

A Rich Chorus of Voices: Fascinating record of Irish women's causes and creativity

A follow-on from *Voices that Rocked the System*, Sonja Tiernan has collated an enriching oratory of *Mná na hÉireann's* influence on Irish culture, language and literature

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Recently I found myself mooching around president.ie, looking for the address Michael D Higgins gave on International Women's Day. I ended up staying for ages, dipping into his thoughts at random from the consequences of the Civil War to the National Ploughing Championships and the restoration of the wartime neutrality "Eire 6" sign in Howth.

I also read his Message for the International Week of Deaf People from 2021, in which he noted how much work remains to be done, "if we are to create a fully equal and inclusive landscape for citizens who are deaf or hard of hearing".

Irish Women's Speeches Volume II: A Rich Chorus of Voices opens with a talk given by Charlotte Stoker in 1863 to Dublin's Statistical and Social Inquiry Society. This was the first time any female associate member had addressed it. Using census data – an unusual practice at the time – she powerfully urged the establishment of state-run schools for those unable to speak or hear.

All this made me realise that speeches are more than individual pins stuck in a board, capturing voices at distinct moments in time. Rather, each one is a stake which can be used to forge connections across decades, even centuries.

This book is a sequel to last year's ground-breaking *Voices that Rocked the System*, also edited by Sonja Tiernan, the Eamon Cleary Professor of Irish Studies and co-director of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand. Containing 32 inspiring speeches from Irish women such as Countess Markievicz, Nan Joyce, Mary Robinson and Mamo McDonald, it was an anthology of rallying cries for peace, change and equality.

In this second compilation, Tiernan has chosen oratory related to arts, culture and heritage, including authors, journalists, actors, artists and cultural activists. As professor of Irish Gender History at UCC, Lindsey Earner-Byrne notes in her foreword, the selection "is both judicious and enriching, reflecting in many senses the creative process itself".

Tiernan's astute curatorial decisions create a fascinating record of both causes and voices. From Maud Gonne's public address in a Roscommon graveyard in 1901 to Brenda Fricker's acceptance of an Oscar 89 years later, they come from a vast range of sources and were originally delivered to an even wider range of audiences. Six were made outside Ireland, including the educationist Margaret (Gretta) Cousins's speech in an Indian courtroom before she was sentenced to prison. Some of the very lengthy ones have been reduced, though reference sources for the full text are also included.

There are plenty of familiar names (Veronica Guerin, Maureen O'Hara, Nuala O'Faolain, Edna O'Brien) as well as others whose work I didn't know as well. They include Irish Women's Liberation Movement founder Máirín de Burca ("I don't believe that men can write intelligently of women's oppression") and Maureen O'Carroll, the first female Irish Labour TD on whom the lead character in her son Brendan's comedy *Mrs Brown's Boys* is based.

Speaking in Dáil Éireann in 1956, O'Carroll challenged the culture of silence surrounding the adoption of Irish children in America. "I submit that not only was there something irregular about the manner of the removal of those children, but something definitely illegal."

Each entry is prefaced with a biography of its author. If you decide to read through each one first (as I initially tried to do), six or seven information-heavy pages may pass before you get to the actual speech. A couple of times, I had to skip back to the beginning to remind myself of what the topic was. But that's a small point, to do with layout rather than content.

The first speaker, Charlotte Stoker, is credited with being a significant influence on her son Bram's classic novel *Dracula*. This book closes with Lian Bell speaking at the launch of the *Waking the Feminists* archive in 2021. In recognition of this movement, she was awarded the Trinity College Philosophical Society's Bram Stoker Award – a link through time I think Charlotte would have appreciated.