**Open Address by Catriona Crowe**

This exhibition, Women of Influence, is part of Cavan County Museum’s contribution to our ongoing Decade of Centenaries, in this case inspired by the 100th anniversary of partial female suffrage in 1918. The achievement of votes for women in the West is one of the great human rights achievements of the 20th century, along with the achievement of civil rights, including voting rights, for people of colour in the United States. It’s instructive to reflect on the fact that both successes were brought about largely without violence on the part of their campaigners.

In Ireland, securing the vote for women was the culmination of decades of campaigning by our first wave feminists, in the course of which they scored notable successes, including the Married Woman’s Property Acts of 1870 – 82, which granted married women for the first time a separate legal existence to their husbands, the Intermediate Education Act of 1878, which provided for secondary education for girls, and the Royal University Act of 1879, which allowed women to be admitted as undergraduates to universities. They also achieved repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869. Under the terms of this legislation, any woman suspected of being a prostitute could be arrested and forced to undergo medical examination by the police for venereal disease. These practices were opposed by feminists as an infringement of women's civil liberties.

More success came in 1896, when Irish women fulfilling certain property qualifications were allowed to serve as Poor Law Guardians, and in 1898 when qualified women were allowed to vote in local elections and to be elected to Rural and Urban District Councils. By 1899, Ireland had 85 female Poor Law Guardians, 31 female Rural District Councillors, and 4 female Urban District Councillors. And in 1918, partial voting rights to parliament (for women over 30, with a property qualification or a university degree) were granted. In 1922, the Irish Free State constitution enfranchised everyone over the age of 21.

Women like Isabella Tod, Anna Haslam and Margaret Byers were the prime movers in this long-term campaign to improve women’s lives, joined for the parliamentary suffrage campaign by more radical women like Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, Margaret Cousins and Constance Markievicz.

The arrival of independence, despite the rhetoric of equality in the 1916 Proclamation and the Democratic Programme of the First Dail, did not herald great advances for women. Having got the vote, women, like men, voted along party lines, and many of them were deeply conservative Catholics who did not wish to see women advancing any further than they already had. The 1920s and ‘30s saw the gradual roll-back of women’s rights, to sit on juries, to divorce, to certain kinds of employment, to employment after marriage, and to legal contraception. **Article 41.2** of the 1937 Constitution squarely placed women in the home. Most of these measures were supported by women as well as men.

Ireland also maintained an archipelago of coercive institutions for women like Magdalen Asylums and Mother and Baby Homes, which caused immense hurt and damage to their inmates, and which have caused a number of commissions of inquiry to take place.

The feminist movement kept going, through organisations like the Joint Committee of Women’s Societies and Social Workers and the Irish Housewives’ Association, and women like Andree Sheehy Skeffington and Hilda Tweedy. but the environment for activist women remained inhospitable until the 1960s, when Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, am0ng other books, began what became the second wave of feminism.

And Ireland did very well out of the second wave of feminism. The link between the first and second waves was the Irish Housewives Association**,** which became the inheritor of the mantle of the radical Irish Women’s Franchise League, and although it sounds desperately conservative, was in fact a highly progressive advocacy body for women, not least through its contacts with international women’s organisations.

In 1968, Hilda Tweedy of the IHA, acting on a directive from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, set up an ad hoc committee to lobby the government to establish a commission on the status of women in Ireland. Their efforts were successful in 1970, when the government set up the Commission, chaired by Dr. Thekla Beere, the first woman to become Secretary of a government department. The terms of reference for the Commission were:

“To examine and report on the status of women in Irish society, to make recommendations on the steps necessary to ensure the participation of women on equal terms and conditions with men in the political, social, cultural and economic life of the country and to indicate the implications generally - including the estimated cost - of such recommendations.”

The Commission reported in 1972 (take note, interminable and expensive commissions of inquiry!) and it recommended a slate of far-reaching reforms including

Allowances for unmarried mothers and deserted wives;

Paid maternity leave;

Equal pay for men and women;

An end to the marriage bar;

Co-ownership of the family home;

Jury service on the same terms as men;

Marriage counselling services and expert advice on family planning to be made available throughout the country.

These recommendations were issued to the public in 1973. They were assigned to various government departments and several were implemented more or less immediately. Others were gradually implemented in subsequent years, often helped by Supreme Court judgments.

The Commission report was a huge milestone in the advancement of women’s rights in Ireland. A great deal of the feminist agenda was covered by the Commission’s recommendations, and they gave valuable weight to the radical groups who attracted the public’s attention.

Of these, the Irishwomen’s Liberation Movement was the best known, with members like Nell McCafferty, Mary Kenny, June Levine and Mary Maher. They are most famous for the famous contraceptive train of May 1971. Contraceptionwas the first priority for the women’s movement everywhere, as control of female fertility held the key to women’s autonomy. The contraceptive pill was available in Ireland, and tens of thousands of women used it as a “cycle regulator”. The weirdness of Irishwomen’s reproductive systems would have puzzled a visiting Martian!

It was illegal to import or to sell contraceptives in Ireland, but it was known that people regularly travelled to Belfast to buy what they needed, and were never challenged by the customs officers at railway stations. The IWLM decided to go en masse to Belfast, purchase many contraceptives, and display them to the customs officers, who would have to arrest them, providing an opportunity for legal martyrdom and its attendant publicity, or let them go by, thus demonstrating the hypocrisy of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1935. Win-win!

47 women set off for Belfast on 22 May, taking up two carriages on a train otherwise occupied by women going north for bargains. When they arrived in Belfast, they converged on the nearest chemist shop, where their ignorance of contraception was lamentably on display. June Levine, as a divorced mother, and therefore a woman of the world, was designated the expert for the day, and had to break the news that you couldn’t get the Pill or a diaphragm without a prescription. Nell McCafferty had a brainwave, and bought hundreds of packages ofaspirin which would be passed off as the Pill at the station.

They arrived back at Amiens St. station with Aspirin, condoms and spermicidal jelly. Fewer condoms than they started with, as Mary Kenny spent the train journey back blowing up condoms and letting them zip around the carriage, to the great scandalisation of her fellow passengers. They were met with a noisy demonstration of their supporters singing “We shall Overcome”, and some very uncomfortable customs officers.

The criminals were allowed to pass, some waving their fake Pills in the air. They were so thorough that they went around to Store St. police station to see if anyone wanted to arrest them.

The train, recently made into a musical by Rough Magic**,** became an international story, highlighting Ireland’s draconian laws on contraception and embarrassing politicians. But it took a brave woman called Mary McGee to pursue the right to contraception through the courts. Her 1973 Supreme Court victory for the right of married couples to import contraceptives for their own use was, as is the Irish way, eventually followed by Charlie Haughey’s Irish solution to an Irish problem in 1979, which decreed that you needed a prescription to buy condoms.

A remarkable number of organisations dedicated to women’s rights and needs was established during the 1970s:

The Women's Political Association (WPA) was founded in 1971 to encourage women into political life and party politics, regardless of party.

Cherish, a support group for single parents was founded in 1972, and successfully campaigned to abolish the status of illegitimacy.

AIM was founded in 1972 to campaign for reform of the laws relating to women and the family.

Adapt was founded as a support group for deserted wives in 1974.

Women's Aid was founded in 1975 to provide refuges for women and children suffering from violence and abuse.

The Rape Crisis Centre offering a telephone and counselling service to female, male and child victims of rape and sexual abuse, was founded in 1978 after a huge torchlight 'Women against violence against women' march in Dublin.

The last 35 years have been taken up by battles against the 8th Amendment to the constitution, finally repealed on 25 May last year. Whatever one’s stance on abortion, I don’t think anyone of good sense could now argue that the 8th amendment was a wise addition to our constitution. We are in the middle of a flourishing 3rd or 4th wave of Irish feminism now, animated by the marriage equality and repeal referenda, and concerned with social issues like housing and health. Issues of sexual identity are very much to the fore, with the transgender discussion educating us all about identities many of us haven’t thought about before.

And so to this lovely exhibition. The introductory panel tells us:

“This exhibition seeks to examine the lives, careers and contributions of a diverse mix of women who lived and worked in Ireland and overseas in all ten decades of the twentieth century”.

With some contextual panels on life for Irish women in the 2oth century, the exhibition gives us a group of nine women, each one representing a period in that century’s history. Among their numbers are writers, poets, artists, engineers, sportswomen, teachers, university lecturers, political and environmental campaigners, librarians, counsellors, medical practitioners and religious sisters.

The women are Edith Somerville, Letitia Dunbar-Harrison, Iris Cummins, Teresa Deevy, Agnes O Farrelly, Majella Mc Carron, Sherie de Burgh, Rita Duffy and Derbhle Crotty. The exhibition was researched by Laura Servilan Brown, who deserves great credit for choosing an interesting and innovative way to look at women’s history over time. You will have heard of some of these women, but by no means all, and it is always a revelation to discover new actors on the diverse stage of Irish women’s history.

Let’s take a closer look at some of them:

Agnes O’Farrelly, from Virginia in this very county, was one of the early beneficiaries of the campaign for women’s university education, graduating with a degree in languages from the Royal University in 1899. She became a fervent Irish language activist, a writer of poetry, fiction and other prose works, a university teacher, and eventually Professor of Irish at University College Dublin. She was involved with Cumannn mBan but split from them over recruitment in WW1. But her first love was the Irish language. She became highly influential in the Gaelic League, constantly agitating for women’s involvement in the language movement and spending 5 summers in the Aran Islands to perfect her own use of Irish.

She was a life-long advocate of university education for women, a dedicated player and supporter of camogie, and a staunch opponent of the anti-women provisions of the 1937 constitution. Her memoir of life on Inish Meain gives us a unique view of the lives of women and children on the Aran Islands at the end of the 19th century.

We have two theatre women, **Teresa Deevy** from Waterford and my dear friend **Derbhle Crotty** from here in Cavan. **Teresa Deevy** suffered from a life-long disability – almost total deafness, but overcame it by learning to lipread, and did not let it stand in the way of her flourishing career as a playwright. She was the author of 18 stage plays and 11 radio plays. She was a favoured playwright in the Abbey Theatre during the 1930s, the period of her greatest success, when *The King of Spain’s Daughter* and *Katie Roche* were produced in 1935 and 36 respectively. Her work explores the narrow limits of life available to women in post-independence Ireland, reflecting her own concerns about how the new state was treating women. Ernest Blythe, the legendary long-term manager of the Abbey, failed to produce some of her plays, and she turned to radio, where she had an equally successful career.

**Derbhle Crotty**is connected to Teresa as the person who redefined the title role of *Katie Roche* when it was revived in the Abbey in 1995, and it was an unforgettable performance. Derbhle is probably the best stage actress we have in Ireland right now, and that is against stiff opposition like Marie Mullen, Cathy Belton and Aisling O’Sullivan. She has become the actress who gave us the great Marina Carr roles, from *The Mai* to *Portia Coughlan* to *Hecuba.* She has had a long and illustrious career both here in Ireland and in the UK, where she has worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company. She is one of Druid’s go-to actresses, most recently enthralling us as *Henry 1v* in their DruidShakespeare cycle. Derbhle conveys a mixture of strength and vulnerability in her stage roles, complicated portraits of women under pressure who have hearts and brains and use both to navigate life’s troubles. She is a life-long feminist, and has been particularly active in the Waking the Feminists movement which originated in Irish theatre.

Other panels here deal with writer Edith Somerville, who invented the unforgettable Flurry Knox. Iris Cummins, engineer and international hockey player, Letitia Dunbar Harrison, centre of a sectarian battle about the Mayo County Librarianship in 1930, Sister Majella McCarron, social justice activist in Nigeria and Ireland and friend to the late Ken Saro Wiwa, Rita Duffy, visionary visual artist and maker of enchanting pop-up environments, and Sherie De Burgh, influential promoter of practical help for women with crisis pregnancies through her work with Open Line, the IFPA and One Family. Sherie, alas, passed on in 2017.

This is a fascinating mixture of women, ranging from the feminist, language and independence movements at the beginning of the last century to women’s activism and artistic achievements right now. It’s a very useful lens through which to view a complicated, turbulent and sometimes triumphant century of Irish women’s lives. I have great pleasure in launching Women of Influence.