

Creative Writing

Eileen Casey

left to right Dr Maggie O'Neill, Professor Margaret Mills Harper, Germaine Greer, Dr Cathy McGlynn, Dr Michaela Schrage-Früh



Fresh thinking on women and ageing

Over the course of three days last May, the ageing woman as theme provided numerous and varied conference discussions at the University of Limerick. The venues at the university (Plassy House and Jean Monnet Theatre) proved to be worthy settings for an international gathering of academics and writers. Delegates came from as far afield as the US, Canada, South Africa, Israel, Australia, Europe, the UK and across Ireland.

The city of Limerick itself is one of my favourite places to visit, a city which boasts many attractions I've enjoyed over the years. As a participant in the 2015 Women and Ageing Conference, this was, however, my first time to enter the university campus. Among the topics presented by 60 delegates were: motherhood, spinsterhood, sexuality, women minorities, health and fashion.

When I first became aware of this conference I was immediately intrigued. Presentations and lectures on offer

promised a treasure trove of riches in terms of inspiration and reflection. Not to mention an opportunity to expand and re-energise existing knowledge and perceptions on the business of ageing.

This territory is now increasingly familiar to me, both as a woman and a writer. I've always championed characters in the throes of older age. May 2015 saw the launch of Faber & Faber's *'All Over Ireland Short Story Anthology'*, in which one of my stories *Beneath Green Hills* features. This story, in part, concerns the funeral rituals of a woman facing the end of her life. However, in preparing my paper for the conference, I realized that my contribution *'Hall of Mirrors'* was largely concerned with locating a trajectory between my more youthful self and the stage of life I'm at now. As with all worthwhile explorations, a journey is embarked upon, one of discovery and re-evaluation for the most part.

The organizers of the Women and Ageing Conference, all based in

Limerick University, are three women with a wealth of academic experience. Dr Cathy McGlynn, Dr Maggie O'Neill (both based at the School of Culture and Communication) and Dr Michaela Schrage-Früh (School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics) put in place a programme which included topics broad ranging and engaging and in some cases with more than a fair share of wit - as in *'My Clothes are too Shabby: Fashion and Ageing in the Fiction of Jean Rhys'* (by Rachael Hynes). The only regret I had when faced with such a sumptuous feast was that I didn't possess the gift of bi-location. I so wanted to attend everything but that not being possible, I relied on the accurate accounts of women I met at the conference.

Conversation between strangers is easy when the atmosphere is sparked by senses having come alive through the sheer force of imaginative, articulate presentations. Combine these sensibilities with sharp, questioning intellects and the result is electric. A



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plentiful supply of tea and coffee helps too and in this regard we were well looked after!

Among the lynchpins of the conference were undoubtedly the keynote addresses and roundtable panels. Professor Margaret Mills Harper's 'The Problem of Crazy Jane' was a tour de force in terms of exploring Yeats' use of the voice of this persona (an old 'crazy' woman). Yeats adopted this voice in his middle years as a form of ventriloquism or mask that he used to decry (among other things) the hold of the Catholic Church on a post independent Ireland. Dr Patricia Moran's 'The Strange Adventures of Ageing' was equally as powerful and subsequently featured on Lyric FM.

Germaine Greer highlight

A major highlight of the conference was undoubtedly the address given by Germaine Greer (born 29th January 1939). Greer, an Australian theorist, academic and journalist, is regarded as having been a major feminist voice of the mid-20th century. Currently she is Emeritus Professor in English Literature and Comparative Studies at the University of Warwick. Her ideas, not just those related to feminism, have created a stir ever since *The Female Eunuch* became an international best seller in 1970. Her many other books include *Sex and Destiny: The Politics of Human Fertility*, *The Change*, *Shakespeare's Wife* and *The Whole Woman*.

Her address in the Jean Monnet Theatre, *The Deconstruction of Motherhood*, focused on ways in which motherhood is being dismembered so that the

genetic mother, the womb mother and the legal mother may all be different individuals. Ms Greer's talk raised more than a few eyebrows, much discussion and many raised hands in the Q & A afterwards - 'the first of which was not allowed to be male.' Medbh McGuckian's poetry reading was also a much looked forward to occasion and the acclaimed poet did not disappoint.

One of the presentations I attended came courtesy of Caroline Coyle and Nicole McKenna, Athlone Institute of Technology: '*Phenomenal Woman: A Poetic View of the Social Construction of Widows in Society*.' This presentation included a short film and was drawn from conversations with women from the Active-Age Group in their community and with members of the Widow's Association. Caroline Coyle made a case for the impact of poetry: "Using poetry as a gateway in to these communities and as a pathway of engagement, the women shared and vocalised their feelings around a huge range of topics, including age, widowhood, friendship and what is important to them."

If Coyle and McKenna promote poetry as a portal to self-awareness, Dr Ann Webster-Wright (Griffith University Brisbane) cites dancing as a holistic avenue for a creative old age. Her presentation '*Dancing into the Night: The Politics, Performance and Poetics of Ageing as a Woman*,' was a revelation in terms of promoting an optimistic ageing process. Wright makes the case that "Older women are the fastest growing demographic in western societies. Many are educated, skilled and healthy, with much to contribute to a world inim-

ical to their existence." Wright has researched the area of women making successful transitions from traditional working lives thereby framing her own distinct notion of 'Lifework'. She recently found herself dancing with younger women, celebrating and performing a history of women and work, an area she had previously researched through academia. Wright's manifesto is lyrically beautiful:

Older women, with grace and grit, have an important stake in a society in need of strong female qualities such as caring and collaboration. Moving from a focus on pathology to possibility opens the view, draws back the curtains to consider the night, neither to rage against, nor to run from, the dying of the light.

The organisers of the Women and Ageing Conference stated that "the aim of this conference is to provide an opportunity to discuss intersections of the cultural, social and medical dimensions of women and ageing." It's intentions were to engage with discourses on ageing in their various cultural manifestations through the ages but also across different cultures, genres and media." Was this remit a success? Most definitely. What I personally found most engaging were the presentations focused on literary writings. Old favourites were forensically explored in interesting and thought provoking ways. Joseph's O'Conner's '*Ghost Light*' ('*This is How Time Unfolds When You Are Old*' by Maggie O'Neill) through Edna O'Brien's '*Country Girl*' (Zuzanna Sanches' '*Narrative of the Self*') provided new interpretations of acknowledged classics. The world of poetry provided



Delegates were entertained by the Vulcana Cabaret

source material for a hugely enjoyable *'Poems to Grow Old In: Women and Ageing in the Work of Eavan Boland and Medbh McGuckian'* (Dr Michaela Schrage-Früh).

There are so many really important presentations which cannot be accommodated here but a visit to the conference website is recommended to fill this gap to some respect. For example, it's possible to gain an overview of the work of people such as Ewelina Twardoch (Jagiellonian University, Cracow). Her themes explore *'The Older Woman and Sexuality in Films'*. Twardoch rightly makes the point that "Contrary to what is generally thought, images of old women appear in cinema quite often." She cited the great roles in the history of the cinema that are concerned with the emotions and problems of old ladies (*'Sunset Boulevard'* / *'Driving Miss Daisy'*). However, although old women theoretically are not invisible, they occupy specific places connected with specific social roles. Twardoch's focus however is on films which buck the norm in this regard, films such as *'Innocence'* (a Paul Cox movie) which shows erotic scenes between an ageing woman and a man over 60. *'Japan'* (by Carlos Reygadas) is regarded by Twardoch as being one of the bravest films because of its depiction of sexuality between a man and a woman over 80 years old. She asks the question regarding how the ageing body is presented. Is it associated with shame, repulsion or innocence and beauty?

My own contribution to the conference began in the tiny confines of my bedroom while I was growing up in the Midlands. I loved popular music but my favourites were Thin Lizzy and Horslips especially the latter. Their 1973 album *'Happy to Meet, Sorry to Part'* still resonates, particularly the line 'Once you've been through the tunnel of love,

it's the hall of Mirrors for you,' (*Hall of Mirrors*). At that time I considered the concept of a hall of mirrors to be one of self discovery on a purely physical level. I didn't have a funfair model in mind, a model where images were abstracted, distorted.

I grew up in a council house, two up, two down and there were no full length mirrors. We saw ourselves incrementally. The mirror or looking glass was above the range in the kitchen and we stood on chairs if we wanted to see ourselves from the waist down. Photographs were few and far between and when they did appear, they were black and white and grainy. Usually, the tops of our heads or our feet were chopped off. But good preparation now that I'm ageing. I read so much about disjointed body parts... how to treat the ageing foot for example, or dimming eyesight, inner ear trouble.

The first time I saw myself in full length clarity was in a drapery shop I visited with my mother. When I was just fourteen, Mrs Harrington, the owner of the shop installed a floor to ceiling glass. It was a startling experience to say the least. I smiled to make sure it was me. I knew by the gap in my teeth that it was me. While my mother had some table oilcloth measured out, I turned to look at my plump calves. It must have been winter because I was wearing a brown herringbone coat that my sister had sent me from London. My hair and my eyes were brown. It was like looking at a bright fish swimming in a sea of glass. It wasn't a narcissistic experience however, that first full sighting of myself.

It was a revelation. At first I felt as if there were two of me, a duality which had not previously existed. It was like meeting my soul star. Paul Coelho once said that through literature he finds his



May 2015 saw the launch of Faber & Faber's *All Over Ireland* short story anthology, in which one of my stories *Beneath Green Hills* features.

All Over Ireland is edited by Deirdre Madden and features Selina Guinness, Eoin McNamee, Colm Toibin, Ita Daly, Belinda McKeon, Eileen Casey, among others.

You Could've Been Someone (Stories, memoirs and poems) by Frances Browner has just been published and is available from Original Writing Ltd., Dublin. Frances is an award winning writer whose work has appeared in a number of reputable outlets at home and abroad and been broadcast on RTE.

place in the world. In the synchronistic way of things, after I wrote myself as being like a 'bright fish swimming in a sea of glass,' I came across Sylvia Plath's poem *'Mirror'*, written from the perspective of the Mirror. The closing lines are:

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness. In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman / Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish. - extract from 'Hall of Mirrors'.