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## **Anna Haslam's contribution to the cause of women's rights in Ireland**

### **Anna Haslam (1829–1922), by Mary Cullen**

Anna Haslam was a major figure in the 19th and early 20th-century women's movement in Ireland. She was born Anna Maria Fisher into a Quaker family in Youghal, county Cork. Quakers (the Religious Society of Friends) were leaders in philanthropy and social reform, and, of all the Christian denominations, the most favourable to equality between the sexes. Anna was educated at the Quaker boarding school for girls and boys at Newtown in county Waterford and later at a Quaker school in Yorkshire.

In 1854, she married Thomas Haslam, also from a Quaker family from Mountmellick, and in 1858 they came to live in Dublin. Thomas was a committed supporter of women's rights and a co-worker with his wife throughout a long and happy marriage. His health broke down in 1866 and for forty years Anna was the breadwinner, running a fancy goods shop in Rathmines.

The 19th-century women's movement emerged in the context of the economic, political and intellectual developments of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These included: the industrial revolution and the expansion of commerce, trade, finance and the professions; the growth of the middle class in numbers and wealth and the movement of middle-class men into political office and power, while middle-class women were increasingly confined to the 'private sphere'.

Enlightenment thinking which stressed the equality of all rational human beings brought more democratic ideas to bear on the tradition of republican citizenship based on the co-operation of free autonomous citizens to create the common good

while evangelical religion emphasised the role of women as guardians of morality in the family and society.

These all interacted in the upsurge of female philanthropy which brought large numbers of middle and upper-class women outside the home to organise action for the physical and moral benefit of the less advantaged in society. It is no coincidence that the pioneering Irish women's rights campaigners came from backgrounds in philanthropy. Their driving force was the assertion that women were autonomous human persons with both the right and responsibility to direct their own lives, develop their individual potential and share in shaping the direction of society.

The Irish pioneers appear to have been virtually all middle class, Protestant in religion and unionist in politics. Ireland was part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the early women's rights activists had a close relationship with their English counterparts. They shared the same general disabilities under the common law and largely similar discrimination in education, employment, sexual double standards and political participation.

Most reforms for any part of the UK required legislation by the all-male parliament at Westminster. To many nationalists, the feminist campaigns appeared to have an English importation and so nationalist and Catholic women were more likely to be active in Catholic Emancipation, Repeal of the Union, Young Ireland, the Fenians, the Land League and Land War and the Ladies Land League.

Starting in the mid-19th century, four main feminist campaigns developed in Ireland, running more or less concurrently and all related to the overall objective. In those for married women's control of their property and for repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, action in Ireland was essentially part of an English-based campaign. In those for educational reform and the parliamentary franchise, the campaigns operated in different political contexts and were more separate.

The married women's property campaign targeted the legal right of husbands under the common law to control, use and dispose of their wives' inherited or earned wealth, the only exception being the alienation of property in land. The law drastically curtailed the power of married women of all classes to make decisions about their

own lives and encouraged the education of middle-class girls towards the acquisition of accomplishments likely to lead to advantageous marriage rather than intellectual development and economic independence.

In the case of the Contagious Diseases Acts, passed in the 1860s to regulate prostitution in areas where the army or navy was stationed, feminists opposed them on two grounds. Firstly, state regulation gave recognition, and thus implied approval, to prostitution which they saw as a threat to family life, and secondly, the acts imposed a double sexual standard which did not touch the men involved but treated the women as commodities to be, in the words of the English leader, Josephine Butler, periodically cleansed and recycled as 'clean harlots for the army and navy.'

Education was another crucial issue for developing women's self-esteem and potential and in equipping them for their role in reforming society. Here the campaign aimed to upgrade girls' secondary education so that it stressed intellectual development rather than accomplishment, and to gain entry to the universities, degrees, the higher professions and better paid employments generally.

Anna Haslam was active in all these campaigns, and saw them all as vital for women's advancement and mission. However, she is best remembered today for her work for votes for women. The parliamentary franchise was important both as a recognition of women's citizenship and as empowering them to reform society through influencing legislation.

In 1866, in anticipation of the 1867 extension of the male franchise, a petition to parliament to include women on the same terms as men in the legislation was hastily drawn up and within a fortnight gathered 1,499 women's signatures. Among the fifteen with Irish addresses was that of Anna Haslam. When the petition was not successful, organised action began. In England, the National Society for Women's Suffrage was founded in 1867 and in Ireland the Northern Ireland Society for Women's Suffrage in 1871.

In Dublin, meetings to promote suffrage were held from about 1868, with Anne Robertson of Blackrock, county Dublin, the first leading figure. Anna Haslam attended at least some of these meetings and was one of the organisers of a

meeting in Dublin in the early 1870s at which Isabella Tod, the prominent feminist leader in Belfast, spoke. In 1874, Thomas Haslam published three issues of a periodical *The Women's Advocate* which asserted women's right to the vote, and in 1876 Anna and Thomas Haslam founded the Dublin Women's Suffrage Association (DWSA), the longest-lived Irish suffrage society.

Anna Haslam was secretary of the DWSA from its inception until 1913 when she stood down and was elected life-president. She did not miss a single meeting and was clearly a driving force in the organisation. The original membership was predominantly Quaker and included both women and men, though as time passed, women increasingly outnumbered men. It worked to educate public opinion by letters to the newspapers and organising drawing room and public meetings, the latter whenever the opportunity of high-profile women speakers presented itself. Drawing room meetings aimed to influence as many 'important' people as possible.

The association maintained contact with the suffrage movement both in England and internationally and sent delegates, regularly both Haslams, to suffrage and other feminist conferences, and later to suffrage demonstrations and parades. It followed political developments in Ireland and Britain to exploit favourable opportunities to lobby in support of suffrage. It organised petitions to parliament and sent deputations and letters to Irish MPs urging them to introduce or support bills or amendments to bills to enfranchise women. It exhorted 'influential' women in different parts of Ireland to lobby their MPs. Its minutes noted with approval advances in the various feminist causes.

In 1884, women were again excluded from an act extending male suffrage, and emancipationists' efforts now switched to private members' bills. Even though these regularly drew substantial support from MPs, including the Irish Home Rule members, they never resulted in legislation. The Conservative Party, generally opposed to women's suffrage, was almost continuously in government from 1885 to 1906, allowing the leadership to use parliamentary procedures to dispose of unwelcome bills.

The DWSA, like most middle-class suffrage organisations in the United Kingdom, demanded the vote for women on the same terms as men. In the mid-19th century,

this meant on a property qualification which also excluded most men. As the property qualification was reduced by successive acts of parliament, thus extending the franchise to more categories of men, the demand for women's suffrage correspondingly extended to more women, and, as married women gained property rights, the suffragists demanded the removal of either sex or marriage bars. Socialist feminists challenged suffragists as bourgeois women looking for votes for their own class.

The number of Irish suffrage campaigners remained small throughout the 19th century, with the DWSA recording only 43 members in 1896. While no progress had yet been achieved on the parliamentary franchise, the suffragists had more success in the area of local government. The time was favourable as local government reform was on the political agenda throughout the UK. The Irish poor law system had been set up in 1838 and the boards of guardians had become an important part of the local government structure. Some of the guardians were elected by the ratepayers and it was the one area where women could vote on the same property qualification as men, while in England, women were also eligible for election as guardians.

The office of poor law guardian had obvious potential for women philanthropists as a way to share in policymaking. Anna Haslam explained Irish suffragists' slowness in acting on the issue to the fact that in Ireland, election to the boards of guardians had from the start become an arena of political contest between male nationalists and unionists.

The DWSA now organised the introduction of a private member's bill to remove disqualification 'by sex or marriage' for election or serving as a poor law guardian. The bill passed in 1896 and the association immediately wrote to the newspapers and published leaflets explaining how to register to vote and stand for election and actively encouraged qualified women to go forward as candidates. By 1900, there were nearly 100 women guardians.

There followed successful campaigning to have women included in the anticipated reorganisation of Irish local government to replace the administrative role of the grand juries in the counties. In England, women had already won the vote in

municipal elections in 1869 and in 1887, the Northern Ireland Suffrage Society had done the same for Belfast.

County councils had already been introduced in England and Scotland, and the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1898 set up elected county councils and urban and rural district councils. Women gained the franchise on the same terms as men for all these new bodies as well as eligibility for election to the urban and rural district councils. Eligibility for election to the county councils did not come until 1911.

Again the DWSA published information on what had been achieved and advice on how to avail of it. Anna Haslam saw the Local Government Act as the 'most signal political revolution that has taken place in the history of Irishwomen.' It opened unprecedented opportunities for participation in public political life, and also, and of major importance to Haslam, it would encourage more women to join the campaign for the parliamentary franchise. In anticipation of this, and to include local government in its remit, the DWSA changed its name to the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA).

By the early years of the 20th century, advances, some considerable, had been made in all the campaigns except that for the parliamentary vote, and that now became the big feminist objective. Internationally and in Ireland, the suffrage movement grew rapidly. In Ireland the expansion took place in the atmosphere of optimism and self-help that characterised the cultural and political renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Many new recruits had benefited by the earlier feminist achievements. Many were educated, some with university degrees. Many were active in the cultural revival, some were nationalists and some sympathetic to socialism and the labour movement. Catholic women became involved in greater numbers than before. New suffrage societies were founded and the IWSLGA had grown to over 700 members by 1912.

Many new suffragists came to the movement through the long-established IWSLGA. Anna Haslam, though herself unionist in sympathy, actively encouraged women of all political and religious affiliations to join. Members with well-known nationalist

sympathies included Jennie Wyse Power of the Sinn Féin executive, Mary Hayden, professor of Irish History at UCD, and the future founders of the militant Irish Women's Franchise League, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins.

As the suffrage movement grew internationally, it began to use new methods, such as large scale street demonstrations, with banners, colours and slogan. Some suffragists moved to 'militant' methods, first to forms of passive disobedience such as refusal to pay tax, then to heckling and disrupting public meetings, and finally to physical violence such as damaging public buildings. This last type of militancy emerged in Britain and Ireland where suffrage had for so long appeared within reach but never materialised. The name 'suffragette' was coined to designate these militants.

The IWSLGA took part in street marches in London but remained committed to strictly constitutional methods. Ireland's chief militant suffrage organisation, the Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL), was founded in 1908 by a group led by Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and Margaret Cousins. As Cousins recorded, they went to Anna Haslam, 'the dear old leader of the constitutional suffragists', to explain that they wanted a more 'Irish' organisation and one prepared to use militant methods if necessary. While Haslam regretted their action, they agreed to 'differ on means, though united in aims and ideals'.

As the tensions between nationalists and unionists grew with the increasing likelihood of Home Rule being implemented, the Irish suffrage societies managed to maintain unity of action. All were agreed that if Home Rule came it should include women's suffrage. When the Irish Parliamentary Party refused to commit to support for this, for fear of destabilising the Liberal government and endangering the third Home Rule bill introduced into parliament in 1912, the IWFL turned to militancy in the form of breaking windows in public buildings.

While Anna Haslam publicly expressed the IWSLGA's disapproval of these actions as detrimental to the suffrage cause, her private view was more complex. She visited Hanna Sheehy Skeffington in Mountjoy jail, explaining: *'I am not here in my official capacity, of course ... but here's some loganberry jam – I made it myself'*.

In 1913, she stepped down as secretary of the Association and was elected life-president. When the First World War began in 1914, organised suffrage activism became difficult for all the societies. The IWSLGA tried to maintain co-operation with other societies on other feminist issues, and Anna Haslam herself remained active. In 1915, she was to the fore in another project, the setting up of voluntary women police patrols, working with the police, and with the aim of keeping young girls off the streets.

This activity drew criticism from the IWFL newspaper, the *Irish Citizen*, as undermining the objective of properly paid professional women police and from the socialists as the activity of '*middle-class snobs*'. In 1918, the IWSLGA joined the IWFL, Cumann na mBan and the Irish Women Workers' Union in opposition to another government attempt to regulate prostitution under the Defence of the Realm Act of 1918.

The political scene was changing rapidly after the 1916 Rising and the reorganisation of Sinn Féin in 1917 as the party of separatist nationalists. In the general election in December 1918 after the great war had ended, Sinn Féin won the vast majority of Irish seats on an abstentionist platform and in January 1919, set up Dáil Éireann and declared an Irish republic. In this election, women in the UK voted for the first time, though on a franchise restricted to women over thirty and with a property qualification. Constance Markievicz was the first woman to be elected to the UK parliament, though as a Sinn Féin candidate she did not take her seat.

In the 1918 election, Anna Haslam finally cast her vote after more than forty years of suffrage activism. Sadly, Thomas had died in 1917 and was not there to celebrate with her. However, despite the high political tension and different political allegiances, suffragists of all political hues, unionist, Irish Parliamentary Party and Sinn Féin, gathered to cheer her and present her with a bouquet of flowers in suffrage colours. The IWSLGA now changed its name again to the Irish Women Citizens and Local Government Association to continue the work to win votes for women on the same terms as men, which would now mean universal suffrage, and to help women to fully use and avail of their new citizenship.

The following years saw the War of Independence from 1919–1921, the partition of Ireland under the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, the truce, the Treaty and the setting up of the Irish Free State in 1922. It fell to nationalist feminists to carry on the struggle with their male colleagues to ensure that women achieved full equality of citizenship in the new state. This was achieved, and Article 3 of its constitution guaranteed to every person '*without distinction of sex*' both the '*privileges and...the obligations*' of citizenship'.

Anna Haslam died in the same year of 1922. She did not live to witness the backlash against women's full citizenship in the decades following the setting up of the Irish Free State. The formal equality in the constitution did not translate into the full reality. Nor did the pioneering feminists' belief that women's votes would fundamentally change legislation and society for the better materialise. But feminist objectives and feminist action survived and continued and so did the IWSLGA.

Over the following decades, the association Haslam founded in 1876 was actively involved in feminist resistance to efforts by succeeding Irish governments to claw back a number of aspects of sex equality in areas such as liability for jury service and the introduction of a sex bar in the civil service and a marriage bar in national school teaching. In 1947, the IWSLGA merged with the newly established Irish Housewives Association (IHA). To the merger it brought its long-standing affiliation to the International Alliance of Women, a contact which led directly to the IHA's central role in the setting up of the first Council on the Status of Women in Ireland in 1970.

Anna Haslam's contribution to the development of Irish feminist activism was enormous, as was that of the suffrage association she founded. She combined strong and effective leadership with an ability to win the respect and admiration of many who disagreed with her on various issues. All descriptions of her by contemporaries note her vigour and enthusiasm throughout her extraordinarily long and active career. To this was added the quality of her contribution, her clarity of thought and expression, her long presence as an articulate and confident voice steadily and consistently asserting the self-evident validity of women's claims, and, not least, the inclusiveness of her concept of sisterhood and Irishness.

Though herself a unionist and from a Quaker background, she successfully drew nationalist, Catholic and socialist young women into the suffrage movement and retained their esteem and affection to the end. Her own association accurately summed up her life's work in its 1917 report which described her as 'one of the giants of the women's cause.'

Mary Cullen

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Mary Cullen is one of Ireland's foremost historians of women. She is the author of *Girls Don't Do Honours: Irish Women in Education in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 1987, and Editor with Maria Luddy, of *Women, Power and Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Eight Biographical Studies*, 1995, and *Female Activists; Irish Women and Change 1900-1960*, 2001.