

**MARGARET SKINNIDER,
EASTER RISING SHARPSHOOTER, TRADE
UNIONIST, FEMINIST AND EDUCATOR
BY AESHNA KUMAR**

INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of WWI, there were major labour shortages in Britain as hundreds of thousands of young men had left the country to fight. Before the war, women had been in the workforce, but mostly in the textile industry, and now they were needed to work in munitions factories. Though a woman doing what was considered “man’s work” was frowned upon, as a necessity of the war women were brought into the workforce in the thousands to pick up the slack and support the war effort: the number of women working on the railways rose from 9,000 to 50,000, the first female police officers appeared, female bus drivers, female ticket collectors, female porters. Women built ships, worked in munitions factories, and did hard labour, carrying and unloading coal. Rifle clubs were set up to teach women to shoot to defend the British Empire. One of the women who took part in these classes was twenty-two-year-old Margaret Skinnider, a maths teacher. “I kept on until I was a good marksman,” she went on to write in her autobiography. In a matter of two years, she would employ the skills she gained at the classes in a struggle against the British Empire.

“SCOTLAND IS MY HOME, BUT IRELAND MY COUNTRY.”



Margaret Skinnider in Glasgow, *c.* 1914

Margaret Skinnider was born in 1892 in Coatbridge, near Glasgow. Her father was an Irish immigrant from Tydavnet, Co. Monaghan, where she spent many summers in her youth. It was on these trips that the young Margaret was told the colonization story of Ireland. The stories of dispossession, forced emigration and rural poverty that she witnessed first-hand, inspired her future activism. Though raised in Scotland, she considered herself Irish. As an adult, she trained as a maths teacher and taught in Saint Agnes School in Lambil, Glasgow. Increasingly influenced by feminist and Irish nationalist thinking, she was a member of the Women's Social and Political Union in Scotland and a militant suffragist. In addition, she belonged to Cumann na mBan and the Irish Volunteers.

Countess Markievicz first became aware of Skinnider on a trip to Glasgow, and she invited Skinnider to Dublin in the December of 1915. Skinnider crossed the Irish Sea on a mailboat at night, carrying detonators for bombs in her hat, the wires wound around her body, underneath her coat. Arriving in Dublin, she lodged with Countess Markievicz in her home on Leinster Road. Due to her knowledge of maths and calculus, she was requested by the Countess to draw up a map of the Beggar's Barracks in case it was necessary for them to be destroyed, a task that two Irish Volunteer officers had earlier failed to complete.



Margaret Skinnider (middle) wearing men's clothes. Skinnider wrote that Countess Markievicz once dressed her in a Fianna Éireann uniform to see if she could pass for a boy. *c. 1916*

Unaware at first of even the location of the building, Skinnider was able to gauge from close inspection of the barracks that there was a powder magazine hidden within, disguised to be invisible from the street but near enough to the arrow slits in the walls to allow for ease of access. Furthermore, she let a gust of wind carry her handkerchief over the outer wall of the barracks, and when a boy climbed the wall to retrieve her lost item, she stood on tiptoes and assessed that the ground between the two walls had not been paved, which would allow the rebels to dig a hole and plant an explosive, and the resulting explosion would set off the powder magazine, blasting away the whole barracks. When Skinnider returned with her findings on the barracks, Countess Markievicz had her write them down and presented the document to James Connolly who was impressed by the plan and told her about the Rising. Fittingly as an ardent socialist, Skinnider would fight in the Rising as part of the Irish Citizen Army.

For the remaining duration of her visit to Ireland, she was involved in raids to obtain explosives and helped test dynamite that would be used during the Rising. She

returned briefly to Scotland in early 1916 and was back in Ireland by Holy Thursday, April 20.

EASTER RISING

Shortly before the Rising began at noon on Easter Monday, Skinnider was sent to scout the city for any British troop activity around the barracks, finding out that most of their officers were away watching the races at Fairyhouse. Next, she was detailed as a dispatch rider for the St. Stephen's Green Command under Commandant Michael Mallin and sent again to scout. As a woman, she was not paid much attention to by the policemen she encountered, and at noon rebels arrived to take control over the Green. A barricade was set up around the Green and two British Officers were taken prisoner. Later in the day, after Countess Markievicz took the Royal College of Surgeons, facing no resistance, the tricolour that was flown from the building was one that Skinnider brought on her bicycle from headquarters.

The day after, at four o'clock in the morning, the rebels encamped in St. Stephen's Green awoke to find that they were under fire. A company of British soldiers was moving into St. Stephen's Green South. The soldiers had taken control of the Shelbourne Hotel, located to the side of the Green, and had placed a machine gun on the roof. They had also climbed on the roof of the University Church and set up a Lewis machine gun post.

Waking up initially due to the chill, Skinnider followed the rest of her comrades to a hiding place. Deciding to abandon the Green and retreat into the College of Surgeons, Commandant Mallin sent her with a dispatch to headquarters, and as soon as she returned, she was sent away again to bring in sixteen men guarding the Leeson Bridge as reinforcements. Riding her bicycle, she took fire from soldiers, a bullet puncturing the tyre of her bicycle, but she sped on.

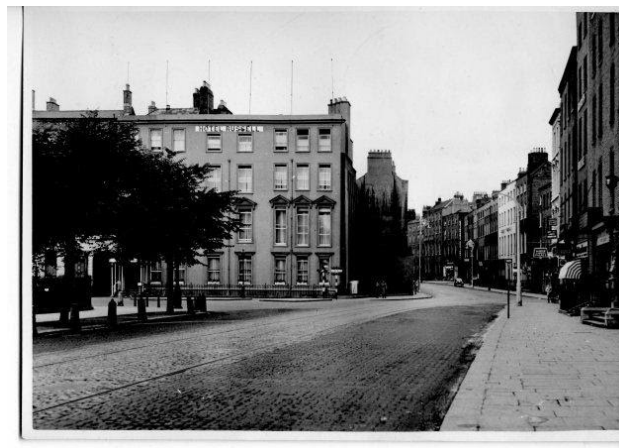
For the next few days, the regiment under Commandant Mallin, having retreated into the Royal College of Surgeons, prepared itself for a siege. Men went up on the roof to use their rifles against the British but shooting from the roof was difficult business as in the open air the men were easy targets. As a result, holes were cut under the roof so snipers could shoot without being seen. At this time, Skinnider was not permitted to shoot as she did not wear the green uniform of the Republican Army. On Wednesday, most of the regiment's time was spent sniping at the enemy. Skinnider, anxious to be of assistance, was allowed to shoot through a loophole. She later wrote: "More than once I saw the man I aimed at fall."

Later that day, after consulting a map of their surroundings, Skinnider proposed a plan to dislodge the soldiers from the roof of the Shelbourne Hotel: throw a bomb with an eight-second fuse through a bow window which, being on the farthest side to the College, was unlikely to be guarded. Commandant Mallin agreed that it was a good plan, though risky, but he was uncomfortable with the idea of allowing a woman to be involved in such a dangerous operation. Skinnider responded that the constitution of the Irish Republic

guaranteed women the same rights as men, and therefore women had the same right to risk their lives as men. Acceding to her reasoning, the Commandant told her that before the hotel could be bombed, the company of the Royal Irish Regiment in the University Church had to be dealt with, as they were cutting them off from another command with which they had to keep communication. She asked him to allow her to help with the sortie and he agreed.

The plan was as follows: Skinnider and a man by the name of William Partridge were detailed to take a group of four to the Russell Hotel on the corner of the Green and Harcourt Street. There, they would gain entry, go down the row of buildings, and set fire to two British posts. This would remove the snipers, forcing the military to withdraw, and remove this position to the enemy.

It took the section only a few moments to reach the building they were to set fire to. Exiting from the side door at the York Street entrance to the College, the group kept close to the buildings toward the bottom of Harcourt Street and came to a shop adjacent to the Russell Hotel. The shop allowed them access to the roof, from where they could begin their arson attacks on the British positions. Abandoning the cover of the buildings, they crossed the street, and Partridge smashed the glass door of the shop with the butt of his rifle. There was a flash; Skinner turned to speak to Fredy Ryan, a seventeen-year-old member of the Irish Citizen Army, when he was hit by a volley of fire and shot dead. Another volley caught Skinnider and she collapsed on the ground. Alive, but gravely wounded, Partridge carried Skinnider into the street as the rest of the section laid down cover fire. The section then retreated to the College, carrying Skinnider between them.



Margaret Skinnider was shot outside of this building during the Rising. (Royal College of Surgeons, *c.* 1916)

The plans for her to bomb the Hotel Shelbourne had to be abandoned as Skinnider was placed on a cot in the makeshift hospital and her bloody uniform was cut away. She was found to have been shot thrice, with one bullet wound only a quarter of an inch from her spine and from the size of the wounds it seemed like dum dum or expanding bullets had been used. Realising that he did not have medics qualified enough to attend to her,

Commandant Mallin ordered that she be taken to the nearest hospital, but Skinnider refused to be evacuated. Delirious with pneumonia for the next few days, she ate little but drank large quantities of water. She was the only female combatant to be injured during the Rising.

By this point, the College of Surgeons was completely cut off from the rest of the rebels. Fighting continued all around Dublin. Over 16,000 British troops were deployed, some of whom thought they were headed to France. On the morning of the 26th of April, the HMY Helga sailed up the River Liffey and shelled Liberty Hall. The fiercest bombardment was focused on the General Post Office, which served as the rebels' headquarters. Much of Sackville Street was wiped out by fire. Eventually, the rebels were forced to evacuate the GPO for Moore Street. At noon, on the sixth day of the Rising, Pearse surrendered unconditionally.

At the time that the College of Surgeons received the news of the general surrender, Commandant Mallin and Constance Markievicz were both in Skinnider's sick room. Both women urged the Commandant not to accept the surrender, however, only an hour later an ambulance arrived to take Skinnider to St. Vincent's Hospital, which was just across the Green. Commandant Mallin would later be executed by the British for his part in the Rising.

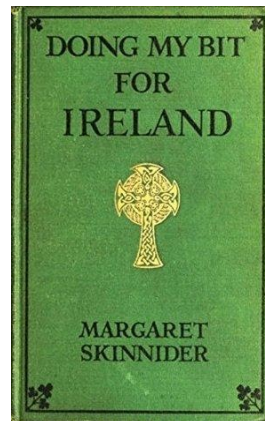
POST- RISING ACTIVITIES

Skinnider received the news of the executions while she languished in St. Vincent's and was horrified. "Why were these men not treated as prisoners of war?" she later wrote, "We had obeyed all rules of war and surrendered as formally as any army ever capitulated."

Executions occurred from May 3 to May 12. Fifteen Republicans, including all seven of the signatories of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic, were executed. The executions sparked a massive public outcry, especially that of James Connolly, who was so badly injured that he was unable to stand to face the firing squad and had to be strapped to a chair. Constance Markievicz, the only woman to be court-martialed was spared execution due to her gender and sentenced to penal servitude. The most prominent leader to be spared the death sentence was Eamon de Valera, who had been commandant at Boland's Bakery, due to his American birth.

At the end of seven weeks, Skinnider was discharged from St. Vincent's. So soon after the Rising, no one could leave Ireland for Scotland without a permit from Dublin Castle. Despite fears of being arrested, Skinnider applied for a permit in person and was miraculously granted one. On her return to Scotland, she was unable to continue working as a teacher as she'd lost her job and could not write on a blackboard due to her injuries. In December 1916, she went by boat to New York to visit her brother, and while there met Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington and Nora Connolly, both of whom were trying to raise funds. From 1917 to 1918 she toured the United States on behalf of Cumann na mBan and spoke at hundreds of rallies in support of the Republic, during which time she

published her autobiography *Doing My Bit for Ireland*, one of the earliest accounts of the Rising.



The cover of *Doing My Bit for Ireland*, published in America in 1917.

While she was away in America, the situation in Ireland changed rapidly. The widespread outrage at the executions which took place after the Easter Rising had caused a swing in public opinion, which had initially not been favourable towards the rebels, to now be firmly on their side. At the same time as the public redemption of the Rising, the Sinn Féin party, which had become associated with the Rising due to the popular misnomer referring to the Rising as the ‘Sinn Féin Rebellion’, was also gaining traction. When Lloyd George became Prime Minister in December 1916, as a show of good faith towards Ireland, he ordered the release of most of the 1,800 participants of the Rising who were still imprisoned and had not been considered important enough to be put on trial. These released prisoners returned to Ireland to cheering crowds and went on to swell the ranks of Sinn Féin and the Irish Volunteers.

The 1918 general election was a landslide for Sinn Féin, winning seventy-three seats. It was a demonstration of how dramatically the mood had changed over the past ten years. At the beginning of the decade, most nationalists were satisfied with the idea of home rule, but now nearing its end the Home Rule Party had become so marginalised that it won only six seats in the election. Following its policy of absenteeism, Sinn Féin set up its own government in the Mansion House, Dublin. The twenty-six Unionist and six Home Rule MPs ignored the invitation but all the Sinn Féin members (who were able to attend and were not in prison or on the run) came and the first Dáil convened on the 21st of January 1919. It was on this same day that the first shots were fired of the War of Independence when a group of Volunteers attacked a police convoy in Co. Tipperary.



Skinnider in the North Dublin Union, *c.* 1923

Skinnider returned to Dublin in April 1919, two months after the start of the War of Independence. She participated in the War of Independence with the Fairview branch of Cumann na mBan, organising first aid training, providing support to the dependents of imprisoned IRA members, going on raids for firearms and giving shelter to people on the run. At the war's end, she was dissatisfied by the Anglo-Irish treaty and was an active militant during the bombardment of the Four Courts, where she operated as a courier for top ranking Irregulars such as Liam Mellows and Cathal Brugha. After the death of Harry Boland, she took over his post as the quartermaster general, becoming the only woman to hold such a high rank in the IRA. On Christmas Day, 1922, Skinnider was arrested by the provisional government for being in possession of a revolver and was imprisoned in Mountjoy Jail. She and eleven other Republican women imprisoned in Mountjoy went on hunger strike to protest the deteriorating conditions in the jail and after twelve days of fasting, they were all transferred to North Dublin Union. She was released from prison in November 1923, six months after the end of the Irish Civil war.

LATER LIFE

By 1928 Skinnider returned to teaching, taking up a position at the Sisters of Charity primary school in Dublin, where she remained until her retirement in 1959. It was in the field of education where her activism and egalitarian sensibility would find new expression. She was a member of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), rising to become its president in 1956. As a member of the INTO she strove to promote the rights of female teachers against oppressive laws such as the marriage bar, which prohibited married women from teaching. During the sixth month 1946 teachers' strike, she served on the strike executive committee, then on the salaries and arbitration committee established in the aftermath. Her efforts were instrumental in securing common incremental salary scales for women and single men in 1949. Whilst president, she represented Ireland at the world conference of the Organisation of the Teaching Profession in Manila in the Philippines.



Margaret Skinnider (middle) in August 1925.

Despite the increasingly conservative bend of Irish society, especially after the revised constitution of 1937¹, Skinnider lived in Ireland until her death in 1971. The most poignant chapter of her story is when she applied for a military pension in 1925, having served in the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the Civil. During the Easter Rising, she had been mentioned in several dispatches for her bravery, was shot three times — would've been paralysed if she'd been facing a different direction — and undoubtedly had contributed as much as a single person could towards Ireland's independence. However, her pension was refused. The authorities informed her that the Military Service Pensions Act applied only to “soldiers as generally understood in the masculine sense.”

A militant suffragist and a feminist, the assurance of equal suffrage promised in the constitution of the Irish Republic had certainly been appealing to Margaret Skinnider. In her book, she wrote: “For the first time in history, indeed, a constitution had been written that incorporated the principle of equal suffrage.” The republic for which she had bled in 1916 was one that valued women, the struggle she had joined was one with women at its forefront. The country that she ended up in refused to recognise her sacrifices. It is a disservice to Skinnider's achievements that her contributions to the pursuit of an Irish Republic, her efforts to improve the lives of women, her role as a trade unionist and educator have to a large extent been overlooked in the historiography and commemorations of the decade of centenaries as well as the teaching of the Rising in Irish schools. It is my belief that it is the duty and responsibility of future historians, like myself, to challenge the established narratives surrounding events such as the Rising and to shine a light on the stories that remain untold and the contributions of figures such as Margaret Skinnider who have for too long been neglected.

¹ In April 2021, The Citizens' Assembly recommended that the constitutional clause on women's place being in the home should be replaced by a recognition of the value of care within the home and the wider community.

University College Dublin historian, Mary McAuliffe has gone a long way to redress this in her recent biography on Skinnider. She summed up the breadth of her talent and contribution to modern Ireland when interviewed on Newstalk's 'Talking History' programme in April 2020. When asked by presenter Patrick Geoghegan what Skinnider's lasting legacy might be, McAuliffe, while acknowledging her role as revolutionary activist and Trade Unionist, chose her role as Educator. "She [Skinnider] was very much concerned about education - especially children with additional and intellectual needs... she wanted them to be educated through the mainstream system, but that it had to be fit for purpose. She believed in the power of education to lift people out of poverty..." Her philosophy of inclusion resonates today, with education in Ireland already moving in that direction. She was indeed a visionary, with a deep-seated compassion and concern for those in greatest need in Irish society. I sincerely hope that my project has done justice to the life, career and legacy of Margaret Skinnider whose contribution to Irish history extends beyond that of a mere revolutionary.

Footnotes

1. In April 2021, The Citizens' Assembly recommended that the constitutional clause on women's place being in the home should be replaced by a recognition of the value of care within the home and the wider community.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barry, Michael. "The Helga and the Shelling of Liberty Hall." *The Irish Story*, The Irish Story, 24 Mar. 2016, www.theirishstory.com/2016/03/24/the-helga-and-the-shelling-of-liberty-hall/#.YThMoZNKg1J.

Geoghegan, Patrick, 2020, *Talking History*, 'Best of April Books - Part 2', 19 April 2020, Available at: <https://www.newstalk.com/podcasts/highlights-from-talking-history/best-april-books-part-two>

"Margaret Skinnider - CSO - Central Statistics Office." CSO, 15 Feb. 2017, www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-1916/1916irl/cpr/cwr/ms/

McAuliffe, Mary. "MARGARET SKINNIDER—: A LIFE AFTER REVOLUTION?" *History Ireland*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2020, pp. 38–41. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26915182. Accessed 17 Apr. 2021.

Moynihan, Mary. "Margaret Skinnider: from Maths Teacher to 1916 Sharpshooter." *RTE.ie*, RTÉ, 26 May 2020, www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2019/0515/1049649-margaret-skinnider-easter-1916-maths-sharpshooter/.

O'Brien, Paul. *Shootout: the Battle for St Stephen's Green, 1916*. New Island, 2013.

RTÉ Radio 1, 27 April 1986. "Donncha's Sunday: Women of the 1916 Rising." [Audio recording]

Retrieved from <https://1916.rte.ie/women-in-the-rising/behind-me-came-a-sound-of-a-volley-and-i-fell/>

Skinnider, Margaret. *Doing My Bit for Ireland*. The Century Company, 1917.

William White, Lawrence and Quinn, James (eds.), *1916: Portraits and Lives*. Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 2015.