

“Transformed Utterly”:
Excavating the Case of Francis Sheehy Skeffington



Memorial card for Francis Sheehy Skeffington that describes the details of his murder, May 1916, *RTÉ*.

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Figure 1. Hanna and Francis Sheehy Skeffington in 1912, *RTÉ*.



Figure 2. Memorial to Francis Sheehy Skeffington in the yard where he was killed at Portobello Barracks (now Cathal Brugha Barracks), *The Cricket Bat that Died for Ireland*.



Figure 3. The bullet that killed Francis Sheehy Skeffington embedded in a brick from Portobello Barracks, *The Cricket Bat that Died for Ireland*.



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Figure 5. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington with her son, Owen in December 1916; she aged significantly in only four years. *RTÉ*.



Figure 6. Portrait of Sir Francis Vane personally addressed to Owen Sheehy Skeffington, *The Cricket Bat that Died for Ireland*.

Introduction

In 1916, in the midst of the First World War, a rebellion against British rule occurred in Dublin, Ireland. The Easter Rising was launched by a small group of Irishmen that lasted for six days in late April 1916. The vast majority of the Irish population viewed the rebels as traitors and supported the British throughout the duration of the rebellion.¹ During this event, a well-known pacifist named Francis Sheehy Skeffington (1878-1916) was murdered on the orders of a British officer for no discernable reason. Sheehy Skeffington was a prominent public figure, but he was not involved in the rebellion.² His killing was a potent example and reminder of British violence and brutality. Ordinary Irish people were able to sympathize with Sheehy Skeffington because he was a civilian caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, and theoretically, any other civilian could have ended up in his position. Soon after his demise was reported, the majority of Irish civilians began to sympathize with the rebels and turn against the British. Through the examination of eyewitness accounts, newspaper articles, and court testimony, I will present and analyze the impact that the murder had on Irish public opinion.

British authorities understood that Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder could result in severe repercussions, so they were anxious to conceal as many facts of the case from the public as possible. Instead, they encountered a formidable enemy in Hanna Sheehy Skeffington (1877-1946), the victim's wife. She was the eldest daughter of David Sheehy, a long-serving and influential Member of Parliament (MP) in the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) in the House of Commons at Westminster.³ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was fixated on getting justice for her

¹ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916): c940, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1916/may/11/continuance-of-martial-law>.

² "Drastic Severity," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), May 9, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

³ Owen McGee, "Sheehy, David," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, accessed November 12, 2018, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8026>.

husband, so she utilized her father's political connections to contact two of his colleagues, John Dillon and Timothy "T.M." Healy; both advocated on her behalf. She even succeeded in securing a personal meeting with Prime Minister Asquith himself.⁴ As a result of her efforts, the murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington became a rallying point for opposition to British rule and helped the remaining rebels earn popular support for Ireland's successful War of Independence several years later.

My intention in this thesis is to place Francis Sheehy Skeffington in his rightful place in history. He was an extremely important public figure whose murder has been underestimated or, in most cases, not considered by historians who have previously examined the change in Irish public opinion after the Easter Rising. My thesis reveals that Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder was a significant factor in the shift of Irish public opinion, and in fact changed the course of Irish history for the next sixty years, during which the country earned its independence from the United Kingdom.

Historiography

Historians of Irish history routinely mention Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder as one of several factors explaining the shift of Irish public opinion, but just how and why this was the case remains unclear. Historian R.F. Foster's *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* was the first time I read about Francis Sheehy Skeffington or his murder. Foster wrote only a few pages about Sheehy Skeffington, but the way in which he conveyed his personality made an incredibly strong impression on me. Sheehy Skeffington was a man ahead of his time. When he married Hanna Sheehy in 1903, they both took each other's surnames and

⁴ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It* (New York: The Donnelly Press, 1917), 26-27.

combined it with their own to symbolize the equal nature of their relationship.⁵ There are few people who would take such a step today, and I deeply admire Francis Sheehy Skeffington's commitment to feminism. Regarding his murder, which was covered in less than one page, Foster said, "The authorities' attempts at a cover-up [of the murder] . . . compounded what became seen as one of the most damaging episodes of British oppression in Ireland . . . The choice of victim could not have made worse publicity for the authorities."⁶ After reading this book, I immediately wanted to know more about Francis Sheehy Skeffington and how his murder impacted public opinion in the aftermath of the Easter Rising.

The most detailed analysis of the case and its effect on Irish public opinion came from Charles Townshend, who wrote in his book, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* that Sheehy Skeffington's murder was "a slow-burning public relations disaster for the army—and indeed for the Union."⁷ This is quite a strong statement, but Townshend only devoted seven pages to the case and provided little evidence to back up this claim. What Townshend did, however, was describe the circumstances of the case in enough detail to convince me there were primary sources in existence that might shed light on why and how Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder made a significant impact on public opinion.

I assembled multiple primary sources and combed through them for evidence that would confirm my suspicions that the case played a role in the shift of Irish public opinion against the British. Through this research, I realized that Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder played an even more significant role than I originally thought. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's *British Militarism As I Have Known It* and Sir Francis Vane's memoir, *Agin the Governments:*

⁵ Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life* (Cork: Attic Press, 1997), 27.

⁶ R.F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2015), 237.

⁷ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (Lanham, MD: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 195.

Memories and Adventures of Sir Francis Fletcher Vane are two of the most critical primary sources used in this thesis. I had to be cautious when evaluating these sources, though, because both individuals could be deemed unreliable narrators. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was a bereaved widow, and Sir Francis Vane lost his employment in the army after the Easter Rising,⁸ so both had an axe to grind against the British government. I carefully evaluated both sources, and they not only corroborated each other's stories, but the facts listed in each source were also corroborated by multiple other unbiased sources. Another memoir, Monk Gibbon's *Inglorious Soldier*, provided valuable evidence regarding Francis Sheehy Skeffington's last moments and the immediate aftermath of his murder.

Government documents were also extremely useful in writing this thesis. Due to Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's political connections in Westminster, multiple MPs asked Prime Minister Asquith and other high-ranking officials questions about her husband's murder case on the floor of the House of Commons. The British Parliament records every statement made during House of Commons sessions, and they are available to the public through a free database, *Hansard 1803-2005*. The material available in the database enabled me to view every speech made in the House of Commons during the 1916 calendar year. At least fifty speeches made direct reference to Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder, including John Dillon's crucial speech linking the case to the military authorities' excessive use of force in Ireland after the Easter Rising. This particular speech was a significant factor in the shift of Irish public opinion.⁹

The British government also ordered a Royal Commission to investigate the circumstances surrounding the murders of Francis Sheehy Skeffington and two other journalists.

⁸ Francis Patrick Fletcher Vane, *Agin the Governments: Memories and Adventures of Sir Francis Fletcher Vane* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., Ltd., 1929), 270-71.

⁹ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16: Preserved in the State Paper Office* (Dublin: Oifig an tSoláthair, 1966), 202-04, 210, and 216-17.

The *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment of Mr. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Mr. Thomas Dickson, and Mr. Patrick James McIntyre: Report of Commission*, published soon after the inquiry was complete, was one of the main sources I utilized in writing this thesis. The report was extremely valuable, providing an accurate and complete picture of the events surrounding Sheehy Skeffington's murder, and it made important judgments regarding martial law. Since it was a report authored by a panel that the British government assembled, however, it excluded some important details.

Newspapers were extremely valuable in writing this thesis because they published all of the testimony given during the Royal Commission. If they hadn't published this information, the testimony would have likely never surfaced. The testimony from the Royal Commission helped fill the gaps in the Royal Commission's report. The *Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook: Easter, 1916*, which was published by the *Weekly Irish Times* a year after the Easter Rising occurred, included almost all of the testimony given during the Royal Commission. The *Freeman's Journal* also published the testimony, which I accessed through the British Newspaper Archive database. The British Newspaper Archive contains a wide selection of newspapers from Ireland, England, Scotland, and Wales, so it was not only helpful for accessing testimony from the Royal Commission, but it also helped pinpoint any changes in Irish public opinion.

Chapter One: Context: Violence in the Irish Public Consciousness

Starting at the beginning of the twentieth century, contentious movements at home and violent wars abroad eventually took their toll on a conflict-weary Irish public. The amount of violence significantly increased after 1910, shaping the Irish mentality and creating an uneasy atmosphere. After the Easter Rising of 1916 occurred, the Irish public was no longer willing to tolerate the violence that came with the British Empire. This violence was a key factor in the shift in Irish public opinion against the British and towards the rebels.

Increasing Unrest in Ireland

Violence became a part of daily life in Ireland through different social movements. In the early 1900s, militant tactics used by the English and Irish women's suffrage movements led to widespread violence in Dublin. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, tired of waiting patiently for women to receive equal rights, founded the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL) on November 11, 1908 alongside her husband, Francis, and their friends, James and Gretta Cousins. The main objective of the IWFL was to secure the right to vote for women "on the same terms as it is, or may be, granted to men."¹⁰ Although the IWFL initially received popular support, it faced multiple obstacles during its infancy. The organization did not have the support of militant feminists, who, because they were also Irish nationalists, refused to ask for the right to vote from any English government.¹¹ The Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) and the vast majority of Irish Members of Parliament (MPs)¹² refused to support women's suffrage because Home Rule, or self-government, was finally within reach, and they did not want to jeopardize its passage into

¹⁰ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 46-47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹² Member of Parliament (MP): A representative of a county or district in the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

law. Augustine Birrell, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, was pressured by the IPP in 1910 into not voting for a Conciliation Bill that included women's suffrage, despite the fact that he was personally in favor of it. Afterwards, the IWFL began using militant tactics, such as heckling politicians.¹³ The IPP continually sabotaged other Conciliation Bills whenever they included women's suffrage, and in 1912, without any other options, the Irish suffragettes fully embraced militancy.¹⁴

Following in the footsteps of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), an English suffragette organization, eight female IWFL members, including Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, broke windows at the General Post Office (GPO), Custom House, and Dublin Castle in June 1912. All were subsequently arrested and imprisoned. Public opinion began to turn against the suffrage movement due to the increased violence, and the Irish suffragettes temporarily retreated from the public eye. However, English WSPU members who traveled to Dublin for Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's visit to Ireland threw a symbolic hatchet at his carriage. Chaos ensued, and for weeks, any woman walking alone in Dublin's streets was vulnerable to assault. As a result of the English suffragettes' actions, Irish public opinion firmly turned against women's suffrage.¹⁵

Violence also continued in Ireland because of the labor movement. The Dublin Lockout of 1913 led to widespread police brutality, as well as general street violence, committed against the majority of Dublin's innocent civilian population. The events of August 31, later known as "Bloody Sunday," were especially heinous: police violently dispersed an illegal meeting at the Imperial Hotel at which labor leader James Larkin had spoken. Innocent civilians were caught in the crosshairs, and policemen savagely clubbed men, women, and children. Over four hundred

¹³ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 55-56, 62, and 68.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 74 and 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83, 87, and 92-93.

people were admitted to hospitals as a result of the incident. General violence also continued to occur throughout Dublin; an explosion in a slum tenement, which killed two workers, was one of many violent incidents.¹⁶

Beginning in 1913, Irish society became increasingly militarized. In November 1913, the Irish Citizen Army (ICA) was founded in response to the police brutality that had occurred during the Dublin Lockout. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, despite being a pacifist, was one of the founding members. He saw the ICA as a defense force to protect workers from the police, and since the group did not incite violence, it did not contradict his pacifist views. The ICA achieved its purpose: the intimidated police stopped committing unprovoked acts of violence against workers.¹⁷ The ICA, however, was only one of many armed groups that were founded at this time, and these other groups had a militant focus. The most influential of these groups, the Irish Volunteers, was also founded in November 1913. While the official aim of the organization was to ensure the passage of the Home Rule Bill for Ireland, they were actually becoming an independent Irish army. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), a militant organization, infiltrated the Volunteers, putting the organization on a track towards separatism.¹⁸

Many individuals and organizations, including the ICA, were influenced by the increasingly militant climate in Ireland. One of the co-founders of the ICA, labor leader James Connolly, soon became commander of the organization, and he fostered closer ties with the Irish Volunteers, which inevitably led to the ICA's increasingly militant focus.¹⁹ Francis Sheehy Skeffington was extremely unsettled by these events; a close friend, Rosamond Jacob, recorded

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

¹⁸ Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 181-83 and 186-88.

¹⁹ Leah Levenson, *With Wooden Sword: A Portrait of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, Militant Pacifist* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 157.

these sentiments in her diary after visiting the Sheehy Skeffington residence in March 1914.²⁰ Sheehy Skeffington resigned from the ICA shortly after, disillusioned with both its militant leanings and its lack of support for the labor and suffrage movements. He also knew that associating with the Volunteers violated his pacifist principles.²¹ Francis and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington were in a tiny minority among individuals with nationalist leanings. The vast majority of nationalists supported the increasing militarization of these groups, believing that weapons were a necessary component of their identity.²²

The First World War

The outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 was a turning point in the Irish public's increasing opposition to violence. John Redmond, the leader of the IPP, pledged that Ireland would support the United Kingdom in the war. While this was not well received by the Irish public, the IPP fell in line behind their leader.²³ Redmond also infiltrated the Irish Volunteers, and on September 20, 1914, he made a speech encouraging the Volunteers to enlist in the British Army. Some members opposed the war and viewed Redmond as a traitor to his country, but the vast majority of the Volunteers answered his call to arms.²⁴ Others believed that it was not Ireland's place to fight in wars that England started. From the beginning, Francis Sheehy Skeffington was vehemently opposed to the First World War, and he never shied away from making his pacifist views clear. Pacifism, however, became divisive at this time because people viewed those who adopted this stance as unpatriotic. Sheehy Skeffington's pacifist position led to social isolation for both himself and his wife, Hanna. Hanna's father, David

²⁰ Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 188.

²¹ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 157.

²² Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 180-81.

²³ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 159-60.

²⁴ Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 194, 208, and 210.

Sheehy, was a senior member of the IPP and represented the party as an MP in the House of Commons at Westminster, so he naturally supported the war effort. The rest of Hanna's family adopted the same stance, which led to strained relations between them and Hanna and Francis. The Sheehy Skeffingtons were also unwelcome in moderate nationalist circles due to their pacifist leanings.²⁵

Beginning in 1915, Irish public opinion increasingly turned against the First World War. The government faced a public relations scandal after Francis Sheehy Skeffington was arrested for delivering anti-war speeches on May 29, 1915. The judge sentenced him to six months of hard labor and an additional six months instead of paying bail, which was the maximum punishment. Sheehy Skeffington immediately went on a hunger strike, and the government only agreed to release him a week later after he entered a state of collapse. The sentencing and the government's initial refusal to release Sheehy Skeffington from jail horrified the Irish public, increasing anti-war sentiment in Ireland.²⁶ In July 1915, Pope Benedict XV condemned the war, and Edward O'Dwyer, the influential Bishop of Limerick, wrote an open letter to Redmond demanding that he withdraw Irish support of the war. Redmond's failure to do so hurt the IPP and the war effort.²⁷ The results on the battlefield were also detrimental to the war effort in Ireland. Irish regiments suffered some of the heaviest casualties, specifically at Gallipoli in 1915, which led to a decrease in Irish enlistment.²⁸ In January 1916, three months before the Easter Rising, the government introduced conscription everywhere in the United Kingdom except for Ireland. The Irish public was extremely hostile to the idea of forcing people to fight in

²⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Twentieth Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's," *The Atlantic*, January 1994, accessed March 5, 2019, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=BIC&u=columbiau&id=GALE%7CA14669384&v=2.1&it=r&sid=BIC&asid=d57b07e0>.

²⁶ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 175, 177, and 180-81.

²⁷ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 78-79.

²⁸ David Fitzpatrick, "Militarism in Ireland, 1900-1922," in *A Military History of Ireland*, ed. Thomas Bartlett and Keith Jeffery (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 392.

the war, and many worried that it was only a matter of time until conscription would be introduced in Ireland.²⁹

By the time the Easter Rising occurred in April 1916, the Irish public had been bombarded with constant violence both at home and abroad for nearly two decades. One can only imagine the amount of psychological trauma involved. Francis and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington were deeply involved in important events preceding the Easter Rising, and they became well-known public figures in Dublin. Francis was especially recognizable due to his work as a journalist, using the *Irish Citizen*, the newspaper he and Hanna co-founded in 1912, to make his voice and feminist opinions heard.³⁰ After the outbreak of the First World War, he gained additional notoriety for his pacifist views, which made “the Sheehy Skeffington name . . . synonymous with pacifism.”³¹ Hanna was also a public figure, and her profile intensified after two stints in prison in 1912 and 1913. The latter sentence was especially egregious, since she was falsely imprisoned for assaulting a police sergeant when he was the one who assaulted her. This and Hanna’s time spent in prison made her extremely distrustful of the police and the justice system: “Such a sentence makes every turn of the jailer’s key an outrage, and burns into the victim’s soul a searing hatred of the whole infamy of our prison system.”³²

After Hanna’s release from jail in 1912, she and Francis lived their lives in the public eye; their private life was almost non-existent. The couple gave countless speeches on behalf of the IWFL, often delivering them together.³³ This, however, paled in comparison to their entrance into the international spotlight after Francis Sheehy Skeffington was murdered during

²⁹ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 209.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

³¹ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 106.

³² Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, “Mountjoy re-visited,” in *Suffragette and Sinn Féiner: Her Memoirs and Political Writings*, ed. Margaret Ward (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2017), 365.

³³ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 114-15.

the Easter Rising at the hands of a British soldier, Captain John Bowen-Colthurst (1880-1965). The foundation for Francis' martyrdom and Hanna's tireless efforts to bring his killer to justice had already been laid.³⁴ Francis' involvement in the suffrage and labor movements made him a household name in Ireland, and while violence had been a fact of life before 1916, his senseless killing represented a breaking point in how much violence the Irish public was willing to endure.

³⁴ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 236.

Chapter Two: Lethal Combination: What Made the Sheehy Skeffington Murder a Cause Célèbre?

While Francis Sheehy Skeffington was not the only unarmed civilian to fall victim to British soldiers during the Easter Rising, his murder became a cause célèbre.³⁵ A cause célèbre is a controversial incident “that attracts great public attention,”³⁶ and this case created an epic scandal. The following factors catapulted Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s murder into the international spotlight: the connections he made while attending University College Dublin (UCD), his increased public profile as a noted journalist and pacifist in the 1910s, the details of his arrest, incarceration, and murder, and ultimately, the official silence surrounding his death.

The Making of a Public Figure

Francis Sheehy Skeffington attended UCD when it was a breeding ground for radicalism and new ideas. Surrounded by equally ambitious peers, his experience there played a significant role in shaping his later life. When he arrived in Dublin in the summer of 1896, he immediately stood out from the crowd. Sheehy Skeffington had strong opinions, was outspoken, and stuck to his principles, no matter how unpopular. His peers found his appearance even more striking and odd:

A man of about five feet eight inches in height, who had never used a razor and allowed Nature to endow him with a soft, fair beard, which was never too well trimmed . . . He wore, on all occasions on which I met him, a rough, grey, tweed suit with knickerbocker trousers, and stockings and cap to match . . . a pair of boots at least one size too large for his feet, and he flaunted in his lapel of his coat a big button which advertised the very unpopular slogan of “Votes for Women.”³⁷

³⁵ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 29.

³⁶ “Cause Célèbre,” Dictionary.com, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/cause-celebre>.

³⁷ Eugene Sheehy, *May It Please the Court* (Dublin: C.J. Fallon Ltd., 1951), 30.

During his first year at UCD, Sheehy Skeffington revitalized and became the first auditor of the Literary and Historical Debating Society (the L&H). The L&H became a place where like-minded students discussed politics, their dissatisfaction with how the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) represented Irish interests in Westminster, and later, Home Rule.³⁸ Sheehy Skeffington also made valuable connections through the L&H, particularly with two influential people: Tom Kettle, his future brother-in-law who would later become a Member of Parliament (MP) for the IPP in the House of Commons at Westminster, and James Joyce, not yet one of the most revered novelists of his time period.³⁹ For the next several years, the three men motivated each other to take their respective talents to even greater heights. Francis Sheehy Skeffington's experiences at UCD served as a launching pad for his career when he graduated at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It did not take long after leaving UCD for Francis Sheehy Skeffington to establish himself as a well-known journalist. Starting in 1904, he wrote for multiple newspapers including *The Nationist* and the *Freeman's Journal*, and served as the Irish correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* and *L'Humanité*, a French Socialist newspaper. Sheehy Skeffington began to achieve greater recognition when he started writing a recurring feature called "Dialogues of the Day" for *The Nationist* in late 1905. Through this column, he found an outlet to bring controversial issues to public attention. Even after *The Nationist* folded in 1906, he continued to write and publish them in pamphlets and other newspapers for the next few years.⁴⁰ By 1908, Sheehy Skeffington became an influential public figure in Dublin. He achieved this status after co-founding the short-lived *National Democrat* with a close friend in 1907, and the

³⁸ Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 59-60.

³⁹ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 20 and 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45 and 48-50.

publication of his biography of Home Ruler and Irish MP Michael Davitt the following year.⁴¹

Not all of the attention was positive, however. It was these two ventures that brought him to the attention of D.P. Moran, the editor of *The Leader*. From then on, Sheehy Skeffington became the target of articles and demeaning cartoons in *The Leader*.



Figure 7. Cartoon depicting Francis Sheehy Skeffington in the Dublin Zoo after escaping an attack at an Irish Women’s Franchise League (IWFL) meeting in 1912, *Dublin City Council*.⁴²

The cartoons routinely mocked his choice to wear knickerbockers, his political and social ideals, and even gave him a nickname: “Skeffy.” The attention he received from *The Leader* boosted his public profile immensely, but it later cost him his life.⁴³

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 64-65 and 75.

⁴² Sources disagree as to whether this cartoon was published in *The Leader* or *The Lepracaun*.

⁴³ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 57-58 and 65-66.

Attracting the Notice of Dublin Castle Authorities

After co-founding the *Irish Citizen* with his wife and their two friends in 1912, Francis Sheehy Skeffington's writings and anti-war activities gained even more attention from the public. The *Irish Citizen* was a feminist newspaper that also covered labor and politics. Sheehy Skeffington finally found a platform to voice his opinions, especially his pacifist stance, without restriction. Pacifism became divisive after the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, and while the *Irish Citizen* took no political stance on the war, it declared in an editorial, "We are . . . opposed to this present war and to every war."⁴⁴ This pacifist viewpoint was not universally embraced. The *Irish Citizen* lost many readers and was on the verge of bankruptcy due to perceived lack of patriotism and accusations of being pro-German.⁴⁵ A month later, Sheehy Skeffington wrote an article called "War and Feminism" that received much attention from both the public and Dublin Castle authorities. He strongly hinted at the activities that he would undertake in the next year and a half: "By accepting this war . . . we are helping to perpetuate war. If we want to stop war, we must begin by stopping this war. The only way we can do that is to hamper as far as possible the conduct of it. The best way to do that is to stop recruiting."⁴⁶ True to his word, Sheehy Skeffington gave anti-war and anti-recruiting speeches at Beresford Place in Dublin every Sunday for the next forty weeks.⁴⁷

Francis Sheehy Skeffington's views also created tension between himself and some of his friends. He was friendly with James Connolly and Thomas MacDonagh; both of them later signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic and were executed for their roles in the Easter

⁴⁴ "The Crime of War," *Irish Citizen* (Dublin), August 22, 1914, The British Newspaper Archive.

⁴⁵ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 169-70.

⁴⁶ Francis Sheehy Skeffington, "War and Feminism," *Irish Citizen* (Dublin), September 12, 1914, reprinted in *With Wooden Sword: A Portrait of Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Militant Pacifist*, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 244.

⁴⁷ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 175.

Rising. Sheehy Skeffington was dismayed that both turned to militancy, but he was especially disappointed that MacDonagh, a teacher and poet, had joined the Irish Volunteers.⁴⁸ In an attempt to reason with MacDonagh, he wrote an open letter expressing these sentiments and published it in the *Irish Citizen* on May 22, 1915. While he praised his friend throughout the letter, he made his views on militarism perfectly clear: “High ideals undoubtedly animate you. But has not really every militarist system started with the same high ideals? . . . You justify no war except a war to end oppression, to establish the right. What war-monger spoke otherwise when it was necessary to enlist the people?”⁴⁹ Sheehy Skeffington believed that militarism would quickly become violent and uncontrollable, and that it would do more harm than good for Ireland. He also admitted:

As you know, I am personally in full sympathy with the fundamental objects of the Irish Volunteers. When you shook off the Redmonite incubus last September, I was on the point of joining you . . . I am glad now I did not. For, as your infant movement grows towards the stature of a full-grown militarism, its essence—preparation to kill—grows more repellant to me. I am not blind to the movement’s merits . . . But it is militarism. It is organised to kill.⁵⁰

This quote could be interpreted in several different ways. In the general public’s mind, he was a pacifist, which he made clear in this article by denouncing militarism and advocating a pacifist stance. Dublin Castle authorities, however, saw something different. Sheehy Skeffington’s anti-war stance had already attracted their attention, and his admission of sympathizing with and nearly joining the Irish Volunteers could only have increased their suspicion of his loyalties. It did not matter that he now denounced the Volunteers’ violent practices and declared that he had no plans to associate with them in the future. Dublin Castle saw Francis Sheehy Skeffington as a threat, and that fact would come back to haunt him.

⁴⁸ Lorcan Collins, *1916: The Rising Handbook* (Dublin: The O’Brien Press, 2016), 8, 21, and 73.

⁴⁹ Francis Sheehy Skeffington, “An Open Letter to Thomas MacDonagh,” *Irish Citizen* (Dublin), May 22, 1915, The British Newspaper Archive.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

On May 29, 1915, a week after the open letter was published and six days after his last anti-war speech at Beresford Place, Francis Sheehy Skeffington was arrested for his anti-war and anti-recruiting activities. Sheehy Skeffington conducted his own defense, and during his sentencing hearing, he offered the following rationale for his actions: “I claim as an elementary right of a citizen in a free state the right to put forward those opinions. It is clearly a matter of constitutional right to tell the people of Ireland that they had a right to take no part in a war as to which they were not consulted.”⁵¹ During his cross-examination of Constable McCarthy, chief witness for the Crown, he successfully compelled him to admit that the speech for which he was arrested bore no differences from any other speech he gave, and that his arrest “coincide[d] with the lack of success of the recruiting meetings.”⁵² Despite this and his ability to establish his speeches as passive resistance, he received the maximum sentence of hard labor for six months or, if he did not put up bail, twelve months. Sheehy Skeffington immediately went on a hunger strike and declared: “Long before the expiration of the sentence I shall be out of prison, alive or dead!”⁵³

Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s severe sentence and terms of release led to a public relations nightmare for Dublin Castle authorities. When he was admitted to Mountjoy Prison, the doctor threatened to force feed him but did not act on this threat. After losing six and a half pounds in seven days, Sheehy Skeffington was released under the Cat and Mouse Act, which allowed for prisoners on hunger strike to be released but also provided for their re-arrest once they recovered, with June 30, 1915 set as the date for his return to Mountjoy Prison.⁵⁴ The Cat

⁵¹ Francis Sheehy Skeffington, “Speech from the Dock,” reprinted in *With Wooden Sword: A Portrait of Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, Militant Pacifist* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 245.

⁵² Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 176.

⁵³ F. Sheehy Skeffington, “Speech from the Dock,” reprinted in *With Wooden Sword*, 249.

⁵⁴ Levenson, *With Wooden Sword*, 178-80.

and Mouse Act was already unpopular in Ireland, and Sheehy Skeffington's case unleashed condemnations of the government from both the general public and the press. Even *The Leader*, which had ridiculed him for years, wrote in his favor: "Is Mr. Skeffington to be allowed to die? . . . Will [Chief Secretary for Ireland] Birrell fetch him back on June 30th to another Hunger Strike?"⁵⁵ Sheehy Skeffington did not wait to find out; he traveled to the United States in July 1915 in order to avoid re-arrest.⁵⁶

Between his return to Dublin in December 1915 and his murder in April 1916, Francis Sheehy Skeffington was under intense scrutiny from Dublin Castle. When he arrived in Liverpool, his bags were taken before he boarded the next ship bound for Ireland. After his bags were sent to him in February 1916, Sheehy Skeffington found that many of his books, personal papers, and several copies of his pamphlet, "War and Feminism" had been confiscated by the authorities.⁵⁷ In February 1916, he drew even more negative attention with the publication of "A Forgotten Small Nationality," an article that he wrote for *Century Magazine* in New York City. Sheehy Skeffington was highly critical of Dublin Castle for enacting press censorship in Ireland.⁵⁸ He did not just limit his criticism to Irish authorities; he also criticized John Redmond for involving Ireland in the First World War and implied that Prime Minister H.H. Asquith was a hypocrite. Sheehy Skeffington denounced the British government's treatment of Ireland: "Ireland has never been a partner in the empire or its advantages; she has been a Helot dragged at the chariot-tail of the empire. As it has been put, 'Ireland belongs to the empire, and the empire belongs to England.'"⁵⁹ He ended the article with a call for Irish independence.⁶⁰ According to

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵⁸ Francis Sheehy Skeffington, *A Forgotten Small Nationality: Ireland and the War* (New York: The Donnelly Press, 1917), 12-13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6, 8, and 11.

Lord Midleton, Leader of the Irish Unionist Alliance, Undersecretary for Ireland Sir Matthew Nathan read the article and said the following in a private meeting on February 28, 1916:

“[He] especially pressed on me that since our previous interview the [independence] movement had been developing much more seriously in Dublin. He mentioned to me the names of those who were known to the Government as the chief conspirators and urged me to read as a specimen an article by Sheehy Skeffington in the January or February number of the *Century*.”⁶¹

The fact that Francis Sheehy Skeffington was mentioned in the same sentence as individuals who were believed to be planning a rebellion against the government had significant implications. At best, Undersecretary Nathan implied that his article was a prime example of the deteriorating situation, and at worst, he might have been considered a chief conspirator by Dublin Castle authorities.

Murdered in Cold Blood

Francis Sheehy Skeffington was not involved in the fighting during the Easter Rising in April 1916, and his activities conformed to his pacifist principles: he worked towards the welfare of both Dublin civilians and British soldiers. On Easter Monday, April 24, Sheehy Skeffington was walking around on the streets of Dublin when the first shots of the Easter Rising were fired at Dublin Castle. He was nearby and learned that Captain Pinfield, a British officer, was gravely wounded in front of the Castle gates. Bystanders refused to help the dying soldier due to active shooting in the immediate vicinity, but Sheehy Skeffington, willing to put his own life in danger, convinced a chemist to accompany him through the gunfire to aid the soldier. By the time he arrived, however, Captain Pinfield’s comrades had already dragged him through the gates.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶¹ *Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland: Report of Commission* (London: Darling and Son, 1916), 10.

When his wife, Hanna, angry that he risked his life, confronted him that night, he said, “I could not let anyone bleed to death while I could help.”⁶²

Law and order quickly collapsed in Dublin. Within two hours of the first shots on Easter Monday, all men serving in the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) were ordered to “withdraw from the streets,” which led to widespread looting in Dublin.⁶³ Sheehy Skeffington immediately went to work that afternoon to put an end to the looting, and on Tuesday, April 25, he put up posters throughout the city about organizing a civilian defense force.⁶⁴ He was able to recruit civilians and priests to partake in the effort, “but by Tuesday evening, everyone was afraid.”⁶⁵ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington met her husband for tea at about 5:30PM that evening. Concerned for the welfare of their six year-old son, Owen, Hanna went home, not knowing that she would never see her husband again.⁶⁶

Between 7:00 and 8:00PM on Tuesday, April 25,⁶⁷ Francis Sheehy Skeffington was arrested. He was walking home, and when he approached Portobello Bridge, a mob of Dublin residents began to follow and taunt him with various nicknames, including “Skeffy.”⁶⁸ The officer on duty at the bridge, Lieutenant Morris, arrested him and ordered a police escort to take him to Portobello Barracks.⁶⁹ Sheehy Skeffington was unarmed, only carrying a walking stick, and he did not resist arrest. Shortly after arriving at Portobello Barracks, the Adjutant, Lieutenant Morgan, interviewed him. Since nothing of an incriminating nature was found on his

⁶² H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 17.

⁶³ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16*, 231-32.

⁶⁴ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), c949.

⁶⁵ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁷ The memorial card from May 1916 erroneously states that he was arrested on Easter Monday, April 24.

⁶⁸ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), c949.

⁶⁹ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment of Mr. Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Mr. Thomas Dickson, and Mr. Patrick James McIntyre: Report of Commission* (London: Darling and Son, 1916), 4.

person, Lieut. Morgan did not file any charges. He called headquarters to report the arrest alongside those of other civilians and asked if he should release them. For reasons unknown, he was told to release the other prisoners and keep Sheehy Skeffington in custody.⁷⁰ If Francis Sheehy Skeffington had been released with the other prisoners, he would never have met his eventual murderer, Captain John Bowen-Colthurst.

Captain Bowen-Colthurst's actions on the night of Tuesday, April 25, and the early morning of Wednesday, April 26, greatly contributed to the notoriety of the case. Bowen-Colthurst gathered a raiding party consisting of forty men and Second Lieutenant Leslie Wilson to attack what he believed to be the premises of Alderman Tom Kelly, who was known to have nationalist sympathies.⁷¹ The premises actually belonged to Alderman James Kelly, who was not involved in the Rising. Bowen-Colthurst decided to take Francis Sheehy Skeffington with them as a hostage.⁷² Between eleven o'clock and midnight, he approached the individual in charge of the guardroom, 18 year-old Lieutenant Dobbin, and convinced him to hand over Sheehy Skeffington; this should not have occurred.⁷³ Bowen-Colthurst tied his hostage's hands behind his back and told him to say his prayers. When Sheehy Skeffington refused, Bowen-Colthurst told the other men to take off their hats while he said a prayer for him: "'O Lord God, if it shall please thee to take away the life of this man forgive him for Christ's sake.'" ⁷⁴ Soon after the party left the Barracks, they came across two teenage boys named James Coade and Laurence Byrne. Bowen-Colthurst stopped them and asked:

If they did not know martial law had been proclaimed . . . [Bowen-Colthurst] turned to a soldier and said "Bash him." Coade was then struck with the butt-end of a rifle. No imprudent or offensive language had been used by any of them

⁷⁰ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 18.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷² *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 4.

⁷³ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 18.

⁷⁴ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 4.

before Coade was struck. They then separated . . . [Byrne] saw a flash and heard a report, and looking back he saw that Coade had fallen.⁷⁵

Sheehy Skeffington was present when Coade was killed, and while not confirmed, it is possible that he protested against the murder, leading to subsequent mistreatment.⁷⁶ This incident was troubling because Bowen-Colthurst used martial law to defend killing a teenager for no reason, adding to the existing chaos.

The actions taken immediately before and during the raid on Alderman Kelly's premises made the situation even worse. When the party reached Portobello Bridge, Bowen-Colthurst left Francis Sheehy Skeffington in the charge of Lieut. Wilson, and he ordered Wilson to shoot Sheehy Skeffington if they were fired upon.⁷⁷ Bowen-Colthurst's party went to Kelly's shop and threw a bomb inside. The soldiers arrested Thomas Dickson (a Scotsman), Patrick McIntyre, and two other men. Bowen-Colthurst released two of the men, but for reasons unknown, he decided to keep Dickson and McIntyre and take them back to the barracks with Sheehy Skeffington.⁷⁸ The one characteristic that all three men had in common was that they were journalists. Dickson was the editor of *The Eye-Opener*, and McIntyre was the editor of *The Searchlight*. Both of them were Unionist papers, but Bowen-Colthurst and the other soldiers mistook McIntyre's paper for *The Spark*, a notoriously seditious newspaper. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington later alleged that her husband and the other two men were murdered because they were journalists, saying, "Dead editors tell no tales—though sometimes their wives may."⁷⁹ When the raiding party returned to Portobello Barracks, Francis Sheehy Skeffington was returned to his cell for the night.

⁷⁵ The Weekly *Irish Times*, *Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook: Easter, 1916* (Dublin, 1917), 220-21.

⁷⁶ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 4.

⁷⁷ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 19.

⁷⁸ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 5-6.

⁷⁹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 20.

By the next morning, Wednesday, April 26, most of the soldiers in Portobello Barracks had heard about the late-night raid. A fellow soldier told 19 year-old Monk Gibbon how calm and brave Sheehy Skeffington had been during the raid.⁸⁰ Gibbon, shocked that Bowen-Colthurst had taken him on a raid as a hostage under the threat of death, wanted to meet Sheehy Skeffington. Before he could do so, however, Bowen-Colthurst entered the room: “Around his eyes were two huge black circles . . . One flinched from the sight of that face. He looked as though he were carrying the whole weight of the insurrection upon his shoulders.”⁸¹ Little did Gibbon know, Bowen-Colthurst had spent the night reading the Bible, and he had found an excerpt that seemingly instructed him to murder his three prisoners.⁸² Gibbon met Sheehy Skeffington and had the following first impression:

With his hands handcuffed behind his back, [he] gets up and bows to us. There is something dignified about it, though my first impressions are of a slightly ridiculous figure. He is small with a reddish beard and is wearing knickerbockers. These and the Votes for Women badge in his buttonhole suggest the Hyde Park orator. But my feelings are at once in revolt against the handcuffs . . . When I ask what I can do for him he says he would like his handkerchief, which has been taken from him. He has nothing to wipe his mouth . . . Is there anything else I can do for him? “Tell my wife that I am here and in safe keeping.”⁸³

Like many others, Gibbon was struck by the calm and reasonable manner in which he behaved. Francis Sheehy Skeffington was dressed in similar attire to what he had been wearing when he first arrived at UCD twenty years earlier. Less than thirty minutes after his interaction with Monk Gibbon, he was dead.

The absence of order and supervision in Portobello Barracks created an opening for tragic events to unfold. It was so disorganized that Monk Gibbon, who only held the rank of Second Lieutenant, had been able to visit a prisoner, and a similar scene played out when Captain

⁸⁰ Monk Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier* (London: Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1968), 42.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁸² H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 20.

⁸³ Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier*, 44.

Bowen-Colthurst arrived in the guardroom to obtain the prisoners.⁸⁴ The Royal Commission assembled to inquire into the case determined that the weeklong absence of Lieutenant Colonel McCammond, the commander of Portobello Barracks, paved the way for Bowen-Colthurst's behavior. When Sheehy Skeffington was first arrested the night before, there was confusion about which one of the three teenaged officers, Lieutenants Dobbin, Tooley, and Alexander Wilson, was in charge of the guardroom. The next morning, Sergeant Aldridge had just taken over the post an hour earlier when Bowen-Colthurst gave him the orders to send the prisoners to the Barracks yard so that he could speak with them.⁸⁵

While Aldridge went to retrieve the prisoners from their cells, Bowen-Colthurst confided in Lieut. Dobbin: "He was taking the three prisoners out for the purpose of shooting them, as he thought 'it was the best thing to do.'"⁸⁶ Alarmed, Lieut. Dobbin told Lieut. Alexander Wilson to go to the Adjutant's office to inform him of the situation, but it was too late. Civilian prisoners in the guardroom later testified that Sheehy Skeffington had been shot in the back as he walked through the yard by firing squad with no warning, and the same happened to Dickson and McIntyre.⁸⁷ The three men never had the chance to receive a trial because they were murdered.

Immediately after the shots rang out, Dobbin said to Aldridge that Sheehy Skeffington was not dead and informed Bowen-Colthurst, who said to "finish him off."⁸⁸ Dobbin followed his command and assembled another firing squad to shoot Sheehy Skeffington for the second time. This disturbing fact added another layer to a case that already read like it had been scripted for the purpose of eliciting outrage from the Irish public. While Sergeant Aldridge later said that he believed all three men died instantaneously, and that Lieut. Dobbin had only seen a "muscular

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁸⁵ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 3-4, 6, and 11.

⁸⁶ Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier*, 42.

⁸⁷ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 20.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

contraction,”⁸⁹ the possibility that Sheehy Skeffington might have survived the first hail of gunfire, no doubt in agony, drew negative attention.⁹⁰

The military and Dublin Castle authorities worked together to cover up the murders that Captain Bowen-Colthurst committed at Portobello Barracks. Bowen-Colthurst contacted Dublin Castle officials, who failed to reprimand him and allowed him to continue carrying out his duties.⁹¹ Then, Bowen-Colthurst informed Major Rosborough of the shootings and said that he “possibly might be hanged for it.”⁹² This shows that at the very least, he knew he had done something against the law. Major Rosborough instructed the Adjutant, Lieut. Morgan, to contact the proper Dublin Castle authorities and inform them of what had transpired. Lieut. Morgan called Headquarters, Irish Command, but they refused to take action.⁹³

The military worked hard to eliminate any physical evidence of the shooting. The civilian prisoners testified that soon after the shooting, “They heard washing and sweeping going on for about two hours and when they were allowed into the yard it still bore the marks of murder. The wall was bloodstained and riddled with bullets.”⁹⁴ Since they were unable to wash the bloodstains off the bricks, on Sunday, April 30, Dublin Castle authorities sent a group of Royal Engineers to replace the bricks with any traces of blood.⁹⁵ The fact that they devoted such resources to the removal of the bricks is astounding because the rebels had only surrendered the day before. Clearly, covering up the murders at Portobello Barracks was a top priority for Dublin Castle authorities.

⁸⁹ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 7.

⁹⁰ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 18, 1916): c1632, *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, accessed September 27, 2018, <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1916/may/18/mr-sheehy-skeffington>.

⁹¹ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 264.

⁹² *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 7.

⁹³ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 264.

⁹⁴ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 21.

⁹⁵ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 265.

The military and Dublin Castle authorities quickly disposed of the bodies. Within two hours of the shooting, they were transferred to the mortuary.⁹⁶ Monk Gibbon saw them being carried away: “Two of [the bodies were] roughly covered with a blanket and over the face of the third corpse a hat had been placed, a bowler hat . . . As I drew near the third stretcher, I saw that limp arms hung down on either side and that the hands dripped with blood. It was the body of Skeffington.”⁹⁷ Gibbon’s written account is one of the few to contain explicit details about the condition of the bodies after the shooting was complete. On the evening of the murders, Major Rosborough received an order to bury them in the Barracks yard. The order was carried out secretly that night, with Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s body sewn in a sack⁹⁸ and buried in quicklime to increase the rate of its decay.⁹⁹

Francis Sheehy Skeffington and the other two journalists were not Bowen-Colthurst’s only victims that day. While Major Rosborough had ordered Bowen-Colthurst to remain inside, he ignored these orders.¹⁰⁰ Instead, he committed two other murders. His first victim was Richard O’Carroll, who was both a member of the Irish Volunteers and involved in the Easter Rising. Bowen-Colthurst was inexplicably in charge of troops on Camden Street when they saw O’Carroll, who surrendered.¹⁰¹ Bowen-Colthurst marched him into the backyard and asked him if he was a Sinn Féiner.¹⁰² When O’Carroll confirmed, “From the backbone out!” Bowen-

⁹⁶ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 21.

⁹⁷ Gibbon, *Inglorious Soldier*, 46.

⁹⁸ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 22.

⁹⁹ Owen Sheehy Skeffington, “Francis Sheehy-Skeffington,” in *1916: The Easter Rising*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards and Fergus Pyle (London: MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1968), 135.

¹⁰⁰ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 7.

¹⁰¹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 21.

¹⁰² In 1916, the term “Sinn Féiner” was used to refer to anyone associated with the Easter Rising; only later did this label have a specific connotation attached.

Colthurst shot him in the lung.¹⁰³ A soldier then asked him if O'Carroll was dead, and he responded, "Never mind, he'll die later,"¹⁰⁴ showing a disturbing lack of remorse and human feelings. Bowen-Colthurst ordered his soldiers to drag the gravely wounded man into the street, and they left him in the spot where a bread van picked him up and took him to the hospital, where he suffered in agony until his death nine days later.¹⁰⁵ Bowen-Colthurst's second victim was an unidentified boy whom he suspected of involvement in the Easter Rising. He pressed him for information, and when the boy refused to cooperate, Bowen-Colthurst told him "To kneel in the street and shot him in the back as he raised his hand to cross himself."¹⁰⁶

Ultimately, what made the Sheehy Skeffington murder a cause célèbre were the murky details and general lack of information surrounding the event and immediate aftermath. Francis Sheehy Skeffington was a well-known individual whose personality and opinions were unforgettable, which made him resonate in the general public's mind. Captain Bowen-Colthurst had murdered at least five other people, possibly more, but he was not arrested until May 11, 1916, nearly two weeks after Sheehy Skeffington was killed.¹⁰⁷ The lapse of time between the murder and its revelation to the public was too long, and the facts of the case were released slowly and in pieces, which left people suspicious and distrustful of the military and Dublin Castle authorities' intentions. Hanna Sheehy Skeffington relentlessly pursued justice on behalf of her husband, creating a massive scandal that irreparably damaged the authorities' credibility.

¹⁰³ Lawrence William White, "Richard O'Carroll," in *1916: Portraits and Lives*, ed. James Quinn and Lawrence William White (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015), 216-17.

¹⁰⁴ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ White, "Richard O'Carroll," in *1916*, ed. James Quinn, 217.

¹⁰⁶ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 21-22.

¹⁰⁷ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 10.

Chapter Three: Slow Burn: Revealing the Sheehy Skeffington Case to the Public

The manner in which the military and government officials in Dublin Castle and Westminster handled the aftermath of Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder revealed widespread corruption in both Ireland and the United Kingdom.¹⁰⁸ They repeatedly protected Captain Bowen-Colthurst from facing repercussions and attempted to cover up the real story behind the murder. The authorities, however, underestimated Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Sir Francis Vane's determination to seek justice and reveal the truth behind Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder. Over a four-month period, new facts about the case were made public. The authorities' error in not immediately acknowledging and apologizing for the Sheehy Skeffington murder led to Irish public opinion shifting against the British and in favor of the rebels.

Left in the Dark

Dublin civilians quickly realized that something nefarious had occurred in Portobello Barracks. On the day Sheehy Skeffington was killed, Sir Francis Vane was setting up an observation post at Rathmines Town Hall. On his way back to the Barracks that afternoon, he encountered "A semi-hostile crowd . . . shout[ing]: 'Murderer, Murderer!'"¹⁰⁹ This was the first time he had heard anything about the murders. Meanwhile, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington had not seen or heard from her husband since the previous evening, and she, too, heard rumors about his fate: "He had been wounded and was in a hospital, that he had been shot by a looter, that he was arrested by the police. I also heard that he had been executed, but this I refused to believe—it seemed incredible."¹¹⁰ The military never notified Hanna that her husband was being held in

¹⁰⁸ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 290-92.

¹⁰⁹ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 262.

¹¹⁰ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 22.

Portobello Barracks, let alone that he had been killed. It was not until Friday, April 28, two days after the murders, when “horrible rumors” finally reached Hanna.¹¹¹ She tried to speak to a doctor who worked at Portobello Barracks, but the police prevented this from occurring.¹¹²

Desperate for information, Hanna asked two of her sisters, Mary Kettle and Margaret Culhane, to inquire about her husband.¹¹³ On Friday morning, they went to the Rathmines police station, where they were redirected to Portobello Barracks. This raises the question as to whether the police knew about Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s murder, since they directed the sisters to the place where he was killed. When Mary and Margaret arrived, they decided to inquire after the welfare of their brother, Lieutenant Eugene Sheehy, who was on duty in Dublin at the time, before asking about their brother-in-law. The officer that the sisters initially encountered seemed nervous the moment they asked about Sheehy Skeffington. After consulting with other soldiers nearby, he put them under arrest and interrogated them before Bowen-Colthurst intervened.¹¹⁴ Mary and Margaret repeated their inquiries regarding their brother and brother-in-law, and Bowen-Colthurst replied, “I have no information concerning Mr. Skeffington that is available, and the sooner you leave the barracks the better.”¹¹⁵ Mary and Margaret were escorted out of Portobello Barracks under armed guard, and Bowen-Colthurst insisted that they not speak to each other until they exited the premises.¹¹⁶ If Bowen-Colthurst had not known that Mary and Margaret were in the Barracks asking questions about Francis Sheehy Skeffington, they might have received answers. Their visit also alerted Bowen-Colthurst to the fact that his victim’s widow was beginning to put the pieces together.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18 and 22.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹⁴ *The Weekly Irish Times, Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook*, 220.

¹¹⁵ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

While her sisters encountered Bowen-Colthurst, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington finally discovered the truth about her husband's fate. At 4:00PM on Friday afternoon, she met with James Coade's father, who told her that while collecting his son at the mortuary, he saw Francis' dead body.¹¹⁷ Mr. Coade was able to access the mortuary because he and his family knew Father O'Loughlin, the Chaplain of Portobello Barracks.¹¹⁸ When Hanna went to see Father O'Loughlin, he told her that Francis had already been buried, but otherwise "could give [her] no other information."¹¹⁹ Even though Hanna knew that her husband was dead, she did not know how or when he died.

The military raided the Sheehy Skeffington household that evening and placed Hanna, her son, Owen, and the maid under arrest. Bowen-Colthurst and Colonel Allatt,¹²⁰ an officer with nearly 30 years' experience who was sent from Dublin Castle, were in charge of the soldiers.¹²¹ They burst into the house with no warning, shooting through the windows and forcing open the front door. Hanna was terrified that the soldiers would harm Owen, especially when he became frightened after seeing the guns, so she "put [her] arm around him and said, 'These are the defenders of women and children.' That steadied them a little."¹²² The fact that the soldiers even thought about shooting a six year-old child is horrifying. The soldiers proceeded upstairs to search the house while Hanna, Owen, and the maid were surrounded by armed soldiers who were ordered to shoot them if they moved.¹²³ The young Belfast soldier who guarded them expressed shame about the fact that he and his fellow soldiers were breaching

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹¹⁸ Father O'Loughlin was the spiritual director of the religious solidarity meeting that James Coade attended on the night of his murder.

¹¹⁹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 23.

¹²⁰ Last name is alternatively spelled "Allett" in some primary source documents.

¹²¹ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 265.

¹²² H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 23.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

protocol.¹²⁴ The soldiers stayed for over three hours and took everything of value in the home, including Hanna's private correspondence, letters that Francis had written to her before they were married, and several of Francis' articles and manuscripts. Bowen-Colthurst was able to access Francis' locked study after removing the key from his dead body, and he stole items that he hoped would serve as post facto evidence to justify his actions.¹²⁵ The soldiers used unnecessary force in the raid, which created further negative attention for the military and Dublin Castle authorities.¹²⁶

Seeking Justice

Sir Francis Vane, older and wiser, was the only officer at Portobello Barracks who was both able and willing to seek justice for Francis Sheehy Skeffington. As soon as he returned to the Barracks on the day of the murders, he asked his young officers what had occurred, and they told him that Bowen-Colthurst had shot three civilian prisoners, including Sheehy Skeffington. Vane was horrified by his actions and immediately spoke to Major Rosborough, who was "in deep distress . . . [but] did not feel that he could act in opposition of his military superiors."¹²⁷ Further complicating the situation, many of Rosborough's troops were staunchly anti-Irish and thought Bowen-Colthurst had done nothing wrong, so he had no support from both the soldiers in his command and Dublin Castle authorities. Vane expressed his discomfort about the situation, so Rosborough allowed Vane to lecture the troops not on duty about proper conduct under martial law.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ O. Sheehy Skeffington, "Francis Sheehy Skeffington," in *1916*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, 147.

¹²⁵ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 24.

¹²⁶ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 18, 1916), c1632.

¹²⁷ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 263-64.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264-65.

Vane later revealed that Dublin Castle authorities, apparently unhappy that he had taken control of the situation in the Barracks, assisted Bowen-Colthurst in raiding the Sheehy Skeffington residence and replacing the bloodstained bricks in the Barracks yard. Furthermore, after Lieut. Col. McCammond reassumed command of Portobello Barracks on Monday, May 1, he dismissed Vane from his post as commander of the defenses. He then ordered Vane to surrender the position to Bowen-Colthurst.¹²⁹ The fact that Bowen-Colthurst, who had murdered multiple innocent civilians less than a week earlier, was now in charge of the defenses of Portobello Barracks was inexcusable and revealed the incredible negligence of the military.

Sir Francis Vane reported the murders to the indifferent Dublin Castle authorities. General Sir John Maxwell, Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces in Ireland, was either unavailable or refused to see him, so Vane was redirected to the Park Gate Headquarters. There, he met with the Chief Intelligence Officer, Major Ivon Price. Vane said the following about Major Price's reaction to the murders: "He had the impudence to say that he would note them, but he thought that men like Skeffington were just as well out of the way."¹³⁰ Price's comment had significant implications. By saying that it was better to have Francis Sheehy Skeffington "out of the way," he essentially admitted that he wanted him dead. Price's comment shows that Dublin Castle authorities had a motive to support Bowen-Colthurst, who, in their eyes, had eliminated a major problem.

Sir Francis Vane, determined to hold Bowen-Colthurst accountable, traveled to London and reported the murders to multiple government officials in Westminster. Immediately after meeting with Major Price, Vane requested and received eight days' leave from the Adjutant General and left Dublin that night, arriving in London early in the morning on Tuesday, May 2.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

He went to the War Office, where he met with Harold Arthur Tennant, Under-Secretary for War. Regarding their interaction, Vane reported, “Never was a man more distressed, and no wonder, seeing that the day before he had stated in Parliament ‘that no man had been shot in Dublin without trial.’”¹³¹ Obviously, this assertion was false, so Tennant had significant motivation to ensure that Vane was able to report the murders to powerful officials. Tennant informed Vane that Prime Minister Asquith would send him a message at noon. When this did not occur, Vane went to the House of Commons and reported the murders to the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), John Redmond; he was “dazed” after hearing the news.¹³²

On the same day he arrived in London, Sir Francis Vane met with Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, and Maurice Bonham-Carter, Prime Minister Asquith’s private secretary at 10 Downing Street. Lord Kitchener was unaware that the murders had taken place, and he said: “‘Why have I not been informed . . . and why is the officer not under arrest?’”¹³³ Lord Kitchener’s position put him in charge of all military matters, and Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s murder should have been reported to him. The fact that he was kept in the dark is a signal that a cover up was taking place. Lord Kitchener instructed Bonham-Carter to send a telegram to General Maxwell containing orders for Bowen-Colthust’s arrest, and at the end of the meeting, he told Vane, “This officer must be shot.”¹³⁴ This statement had significant implications. The Secretary of State for War, one of the most powerful officials in the United Kingdom after the Prime Minister, believed that Bowen-Colthurst had committed such an egregious crime that he should have been executed.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 266 and 268.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 268.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 268-69.

The military and Dublin Castle authorities continued to protect Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murderer. General Maxwell ignored Lord Kitchener's telegram and did not restrain Bowen-Colthurst at all for several days.¹³⁵ On Saturday, May 6, Bowen-Colthurst was placed under "open arrest," but he was allowed to move freely.¹³⁶ The military also exhumed Francis Sheehy Skeffington's body from the Barracks yard and reinterred it in Glasnevin Cemetery on Monday, May 8 without notifying Hanna.¹³⁷ The military's failure to inform her of the exhumation would not have been out of character, except for the fact that they ceded control of Francis' remains to his father, Dr. J.B. Skeffington. In order to bury his son in the family plot, Dr. Skeffington was forced to agree that he would not notify Hanna of the event and that the funeral would occur in the early morning hours. General Maxwell was involved in this scheme, and he assured Dr. Skeffington that if he agreed to these terms, Bowen-Colthurst would face a court-martial for the murder of his son.¹³⁸ Based on this agreement, it seems that General Maxwell was afraid that Hanna would refuse to keep quiet about her husband's murder, so he worked to ensure that she received as few details as possible. This contributed to the Irish public's increasing distrust of the military.

The military and Dublin Castle authorities seriously underestimated Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's determination to discover the truth. Due to her father's substantial political connections, Hanna was able to meet with John Dillon, the second-in-command of the IPP, in Dublin on May 8. Hanna said the following about Dillon's demeanor during their meeting: "I never saw a man more moved than he by the tragedies of Easter Week."¹³⁹ Dillon took her written statement with him when he returned to London shortly after their meeting, and on

¹³⁵ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 25.

¹³⁶ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 10.

¹³⁷ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 26.

¹³⁸ Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington*, 162.

¹³⁹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 26.

Thursday, May 11, he read it aloud on the floor of the House of Commons. He also advocated on her behalf, insisting on a public inquiry into the murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington.¹⁴⁰

Prime Minister Asquith responded to the statement, saying:

I confess I cannot believe and I do not believe [it] . . . Does anyone suppose that . . . Sir John Maxwell has any object, in shielding officers and soldiers, if there be such, who have been guilty of ungentlemanly or inhuman conduct? Of course not. It is the last thing the British Army would dream of.¹⁴¹

Asquith was so alarmed that Sheehy Skeffington had been murdered that he wanted to see the situation in Ireland for himself, traveling to Ireland the next day. While John Dillon was presenting Hanna's statement to the House of Commons, Bowen-Colthurst was finally put under "close arrest" for the murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington, and his court-martial was set to begin on June 6, 1916.¹⁴²

Sir Francis Vane risked his military career to assist Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in her quest for justice. As soon as he returned to Dublin, Vane met with Hanna to apologize on behalf of the military for her husband's murder. He said that it was the most "frightening task" he had ever faced, but Vane felt it was the least he could do for Hanna, who was now a widow and had to raise her six year-old son alone.¹⁴³ When he arrived at the Sheehy Skeffington residence, Vane received a cold reception at first, but as Hanna listened to his story, she realized she had found an ally.¹⁴⁴ It was the beginning of a long-lasting friendship.

Sir Francis Vane was at Hanna's side as she prepared for Bowen-Colthurst's court-martial and requested that the military return her husband's property, which was stolen during the raid. With the help of one of Vane's friends, a Provost Marshal, they were successful in

¹⁴⁰ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), cc949-50.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, c957.

¹⁴² H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 25-26.

¹⁴³ Vane, *Agin the Governments*, 269.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

recovering some of this property, including Francis' signet ring. The military authorities, however, were not pleased that Vane was assisting Hanna. Vane recounted the contents of a threatening note from the military authorities: “[They] strongly advis[ed] me not to be seen with Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington—and I replied that as we had killed her husband most certainly I should do everything in my power to help her.”¹⁴⁵ In refusing to compromise his integrity, Vane paid a steep price. He wanted to see active combat and had received a recommendation commending his bravery, but on May 26, Vane was informed that General Maxwell “suppressed the recommendation,” leaving him unemployed.¹⁴⁶ Vane believed that this was in retaliation for assisting Hanna Sheehy Skeffington.¹⁴⁷

Demanding Answers

Captain Bowen-Colthurst's court-martial, which occurred on June 6 and 7, 1916, was deeply flawed. Bowen-Colthurst was present in the courtroom, but he did not testify or give a written statement.¹⁴⁸ Despite having been charged with three counts of murder, he was not under any supervision during the court-martial, staying in a luxury hotel with his family instead. Sir Francis Vane, despite having seen Bowen-Colthurst on numerous occasions after the murders, was not called to testify.¹⁴⁹ All of the witnesses who appeared were either in or associated with the military, and some of them contradicted their own stories throughout the proceedings.¹⁵⁰ Hanna's lawyer, MP Timothy “T.M.” Healy, was not allowed to cross-examine any of the witnesses, and the prosecutor did not give a particularly strong or passionate argument as to why

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 269-70.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 270-71 and 279.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

¹⁴⁸ “The Sheehy-Skeffington Case,” *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), June 7, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁴⁹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 26-27.

¹⁵⁰ “The Sheehy-Skeffington Case.”

Bowen-Colthurst should have been found guilty of murder. Bowen-Colthurst's attorneys, on the other hand, skillfully defended their client and argued that he was not responsible for the murders because he was insane at the time.¹⁵¹ On June 10, Bowen-Colthurst was found "guilty but insane."¹⁵² This verdict prevented Bowen-Colthurst from receiving a death or prison sentence. King George V ordered his detention "in a criminal lunatic asylum during His Majesty's pleasure."¹⁵³ Even though he was found guilty on all three murder charges, Bowen-Colthurst retained his rank of captain and received half pay from the military for several months.¹⁵⁴

Captain Bowen-Colthurst's mental state is still a matter of debate. The night before murdering the three journalists, Bowen-Colthurst had one hour of sleep before resuming duty. At around 4:00AM, while reading the Bible, he found a passage that said: "All these, mine enemies, which will not have Me rule over them, bring them forth and slay them."¹⁵⁵ According to Dr. Parsons, Bowen-Colthurst thought "it was his duty to slay men who would not have His Majesty reign over them."¹⁵⁶ The fact that Bowen-Colthurst was severely sleep deprived before the murders and believed a Bible passage gave him license to murder three people suggests that he was mentally unstable and suffering from extreme exhaustion. Bowen-Colthurst, however, exhibited other behaviors that suggested he was sane. Immediately after the murders, Bowen-Colthurst confided in Major Rosborough that he "possibly might be hanged" for murdering the three journalists.¹⁵⁷ This shows that he knew the difference between right and wrong. He also

¹⁵¹ "Sheehy-Skeffington Case," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), June 8, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁵² "Portobello Shootings," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), June 12, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁵³ *The Weekly Irish Times, Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook*, 108.

¹⁵⁴ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 27.

¹⁵⁵ "The Sheehy-Skeffington Case."

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 7.

appeared unable to empathize with other living beings. For example, Major Goodman discussed an incident that occurred in India long before the Easter Rising or the First World War:

We were put up for the night at a . . . bungalow. There were dogs barking all night, and we did not sleep. At breakfast the following morning, I said: "I wish that dog was dead." [Bowen-Colthurst] got up from the breakfast table and walked out and a little later there was a rifle shot and the howling of a dog. He came back and said he had shot the dog. He was asked if he had killed it and he said 'no,' but that he had wounded it sufficiently.¹⁵⁸

The fact that Bowen-Colthurst was indifferent to killing a living being and did not find it upsetting that the dog was suffering after having been shot suggests a pathological lack of empathy.

Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was deeply unsatisfied with the court-martial's result and refused to give up until there was a public inquiry into her husband's murder. Prime Minister Asquith had promised an inquiry but, true to his reputation for breaking promises, evaded her for months. Hanna traveled to London in July and met with journalists and MPs in the House of Commons to plead her case. On July 19, Asquith agreed to meet with her at 10 Downing Street. Asquith told Hanna that he could not commission a sworn inquiry and that "the best [he] could do" was an inadequate inquiry. Irritated with that answer, Hanna said, "I would not be 'satisfied.'" ¹⁵⁹ Asquith then asked her if she would take monetary compensation. Hanna later described his demeanor while broaching the subject: "[He was] tapping his fingers on the green baize table . . . and glancing sideways at me, for he never looked me straight in the face throughout the interview."¹⁶⁰ Hanna refused to take anything but a public inquiry into Francis' murder, and she saw Asquith's suggestion for what it really was: "hush money."¹⁶¹ While Hanna

¹⁵⁸ "The Sheehy-Skeffington Case."

¹⁵⁹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 27.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

never revealed the exact amount of money Asquith offered her, Owen later confirmed it was £10,000.¹⁶²

Prime Minister Asquith relented in August and ordered a Royal Commission to carry out a public inquiry into her husband's murder, but like the court-martial, it was flawed. The scope of the inquiry was significantly narrowed to focus solely on the murders of Francis Sheehy Skeffington, Thomas Dickson, and Patrick McIntyre. While James Coade's murder fell under the scope of inquiry due to Sheehy Skeffington having witnessed the crime, the murders of Patrick O'Carroll and the unidentified boy, as well as Bowen-Colthurst's mental state, were excluded. Multiple important witnesses had been sent to fight or serve in the First World War, apparently in order to keep them from testifying at the inquiry.¹⁶³ The most glaring absence was that of Dr. Balck¹⁶⁴, who had examined the bodies before the first burial and refused to say that Bowen-Colthurst was insane. The military had sent him to Sierra Leone.¹⁶⁵

The military and government authorities in Dublin Castle and Westminster attempted to conceal Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder, but they were unsuccessful. They had severely underestimated Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who had both the perseverance and political connections to pursue justice for her husband and reveal the truth to the public. Sir Francis Vane was also instrumental in ensuring that the circumstances behind Francis' murder were brought to light, since he had substantial military connections. Together, these two individuals were able to thwart the cover up operation before it fully materialized. Without their efforts, though, the authorities would likely have succeeded in covering up the Sheehy Skeffington murder. This

¹⁶² O. Sheehy Skeffington, "Francis Sheehy Skeffington," in *1916*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, 147.

¹⁶³ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Dr. Balck's name was misspelled as "Balch" in official government documents.

¹⁶⁵ "Portobello Murders." *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), August 29, 1916. The British Newspaper Archive.

was not lost on the Irish population, who became increasingly enraged as the facts of the case became public.

Chapter Four: The Reckoning: A Shift in Irish Public Opinion

Throughout the duration of British rule in Ireland, various groups of Irishmen mounted rebellions against the British. The Easter Rising of 1916 was the first time that the majority of the Irish public sided with the British over their rebellious countrymen.¹⁶⁶ If the military and government authorities in Dublin Castle and Westminster had made the most of this situation, the entire island of Ireland would likely still be under British rule today. Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder, however, was a potent example of the extreme violence that the British employed against civilians and rebels alike during and after the Easter Rising. This played a pivotal role in shifting Irish public opinion away from the British and towards the rebels.

The Impact of the Easter Rising on Civilians

The Easter Rising caught Dublin civilians by surprise, and they were unprepared for the violence that ensued. In the months preceding the Easter Rising, members of the Irish Volunteers and Irish Citizen Army (ICA) had been practicing military exercises in preparation for the rebellion. They even marched in Dublin while armed with rifles and shotguns without interference from the police or Dublin Castle authorities.¹⁶⁷ Thus, when they quietly entered and seized buildings and other locations on Monday, April 24, no one thought anything was wrong.¹⁶⁸ After witnessing the rebels capture the General Post Office (GPO), University College Dublin (UCD) student Ernie O'Malley walked home and found people standing outside their houses, talking about the situation:

¹⁶⁶ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), c940.

¹⁶⁷ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16*, 225 and 227.

¹⁶⁸ "Dublin Rebellion: From *Preston Herald*, May 6, 1916 (Censored by the Press Bureau)," in *Dublin, 1916*, ed. Roger McHugh, (London: Arlington Books, 1966), 80.

The Loyalists talked with an air of contempt. “The troops will soon settle the matter in an hour or two.” . . . The Redmonites were more bitter: “I hope they’ll all be hanged . . . [they’re] trying to stir up trouble for us all.” . . . At home the seizure of the buildings was taken as some kind of mild joke. Dublin had been used to strikes. They had provided excitement but were never very serious.¹⁶⁹

The various people that O’Malley interacted with during this time frame were representative of initial public opinion.¹⁷⁰ Dublin civilians had previously seen so much violence in their city that the fighting on April 24 did not raise much of an alarm. On Tuesday, April 25, the situation remained the same for most of the day, but by the evening, both the fighting and looting of shops intensified. The civilians became genuinely terrified of what lay ahead.¹⁷¹

The violence in Dublin immediately preceding and after Francis Sheehy Skeffington’s murder already had civilians in the city center and suburbs on edge. When the fighting intensified even further on Wednesday, April 26, an “element of doubt” in the military was present; civilians wondered why they had not yet intervened.¹⁷² Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, who was a poetic and effective writer, recalled the unease she felt during the Easter Rising: “At night the city flamed in the distance and lone snipers kept up firing from hidden vantages. One heard the answering rat-tat of machine guns and had the impression that the firing was so close that it would shiver the panes.”¹⁷³ The suburbs, including the Sheehy Skeffington’s neighborhood, Rathmines, were cut off from the rest of Dublin because the British erected barricades on the bridges that connected them to the city center.¹⁷⁴ Civilians in the suburbs felt helpless because they were not only cut off from the resources in the city, but also from the rest of the world. All Irish newspaper publications were suspended except for the *Irish Times*, which did not cover the

¹⁶⁹ Ernie O’Malley, “A Student and the Rising,” in *Dublin, 1916*, ed. Roger McHugh, 129-30.

¹⁷⁰ Eugene Sheehy, *May It Please the Court*, 90.

¹⁷¹ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 17.

¹⁷² O’Malley, “A Student and the Rising,” in *Dublin, 1916*, ed. Roger McHugh, 131-32.

¹⁷³ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, “Unpublished Memoirs,” in *Suffragette and Sinn Féiner*, ed. Margaret Ward, 16.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

events as they unfolded, and newspapers published elsewhere were not sent to Ireland.¹⁷⁵ While civilians in the city center had more information because they were able to see the fighting firsthand, it also created an unsafe atmosphere. Ernie O'Malley recounted soldiers' interactions with civilians in the city center on Thursday, April 27: "The soldiers advanced with fixed bayonets, telling the lingering people, 'Get home, get to your homes at once.'"¹⁷⁶ Instead of offering protection from the unrest, the military posed an additional threat to civilians' safety.

The declaration of martial law was too severe a method for the situation, which finally led to the beginnings of anti-British sentiment in Ireland. When the Easter Rising broke out on April 24, the two highest-ranking officials, including the Chief Secretary for Ireland, were in London, and Undersecretary Sir Matthew Nathan was trapped in his office in Dublin Castle. This left Lord Lieutenant Wimborne as the sole top official with the ability to respond to the rebellion.¹⁷⁷ Wimborne was far from the ideal person to make important decisions because his position was ceremonial and had no executive functions.¹⁷⁸ When the fighting increased on April 25, Wimborne, probably in a state of panic, rushed to declare martial law in the city and county of Dublin. This was a highly questionable decision because martial law had unsavory connotations in both Ireland and England, and Dublin Castle officials had used alternative methods to put down previous Irish insurrections.¹⁷⁹ The next day, the Cabinet in Westminster declared martial law in all of Ireland, despite the fact that disruptions outside Dublin were minimal or nonexistent.¹⁸⁰ The Cabinet's extension of martial law was one of several fatal mistakes.

¹⁷⁵ "Dublin Rebellion," in *Dublin, 1916*, ed. Roger McHugh, 88.

¹⁷⁶ O'Malley, "A Student and the Rising," in *Dublin, 1916*, ed. Roger McHugh, 135.

¹⁷⁷ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 149 and 186-87.

¹⁷⁸ *Royal Commission on the Rebellion in Ireland*, 3.

¹⁷⁹ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 186-88.

¹⁸⁰ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), cc937-40.

The Role of Newspapers in Shaping Public Opinion

Irish newspapers played a significant role in bringing initial awareness to Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder immediately after the Easter Rising ended. While the government censored the Irish press and banned any statements from the rebels, Sheehy Skeffington was a civilian, which allowed the newspapers to report his murder. Out of the three main newspapers in Dublin, the unionist¹⁸¹ *Irish Times* had the most readers. Despite its political stance, the *Irish Times* held their reporters to a high standard in refusing to reward partisanship, resulting in impartial articles.¹⁸² The moderately nationalist *Freeman's Journal* had two lead reporters, one of whom was Francis Cruise O'Brien. Cruise O'Brien was Francis Sheehy Skeffington's friend at UCD and brother-in-law through his marriage to Hanna's youngest sister, Kathleen, so he likely used his high positioning within the newspaper's hierarchy to ensure extensive coverage of the killing. The other nationalist newspaper in Dublin was the *Irish Independent*, and its editor was associated with T.M. Healy, who served as Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's legal counsel at the court-martial and Royal Commission.¹⁸³ All of the major Dublin newspapers had either the journalistic integrity or incentive to devote significant coverage to the Sheehy Skeffington case. The articles that appeared in these newspapers ensured that as many civilians as possible were aware of the details surrounding Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder.

The first articles, which appeared from Saturday, May 6 to Wednesday May 10, indicate the extent of Francis Sheehy Skeffington's celebrity and public outrage regarding the case. In an

¹⁸¹ In 1916, the term "unionist" applied to people who were not in favor of Home Rule or complete independence from the United Kingdom.

¹⁸² "Appendix I: The *Irish Times* on the Easter Rising," in *1916*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, 241 and 243.

¹⁸³ "Appendix II: Press Reaction to the Rising in General," in *1916*, ed. Owen Dudley Edwards, 260-61 and 264.

Irish Times article published on May 6, J.H. Cox commented on Sheehy Skeffington's visibility:

“To the eyes of the populace the leaders of the startling insurrection were not at all known . . .

[Francis Sheehy Skeffington] seemed apart from these . . . [and] was generally more

recognisable than any of them . . . [His] career was public to the close.”¹⁸⁴ The *Freeman's*

Journal went even further, calling for a full and public inquiry into his murder on May 9:

We feel it necessary also to appeal to the Military Authorities themselves to take such steps to dispel such hideous suspicions among the people. Such circumstances as surrounded the execution of Mr. Sheehy Skeffington . . . are the food upon which exasperating rumour feeds. Mystery still surrounds his death. As far as the public knew him he was the very reverse of the doctrinaire that sheds blood for the advance of his cause . . . nothing short of a public inquiry . . . will allay the suspicions and anxieties that have been aroused.¹⁸⁵

Civilians knew that Sheehy Skeffington was a pacifist, and the knowledge that someone with those views was murdered made the population distrustful and fearful of the military authorities.

The article also underscores the fact that after nearly two weeks, few details regarding his death were released to the public. The military's unwillingness to be more forthcoming only made the situation worse. In a stunning show of force, the military authorities threatened to take

“immediate action” against the *Freeman's Journal* for using “incendiary language” to criticize the military's actions in Ireland.¹⁸⁶ The *Freeman's Journal*, however, continued to report on the Sheehy Skeffington case and no action was taken against them.

Member of Parliament John Dillon used Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder as the centerpiece for his argument to stop further executions of the rebels in his speech to the House of Commons on Thursday, May 11, 1916.¹⁸⁷ General Maxwell sentenced ninety men to death in

¹⁸⁴ *1916 Press Cuttings Part 1*, Bureau of Military History, <http://bureauofmilitaryhistory.ie/1916presscuttings.html>.

¹⁸⁵ “Drastic Severity,” *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), May 9, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁸⁶ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 276.

¹⁸⁷ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 26.

secret court-martial trials.¹⁸⁸ Between Wednesday, May 3 and Tuesday, May 9, thirteen men had been executed; only five were primarily responsible for the Easter Rising. The others played minor roles in the rebellion, and one man did not even participate; he was a civilian executed in Cork for shooting a Royal Irish Constabulary officer who was in the process of raiding his home. As of May 11, two leaders of the Easter Rising, Seán Mac Diarmada and the seriously wounded James Connolly, had not yet been executed.¹⁸⁹ Dillon wanted to spread awareness about Sheehy Skeffington's murder, but he also hoped that linking the executions to the Sheehy Skeffington case would convince Prime Minister Asquith to spare Connolly, Mac Diarmada, and the seventy-seven other men sentenced to death.

Dillon delivered an inflammatory and passionate speech condemning the declaration of martial law in Ireland and the execution of the rebels. He claimed that Dublin civilians feared for their lives, saying, "A more lurid light on [martial] law on Ireland could not possibly be imagined than [Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder] in Portobello Barracks . . . You are doing everything conceivable to madden the Irish people and . . . to spread disaffection from one country to the other."¹⁹⁰ Dillon also sharply criticized the extent of General Maxwell's authority over Irish affairs: "The well-known high character of [Maxwell] . . . is the sole protection that any man in Ireland has for liberty or for any of the ordinary rights men are supposed to enjoy in a civilised country . . . The Irish people will refuse to accept [that] as the sole guarantee of their liberty."¹⁹¹ Essentially, Dillon accused Maxwell of being a military dictator. Finally, he argued against any further executions: "It is not murderers who are being executed; it is insurgents who

¹⁸⁸ Townshend, *Easter 1916*, 207 and 287.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 280, 282-83, and 289.

¹⁹⁰ 82 H.C. Deb. 5th ser. (May 11, 1916), cc937-8.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, cc941-2.

have fought a clean fight, a brave fight, however misguided.”¹⁹² In reply, Prime Minister Asquith said that while General Maxwell was not to blame, the state of Irish affairs was “highly unsatisfactory.” He subsequently announced that he was traveling to Ireland “without delay” to make arrangements for the return of civil government and to halt the executions of all rebels except Mac Diarmada and Connolly.¹⁹³ Thus, John Dillon achieved some of his goals through his speech to the House of Commons.

John Dillon’s speech and Prime Minister Asquith’s visit to Ireland significantly impacted Irish public opinion. While Asquith was en route to Dublin at dawn on Friday, May 12, General Maxwell had Seán Mac Diarmada and James Connolly executed by firing squad. Connolly’s execution was particularly gruesome; due to the gunshot wound in his lower leg and foot, he was unable to stand and face the firing squad, so he was tied to a chair and shot. This irreversibly damaged Maxwell’s reputation, and the Irish people still call him “Bloody Maxwell” to this day.¹⁹⁴ After May 12, which coincided with Asquith’s arrival in Dublin, there were no more executions in Ireland.¹⁹⁵ This did not stop the steady growth of anti-British sentiment; his visit actually contributed to the trend in four counties.¹⁹⁶ Dillon’s speech appeared in most of the major newspapers in Dublin,¹⁹⁷ other areas in Ireland,¹⁹⁸ and every other region in the United Kingdom: England,¹⁹⁹ Scotland,²⁰⁰ and Wales.²⁰¹ This allowed the Irish population to read his

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, c951.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, c959.

¹⁹⁴ Charles Duff, *Six Days to Shake an Empire* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1966), 190 and 193-94.

¹⁹⁵ Collins, *1916*, 14.

¹⁹⁶ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16*, 203-04, 207, and 215.

¹⁹⁷ *1916 Press Cuttings Part 1*, Bureau of Military History.

¹⁹⁸ “Irish Rising,” *Belfast Telegraph* (Co. Antrim, Ireland), May 12, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

¹⁹⁹ “Mr. Dillon’s Passionate Speech,” *The Globe* (London), May 11, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

words and draw their own conclusions regarding martial law and General Maxwell's authority. General Maxwell expressed concern in a letter to a colleague that Dillon's speech would cause trouble for him in the future and that he would "have to be very careful."²⁰² At the end of 1916, the Chief Secretary's Office acknowledged that Dillon's speech was a major factor in the shift of public opinion in six counties, including County Down, where Francis Sheehy Skeffington spent most of his childhood.²⁰³

The Royal Commission appointed to inquire into Francis Sheehy Skeffington's death occurred from August 23-31, 1916, and it revealed many disturbing facts previously unknown to the Irish population, further cementing public opinion against the British. While the government kept the official report short, likely in an effort to keep many of the findings from going public, the report still issued stinging condemnations of Bowen-Colthurst's behavior. For example, regarding the murder of James Coade, the report stated: "It is, of course, a delusion to suppose that a proclamation of martial law confers upon an officer any right to take human life in circumstances where this would have been unjustifiable without such a proclamation."²⁰⁴ The report also concluded that Bowen-Colthurst had no right to take Sheehy Skeffington on the raid as a hostage, and that the slayings of James Coade and the three journalists were, in fact, murder.²⁰⁵

The Dublin newspapers did an excellent job in thoroughly recording all of the witness statements, ensuring that the details left out of the official report were relayed to the Irish

²⁰⁰ "Parliament," *Aberdeen Press and Journal* (Aberdeenshire, Scotland), May 12, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

²⁰¹ "Premier Goes to Ireland," *Western Mail* (Glamorgan, Wales), May 12, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

²⁰² "Letter from Sir John Maxwell to Lord French, 16 May 1916," in *Letters 1916-1923*, <http://letters1916.maynoothuniversity.ie/item/1397>.

²⁰³ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16*, 202-04, 210, and 216-17.

²⁰⁴ *Royal Commission on the Arrest and Subsequent Treatment*, 5.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 4 and 11-12.

population. Immediately after Bowen-Colthurst shot James Coade, he encountered another civilian named Hughes, who gave the following testimony to the Royal Commission, which was in turn reported by the *Weekly Irish Times*:

[Hughes, the witness] was challenged by [Bowen-Colthurst, the officer], who presented a revolver at him. Witness was with a friend at the time. As he saw that other civilians were on the road, and thinking that something had happened, he held up his hands and said, "Not with anybody," intending to convey to the mind of the officer that he was not with the other party. The officer then pointed the revolver at witness's friend, and witness said, "He's with me." The officer then aimed straight at a man who was walking away, fired, and the man dropped. The man who fell was about twelve or fifteen yards from the officer . . . The man was not running away. He was walking.²⁰⁶

The fact that this additional murder was unreported until over four months after Francis Sheehy Skeffington's killing cast the military authorities in an even more unflattering light.

The *Freeman's Journal* placed special emphasis on the absence of Dr. Balck, who had examined the bodies before the first burial. Under a subheading titled "The Absent Doctor," the newspaper reported Hanna's legal counsel, T.M. Healy's protest in full: "[Dr. Balck] has been suddenly jerked out of Dublin . . . He would be in a position to tell you how many bullet wounds each body bore, and he would also be able to tell if in fact he declined to certify [that] Captain [Bowen-Colthurst] was insane."²⁰⁷ While the Chairman replied that Healy's request to recall Dr. Balck from Sierra Leone would be considered, Dr. Balck never returned to testify before the Royal Commission.²⁰⁸ Healy had insinuated that the government and military authorities were trying to silence certain witnesses, including Dr. Balck, who could potentially have a negative impact on public opinion. The *Freeman's Journal* gave Irish civilians full access to this information, allowing them to form their own opinions about the situation.

²⁰⁶ The *Weekly Irish Times*, *Sinn Fein Rebellion Handbook*, 221.

²⁰⁷ "Portobello Murders," *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), August 29, 1916, The British Newspaper Archive.

²⁰⁸ H. Sheehy Skeffington, *British Militarism As I Have Known It*, 26.

When the 1916 calendar year came to a close, a new Ireland was rapidly taking shape. The country was still under martial law with no clear end in sight.²⁰⁹ Recruitment for the British Army had decreased in nearly all counties and was severe in some cases.²¹⁰ Military service was one of the main ways that individuals expressed patriotism and pride in their country, so it was significant that the Irish people did not offer their services. Anti-British feeling and pro-rebel sentiments were reported in nearly all Irish counties, and some, including Captain Bowen-Colthurst and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's birthplace, County Cork, were in a constant state of unrest. Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder played an important role in the seismic shift in public opinion because it was a shocking example and reminder of British violence and brutality.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²¹⁰ Breandán Mac Giolla Choille, ed., *Intelligence Notes 1913-16*, 201-20.

Conclusion

Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder catalyzed the sudden turn in Irish public opinion against the British in the aftermath of the Easter Rising of 1916. While he was only one of approximately²¹¹ 254 civilians killed during the Easter Rising, his death stood out due to his notoriety and pacifist views. His killing also encapsulated the devastation civilians suffered as a result of the Easter Rising. The civilian death toll was higher than those of British troops, police, and rebels combined.²¹² Dublin's city center sustained enough damage that it was compared to the destruction in a city on the frontlines of the First World War (1914-18). Irish troops were still fighting for the British in the First World War, and they continued to die in disproportionately high numbers for the duration of the conflict.²¹³ To make matters worse, innocent civilians were falsely imprisoned in England alongside the rebels. When Hanna Sheehy Skeffington was on her way home from London in July 1916, she heard a group of people on the deck of another boat singing a rebel song: "It was sung by young prisoners . . . the first batch to be released. Whether they went in rebels is doubtful – probably not, for they would not have been released so soon had there been anything against them. But certain it was they had come out rebels."²¹⁴ The Irish public was no longer willing to tolerate violence, and most civilians believed the British government was the source of the problem.

The murder of Francis Sheehy Skeffington also had unforeseen consequences that affected the trajectory of twentieth-century Irish history. His killing was, according to a Judge

²¹¹ There is no definitive number, but historians agree that the civilian death toll was somewhere between 250 and 275 people.

²¹² There is no definitive rebel death toll, but historians agree that the combined death toll of rebels, police, and British soldiers was less than 225 people.

²¹³ Keith Jeffery, *1916: A Global History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2016), 97 and 246.

²¹⁴ H. Sheehy Skeffington, "Unpublished Memoirs," in *Suffragette and Sinn Féiner*, ed. Margaret Ward, 18.

Advocate, the main reason why Éamon De Valera, the last surviving battalion commander of the Easter Rising, was spared from the death sentence.²¹⁵ De Valera's survival was critical because he was one of the leaders of the Irish War of Independence (1919-21). The war lasted until Ireland was given dominion status within the United Kingdom as part of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921. The Treaty was controversial because it did not grant Ireland full independence,²¹⁶ and De Valera led the opposition forces in the Irish Civil War (1922-23), an eleven-month conflict that killed thousands of people.²¹⁷ Éamon De Valera remains a polarizing figure due to the violence that came with the Irish Civil War, but his hold on political power left a definitive mark on Irish society. After the Easter Rising of 1916, Ireland remained locked in a struggle for independence that owed at least some of its strength to the public's opposition to violence. Francis Sheehy Skeffington's murder was a powerful example of British brutality that resonated with the masses. Without his death, it is possible that the entire island of Ireland would have remained under British rule.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ James W. Taylor, *Guilty but Insane: J.C. Bowen-Colthurst: Villain or Victim?* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2016), 109-10.

²¹⁶ Ireland gained full independence from the United Kingdom in 1949.

²¹⁷ Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 420-22 and 438-43.

²¹⁸ Six Irish counties remain under direct British rule and are collectively known as Northern Ireland.

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