history. She will be accompanied by a TV crew making a documentary on Hanna's tour. Micheline is well known in Ireland for her own stand against authority, winning a significant gender equality case against her university, and then donating her €70,000 award to five other women who were discriminated against in the same promotion round. Micheline regularly gives talks about her famous grandparents and spoke at both official state events in 2016 commemorating Francis Sheehy Skeffington's death.

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