

The Bullet in the Brick

Senior Cycle Lesson

The brick was sent to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in 1935, nineteen years after the murder of her husband, Francis Sheehy-Skeffington.

Look at the object, read the introduction and these answer the following.

Questions and Activities

1. What two materials are contained in this object?
2. How did the bullet end up in the brick?
3. When Hanna was sent the brick in 1935, it was accompanied by a letter from the sender outlining the circumstances in which he obtained the object. This is called an authenticating document. What is the value of such a letter to a historian?
4. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was a pacifist. What does this term mean?
5. Why was he arrested by Captain Bowen-Colthurst?
6. What decision did the army officer make on 26 April?
7. When Bowen-Colthurst was tried by a court martial, what was the outcome?
8. Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was a civilian casualty of the Rising. Conduct some online research into the scale of civilian casualties during the Rising. A good source is *The Irish Times*. This is available online and free in most schools on the Scoilnet site through the Schools Broadband Network. It is also available in public libraries.

Activity

Read this letter from “F. McL. Scannell” to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in December 1935, when he gifted the brick to her. Scannell’s letter gives us a very good insight in the manner in which Irish society regarded objects that were related to the death of a loved one. In Christian societies, symbolic objects that are associated with the deceased are often described as “memento mori”, essentially souvenirs associated with the deceased person. The Latin phrase translates into English as “remember that you must die”, reminding the living that they are mortal, and they will die someday. Scannell was superstitious, and worried whether the object might not be welcomed by Hanna. She donated the brick to the National Museum within two years.

Dear Mrs Sheehy Skeffington,

[1] The following is an account of how a half brick, in which is embedded a bullet that passed through your husband’s body, came into my possession.

[2] I always considered that you should have it, but considered it too gruesome a souvenir to offer you.

[3] After the three unfortunate victims had been murdered Bowen Colthurst made frantic efforts to wipe out all the traces of his crime which, in the shape of three sets of bullets in the wall, proclaimed to all and sundry who passed that way one of the first actions of ‘a Soldier and a Gentleman’ with which we became so familiar as the struggle went on.

[4] With that object he had several bricklayers, who were working on a large building then being built for the British Government in Dublin, were taken with their tools, in basses, a kind of soft basket without cover but having two handles for carrying them by, to Portobello Barracks.

[5] They were kept surrounded by British Soldiers with fixed bayonets, pointed at them. There were kept for a considerable time in this uncomfortable position, and then harangued at considerable length as to the consequence of divulging anything whatever of what they saw or did.

[6] They were then marched with their 'escort' to the wall where the 'executions' had been perpetrated, still surrounded by fixed bayonets. They were then instructed to remove all the bricks with bullets in them and replace them with new ones which Colthurst had already a supply awaiting.

[7] While this was being done the soldiers told them where each of the victims had stood. The spot being repaired by the man I knew was where your husband had been placed.

[8] When the work had been completed the old bricks were left in a heap, obviously for the British to destroy.

[9] The bricklayers were once again marched away and given another lecture as to what their fate would be if they breathed a word of what happened in the Barracks. They were kept surrounded by the wall of bayonets for a considerable time, evidently to ensure that their nerves were in the proper condition, before being marched to the gate where with a final caution they were sent away.

[10] It was during this last tirade of frightfulness that the man I knew noticed that a portion of a brick was in his bass. He was too frightened to say anything about it. I met him shortly after and he told me what had happened and made me promise not to give him away. He asked me what he should do with the brick as he was afraid to keep it. I told him I would take it and he gave it to me.

[11] I have kept it in my house ever since.

[12] I tried through some of the 'Boys' to get in touch with you shortly after I got it but you were then endeavouring to reach America, and I could not do so.

[13] Although I knew you were the one with the greatest right to it I could not bring myself to offer such a ghastly memento and so rake up wounds which will never be forgotten.

1. Why did Scannell take so long to present the brick to Hanna? (paragraph 2, 12, 13, 14)
2. Why did Bowen-Colthurst employ a number of bricklayers? (paragraph 3 and 4)
3. What was Bowen-Colthurst's purpose when he surrounded the bricklayers with a group of "British Soldiers with fixed bayonet"? (paragraph 5)
4. Why does Scannell place the word "executions" in quotation marks? (paragraph 5)
4. How could the writer be so certain of the spot where Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was killed? (paragraph 7)
5. How did the letter writer manage to get the brick, and to smuggle it out of the barracks? (paragraphs 8, 9, 10)
6. Nearly twenty years had passed before Scannell gave the brick to Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. What is the main reason that he gave it to her at this time? (paragraph 13)
7. What comment in the letter would have been of most comfort to Hanna?

Read the entries on Francis Sheehy-Skeffington and Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington in the *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. This website is available online and free of charge in most schools through the Schools Broadband Network. It is also available in public libraries.

How is this object associated with the Easter Rising 1916 and in what way does it make a unique contribution to our understanding of the event?

Timeline

Pre-1916	Part of wall in Portobello Barracks
1916 Rising	Arrest of Francis Sheehy Skeffington
	Execution of Francis Sheehy Skeffington (brick taken by F. McL. Scannell, author of letter)
	Family of Francis Sheehy Skeffington informed of his death two days later
	Court Martial of Captain Bowen Colthurst (found guilty but insane]
December 1935	F. McL. Scannell donates brick to Hannah Sheehy Skeffington, widow of Francis Sheehy Skeffington, and writes her a letter
1937	Francis Sheehy Skeffington donates the brick to the National Museum of Ireland.

Written by Pat Callan

