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## **Irish Women: Uncovering Their Language of Power**

By Margaret Garry Burke

### **Introduction**

During the summer of 1989, in a quest to explore the social evolution of Irish women since the advent of the feminist movement of the 1960s, I traveled to Ireland armed with a prepared questionnaire and a tape recorder. I chose this topic as my senior thesis for a Women's Studies tutorial in which I had enrolled in order to complete my undergraduate studies. Along the way, in addition to the women I interviewed, I discovered the renowned Irish poet, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, and I unearthed my own long-buried Irish roots. When I began writing my research paper, Nuala became the natural symbol for the contemporary women of Ireland who were undergoing significant changes in attitudes. Since her poetry is so in tune with every Irish woman's experience, I saw a distinct symbiotic relationship between the poet and the women that I interviewed. Each of these women, including Nuala, was a survivor of systemic patriarchal subjugation.

As I spoke to each of my interviewees, I was struck by their ability to express themselves in an honest and open fashion. Their language was melodious and engaging and I never tired of speaking with them just as I never tired of listening to and reading Nuala's poetry. In this paper I use excerpts from my interviews and samples from Nuala's poems to demonstrate how these women have used language to describe their frustration, anger and achievements within contemporary Irish society. I also try to show how meeting these Irish women helped me to put my experience as an Irish-American housewife, who came to a revolutionary way of thinking a bit late in the game, into perspective.

### **Discovering Nuala**

"I've have always found the Irish a bit odd. They refuse to be English." So spoke Sir Winston Churchill who would have found Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill truly odd since this renowned Irish poet refuses to write in English. Rather, her language of choice is Irish, the language that touches her core; a language that best expresses her insightful poetic observations. In spite of Ni Dhomhnaill's preference to articulate her poetic voice in a language that she regards as "fallen from history,"(McGuckian) she is, in person, the most accessible of poets. As a would-be poet myself who can only write during fits of deep despair, or rare moments of ecstasy, I was delighted to discover Nuala, a living, breathing, dyed-in-the-wool primary source at a poetry reading in Ireland in 1989. That summer I was taking a course in Irish Culture and Society at University College Dublin. In addition to the class, I was conducting research concerning Irish women for a Women's Studies tutorial back in New York. One evening, the Irish Studies class was invited to hear two of Ireland's brilliant women poets, Eavan Boland and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. I admired Eavan and her work, but I was drawn to Nuala because she seemed exotic. Actually, when you are a late-blooming undergraduate from Long Island who is studying in a foreign country, almost everything seems exotic. Even the lowly scone in the UCD cafeteria smacked of haute cuisine. But to me Nuala was truly exotic.

Her poetry delves into folklore, the otherworld, and the dream world. And the fact that she writes her evocative poetry in Irish adds to this sense of the mystical, setting her apart from her contemporaries.

Nuala was born in Lancashire, England in 1952 to Irish parents, and, at the age of five, she was “fostered out” to an aunt in County Kerry, center of the Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking region of Ireland), so that she could learn Irish (Haberstroh, “My” 49). Her assimilation into this provincial area was not easy. There was the language problem that made her feel like an outsider. Perhaps her penchant for writing in Irish stems from a childhood of feeling marginalized as the “little English girl” among the Irish-speaking inhabitants of the remote West Coast village of Dingle. Nuala observed, “...that nobody could understand my Souse English anymore than I could understand their Kerry accents.” (Haberstroh, “My” 49). Therefore, one could hypothesize that she is overcompensating because of her own sense of marginalization and, consequently, she is taking on the responsibility of preserving the language and culture in a country fiercely caught up in globalization. At the same time, her connection to the language could be her unconscious stab at reinforcing her own Irish identity. “Night Fishing” published in her book, *Pharaoh’s Daughter*, (45) might speak to that issue:

It’s high time I took myself  
Up the throat of the sea, under the cliff,  
One hand feeling the growth  
Of seaweed on massive rocks  
The other a freebooter  
Out to land a fish

There’s a strange girl in my company  
Speaks with a fine English accent.  
“You there with the book learning,”  
Puts in my aunt from the other side,  
“The like of you ought to be able to follow her.”

“Sometimes,” I answer, “sometimes  
I can understand, but mostly  
There’s nothing there but as if you heard  
the sigh of some bedraggled snow  
Untidily fall from the sky.”

(Translated by Medbh McGuckian)

She began to write poetry in Irish when she was sixteen. Nuala states in her 1995 *New York Times Book Review* essay that her first literary love affair was with the Munster poets. It was from these Irish-speaking, West-of Ireland poets that Nuala “...had learned reams and reams of poetry that wasn’t taught in school. When I myself came to write, it didn’t dawn on me that I could possibly write in Irish.” But she decided, “Writing Irish poetry in English suddenly seemed a very stupid thing to be doing.” Nuala added further that, “I had chosen my language, or more rightly, perhaps, at some very deep level the language had chosen me” (27-28). In an essay in the *Southern Review*, Nuala remarked,

“One of the things that causes me to get up in the morning is the desire to take Irish back from that grey-faced Irish revivalist male preserve” (McGuckian). With nine well-received volumes of poetry in the Irish language, and numerous editions in translations, it appears that she has succeeded; she has crossed the creaky threshold into the previously male-dominated province of Irish poets. Her contemporaries, Irish poets including Meabh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney and Michael Hartnett, have translated Nuala’s poems into English. While it is certain that the translators attempt to capture the tensions and nuances of her work, there must be some loss in the translation. However, this loss is balanced by the fact that the translations extend her audience, and in doing so, have encouraged a much wider awareness of Irish poetry (Haberstroh, “Women” 162). Whether we read her in Irish or English, in the original or mediated by a translator, the energy of her psychic landscape comes through vigorously, to express an Ireland tied to the past, set in the present, and heading to the future (Haberstroh, “Women” 195).

During the reading in 1989, her affinity for Irish was very evident. Nuala delivered her poetry in Irish, and, in spite of the fact that most people in the room, including me, were not familiar with the language, everyone seemed intrigued by its enigmatic quality. I had a vague familiarity with Irish. As a child, I would hear my father, who was born in the West of Ireland, joking occasionally with my uncles in the language. He was not fluent, but, through him, I had this sort of primordial attachment to the language that further established the intimate connection I felt to the poet. Actually Nuala is very aware that Irish touches the core of Irish-Americans. She states, “One of the reasons for writing in Irish is to gauge the reactions of those with Irish descent. I particularly like it when my poetry in English translation sends them back to the originals in Irish, and when they then go on to pick up the long lost threads of the language that is so rightly theirs.” (Federspiel 2000 Para 8) At this first meeting, Nuala was abundantly pregnant with her fourth child, her luxurious red hair flowing about her shoulders. She had the air of an impudent Irish Madonna. I admired her spunky, outspoken manner and I presumptuously felt that we were kindred spirits. Nuala spoke openly about her personal life, and we learned that she was a rebel. Something I hankered to be. I *was* trying and succeeding in a limited sense. I had, after all, left my husband and two children behind in New York while I pursued my studies in Ireland; but Nuala had rebelled on a grand scale. She backed out of her sheltered West-of-Ireland upbringing early on, and ran off with a Turk to live with him in his native land. Where was I at that tender age of nineteen? Hardly in a far-off land, writing poetry inspired by a handsome Turk. As a first generation Irish-Catholic, I was busy following the rules. I allowed the sexual revolution to pass me by; and instead of chanting my mantra and visiting the Dalai Lama in Tibet, or wearing flowers in my hair at Woodstock, I was changing diapers in the suburbs. I hadn’t even heard of Betty Friedan. But Nuala had no need of her. She had her muse. She had thrust herself into the second wave of feminism in Ireland which has been popularly located in the 1960s and 1970s (O’Connor 72) This wave of Irish women seemed to be saying, “I don’t give a damn about the rules. I’m going to do it my way.”

## My Interviewees

During that summer, I came to know some members of that vanguard of women well since I had arranged to interview seven women in connection with the paper I was writing for my Women's Studies class. I was researching the change in Irish women's attitudes and the evolution in Irish society over the past twenty years. The seven women whom I interviewed represented a cross section of middle-class urban Irish females. They were all of the same generation, between 40 and 50 years old, whose attitudes would have been most affected by social changes in Ireland, unlike younger women born in the 1960s and 1970s who take for granted the present Irish social mores. They came from the same generation as Nuala and one could imagine that they shared many common experiences in a country that had spent so much energy trying to keep women in their place. Nuala seemed to me to be the ideal voice for these women, a role that she may play unwittingly and reluctantly since at a reception, she once mused about the women in attendance:

“The question I ask myself is how these women, who are about my own age, give or take a few years, -- definitely we could be considered the same generation – and like me grew up in Ireland about the same time, how on earth could we be so totally different?” (Haberstroh, “My” 56).

Nuala's protestations to the contrary, her work in translation opens up a new perspective on the Irish woman, introducing a revolutionary image of the female to contemporary poetry (Haberstroh, “Women” 162). In her writing, Nuala deals with the ordinary concerns of womanhood, transforming the quotidian into the extraordinary. She demonstrates the poet's capacity to depict everyday suffering in a sublime and seductive manner. Her work relates distinctly to the modern Irish woman's dilemmas and raptures and it was clear to me that Nuala and my interviewees were kindred spirits and shared a revolutionary nature. My seven women did not speak with a poet's voice, but there was a strength and truth in their opinions and language. And, like Nuala, these women have fought to be heard after years of subjugation. The women had varying backgrounds which I purposefully sought. Included in my survey were a nun, a Protestant teacher, a librarian who was a lesbian and a radical feminist, a Jewish restaurant owner, a widow, a working mother who gave birth to her first child at the age of 44, and the conservative wife of a prominent lawyer. In spite of their divergent lifestyles, each of them told me of their fight against a patriarchal church and a government that wouldn't allow divorce, birth control, abortion, or, until 1973, work outside of the home after marriage. Until that year, there had actually been an amendment embedded in the Irish Constitution known as “the marriage bar” that kept married women confined to the home. As an American, I couldn't conceive of that notion.

While I interviewed these women, I was struck by their facility with language. Collectively, the women were exceptionally articulate with colorful jargon specific to the Irish culture. There were never any pauses or dead air. They each spoke frankly and with dignity, and they pulled no punches. It occurred to me that the pleasant Irish manner was in direct contrast to the unwelcoming weather and wondered if there were some sort

of inexplicable connection. It was also evident that these women had learned how to negotiate within a system that had been constructed over generations by males. Their responses were quick and almost poetic in nature, flowing rhythmically, and arriving succinctly at the heart of the matter. To protect the women's privacy, I've changed their names.

Ann, a woman who first became pregnant when she was 44, had a difficult time finding pre-natal counseling in Dublin. Because of the risks involved in pregnancies at a later age, Ann and her husband decided to go to Northern Ireland where she could have an amniocentesis test and where she could find counseling just in case she decided to have an abortion (which would also have had to be performed in Northern Ireland). She talked about her experience:

“You could get the test done here, but that's as far as it would go.  
So, in my instance, what we did is we went to Northern Ireland.  
It was important for me to meet the medical team that would follow  
up for me so that I wouldn't be meeting them red raw. So that if I met  
them two months later, I'd know them.”

It was obvious to me, although Ann never really made this point absolutely clear, that she would have gone ahead with an abortion if there were problems with the fetus. Happily for her and her husband she didn't have to make that choice. She gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Ann continued to work after the birth of her daughter. I asked why she chose to work and not stay at home. She answered:

“I think that housework, on a day-day-basis, is very soul destroying.  
There's not much achievement. It's necessary for me to be involved  
and out meeting other people, and I don't mean just in the evening.  
Having a career gives you a charge that's better than a tonic.”

I was a bit bowled over during my interview with Sister Deirdre, 42, a Dominican nun from Limerick, who was studying in Dublin. At first, she was reluctant to be interviewed and it took a little persuading on my part to have her participate. In her tiny cell-like room, Sister Deirdre whispered in a reserved manner so I expected predictable, conservative responses. However, when I asked about her stand on abortion, she answered:

“Each circumstance has to be taken into account. You  
couldn't make a blanket statement on that. Each person  
is a totally different story.”

Like the other women, she proved to be a revolutionary. For many nuns like Sister Deirdre the question of leaving the church does not arise. They see no apparent contradiction in combining radical feminism with a radical approach to Christianity (O'Connor, 101). It is important to remember that Vatican II played an enormous role in bringing about a sea change within the Catholic Church throughout the world. Some members of the Irish hierarchy embraced the ecumenical movement of this Council in the 1970s (O'Connor, 91), opening the door for priests and nuns to start questioning and

expressing an independence of thought that is reflected in Sister Deirdre's response.

Moira, the feminist librarian, spoke about her frustration with her career. She mentioned that, even though librarianship is primarily a woman's profession, "the men always rise to the top." As early as 1979, Mary Daly a renowned radical feminist philosopher, called for "new working relationships between men and women as peers, and as managers (Daly, 116). This point would have added significance in so-called "women's professions."

In speaking about female liberation from household chores, I asked if she thought that men were getting involved a bit more. Moira answered cynically, "I think they are. But I always think that equality boils down to who actually cleans the loo." I also asked her if the feminist movement had a positive impact on her life. She replied:

"Of course, it's had a positive effect on my life, on every Irish woman's life. Yes, it has. I think that life in this country changed dramatically. I am forty and have lived through social revolutions in this country, and I'm not that old. Okay, so male attitudes may still be very much the same, and, as a single woman, of course, I would be regarded as a social leper. But to me my feminism cushions me, and gives me a dignity for me, myself and I."

Moira's comments prompted me to re-read Nuala's 1988 poem, "Medh Speaks" from her book, *The Astrakhan Cloak* (111). In this poem Nuala demonstrates her commitment to feminist issues and the struggle against female oppression:

War I declare from now  
on all the men of Ireland  
on all the corner-boys  
lying in children's cradles  
their willies worthless  
wanting no woman  
all macho boasting  
last night they bedded  
a Grecian princess  
a terrible war I will declare

I will make incursions  
through the fertile land of Ireland  
my battalions all in arms  
my amazons beside me  
(not just to steal a bull  
not over beasts this battle—  
but for an honour price—  
a thousand times more precious—  
my dignity)  
I will make fierce incursions.

(Translated by Michael Hartnett)

Nora, a widow with three children, was involved in an affair with a married man who was separated from his wife. Under Irish law, he could not get a divorce and the Catholic Church made its opposition to any relaxation in the constitutional ban on divorce very clear, claiming that allowing divorce would undermine the traditional Irish family (Bayes, 95). Thus Nora, and her lover, like so many other couples in Ireland, were controlled by the Church and the State, and were forbidden to make their union legal. Nonetheless, Nora felt that she had the right, despite patriarchal opposition, to a sexual liaison with the man she loved. She spoke of her feelings about women's sexuality:

“I feel women have rights also, provided that it is a relationship. Women have as much right to their feelings and their sexual awareness and fulfillment as men.”

Nora is representative of the modern Irish woman who is reclaiming her sexual freedom. Ireland has historically been perceived as a prudish country where women tolerate the sexual act solely for procreation. To counter this belief, Ni Dhomhnaill frequently uses images of ancient females and their modern counterparts who delight in their sexuality (Haberstroh, “Women” 176). Nuala was once asked if there was a word for sex in Irish. She wrote: “I was so dumbfounded I was unable to answer in proper time-tested Kerry fashion by asking, “Is there an Eskimo word for snow?” (Haberstroh, “My” 56).

The Catholic Church's edict against the use of birth control compounded female repression. Enormous families of ten or more children often tied women down. Julia, 50, the wife of a prominent lawyer and the most conservative of the women, spoke about the effect of the Church's restrictive birth control rules on her marriage. She replied:

“Well, they don't have any importance now, but earlier on we were very restricted by our religion. We did suffer as a result of them. But things have changed now.”

That answer, coming from a very conservative woman, indicated to me that Irish women were becoming free and, at long last, were thinking and speaking defiantly. Additionally, “the marriage bar” had a significant effect upon Julia's life. Julia spoke of her experience:

“The problem was I was working for a semi-state body and in those days you weren't allowed to work if you were married. So I had to give it up. But I didn't like staying at home so, since I had my degree in social sciences, I offered my services to a clinic for mildly handicapped children.”

Julia struggled to maintain some contact outside the home but it was difficult to battle against the Irish Constitution that reinforced a role for women as envisioned by nationalist leaders and church authorities -- as passive caretakers, homemakers, and economic dependants (O'Connor, 90).

The above responses are merely a sampling of the compelling narratives related to me by my interviewees. After listening to these accounts of their struggle for equality, I chose Nuala as their voice and I began my research paper with a verse from one her



poems included in her collection, *Selected Poems: Rogha Danta* (15). This poem flippantly mocks the pervasive patriarchal Irish society.

We are damned, my sisters,  
we who accepted the priests' challenge  
our kindred's challenge: who ate from destiny's dish  
who have knowledge of good and evil  
who are no longer concerned.  
We spent nights in Eden's fields  
eating apples, gooseberries; roses  
behind our ears, singing songs  
around the gipsy bon-fires  
drinking and romping with sailors and robbers:  
and so we are damned, my sisters.  
(Translated by Michael Hartnett)

### **Discovering Myself**

Flying home to New York, I guarded my taped interviews knowing that I had valuable primary source material to weave into my research paper. And on a personal level, at last, I acknowledged and accepted my heritage—a heritage that I had denied and cast off for most of my life. I always wondered what people meant when they spoke about finding their “roots.” Now I understood. Typical of first-generation Americans, I had done my share of denying my ancestry. I was embarrassed by my perceptions of Ireland that had been drawn from tedious images of shamrocks, pubs, and the ubiquitous Irish sot. Never had I expected that Ireland would be so oddly enchanting, or that I would encounter sophisticated, thoughtful and articulate people such as the women I interviewed, and Nuala.

Until this trip, my only other visit to Ireland had been during the summer when I was sixteen. At that time, my main interest was the cinema on O'Connell Street in Dublin where I would drown myself in American movies, followed by a trip to the formal tearoom on the second floor of the theater where high tea was served every afternoon. In the midst of this ancient city, I was oblivious to the remarkable traditions and history surrounding me. I was staying with my aunt in Drimnagh, a grim working-class suburb north of Dublin. Rows of attached grey houses were surrounded by tiny gardens where flowers peeked through to spite the constantly overcast skies. Each Sunday we would drive to County Meath to visit my maternal grandmother who lived on the family's dairy farm where there was no electricity or running water. As an American reared with every conceivable comfort, including television, my introduction to farm life was disappointing and unappealing. Following my grandmother's death, and my aunt's emigration to the United States, I never had a desire to go back to Ireland. When this opportunity to study in Ireland presented itself, I decided to return. As part of my class, excursions were offered. Through these trips, I was introduced to historic locations in County Meath: the Hill of Tara, an ancient site that was home to kings; and Slane Castle, a structure originally built by Norman conquerors that is located on the River Boyne, the momentous setting for the “Battle of the Boyne” in 1690. These historical landmarks were within

minutes of my grandmother's home. As a teenager, I had no interest; as an adult I was fascinated and pleased to finally locate myself among my ancestors.

### **Re-discovering Nuala**

In the spring of 1999, Nuala came to New York. Almost ten years to the day that I first encountered her in Ireland I had the chance to revisit my old friend. It was one of those late spring evenings when Manhattan glistened with a special radiance; the evening sun was bouncing off Washington Square arch. People were gathering in Ireland House, a fairly recent addition to the New York University campus. Throughout the room, I could hear murmuring in Irish, that queer-sounding tongue; and there was a palpable eagerness as we all awaited Nuala's entrance. I looked to my left and observed her descending a staircase, and the first thing I noticed was that her sumptuous red hair had faded to a sepia color, having lost its brilliant luster. And she did not smile as spontaneously as she had ten years ago. There was a world weariness in her manner. Nonetheless, she still possessed that same forthright manner and willingness to share some of the more intimate details of her life. She was going to read from her latest book, *Cead Aighnis*, her only collection of poems published since 1994. We were soon to learn why there had been such a long, barren period.

She began speaking in that self-possessed manner I remembered so well. Nuala told us that over the past few years, "My mother had gone demented and my husband had a devastating stroke." As a result of this stress, she suffered a nervous breakdown and could not write for almost three years. As part of her recovery process, her doctors prescribed Prozac. This anti-depressant medication left her "flat." These "flat lines" killed her creative process, but, at the same time, she said, "The medication saved my life." In truth, life had treated her harshly in the intervening years; and Nuala was not philosophical about the nightmare she had gone through.

She remarked, "I don't believe that suffering is good for the soul, and I see nothing positive in it. How do you hold the pain without turning into something less than human?"

Ironically, Nuala wrote in her *New York Times* essay, "...that you don't have to have a raving psychotic breakdown to enter the 'otherworld'"(27). However her "otherworld" may possibly have provided her with an escape hatch from the throbbing pain of real life. Poets who look to their emotional life for inspiration are often the victims of mental illness. Her friend and colleague, Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, suffered a serious breakdown after the birth of her first child. She and Nuala discussed their experiences in an interview given to Laura O'Connor. Medbh was told by her doctor to never again write poetry because it was thought that had brought on her illness. Nuala offered her opinion: "I mean the only thing that cures it is the poetry. The only thing that keeps us alive is the poetry."(McGuckian) So Nuala resides in that dangerous territory reserved for the gifted. Some of her personal anguish is hinted at in a poem published in 1991.

There's a crack in the flight of stairs  
at my very core  
that I simply can't get round or traverse.  
for days on end, I can do little more

than rummage and root  
through the gloom  
of the cellar, or try out  
the dusty furniture I trundle from room

to lower room: there's a rose withered  
in its pot; a china dog slumped  
on the mantel: an oleograph of the Sacred Heart  
and before it, a paraffin lamp

that's long since snuffed it. The drapes  
have been shredded by moths, as well  
as the nightly phantom-troop  
who leave a familiar, all-pervasive smell.

The piano is under lock and key  
and the lock is hard  
with rust, while I myself cannot break free  
of what's eating away at my heart.

Other days, though, I'm so full of vrouw-vroom  
I'll take the flight  
of stairs with a single bound, into some upper room  
where I'm blinded, blinded by the light. (Astrakhan Cloak 35)

I sat in my chair remembering the glowing woman I had witnessed in Dublin and realized that none of us are free from life's pressures. And all of us -- poet or housewife, rebel or conformist -- will suffer eventually from broken hearts. Nuala's revelations, brought to mind that over the last decade I had lost my Mother, several dear friends, and that I, too, had experienced my share of both professional and personal disillusionment.

Fortunately for me, I hadn't gone "flat." Ironically, my "flat" period had occurred earlier in my life during the time when Nuala flourished. More recently, I worked feverishly to reclaim lost time and negotiated my way through two degrees finding a professional position as an academic librarian. Nuala appears to have banished some of her demons and is now looking at things a bit more realistically. Wryly, she observed, "I've given up looking for the perfect man. He doesn't exist." A poem she published in 1986 may have presaged her present feelings about relationships.

I cannot lie here anymore  
in your aroma  
with your pillowed mouth  
asnore.  
Your idle hand  
across my hip  
not really caring  
whether I exist.

(Selected Poems 25)

Nuala does exist and in place of "the perfect man," she said, "I am now seeking the perfect reader." She is healthy and optimistic and back to a full workload. In 1999 she spent a semester as a visiting scholar at Boston College where she assisted their Burns Library in organizing her papers for a permanent exhibition of her work. In addition, she taught at Villanova College during the spring 2001 semester and she has definitely returned from the "flatlands." She stands tall as a reflection of strong women who pick themselves up and go on with their lives in spite of significant emotional setbacks and disappointments.

After the poetry reading, there was a reception where I had a chance to speak with Nuala. I told her that I had first seen her in Ireland ten years ago at another poetry reading while she was pregnant with her last child. She told me matter-of-factly that she had almost died giving birth to that little girl. I acknowledged that she'd had a rough time of it since then. Nuala smiled, raked her hand through her long hair, and responded in her beautiful Irish accent:

"I've had some bad times. I hope they're done with. I'm writing well now. I know that because, when I'm inspired, I feel like I'm wired to the moon."

I wished her luck, shook her hand and, as I walked through Washington Square Park, I caught a glimpse of the moon and wondered how the events of the next decade would reshape Nuala and me.

### **Conclusion**

In addition to the changes in Nuala's life, the sociological face of Ireland has changed over the past thirty years. Since the early 1970s, different wage scales for men and women have been abolished; the "marriage bar" has been lifted; inequalities based on gender have been substantially eliminated from the social welfare system; legal entitlement to maternity leave has been established; and divorce has been introduced. (O'Connor 1). The proportion of women in administrative, executive and managerial occupation in Ireland has increased. In 1971 women constituted 5 per cent of those in such occupation as compared with 24 per cent in 1996 (O'Connor 218). The sale of contraceptive devices previously banned in the country is now legal. Mary Robinson, an ardent feminist, was elected as the first female president in 1994. However, there is still a long way to go. The participation of Irish married women in the labour force; although it has increased dramatically over the past twenty years is still lower than the European average (O'Connor 1).

In March 2002, the Irish electorate voted down a referendum that was meant to apply even stricter sanctions on abortion, however, despite this victory, Irish women still have to travel outside of the country to have an abortion. Nonetheless the Ireland that I visited in 1989 has undergone radical social change. The women in my survey anticipated the changes. I am pleased that, in my paper, I had the opportunity to highlight critical problems concerning women within Irish society; and it has been gratifying to examine the progress that has been made over the past thirty years. The state has begun to pass legislation offering some emancipation to Irish women. It was my experience that each of my interviewees, including Nuala, had her own special type of empowerment that needed only to be legally affirmed by the government. Women are emerging as strong

voices to be reckoned with in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century after surviving extreme patriarchal suppression. Nuala formulates a relationship between women and the nation in her reflections on the Irish language: “Irish in the Irish context is the language of the Mothers, because everything that has been done to women has been done to Irish. It has been marginalized, its status has been taken from it, it has been reduced to the language of farmers and fishermen, and yet it has survived and survived in extraordinary richness”(Boland 154). This was precisely the impression I formed after my experience in Ireland during the summer of 1989. Irish women are extraordinary survivors and I am proud to count myself as one of them.

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