

Female Activists

Irish Women and Change 1900-1960

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Editors



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Introduction

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It is often assumed that once Irish women won the right to vote in 1918 their political interests, for those who remained politically active, were channelled into supporting the cause of Irish freedom. This overlooks a number of realities. In the first place, the majority of Irish suffragists were neither republicans nor nationalists. Secondly, the vote did not deliver the full feminist programme. Women who were actively involved in the independence campaign found they had to continually demand political equality with their male colleagues. For them and other feminists the struggle to achieve full and active citizenship for women continued over the decades. Thirdly, the objectives of many nationalist and republican women went beyond the attainment of independence to the kind of state they wanted and they, including six of the women in this book, continued to work for this.

After 1922 women tended to find themselves marginalised and restricted in the Irish Free State. One can catalogue the economic and legal restraints: the 1926 Civil Service Act legalised a sex barrier in competitions for posts; from 1927 women were effectively barred from jury service under the Juries Act; from 1932 female civil servants and teachers lost their jobs on marriage; in 1934 the Criminal Law Amendment Act placed a complete ban on the importation of all contraceptives; in 1936 the Conditions of Employment Act empowered the minister to restrict the employment of women in industry; the 1937 Constitution clearly signified the place of women as being exclusively in the home; 1951 saw the 'Mother and Child' scheme controversy. The impact of Catholic social teaching was also an oppressive force. These are topics that have received some attention from historians.¹ Less often explored are the lives of

¹ For accounts and interpretations of these events see the following, Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 'Defining their role in the new state: Irishwomen's protest against the juries act of 1927' in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 17, 1 (July 1992), pp. 43-60; *idem.*, 'Power, gender and identity in the Irish Free State' in *Journal of Women's History*, 6/4/7/1 (Winter/Spring, 1995), pp. 117-136; *idem.*, 'Neither feminist nor flapper': the ecclesiastical construction of the ideal Irish woman' in M. O'Dowd and S. Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society* (Belfast, 1995), pp. 168-178; Mary E. Daly, 'Women in the Irish Free State, 1922-1939: the interaction between economics

those individuals who played an active role in Irish political life throughout the twentieth century. Some of these women provide the subjects for the biographies that follow.

The lives of Mary Galway, Margaret Cousins, Helena Molony, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Louie Bennett, Kathleen Lynn and Rosamond Jacob were often interlinked and a number of these women were close friends, political allies and sometimes political opponents. Some of these women are already known, perhaps Sheehy Skeffington being the most recognisable.² For the others some aspects of their work are readily identified but beyond that they remain shadowy figures. There are many who still remember the work of Lynn and the role she played in establishing St. Ultan's Hospital. Bennett, Galway and Molony are known primarily to labour historians. Cousins is particularly associated with the suffrage campaign in Ireland but few are aware of her life in India where she went to live in 1915. These biographical studies show that far from being limited or confined to one activity these women were significant players in a number of campaigns and on a wide range of issues. All of them can be associated with the suffrage cause. Galway openly supported it within the trade union movement. Cousins and Sheehy Skeffington established the militant Irish Women's Franchise League in 1908 in order to revitalise a suffrage campaign that they felt lacked necessary vigour. Molony was also a supporter of suffrage, though more strongly allied to the nationalist cause than many other suffragists at this time. Bennett was involved in organising both the Irish Women's Suffrage Federation to link together the smaller groups and the Irish Women's Reform League in 1911 to include as far as possible the demands of working women.

and ideology' in *Journal of Women's History*, 6/4/7/1 (Winter/Spring, 1995), pp. 99-116; *idem.*, "Oh, Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Your Way's a Thorny Way!": the condition of women in twentieth-century Ireland', in A. Bradley and M. Gialanella Valiulis (eds.), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland* (Amherst, 1997), pp. 102-126; Yvonne Scannell, 'The constitution and the role of women', in B. Farrell (ed.), *De Valera's Constitution and Ours* (Dublin, 1988), pp. 123-136; Mary Clancy, 'Aspects of women's contribution to the Oireachtas debate in the Irish Free State' in M. Luddy and C. Murphy (eds.), *Women Surviving: Studies in Irish Women's History in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 206-232; Caitriona Beaumont, 'Women, citizenship and Catholicism in the Irish Free State, 1922-1948', *Women's History Review*, 6 (4), (1997), pp. 563-585; *idem.*, 'Women and the politics of equality: the Irish women's movement, 1930-1943', in M. Gialanella Valiulis and M. O'Dowd (eds.), *Women and History in Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 173-188; Sandra McAvoy, 'The regulation of sexuality in the Irish Free State, 1929-1935', in G. Jones and E. Malcolm (eds.), *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland* (Cork, 1999), pp. 253-266.

² See Leah Levenson and Jerry Natterstad, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: Irish Feminist* (Syracuse, 1986); Maria Luddy, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington* (Dublin, 1995); Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: a Life* (Cork, 1999).

Jacob and Lynn were also active suffragists. By 1911 there were about eighteen suffrage societies throughout the country, catering for a variety of political and religious backgrounds, though, surprisingly, there was no distinct nationalist women's suffrage society. There were also many individuals within the campaign who were sympathetic to the labour movement. It was, perhaps, these women's various involvement in this campaign that shaped their political outlook. The political equality of women with men was the central cause within suffrage. Gaining the parliamentary franchise in 1918 saw the dissipation of the political energies of many, but some feminists recognised that real equality in social, economic and political terms had not yet been achieved. Their campaigning continued, for the majority of the women in this book, right up until the times of their deaths.

Five of these women lived in Dublin for most or all of their working lives though Lynn grew up in Counties Mayo and Longford, and Jacob in Waterford. Cousins, from Boyle in County Roscommon, was also Dublin-based during her short but active Irish political career. Galway was the exception, born in Moira, County Down, and growing up and living in Belfast in a family of linen workers. Three, Galway, Sheehy Skeffington and Molony, came from Catholic families, though Sheehy Skeffington firmly abandoned formal religion in adult life. Bennet, Cousins and Lynn all came from Church of Ireland backgrounds while Jacob was of Quaker descent though both she and her parents were agnostics by conviction. Most were middle class, and Bennett, Cousins, Sheehy Skeffington, Lynn and Jacob were most often comfortably off, even if at times money was scarce. Their sensibility was middle class. Both Molony and Galway came from less affluent backgrounds and both understood poverty and the needs of women who worked from their own life experience.

The political activism of these women straddled the partition of Ireland. The Dublin-based women were all actively involved in separatist nationalist politics during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Lynn and Molony were active in the 1916 Rising while Sheehy Skeffington helped bring supplies to the combatants. Bennett was sympathetic to the cause but her pacifism rejected the use of force for any objective. Jacob and Cousins were both sympathetic but Jacob was living in Waterford at the time, and Cousins had emigrated to India. The working lives of these six continued throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, and in some cases longer, for five of them in the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland, and for Cousins in India. Again Galway is the exception. Much less is known of her political views because the sources are so scarce. She spent the last eight years of her life from 1920 in the new Northern Ireland State.

The personal circumstances of these women allowed them to remain active in public life. Most were unencumbered with a husband and children. Only Cousins and Sheehy Skeffington married. The Cousins appear to have decided not to have children. Sheehy Skeffington was of course widowed under

horrendous circumstances and did have a son. But she also had a family circle and friends whom she could call on to help look after him. Jacob, Molony, Galway, Lynn and Bennett remained unmarried and financially independent. However, it was an independence that they worked for. Friendship and companionship also gave these women tremendous support. Sheehy Skeffington had a talent for friendship and numbered Cousins, Lynn, Jacob, Molony and Bennett amongst her close friends. Bennett lived for many years nearby her friend and companion Helen Chenevix; Lynn lived with Madeleine French-Mullen, while Molony lived for thirty years with Evelyn O'Brien. Galway, again, is an exception in that little is known of her personal life and friendships. We must be careful not to read too much into these friendships but they clearly offered vital emotional support to these women.

Sources for some of these women's lives are relatively generous. The papers of Francis and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, housed in the National Library of Ireland, consist of letters, diaries, speeches, newsclippings, photographs and ephemera. The collection reflects the history of Ireland from about 1900 to 1946 and is arguably one of the most underused sources available to Irish historians. Surprisingly, given her current obscurity, there is also a superb collection of papers relating to Rosamond Jacob, again available in the National Library of Ireland. Jacob kept a daily diary from 1897 to the time of her death in 1960 that records her feelings, her friendships, and her political and social involvement. There is also a substantial collection of manuscripts regarding her plays, poems and novels. Her friendship with Sheehy Skeffington is evident from the correspondence available in the Sheehy Skeffington Papers. Jacob's papers offer a veritable history of feminist activism in Ireland to the 1960s. The diaries and papers of Kathleen Lynn, housed in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, are also a wonderful source and provide the historian not only with personal information but particular information about health care and health provision in twentieth-century Ireland. Cousins wrote a joint autobiography with her husband James and this can be augmented by the collection of her papers that exist in India. In contrast Molony, Galway and Bennett are rather elusive figures and the search for their lives required substantial historical detection. There are no collections of personal papers and much about their lives can be gleaned only from working through official papers such as trade union minutes, government reports and their correspondence that is preserved in other personal collections. The absence of personal papers clearly has an impact on how a public individual is remembered or written about. Sometimes they are the ones most quickly forgotten. However, copious papers do not always result in recognition and Jacob's life is proof of this.

The purpose of this book is to bring to light the range and extent of these women's contributions to Irish life, to link that in with their personal experiences and to raise questions about the connections between feminism and political action. There are clear examples within these biographies of the correlations

that existed between personal circumstances and political activism, between issues of gender and the nature of the state which was in many ways profoundly patriarchal. It is impossible to generalise about the experiences of Irish women in these decades and while there are similarities in the lives of these women and even in their political activism, there are also many divergences and paradoxes. How could Sheehy Skeffington, for instance belong to a pacifist organisation and yet support militant republicanism? Further, she and Bennett held sharply divergent views on the relation between pacifism and nationalism but worked closely together for many years. How could Bennett and Molony head the Irish Women Workers Union, campaign vigorously for women's right to equality with men in the workplace, and yet both accept that women might be better off in the home? Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, noted for her egalitarianism, had servants yet seemed to have no conflict over her right to a public life while someone else did the housework. The search for solutions to such apparent paradoxes deepens our understanding of the political, social and economic realities of a specific period and of how important the historical context is in the formation of political thinking. These women must be viewed in the setting of their time and place. Understanding how they came to hold the views they did can also highlight possible anomalies and over-simplifications in some of our own present-day attitudes. What is most evident in the lives and work of all of these women is the level of tolerance they had for the views of others and the importance they gave to debate and argument as a means of resolving conflict.

Only in the case of Sheehy Skeffington did a fairly rounded portrait already exist, and in her contribution here Margaret Ward focuses on the interaction in Sheehy Skeffington's political thinking and activism between her feminism and her opposition to imperialism. The other chapters each present an outline of a life that was up to now little known in any detail. They open up the range of interests and activisms of six women whose lives, objectives and achievements were remarkable by any standards. In doing so they have incidentally exposed the equally remarkable neglect by historians of these women's contribution to Irish history and the development of Irish society. Damian Doyle's study reveals the intellectual and historical interest of Rosamond Jacob's novels. She located her characters at the centre of current and sensitive political events and explored a complex range of experiences and perspectives. Impressive also is her early critique of the tendency of nationalist movements to repeat the repressive conformity imposed by the imperialism they opposed. Nell Regan documents Helena Molony's achievement as an acclaimed leading actress with the Abbey Theatre and her commitment to socialist republicanism. Yet her commitment to the women of the Irish Women Workers Union (IWWU) was so great that she abandoned her acting career and curtailed her socialist activity for their sake. Medb Ruane explains the pioneering contribution of Kathleen Lynn to medical research on tuberculosis and her holistic approach to the healthcare of children, an approach which combined scientific medicine with the need for

love. Noteworthy also is her interest in the educational ideas of Maria Montessori at a time when these were seen by many as dangerously radical. Catherine Candy's research opens up the long and remarkable career of Margaret Cousins in India, where she became a major figure in the Indian women's movement while retaining her attachment to Ireland. Throughout her life she believed both that the women's movement transcended all national boundaries, and that at the same time the reality of cultural difference had to be accepted and respected. Rosemary Cullen Owens shows Louie Bennett throughout her long life steadfastly combining an uncompromising pacifism and commitment to negotiation with an equally uncompromising opposition to imperialism and injustice. Allied to her strong leadership qualities these made her a formidable player in Irish society. Using the scanty available evidence Theresa Moriarty follows the achievement of Mary Galway, who rose through the ranks to become Ireland's first full-time female trade-union official. Galway as a person remains the most elusive of these women, which is particularly frustrating since, unlike the other women in this book, she was one of those women who as a group remain shadowy, the rank and file trade-unionists and workers. The authors of some of the studies in this book have already prepared or are in the process of preparing full-length biographies or studies and these should add substantially to our knowledge of Irish history in the twentieth century.

A number of areas emerge that invite further research. While it cannot be claimed that these women form a representative sample, it is striking how far to the left most of them were in their political beliefs and activism. Four of them, Sheehy Skeffington, Jacob, Molony and Lynn were separatists who rejected the Treaty. Yet theirs was no simple or narrow nationalism. From the beginning their nationalism was linked to their feminist commitment, and so from the start they were aware of the dangers of exclusion and polarisation. All developed towards more complex positions which incorporated awareness of inequality between classes as well as between the sexes. During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, while church and state became increasingly anti-communist and the red scare took hold, they remained committed to socialist principles. All four gravitated to the left wing which tried to push the republican movement towards a commitment to a socialist workers' republic. The studies in this book point to the potential of further research into the political thinking, in the broadest sense, of these women and their like-minded colleagues, particularly in the context of the current interest in the interaction of nationalism and republicanism in Ireland.

The studies of Galway, Molony and Bennett point to another area of interest, the differences between the experience of women in the older craft-based unions and the new unionism. In Belfast Mary Galway rose through the ranks of union members to become a paid organising secretary of the Textile Operatives' Society of Ireland. By contrast the impetus for the foundation of the Irish Women Workers Union in Dublin came from the new unionism which aimed at

organising unskilled workers. The IWWU set out to bring hitherto unorganised women into a trade union. After Delia Larkin's initial brief tenure, Molony, Bennett and Helen Chenevix, middle-class women invited in from outside, dominated its leadership.

The political views of the women studied here evolved over their lifetimes, affected and influenced by their individual experiences, and by their contact with national and international politics. If Ireland was, as has often been claimed, insular these women proved to be remarkably internationalist in their outlook. Many travelled to America, Russia and through Europe attending conferences and seeking funding for their projects. They corresponded with colleagues of similar interests throughout Europe and in America. There was little that was parochial about their views or thoughts.

As research into the history of Irish women continues it will become even more obvious that there were many Irish women who remained politically active throughout the twentieth century whose lives deserve to be investigated.³ One can think immediately of women such as Professor Mary Hayden, Máire Comerford, Helena Concannon, Lily O'Brennan, Agnes O'Farrelly, Lilian Spender, Helen Chenevix, and there are many others, whose activism has gone unrecorded. This volume places the lives of seven 'forgotten' women in their political and social contexts and opens the way for further study of their lives.

³ For recent studies in nineteenth-century biography see Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy (eds.), *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th-Century Ireland: Eight Biographical Studies* (Dublin, 1995).