

Irish women who rocked the patriarchal system with their words

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There has long been recognition of the power of speeches in the course of modern Irish history. Over the past two centuries, audiences have witnessed great Irish speeches made from diverse platforms, such as courtroom docks and during graveside eulogies. Numerous volumes of Irish speeches have been published, but many of these include only speeches by men. In the 21st century, volumes of speeches do include Irish women, but these are few and often the female voice appears tagged on.

For the first time, a new volume, *Irish Women's Speeches: Voices that Rocked the System*, showcases how women's speeches provide a different perspective when examining how and why Ireland has evolved over the last two centuries.

The political and social struggles experienced by Irish men since the 19th century were experienced by Irish women too. Women were particularly vocal on issues relating to the Irish land war, the struggle for independence, the plight of trade unionism, and in demands for peace. In their speeches, Irish women assessed these situations from a different perspective, often considering the implications for the most vulnerable in society. Irish women fought against deeper injustices brought about by inequalities specific to gender.

Women were excluded from full citizenship when they were denied the right to vote or to stand for government, restricted from serving on juries, discriminated against in the workplace, and excluded from equal access to education. Many women were victims of gender-related brutality, including domestic violence and being incarcerated in religious-run institutions. Women spoke out on these issues even when positioning themselves in vulnerable or dangerous situations.

It is fair to say that records of speeches made by Irish women are more challenging to source than those made by their fellow countrymen. There are numerous reasons why speeches by women seem almost obscured. If a woman had the opportunity and the inclination to speak publicly, it is less likely that her speech would have been recorded. The fact that women in Ireland were banned from standing for general election prior to the 20th century excluded female speakers from these official records.

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When women gained formal access to the political structure, female voices still often remained absent from the record. In notable debates in the Houses of the Oireachtas related directly to women's interests – such as women on juries in 1924, the introduction of the Mother and Child Scheme in 1951, and the X case in 1992 – the issues were debated entirely by male politicians. Although female politicians were at times present in such debates, issues were often corralled to include only male speakers.



Irish Women's Speeches showcases 33 speeches from over the course of the last 140 years. The earliest speech included was given by Anna Parnell on the plight of evicted tenants and the land war then ongoing in Ireland. Parnell organised the Ladies' Land League, originally an auxiliary organisation to her brother Charles Stewart Parnell's Irish National Land League. Under her leadership the Ladies' Land League became the only group actively challenging the landlord-tenant system for a time. Through her speeches, Parnell inspired women across Ireland and further afield to actively dispute unreasonable rents and oppose evictions.

Parnell proved to be an engaging and inspiring speaker, often scattering witty comments amidst difficult subject matter. At her speech in Glasgow in August 1881 she described recent evictions at Mitchelstown in Cork. Her speech was carefully structured to admonish the actions of the British authorities and to gain sympathy for evicted tenants, describing the scene at Lady Kingston's estate:

“So the police were ordered to draw their batons, and the soldiers to canter along the road terrifying and scaring out of their wits unfortunate poor old men and women who were not quick enough to get out of their way. Then the bailiffs began to smash the furniture. I don't know whether you know the orthodox way to remove a man's furniture in Ireland when he is being evicted. It is to take a crowbar and to smash the article until it is reduced to such proportions that it can be thrown out of the window, to save the trouble of carrying it downstairs.”

Parnell's speech progressively enraged her audience and they began cheering wildly when she concluded by asking them to support evicted tenants in Ireland: "Do you back them up, give them your money, and encourage them; don't give them up 'til the very last moment."

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Anna Parnell and the women of the Ladies' Land League played a vital role in the land war in Ireland, yet they did not have an entitlement to stand in general elections. Women in Ireland were partially granted this right in 1918 and from that point politically active women became even more vocal.

Six women were returned as TDs in the 1921 general election: Kathleen Clarke, Ada English, Kathleen O'Callaghan, Constance Markievicz, Margaret Pearse and Mary MacSwiney. As we approach the centenary of the Anglo-Irish Treaty it is fascinating to examine the contributions made by these women to the debates, which were held in Earlsfort Terrace from December 14th, 1921 to January 7th, 1922. All six TDs vehemently opposed the treaty but the contributions of one woman in particular are exceptional.

On December 21st, 1921, Mary MacSwiney, TD for Cork city, rose to address Dáil Éireann, delivering a momentous speech. For two hours and 40 minutes, MacSwiney outlined her objections to the Anglo-Irish Treaty with clarity and passion. She had witnessed her brother Terence die in Brixton Prison after a 74-day hunger strike and she would accept nothing less than complete independence for Ireland.



“She [England] has the military. I know that, but she cannot win this battle, for if she exterminates the men, the women will take their places; and if she exterminates the women, the children are rising fast; and if she exterminates the men, women and children of this generation, the blades of grass, dyed with their blood, will rise, like the dragons’ teeth of old, into armed men and the fight will begin in the next generation.”

On January 7th, 1922, members of Dáil Éireann voted 64 to 57 to accept the Anglo-Irish Treaty. This was a landmark in modern Irish history, which saw the establishment of the Irish Free State, which would become the Republic of Ireland in 1949. However, it was also a bitter loss as six counties in the north of Ireland were given the opportunity to opt out of the new Irish State.

The terms of the treaty embittered MacSwiney and the other female TDs, especially those whose relatives had died fighting for independence. After the vote was declared, MacSwiney delivered what was essentially the final contribution to the debates when she declared the treaty as “a betrayal, a gross betrayal”.

The partition of Ireland created an unstable political system in Northern Ireland which eventually led to the Troubles. The long and complex campaign for civil rights in Northern Ireland can be traced through the speeches of women.

Of particular note is a Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech given by Betty Williams on December 11th, 1977. The Nobel Prize was jointly awarded to two Irish women, Williams and Mairead Corrigan, in 1976. Williams and Corrigan are the only Irish women to receive a Nobel prize in any category. In her speech, Williams described the events that led the women, along with Ciarán McKeown, to establish the Community of Peace People, a grassroots movement of Catholic and Protestant campaigners for peace.

On August 10, 1976, a violent incident occurred between British troops and members of the IRA that resulted in the deaths of four young people in West Belfast. British troops shot and killed IRA member Danny Lennon and the car he had been driving swerved onto a footpath, crashing into Anne Maguire, who was walking with her four young children. Joanne (8) and Andrew (6 weeks) were killed instantly. John (2½) died in hospital the following day. Anne sustained serious brain and other injuries. She never recovered from the ordeal and the violent loss of her children.

Betty Williams witnessed the scene on her way home from work and went to Maguire's aid. This event stirred Williams to launch an intense campaign for peace. She was later joined by Anne Maguire's sister Mairead Corrigan and journalist McKeown. The group organised peace rallies and protests across the island of Ireland and many more occurred across the UK.

Within six months of establishing the peace movement, the rate of violence in Northern Ireland had decreased by an extraordinary 70 per cent. The work of Williams, Corrigan and McKeown undoubtedly contributed vastly to this decrease.



Corrigan and Williams endured many threats on their lives. When Williams gave her acceptance speech in Oslo, she and Corrigan were closely guarded by Norwegian police, and the location of the hotel where they stayed was kept secret. Williams's speech that day was passionate, coherent and inspiring.

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“For us on that little area of the globe known as Northern Ireland, we know how much we have yet to do, indeed that we will have much to do for the rest of our lives. Today, we may be receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, which has been described as ‘the highest honour any human being can receive on this earth’. Well, that may be the case, and we tremble in the awful responsibility that such an honor places on us. But even as we receive it, we think of the blood that has been spilt, and may yet be shed on that beautiful landscape, from the majestic Mourne Mountains to the Glens of Antrim, from dear old suffering Belfast to the magnificent lakes of County Fermanagh, from lovely Derry on the banks of the Foyle to the orchards of Armagh. And we know that, for us, there is still a vast amount of work to be done to make the lives of the Northern Irish people as beautiful as our landscape is green.”



The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a heightened public awareness of social reform in Ireland, with highly emotive referenda on issues relating to abortion and divorce as well as the signing of the Belfast Agreement. There are many inspiring and engaging speeches by women throughout this period. One woman may well be remembered as a particularly vocal politician who campaigned vigorously to maintain traditional values.

Alice Glenn, often described by media sources as a rebel TD, addressed the Dáil on May 14th, 1986 outlining her opposition to the introduction of divorce

legislation to Ireland. Glenn's speech attracted vast attention in advance of a referendum on the issue, mainly due to her assertion that "any woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas". Her speech was in direct opposition to the government's recommendation for a 10th amendment to the Constitution, which, if introduced, would remove the prohibition on divorce in Ireland. By the time of Glenn's speech, Ireland was the only western European country that did not have a provision for marital divorce.

Glenn was first elected in 1981 as a Fine Gael TD for Dublin Central, and she quickly became a cause of concern for taoiseach Garret FitzGerald during his campaign to liberalise laws. She voted against her party on several occasions, including against the sale of contraceptive devices in 1985, which saw her temporarily expelled from the parliamentary party. She attracted intense national media attention over these years and infamously became a focus in Christy Moore's song *Delirium Tremens*, which includes the lines, "I dreamt I was in a jacuzzi along with Alice Glenn/ 'Twas then I knew I'd never ever, ever drink again."

Much of Glenn's speech to the Dáil played on the fears felt by many married women in Ireland at that time. Her speeches undoubtedly contributed to the referendum result, which saw the introduction of divorce overwhelmingly rejected by voters, with 63 per cent against the constitutional change and only 36 per cent voting in support.

"The Constitution is to protect the family but a woman cast aside is not a family. She becomes a non-person. She loses all protection under the Constitution. The wife and the children are diminished. But the opposite happens to the male. He will have formed an alliance with somebody in the workforce who is bringing in plenty of money. That is all he is interested in. This is what has happened everywhere else and it will happen here. It occurs to me that any woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas . . . Not only will I vote against the introduction of divorce when I get to the ballot box, but I will work night and day to inform and to encourage everyone I can to do the same, to go out in throngs and say 'No' to this evil recommendation."

The most recent speech in this volume is by Catherine Connolly, given in January 2021 during Dáil statements on the release of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. The main findings of the report were leaked to the media before survivors had access to them. This error was compounded by the format in which the Government launched the report to survivors.

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Due to Covid-19 restrictions, survivors could not attend an event in person, and they were instead invited to an online webinar for the report launch. This format was worsened by the fact that survivors were advised to download the large report electronically. Connolly was conscious that many survivors may never have access to a hard copy and to make this point she held her copy of the report up during her speech to show survivors.

Connolly was particularly critical of the three male politicians in charge of releasing the report, Micheál Martin, Leo Varadkar and Roderic O'Gorman, describing them as "three unwise men".



"The spin continues as regards the way this report was undertaken. That spin came from the then taoiseach in 2017, which the current Taoiseach is continuing with today . . . The powers that be were the church, with politicians playing a subservient role. I will use the county council in Galway as an example because it jumps off the pages. It held its meetings in the home. The absence of records and the appalling mortality rate were known at the time, but the Taoiseach is saying now that we are all responsible. I am not responsible. My family is not responsible. The people I know are not responsible. Those least responsible were those put into the homes. The Taoiseach should not stand here today and expect me to listen to him with patience when he tells us that society did that. It was done by a society composed of the powerful against the powerless."

The record of Irish women's speeches provides an inspiring account of Irish women whose words continue to shake people out of apathy and enthuse new generations. It is a record of women who, as Mary Robinson noted in her presidential acceptance speech, "instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system".

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