

Haslam, Anna Maria

by Patrick Maume

Haslam, Anna Maria (1829–1922), campaigner for women's rights, was born Anna Fisher at Youghal, Co. Cork, in April 1829, the sixteenth of seventeen children (there were, besides her, eight boys and eight girls) of Abraham Fisher (1783–1871), miller, philanthropist, and insurance agent, and his wife Jane (née Moor; 1789–1877), who was a Welshwoman. Members of the Fisher family had lived in Youghal since the late seventeenth century. The non-hierarchical structure of quakerism, where women played a prominent role in ministry, formed the background of many early anglophone supporters of women's rights; Anna stated that her quaker upbringing meant she always took women's equality for granted, and she formed her considerable administrative skills through participation in quaker women's meetings.

Anna was educated at the Munster provincial school, Newtown, Co. Waterford (1840–42) and at Castlegate (or the Mount) School, York (1842–5). While working as an assistant teacher at Ackworth school in Yorkshire (1847–8) she met Thomas Joseph Haslam (1825–1917), social reformer, born in Mountmellick, Queen's County, the younger son of John Haslam, artisan, and his wife Mary (née White). The Haslams' status within the quaker community was considerably lower than that of the Fishers; Mary appears to have had links with the schismatic White Quakers. Thomas Haslam was educated at the Friends' provincial school at Mountmellick (1835–40) and trained as an apprentice teacher at the Friends' school, Lisburn (1840–46) before teaching at Ackworth (1846–8). Anna and Thomas left Ackworth within a day of each other; Anna returned to Youghal, where she engaged in famine relief with her sisters and founded a local knitting industry. She also continued the family involvement in temperance, anti-slavery, and pacifist societies.

Thomas went from Ackworth to London, where he worked as a journalist and researcher; he was converted to feminism by reading Herbert Spencer. In February 1851, after a visit to Mountmellick, he was expelled from the Society of Friends for heterodoxy, the precise nature of which is unclear. In later correspondence he expressed disbelief in hell and contempt for the Athanasian creed (though it is not clear how much of its content, as distinct from its damnatory clauses, he rejected). His work also displays a general rejection of revelation and a belief in human perfectibility through the development of reason; he may have been a very liberal Christian but was probably an agnostic. Thomas's excommunication made it impossible for Anna to marry him within the Society of Friends. On 20 March 1854 they married in Cork registry office and went to live in Clonmel; as a result, Anna also was expelled from the society in August 1854. Neither ever rejoined it, but they maintained lifelong contact with Friends and were buried at the quaker burial ground at Temple Hill, Blackrock, co. Dublin.

It appears that before their marriage they decided that financial exigency made it inadvisable for them to have children, and that after the first week of married life they practised complete sexual abstinence. They appear to have believed that sexual desire should be restrained in the interests of advancing civilisation, that women were naturally chaste, and that true manliness was expressed by self-restraint and by treating women as companions rather than sex objects. Their relationship remained very close into extreme old age, and their visible mutual affection was commented upon by most who knew them in later life; Anna remarked that she was proud to bear her husband's name, and habitually addressed Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (qv) as 'Mrs Skeffington'.

By 1858 the Haslams moved to Dublin, where Thomas worked as an accountant while Anna supplemented their income by running a stationery and toy shop. In 1866 Thomas suffered a breakdown which left him unable to work; Anna now became the breadwinner, and this state of affairs continued until 1895, when she retired on the strength of a testimonial subscription from friends. In their lengthy careers as social reformers, Thomas was primarily a theoretician, Anna mainly an activist and organiser (though this characterisation should not be overemphasised – Anna was also a competent speaker). Both Haslams were members of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland from the 1860s. From 1861 Anna was active in groups promoting women's education and in 1882 she founded the Central Association of Irish Schoolmistresses and Other Ladies Interested in Education. She also practised homeopathy.

In 1865 Thomas published *The real wants of the Irish people*, advocating a reformist unionism based on disestablishment, land reform, and nondenominational education, aimed at encouraging Malthusian self-restraint. (His attribution of the great famine to plebeian lack of foresight and his complaints about the failure of the very poor to save regularly reflect a naive and patronising element in his thought.) In 1868 he published (as 'Oedipus') *The marriage problem*, advocating birth control through periodic abstinence. He corresponded with various individuals (including John Stuart Mill and Francis Newman) on this subject, which he regarded as marking an epoch in the history of civilisation; in fact, his sources had misunderstood the menstrual cycle, and the 'safe period' he specified virtually guaranteed pregnancy. In the last years of her life Anna corresponded with Marie Stopes about her husband's work and revealed that she regularly advised female acquaintances on birth control methods.

Thomas's *The duties of parents* (1872) is highly prescriptive (despite its author's childlessness), and more explicitly anti-sensualist than his earlier writings. This may reflect the Haslams' involvement in the campaign against the contagious diseases acts, which licensed and regulated prostitution. Anna served as secretary of the Dublin branch of the Ladies' National Association for the Abolition of the Government Regulation of Vice, and was subsequently a member of the London-based central executive; Thomas published *A few words on prostitution*, presenting prostitutes as

victims of seduction and desertion. After the repeal of the acts they were involved in other social purity campaigns; they were on friendly terms with W. T. Stead and Anna helped to organise Dublin women's patrols, which aimed to rescue young girls from prostitution; the patrols led to the recruitment of a few women police constables during the first world war. She was also a member of the committee of Rathmines night school, and active in the St John's Ambulance organisation, the Rathmines Literary Society, the Friends' Education Society, the Sanitary Society, the Fresh Air Society, the Irish Housewives' Association, and the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Anna signed a women's suffrage petition organised by John Stuart Mill in 1866. In 1874 Thomas produced a short-lived periodical, the *Woman's Advocate*. In 1876 Anna became secretary of the newly founded Dublin Women's Suffrage Association (DWSA), whose function was primarily educational; she held the position until 1913, when she became president. The organisation helped to secure the eligibility of women to serve as poor law guardians in 1896. Anna chose not to stand for election herself but helped to register female voters and recruit female candidates; she produced short guides for women seeking election as guardians or wishing to work within local government (1900). In 1901 the DWSA became the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association (IWSLGA). Anna also served on the committee of the National Union of Women Workers from 1897 and was its vice-president in 1907. Thomas, who had a relatively low profile in the 1880s and 1890s, re-emerged as a pro-suffrage writer and speaker early in the twentieth century with *Women's suffrage from a masculine standpoint* (1904) and *The rightful claims of women* (1906).

The Haslams became liberal unionists in 1886; Anna joined the Women's Liberal Unionist Association and served on the ladies' committee of the Irish Unionist Association; they appear to have regarded the boycott mentality as a threat to personal liberty and to have believed that social reform was likelier within the union than under a home rule state. From 1906 the IWSLGA experienced tensions between its moderate stance and the more militant views of younger members such as Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington, who resigned in protest at references to 'our colonies' in the 1906 annual report, and went on to found the militant Irish Women's Franchise League (IWFL). There was some overlap in membership between the two organisations and a degree of mutual respect: Anna Haslam expressed personal sympathy for imprisoned militants, while the IWFL's *Irish Citizen* spoke of the Haslams with esteem and provided coverage of IWSLGA activities. Nonetheless, Anna Haslam publicly criticised militant tactics as counter-productive and liable to alienate potential supporters. In 1915 Thomas Haslam delivered a lecture, 'Some last words on women's suffrage' (published as a pamphlet in 1916) advocating universal suffrage and a proportionate share for women of seats in parliament and posts in cabinet.

Thomas Haslam died in January 1917. In December 1918 Anna's first parliamentary vote (in Rathmines, for the unionist candidate, Maurice Dockrell (qv), whose wife Margaret Dockrell (qv) was an old friend and co-worker) became the focus of a suffragette celebration. Her last years were spent in reduced circumstances (probably due to the erosion of investment income by wartime inflation); she died 28 November 1922.

The Haslams are commemorated by a bench in St Stephen's Green (carved by Albert Power (qv)); the Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, has a portrait (1904) of the couple by Sarah Purser (qv). The Haslams represent a tradition of middle-class liberal unionist reformism whose contributions to later developments has been overshadowed by the triumph of populist nationalism.

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Mary Cullen, 'Anna Maria Haslam (1829–1922)', *Women, power and consciousness in 19th-century Ireland*, ed. Mary Cullen and Maria Luddy (1995); Carmel Quinlan, *Genteel revolutionaries: Anna and Thomas Haslam and the Irish women's movement* (2002); *ODNB*