

## Book review: Irish women's speeches second installment is absorbing

There is a glorious theatrical quality to Sonja Tiernan's new book, Irish Women's Speeches, Volume II, Clodagh Finn writes



Journalist and author Nuala O'Faolain, (in Dublin in 1996) is luminous and hilarious on her writing process: 'It's trickling out backwards.' Picture: Marc O'Sullivan

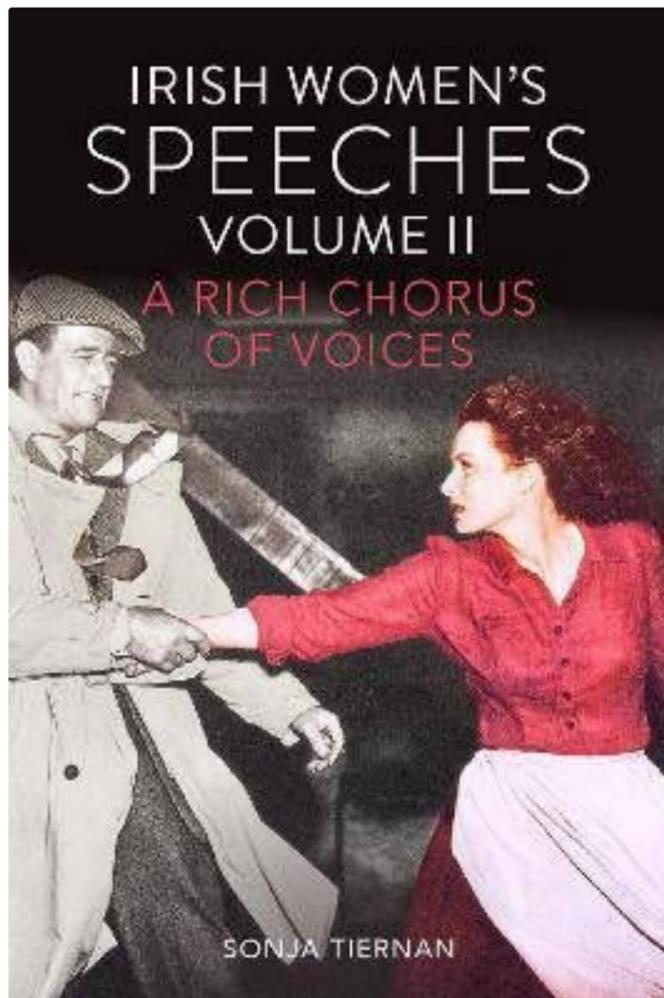
SAT, 17 DEC, 2022 - 21:01  
CLODAGH FINN



- Irish Women's Speeches, Volume II: A rich chorus of voices
- Sonja Tiernan
- UCD Press, €25

There is a glorious theatrical quality to Sonja Tiernan's new book, Irish Women's Speeches, Volume II, a collection of the speeches of 17 women who shaped the arts, culture, and heritage of Ireland from 1863 to the present day.

Tiernan introduces each entry with a short, scene-setting biography, before presenting each speaker, allowing their voices to speak their own words.



Irish Women's Speeches Volume II

It is an inspired format, the author turning compere and raising the curtain to allow her subjects stand in the spotlight centre stage.

Take Sarah Purser, that under-celebrated Irish artist, for example.

### LATEST

Enda McNulty's dos and don'ts of cup final prep  
10 minutes ago

Availability of rental properties 'at one of the lowest levels ever', survey shows  
an hour ago

Cork City has no properties available to rent to people on Hap—report  
an hour ago

O'Sullivan adapting to motherhood just in time for league tilt  
3 hours ago

FOLLOW IRISH EXAMINER



### Scene & Heard Newsletter

Music, film art, culture, books and more from Munster and beyond.....curated weekly by the Irish Examiner Arts Editor.

Sign up



Irish Examiner  
Family Notice

Book Notice

"[Purser] is not a household name," Tiernan writes, "however, it is almost certain that every day, somewhere in the world, a person looks in admiration at a stained-glass window produced through her efforts [as founder of the Dublin-based stained-glass workshop, An Túr Gloine]."

Purser's influence and importance are noted in detail, but it is the words spoken by the woman herself that speak volumes.

In one witty exchange, Purser explains her soaring popularity as a portrait artist after painting Eva and Constance (later Countess Markievicz) Gore-Booth as young girls.

"I went through the aristocracy like measles," she said.

"Then I attacked the English, and to this day you will find vestiges of the outbreak on the walls of the stately homes."

That self-deprecating humour runs through her speech — her first in public — which is so evocative that you feel you could have been a fly on the wall when An Túr Gloine (The Tower of Glass) opened its workshop in January 1903.

"The shop was quite new, and, oh, so cold! We gathered around the kiln and drank champagne out of tea cups — it didn't taste very well, and we betook ourselves to the teapot."

It is that potent mix of biography and direct speech that brings this book to vivid life.

It offers new perspectives on some well-known and lesser-known women by quoting them at length.

Indeed, the fact a second volume followed so quickly after last year's collection of 32 speeches shows that Tiernan has struck a chord.

But more than that, these volumes jolt us into recognising that women were also involved in the key movements and moments of history, making their mark on all aspects of Irish society.

In this volume, Purser (the Eamon Cleary Professor of Irish Studies and Co-Director of the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies at University of Otago, New Zealand), casts her net on the creative sphere to bring us a fascinating cross-section of artists, campaigners, writers and actors.

Culture is also interpreted broadly to include pioneers such as Labour TD Maureen O'Carroll, mother to comedian Brendan, who spoke out against the culture of silence around the illegal adoption and "export" of Irish children for adoption abroad as early as 1956.

Lydia Foy's long, hard campaign for a Gender Recognition Act, introduced in 2015, lays bare the constricting norms of our culture — and, sadly, an ongoing bitter culture war about transgender rights.

Bram Stoker's mother, Charlotte, used what might be now described as offensive language in her 1863 campaign for education and increased resources for the disabled but the essential truth of her message still resonates clearly.

Journalist and author Nuala O'Faolain is luminous and hilarious on her writing process: "It's trickling out backwards."

Another Nuala (Ní Dhomhnaill, the poet) is an endless joy: "Stories are all we have. Stories are what we tell each other to keep going, to keep alive."

I'd say the same of these absorbing speeches.

I'm looking forward to volume three.

## MORE IN THIS SECTION



[Ozzy Osbourne, Brian May and Jimmy Page lead tributes to Jeff Beck](#)

STATION TOSTATIONDAWIDBOWIE



[Tom Dunne: Station To Station with a lifelong love of music](#)



[KSI: 'At 25, I realised if I retired I would be so bored'](#)