

Clodagh Finn: Still a long way to go before women are heard, never mind heeded

Why do we still have such an issue with the female voice?



Mary MacSwiney, TD for Cork City, stood up in the second Dáil 100 years ago and spoke for two hours and 40 minutes to explain why she opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Picture: Getty Images
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It will be exactly 100 years on Tuesday since Mary MacSwiney, TD for Cork City, stood up in the second Dáil and spoke for two hours and 40 minutes to explain why she opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which had been signed some weeks earlier.

She made no apology for it, either.

“It is no use for you to look at your watches. Go out if you like... I care not, and apologise not, if I take more of your time than you are willing to give.”

If you have the time, seek it out online but beware of falling down a digital rabbit-hole reading the words of a woman who, during the divisive Dáil debates of a century ago, spoke with refreshing frankness against the Treaty and its implications. It doesn't matter whether you agree with her or not, you can't but admire her indomitable spirit.

You could fill this page with quotable snippets, but here are just two that capture something of her turn or phrase: “Some of you will realise what a hard and terrible fight it has been for our people to destroy the evils of shoneenism [an Irish person who adopts upper-class English airs and graces] in this country. Here under this instrument [the Treaty] you will have shoneenism rampant.”

“I love my people, every single one of them; I love the country, and I have faith in the people, but I am under no delusions about any of us. We are not a race of archangels.”

“We are not a race of archangels” — what a great line. One of many, very many in a speech crafted by a woman who was considered only in terms of her relationship to her brother, Cork mayor Terence MacSwiney, who died on hunger strike in 1920. In recent years, at least, Mary MacSwiney and her contemporaries have been recognised as activists, politicians, and agents of change in their own right.

“Women,” as Éamon de Valera once put it, “are at once the boldest and most unmanageable revolutionaries.” Though for the longest time, that was forgotten.

When, in 1983, historian Dr Margaret Ward used the phrase “unmanageable revolutionaries” as the title of her book, she was faced with the unenviable task of excavating — and that seems like the appropriate word — the contributions made by women to the formation of the State.

She wrote: “Buried somewhere in the abundant chronicles of Irish history was evidence to show that women were politically active, and they too warranted serious consideration by historians.”

Fellow historian Dr Mary McAuliffe quotes it in the introduction to an updated edition of *Unmanageable Revolutionaries*, which has just been published by Arlen House. Both women have done so much to cast a new light, indeed any light, on the women who were, to quote Dr McAuliffe, “remembered for being forgotten”.

This week, as we recall Mary MacSwiney and her contribution to the Treaty debate — all four-and-a-half hours of it, in total — we might also remember how it was received in 1921. Her words were dismissed because they were the ‘distorted’ and emotional outpourings of a grieving sister.

The five other women in the second Dáil were also discredited by some male members, who raised doubts about their mental stability.

As Dr Ward notes: “It was a tactic that was resorted to on several occasions, most notably by Alec MacCabe of Sligo, who felt, disingenuously, that there might be some excuse for Mary MacSwiney because ‘her mind and outlook were distorted by the terrible experience she has passed through’.”

You’d like to think all of that is firmly in the past, but another new book suggests otherwise. *Irish Women’s Speeches: Voices that rocked the system* by Sonja Tiernan, which will be launched tonight, begins with the words: “Men don’t like sopranos.” That is a comment former tánaiste and Labour leader Joan Burton made to journalist Olivia O’Leary, who quotes it in the foreword.

O’Leary continues: “In those four words she captured a whole wall of male prejudice that still faces women from the moment they open their mouths in public. Their voices are too high, too whiny. And, if they speak louder to overcome male heckling: Their voices are too shrill.”

What follows, though, is a glorious celebration of women’s words contained in 33 speeches that rocked the system in various ways from the 19th century to the present.

It begins with the uncompromising words of Anna Parnell — “the landlords will be beaten with a vengeance” (1881) — and takes a fascinating course through the decades charting the words of so many, from that woman of many words, Mary MacSwiney, to actor Siobhán McKenna’s impassioned anti-apartheid

speech to the UN in 1982, and Saffa Musleh’s 2016 reflection on what constitutes an Irish person.



Mamo McDonald, the

pioneering ‘born-again’ feminist. Picture: movingimages.ie

It is great to see that the late Mamo McDonald, the pioneering ‘born-again’ feminist (“I didn’t start out as a feminist but I became one”) is also included.

In 1984, she memorably observed: “In Kerry you’re better off to be a greyhound than a woman — at least that’s what I was told when researching the topic of women’s representation in Occupational Organisations.”

She was voicing her concern for women in agriculture who, she said, did not receive recognition for their work.

You would like to think that slow, steady progress has been made in that sector, although a new social media campaign run by Women in Agriculture Stakeholders Group shows that women still struggle to have their voices heard.

The same lack of progress is also painfully evident in the words spoken by Traveller activist Nan Joyce at the 10th anniversary Trócaire seminar in 1983: “You people are very concerned about the Third World. I think you should also be concerned about us; we are the fourth world. We live among rats in camps or caravans... Our children suffer from as many diseases as the children of the Third World.”

Her speech had “an extraordinary impact”, to quote a newspaper report on the seminar, yet, nearly 40 years later, Travellers are still fighting to be heard. Last week, Travellers protested outside the Dáil to highlight the lack of political will to address inequality and the mental health crisis facing their community.

The same lack of action is clear in the poignant personal speech by Elizabeth Coppin, survivor of Irish institutional abuse, and Independent TD for Galway West Catherine Connolly’s excoriating appraisal of the shortcomings of the final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

In *Irish Women’s Speeches* we have an absorbing account of women’s words at least, even if there is still a way to go before they are heard, much less heeded.

All the same, it is encouraging to see a hidden past being rendered visible at last. My single hope for the year ahead is that when we talk of women’s contributions, past and present, the adjectives ‘unseen’, ‘unheard’, or ‘unsung’ will no longer be needed to describe them.