

‘It often took courage for women to speak out, moral and physical courage’

Olivia O’Leary’s foreword to Irish Women’s Speeches: Voices That Rocked The System

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Olivia O’Leary



Mary Robinson signs the Seal of Office in December 1990 at her inauguration in Dublin Castle. It was only when she won the presidency in 1990 that it became normal that a woman would speak for Ireland. Photograph: Matt Kavanagh

“Men don’t like sopranos,” the former leader of the Labour party, Joan Burton, said to me once. 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. I come from the generation of women who were catcalled whenever they dared to stand up and speak. In my time at UCD in the ’60s, most women who spoke at the Literary and Historical Society were tolerated if they were the daughters or sisters or girlfriends of well-known men or if they were very pretty. Without either of these passports, they were shouted down. And being pretty carried its own problems, even for women lecturers. Nuala O’Faolain, then lecturing in English in UCD, almost caused a riot when she appeared on the dais wearing what was normal then for every young woman from Berlin

to San Francisco: dark tights and a mini skirt. Most women lecturers were careful to dress like secular nuns. That way they didn't upset the boys.

Indeed, it was often from behind the disguise of a nun's garb that women wielded authority and influence. By hiding under long black robes and veils everything that made them attractive as females – hair, female curves, legs – they were allowed to wield authority as matrons of large hospitals or headmistresses of schools or superiors of religious orders. They developed demure voices stripped of emotion or local accent and as such they were allowed to express opinions but not in a way that challenged the male hierarchy, either religious or political.

The assumption was that women didn't need to be heard. After all, didn't they have fathers, and husbands and brothers to speak for them? High Court Justice Tom O'Higgins said as much in 1973. Here's what happened. When housing activist Máirín de Burca was charged with obstruction after a housing protest at Leinster House, she realised she would be judged by an all-male, property-owning jury. So on the basis that one should be judged by one's peers, she took a constitutional case challenging the Irish system of all-male juries (which Senator Jenny Wyse Power had railed against in 1927 in a speech included here). Dismissing de Burca's case, Mr O'Higgins said he must assume "that the members of an all-male jury will not disregard their oaths simply because the defendant is a woman". Happily, the Supreme Court thought differently.

As a young reporter on the Nationalist and Leinster Times in the '60s and early '70s, I can count on one hand the women I heard speak in public. Almost all would have been on local authorities. One was Nancy Moore, a Newbridge councillor on Kildare County Council. Nancy was an Independent, as were many women politicians in those days. The lowly status they were given in political parties meant they fared better as lone wolves. On my rounds collecting news in Co Kildare for the Nationalist and Leinster Times, I would always call last to Nancy. We'd go to the hotel next door for a gin and tonic and then she'd give me a political read on local affairs that has rarely been bettered in 50 years in political journalism.

Still, it was only when Mary Robinson won the presidency in 1990 that it became normal that a woman would speak for Ireland. Like many Irish households during that election, ours had witnessed lots of arguments as to the merits of Mary Robinson, Austin Currie and Brian Lenihan. I voted early and met my husband later in the day. "All right, all right," he said, "I voted for her. Are you happy now?" "What's equally important, are you happy?" I asked. He was and never had any reason to change his mind. It's important that Mná na hÉireann elected Mary Robinson. What's just as important, it wasn't just Mná na hÉireann who elected Mary Robinson.

So it's from that agonisingly slow progression to two women presidents, a number of female party leaders and a gradual increase in the number of women politicians,

academics, business leaders, that we now look back at those brave and independent-minded women who spoke out in the past.

What makes this book so rich is not only the wide range of speeches but the history and context in which each is carefully placed. Everyone will have their favourites but one of mine is the speech made by the poet, feminist and social reformer, Eva Gore-Booth, in May 1916 to the London Society, entitled *Dublin in the Aftermath of the 1916 Rising*. Having first read in London that her sister, Constance Markievicz, had been killed in the Rising, Eva was relieved to find she was alive, and made her way to Dublin to visit her sister in Mountjoy Jail. Her account of that journey and of the bewildered state of people in the city after the 1916 executions is surely one of the most vivid descriptions of that time and was one of the first accounts of it given to an English audience.

There's little rhetoric here. We're conscious more of Eva's concern for her sister; for the family of the murdered Francis Sheehy Skeffington who had fought for women's rights as Eva and her sister had; for the family of executed 1916 leader and colleague of Markievicz in Stephen's Green, Michael Mallin. We're made conscious too of her desperate attempts to have revoked the death sentence imposed on Roger Casement in London. The British public saw the Rising as a treacherous blow when Britain was fighting the first World War, and Eva's speech was an attempt to change that attitude. Delivered only weeks after the Rising, it has an astonishing freshness and immediacy about it, all the more so because Eva's views are so modern, so far ahead of her time. As is so often the case with women speakers, she saw the price that families paid for war and political upheaval, the misery inflicted on mothers and children.

It often took courage for women to speak out, moral and physical courage. Look what it cost Margaret Hinchey, an Irish immigrant laundry worker, whose speech to the Equal Suffrage League in New York is quoted here. Margaret spoke out for women workers' rights and votes for women in America in the early 1900s and found herself blacklisted by every factory in New York.

Extraordinary as it may seem, the peace women of the mid-1970s in Northern Ireland, Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, were under constant threat for speaking out for peace in Northern Ireland. They were even guarded by Norwegian police when accepting the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo in 1977. It is telling that asking for peace should be regarded in some quarters as such a threat.

It takes particular courage to speak out when discrimination and a lack of education make you less confident. Traveller activist, Nan Joyce, kept it short and simple when she addressed a seminar run by the third world agency, Trócaire, in Galway in 1983. Trócaire is a Catholic agency. So Nan went straight to the point. Trócaire, she said, directed its efforts at those in the third world suffering from poverty and discrimination. How could

they call themselves Christians if they ignored the third world conditions and social discrimination suffered by Travellers in Ireland?

Nan's speech grabbed the headlines. She was giving a voice to those who were never heard in public forums. The need to hear that voice was brought home to me in an online discussion I took part in recently about the problems of getting older. After we'd complained about becoming tired and ill and pushed to the sidelines, the writer and Traveller activist, Rosaleen McDonagh, spoke up. Travellers, she said, didn't have those problems because so many of them don't live much past 60.

Didn't we know this? Well, if we did, maybe we had forgotten it and what Rosaleen had done was to widen our view, to make us appreciate that living to be old was a privilege. We needed to hear her, speaking for her community, to educate us to that fact.

The voices that have been silent are the ones we must hear. When the women quoted here broke their silence, they expanded our view of what it is to be human because they represent half the race. We may not always agree with them but without them we'll have only half the story.

This is the foreword to Irish Women's Speeches: Voices That Rocked The System (UCD Press), edited by Sonja Tiernan