Trinity College Memorial Address

Owen Sheehy Skeffington (1909-1970)

Michael Cronin

Family

Owen Lancelot Sheehy Skeffington was being put to bed on the Friday of Easter Week, 1916, when the sounds of rifle shots, directed at his house, rang out. Initially, Owen and the maid ran out into the back yard but the maid decided it would safer to go back into the house. I will let the seven-year old Owen take up the story:

> After I was brought into the house by the maid, I heard a crash of glass, and then saw the soldiers with fixed bayonets climbing in through the windows...They told me to hold up my hands. They told the same thing to my mother and the maid…They pulled down all my pictures from the walls and broke a lot of my toys…and I thought for several days they were going to kill my mother and me…
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> My Daddy promised to take me to the museum as an Easter gift, and my mother was to take me to the theatre. My mother took me to the motion pictures theatre the day Daddy left for Dublin, but Daddy never took me to the museum. Daddy never came back to take me there.

‘Daddy’ was a Francis Sheehy, a radical pacifist, socialist and feminist, a one-time Registrar of the National University, and close college friend of James Joyce (he is ‘McCann’ in *Stephen Hero*). On the occasion of his marriage, in line with his feminist principles, he took his wife’s name and became known as Francis Sheehy Skeffington. On the Wednesday of Easter Week he had gone into Westmoreland Street to attempt to stop some of the widespread looting that had occurred as a result of the rebellion. As a staunch pacifist who had served time in prison the year before for his anti-conscription activities, he deplored the idea of armed insurrection. Friends who had planned to assist him in curbing the activities of the looters never showed up so he decided to return home. On his way back to Rathmines he was stopped by British Army soldiers who took him to Richmond Barracks. There, along with two journalists, he was summarily executed by order of Captain J.C Bowen Colthurst. The raid on the house was an attempt to find evidence to cover up for the crime. A fellow officer, Francis Vane, was appalled at what had happened and after initially being demoted by General Sir John Maxwell for ‘interference,’ he eventually managed to have Bowen Colthurst court-martialled. Bowen-Colthurst (at this stage, a colonel, he had been promoted) was found guilty of murder but deemed to be criminally insane at the time of the killings. He spent a year in Broadmoor Prison and was subsequently sent to Canada on ‘retired pay’ where he later became involved in local politics in Edmonton, Alberta.

‘Mammy’ was Hanna Skeffington from Kanturk in County Cork who held degrees in modern languages (BA and MA) from the Royal University, precursor of the National University. She was a deeply committed nationalist and feminist who was co-founder of the Irish Women’s Franchise League in 1908. In 1912 she was sent to jail for her suffragette activities and went on hunger strike. While in prison she was dismissed from her post teaching German in the College of Commerce in Rathmines. A founding member of Fianna

Fáil in 1926, she would break with De Valera over his decision to enter Dáil Éireann and take the oath of allegiance. Bitterly opposed to discriminatory provisions of the 1937 Constitution, Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington co-founded the Women's Social and Progressive League, a women's political party that was explicitly socialist and avowedly non-sectarian. More than a decade earlier, in 1926, she and a small group of other women had tried to disrupt the conferring of an honorary degree in the Public Theatre in Trinity on the then Taoiseach, W.T. Cosgrave., loudly singing 'Amhrán na bhFiann' when the Professor of Italian, Robert Tate, began to read the oration, before being summarily ejected from the building.

Trinity College Dublin

In the light of his family history, Owen Sheehy Skeffington's decision to enter a predominantly pro-unionist Trinity in 1927 to study French and English must have surprised more than a few. His parents, aunts and uncles had all been graduates of the Royal University (later to become the National University, University College Dublin being one of the constituent colleges). His mother when asked by friends, 'Why didn't you send Owen to Trinity, weren't you and Frank at the other,' replied crisply, 'That's why.' Owen himself joked that the only reason he wanted to go there was to continue playing cricket, in which he had excelled at Sandford Park School. As it transpired, in terms of his future career as a politician and fearless commentator on Irish social and political life, the choice of university was crucial in allowing him a freedom and an autonomy that were not readily available elsewhere. Not only would the choice of College change his life and but so also, I want to argue, was his choice of a subject, French. His mother, as we have noted was a modern languages graduate, and his father Francis, before the First World War had been the Irish correspondent for the leading French socialist newspaper under the direction of Jean Jaurès,

L'Humanité. Owen, who obtained a Junior Exhibition entrance Prize in French in 1927 and would become a Scholar, two years later in 1929 was clearly a gifted linguist but it is what it gave him access to that concerns me here.

Firstly, the Department was under the stewardship of T.B. Rudmose-Brown, who had been appointed a Professor of Romance Languages in 1909. Rudmose-Brown, a Scot was fiercely committed to intellectual freedom. In his unpublished autobiography, he declared that the 'greatest good is, for me, the greatest possible degree of individual liberty. That is why I am neither Fascist nor Communist. Imperialist nor Socialist.' In 1929, when he is recommending a graduate of the French Department to the French writer and translator, Valéry Larbaud, he is clearly projecting his own political preferences on to his former student:

> Un de mes élèves les plus intelligents, grand ennemi de l'impérialisme, du patriotisme, de toutes les Églises, Sam Beckett, se trouve en ce moment à l'École Normale Supérieure 45 rue d'Ulm, comme Lecteur d'anglais. Il voudrait beaucoup faire votre connaissance. Vous seriez gentil de lui écrire un mot pour fixer un rendez-vous. (Little 1984: 37)

Beckett would, of course, go on to teach in the Department. What Beckett shared with other appointees such as the poet Ethna MacCarthy and the Joyce collaborator Con Leventhal was an intense hostility to restrictions on freedom of expression and clericalist interference. Rudmose-Brown's public support for the democratically elected government of Spain during the Spanish Civil War and his repeated denunciations of the different expressions of European fascism, both at home and abroad, created an intellectual climate in the Department that promoted and valued Owen Sheehy Skeffington's development as a freethinker.

A second dimension to the transformative experience of an engagement with a foreign language was that it facilitated contact with a culture and a polity that operated according to a different set of norms. Difference was not just an abstraction. It could become a reality. When through previous contacts of the Sheehy family, he went to France in 1928 as a guest of the Denis family in Amiens to improve his French, he was introduced to a world steeped in the values of progressive secularism. Not only would he meet his future wife there, Andrée Denis, but he would regularly encounter people from all walks of life that were committed to the separation of church and state and enthused by a notion of distributive social justice. In her biography of her husband, Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, writes about Owen studying for his final examinations in an empty schoolroom in the French countryside:

> This plain little village school represented the fundamentals of French primary education, the fifty-year old '*école laïque*', separated from religious teaching. It gave Owen a point of comparison when, in the years to come, he became concerned with Irish primary education.

Language as a trigger to a change in regimes of attention partly informs Rudmose-Brown's enthusiastic sponsorship of extended trips to France by TCD modern languages students such as Vivian Mercier, Oisín Kelly, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Moira Georgina Scarff, Lilian Dalton and Eithne MacCarthy throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

A more structured form of exchange brings us to the third dimension of language agency, namely the establishment in 1919 of a formal link between TCD and the École Normale Supérieure in Paris—home to France's political and academic elites. Tomás Irish in his *Trinity in War and Revolution 1912-1923* sees this development as part of a wider move towards the internationalisation of higher education in the postwar period, marked also by

the College's decision that same year to recognise the award of Ph.D. degrees to facilitate research mobility. The exchange which was largely administered by the French Department brought a series of young French scholars to Dublin with their new ideas, perspectives, and contacts with emerging movements in European literary and cultural modernism. They include, in the early years, Jean Allary, Georges Pelorson (later Belmont), and Alfred Péron.

Jean Allary would go on to work with the influential journal *L'Europe nouvelle* founded by Louise Weiss in 1918 and aimed at promoting postwar reconciliation between European nations. Pelorson, before becoming deeply compromised by the Vichy regime in the second world war, was extremely active in European avant-garde circles notably through his work for *transition* (with Eugene Jolas) and a journal he launched in 1937, *Volontés*. Alfred Péron who would later collaborate with Beckett on the translation of Joyce's *Anna Livia Purabelle* set up a literary and philosophical reading group in Trinity that proved to an important conduit for new forms of thinking.

In the other direction went graduates like Samuel Beckett, Thomas MacGreevy (poet, future Director of the National Gallery and peerless cultural networker) and Owen Sheehy Skeffington. Owen had been a co-founder of the Trinity branch of the League of Nations Society in 1930. In February 1931, he represented the Irish Free State at a British and American student conference in New York on student affairs and peace. On taking up his position as *lecteur* in the ENS in October 1931, he maintained his deep interest in French and international politics. He reported back to his mother in November 1932 on a meeting of a Disarmament conference in Paris, which he addressed as a TCD delegate and which was violently broken up by the far-right groups, Croix-de-Feu, Jeunesses Patriotes and Action Française. He ended his letter: 'The French are more anti-German than ever. It was pretty rotten all round. I am convinced there will be another war within five years. It's absolutely

inevitable.' The intuition was right, even if the timing was slightly off. It was his knowledge of French that allowed him to communicate with French audiences offering a small-nation perspective on global affairs but it was equally his familiarity with the language which gave him a non-Anglocentric perspective on the course of European politics.

As a complement rather than an antidote to the political, Sheehy Skeffington became interested in the writings of the French poet and novelist Jules Romains. In 1930 as a Christmas present, he received a copy of *Les Copains* from Michel and Jacques Denis. Romains main claim to fame was his 27-volume novel cycle published between 1932 and 1948 known collectively as *Les hommes de bonne volonté*. Owen decided to do his PhD thesis on Romains' aesthetic and political philosophy, a thesis which he submitted to Trinity in November 1934 under the title, *Jules Romains, The Apostle of Unanism: A Critical Review of his Contribution to Literature*. Unlike many of his academic co-workers, Owen Sheehy Skeffington was an early fan of clarity. Indeed, what drew him to the work of the French writer was that "Romains was unfalteringly carrying on the tradition of classical French literature, in which clarity and sanity are essentials." Romains' essential preoccupation with what brought people together rather than what divided them and the power of the collective for positive transformation (core tenets of 'unanism') deeply influenced Owen. He notes that Romains felt that it is necessary to "to realise instinctively what we have in common with our fellow men, and above all to become aware of certain forces, certain pulsations which exist not in the individual soul, but in the 'soul' of the group."

These very real needs had been hijacked by the regressive collectivism of Stalinism, fascism and bellicose nationalism and needed to be understood and repurposed for humane forms of liberal democracy. For Owen, central to Romains'

vision were his knowledge of languages other than French and his broad European sympathies. As Owen writes, Romains is not "content to converse in French with the 'natives' of the countries which he visits. He speaks fluent English and German and has a sound knowledge of Spanish." He notes further, "Romains had, for several years before the war, intended to sing the future glory of Europe, the breaking of the national frontiers by the good will of several peoples. He believed with Gide that the mind knows no frontiers." And Owen quotes a line from Romains' poem, "Europe," 'L'Europe, mon pays, que j'ai voulu chanter." Thus, when we come to judge the contribution to Irish life of this outstanding graduate of the College, the modern language context—institutional, experiential and intellectual—is crucial. Knowledge of French, among other languages, both stimulated and sustained him in the difficult years of his political apprenticeship.

Politics

Owen Sheehy Skeffington took up a three-year position as lecturer in the French Department in the autumn of 1934 and was made permanent in 1936. He quickly made it clear that he would speak his mind, irrespective of the potential consequences. Responding to a student paper in French on the role of the state, he was deeply critical of France's role in the framing of the Treaty of Versailles. It was a public event and the French minister present walked out and wrote a sharp-worded letter of protest to Professor Rudmose-Brown castigating his junior colleague's insolence. By June 1936, Owen was already being identified by the journal *Ireland Today* as 'perhaps the keenest young student of foreign affairs out of Trinity' for his trenchant, public commentaries on the emergence of different fascist movements in Europe. In a period when the 'red scare' was being mobilised to silence critical voices in Irish society, his positions did not

always make him popular. Already by November 1935, the Catholic Truth Society had written an open letter to Irish newspapers asking the leading question, 'Is Trinity or its professional staff going Communist?' Threats were not always idle. Owen was a founding member and one-time Vice-President of the Secular Society established in 1933 and dedicated to 'complete freedom of thought, speech and publication, in the widest toleration compatible with orderly progress and rational conduct.' As a result of virulent articles in the press, it became more and difficult and dangerous to secure premises for meetings and the Society was eventually reduced to holding outdoor meetings in the Dublin mountains before finally being wound up.

If freedom of thought and expression was central to Owen's public advocacy, so too were economic and social justice. From 1941 to 1945, he was one of the main movers in the Pearse Street Council of Action. Then as now, predatory forms of landlordism and unreasonable rents were plaguing city dwellers on low incomes. In a way that would anticipate the actions of later bodies such as Threshold and FLAC, the Council concentrated on providing forms of administrative and legal insistence that would assist tenants in defending their rights. One case involved an unemployed man and his wife and their five children living in a basement 12 feet below ground level for which an extortionate rent was being demanded. He was a founding member of the Irish Anti-Tuberculosis League in 1942, dismayed at the unequal provision of appropriate treatment for poorer sections of the population. He had contracted tuberculosis himself in the late 1930s and was able to attend a sanatorium in Davos but knew, of course, that this possibility was available only to the few.

The advent of the Cold War brought new threats to civil liberties with increasingly aggressive uses of the Offences Against the State Act and intrusive forms of police

surveillance. In 1947, Owen and Christopher Gore-Grimes set about the creation of the Irish Association for Civil Liberty, a precursor of the Irish Council of Civil Liberties. The Association was committed to opposing all kinds of authoritarianism, irrespective of their source of origin. Owen, for example, was deeply critical of Stalinism and the operation of communist governments in Soviet satellite states. He was forced to resign from the Fabian Society in Trinity in the early 1950s when it was taken over by a pro-Stalinist faction. Equally, in the late 1960s, the pro-Maoist group, the Internationalists, published a black-framed photograph of Owen on the back page of their newspaper, *Revolutionary Alternative*, with the blazing caption, 'Wanted! For Falsifying History, Slandering Progressive Students, Promoting Imperialism.' As he himself once pointedly remarked: 'there is a tendency in this country for me to be considered a communist by everyone except the communists.'

Senator

Owen Sheehy Skeffington's election as Senator for this College between 1954 and 1961 and 1960 until his untimely death in 1970 provided him with a more formal forum for his public interventions. It would be impossible to do justice to the range of topics he covered but I want to single out three as having a deep, personal relevance to the sense and sensibility of the Trinity Senator; womens' rights, corporal punishment and the death penalty. The son of two committed feminists, Owen was a lifelong campaigner for women's rights. As an undergraduate here in Trinity he was involved in a protest in the Buttery for women's access to dining facilities and as Librarian in the Hist he spoke passionately, if unsuccessfully, on a motion advocating for women's admission to the student society. In April 1955, Owen tabled an amendment to the Local Government Bill

which would have removed the right from a local authority to dismiss a woman on marriage or take make it a condition of employment that she be either unmarried or a widow. He pointed out to the Senators present that the Proclamation of the Republic in 1916 gave women and men equal rights before the law. To no avail. The amendment was lost because not one single Senator was prepared to support it. His final comment was 'I appear to be alone.' Two other issues that he raised that year touched on women's rights. Owen argued forcefully that there should be a women's section in the Garda Síochána as it was an exclusively male force at the time. He also advocated for female representation on public bodies and advisory committees, which was virtually non-existent at the time. In neither instance, did he receive any support from the other senators in Dáil Éireann. Owen may have been isolated but nobody in the 1950s and 1960s could say that they did not know. Using evidence-based arguments, he consistently and repeatedly condemned discrimination against women and their treatment as second-class citizens and did so in the most public forum available to him.

Another group in Irish society that Owen identified as the spectacular victims of state indifference were children. In April 1955, the Schoolchildren's Protection Association published a booklet entitled *Punishment in Our Schools* which detailed brutal physical assaults on primary school children in twenty-one counties often for the most minor of misdemeanours or for simply getting their sums wrong. Owen forced a debate in the Seanad to see if the government was going to respond to what was detailed in the booklet. In his speech, he argued that the 'inculcation of fear through physical pain is the very negation of education…by example, it teaches the strong to beat the weak, and the weak to show cowardly deference and fear before the wielders

of force.' General Richard Mulcahy, somewhat tellingly a former army general who had become Minister of Education, was furious and stated, 'I am not going to be driven by any kind of public agitation like that, to go mucking back into that kind of stuff either.' A year later, the minister would move to legalize the use of the leather strap in Irish schools.

Owen not only highlighted the routine horrors of corporal punishment in Irish primary schools. He was also appalled when he became aware of the extent of institutional brutality in industrial and reformatory schools. He helped Peter Tyrrell—a survivor of Letterfrack Industrial School to which Tyrrell had been sent in 1924 at the age of eight—write his memoir, sections of which were subsequently published in *Hibernia* newspaper. Overcome by the extent of his early traumas, Tyrrell set fire to himself on Hampstead Heath in London in 1967. A year was to pass before the British police were able to finally establish his identity. They managed to do this by tracing the unburned part of a postcard in his pocket addressed to Owen.

Another instance of state practice that would attract Owen's unyielding opposition was capital punishment. A great admirer of Albert Camus and a correspondent of Arthur Koestler—both high profile opponents of the death penalty—he supported a motion proposed by another Trinity senator, Professor Bedell Stanford, to abolish the death penalty in Ireland. He invoked the memory of both of his parents in advocating for an end to state executions: 'I can say this with certainty – my father would not have wanted the death penalty to be enacted in the case of the man who killed him.' In the case of his mother, he pointed that while she was determined to get to the truth around her husband's death, she 'had no personal vindictiveness whatsoever towards the murderer, and, were she alive today, would speak very vehemently on

behalf of this motion.' The motion was lost but there were to be no further hangings in the Republic of Ireland.

In 1954, the legendary editor of *The Irish Times*, R.M. Smyllie wrote in his 'Irishman's Dairy' about Owen Sheehy Skeffington that 'throughout his adult career, since he was a schoolboy at Sandford Park, he has brought a liberal approach to every problem with which he has dealt. And he has dealt with most problems. He has made his influence felt wherever he has been…The man knows absolutely no fear.' His memory and career are still luminously relevant for us today for three reasons.

Firstly, this University stood resolutely by him over the decades and was unswerving in the defence of his academic freedom despite threats, intimidation and slurs. It is important to remember, in this context, that in one year alone, 1961, he was banned on three separate occasions from speaking to students of constituent colleges of the National University of Ireland. As Owen himself said, 'the mind unfree can set no other free.' Academic freedom remains a vital and necessary political and social good in the face of an unprecedented assault in the present moment on the critical capacity of the humanities and the academic integrity of the sciences. Secondly, Owen Sheehy Skeffington's life is testament to the many forms that academic excellence can take. His wide reading, his finely honed speaking skills, his brilliant command of logic and reason in debate and his matchless eloquence in print, were evidence of a profoundly scholarly mind that would express itself in the agora rather than the library. Our universities need to protect that capaciousness of spirit. Thirdly, in the year when we celebrate John Healy Hutchinson's far-sighted decision to establish Chairs of Modern Languages in Trinity College Dublin, we see in the life and legacy of Owen Sheehy Skeffington a

compelling example of the transformative contribution of a modern language to the life of an individual and the life of a nation.

In a lecture delivered in 1962, the great African-American writer and essayist James Baldwin asked the question, what was it that societies wanted from their artists: 'societies never know it but the war of an artist with his society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, to make freedom real.' As a lifelong pacifist, Owen Sheehy Skeffington would have quibbled with the idiom of war. But he would have surely sympathised with Baldwin's belief that societies grow into freedom through robust debate, honest critique, and through the potential of human tenderness, or as he put it in his last words to his beloved wife, Andrée, *la tendresse humaine*.