

“Road to Repeal: 50 years of struggle in Ireland for contraception and abortion” - An outstanding PhotoBook - Interview with Co-Author Therese Caherty

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We’ve come a long way!

The fight for reproductive freedom in Ireland

Irish publisher Lilliput Press recently launched the photobook, *Road to Repeal: 50 years of struggle in Ireland for contraception and abortion*, in Dublin’s Mansion House. Social policy analyst Pauline Conroy, photographer Derek Speirs and journalist. Therese Caherty have documented in pictures and words Ireland’s choice movement over half a century.

John Meehan interviews Therese about the project, where it came from and the future for reproductive rights in Ireland.

John Meehan - What gave you idea for the book?

Therese Caherty - Our project began in 2013 at Against the Tide, a retrospective of 1980s activism by photographer Rose Comiskey. At a closing discussion on Irish feminism, a young woman asked some of us oldies - Why did you let the 8th Amendment happen? It wasn’t a view we were familiar with. But you could see where she was coming from. She had arrived into the world of the Eighth and seen, maybe experienced, its effects. And she was angry.

In 2014 we answered her question with Women to Blame, a multimedia exhibition on the struggle in Ireland for contraception and abortion. Today, thanks to Lilliput Press, we have what we always wanted - a permanent home for that exhibition. Road to Repeal commemorates in pictures and words a people- powered movement that believed in a more equal Ireland for women and pregnant people, and their unfettered right to independent decision- making about parenthood.

We see our book as part of that movement of activists and participants and a contribution to it. It’s not for profit and all royalties go to the National Women’s Council of Ireland.

JM - Where do you start the story of Repeal?

TC - We launched the book in the Mansion House because Road to Repeal starts with the formation of the landmark Irish Women’s Liberation Movement in that building in 1971 where we believe the Repeal movement has its roots. The IWLM women are responsible for a radical manifesto Chains or Change that highlighted women’s second class status in society. Contraception was not a word in Ireland’s vocabulary in the 70s. Marriage meant forfeiting more rights - there was no divorce, no social supports for deserted wives or unmarried mothers as they were called. IWLM recommended

living in sin as marginally better. Some of their demands are still outstanding half a century later: state childcare, adequate housing, equal pay. They really were ahead of their time.

JM - What is the book's format?

TC - Road to Repeal addresses abortion in a broad 32-county, feminist and human rights context. A narrative for each decade places the fight for liberation from the Eighth alongside other major events at home and abroad. Along the way we highlight the State and the Catholic Church's contempt for maternity which expressed itself so shamefully in the Magdalene Laundries, mother and baby homes, the practice of symphysiotomy; the Anti-D blood and cervical smear scandals; the absence until recently of inquests into maternal death and more...

The mindset that demanded and won a blanket abortion ban has not gone away. How else are we to explain the government's decision to transfer our National Maternity Hospital to a site they will lease from a Catholic religious order knowing the Church's past treatment of women and children?

JM - What was responsible for the change in attitude towards abortion rights?

TC - The weakening of the Catholic Church's power by its own hand was one reason. No family was unaffected by the effects of the Eighth is another. And these experiences gave rise to street protest made up of thousands of people who were there because they believed in the possibility of social change. No other reason. They are the rock on which all movements are built, and repeal is no exception. One woman who personifies this type of activism is Mrs Mary McGee. In 1971 she was in her late 20s, living with her husband and four children in a caravan in Louth. Blood pressure issues made pregnancy life-threatening for her. On her GP's advice, she imported a diaphragm and spermicidal jelly. When customs seized both in 1971, she went to court - mapping the way for women for years to come. She won her case in 1973, making contraception a private matter for all married couples in the process.

The ordinary people like Mrs McGee who crowd the pages of Road to Repeal are in fact extraordinary. We focus on their quiet heroism because it has provided the major turning points in our struggle.

JM - A key turning point you describe in the book is the X Case of 1992.

TC - Yes, with the X case, you got a view of the Eighth Amendment in full swing. Miss X was 14. She'd been raped and became suicidal because she was denied an abortion. Ireland's attorney general learned she and her parents were in England seeking a termination and demanded their return. They came back to massive and effective street mobilization in X's favour and several high profile court cases that resulted in a softening of the ban: when a woman's life, as opposed to her health, was in danger, abortion was permitted. A referendum was held later that year and as well as relaxing access to information and removing all doubt about a woman's right to travel for the medical treatment she needed, the electorate now saw how flawed the Eighth was. Abortion was available in Ireland in the most restrictive of circumstances - but yet again appalling suffering had to be endured by a child before it happened. It's a pattern right the way through the narrative: Savita Halappanavar's death in October 2012 is another victim of the Eighth.

JM - And of course another critical moment is the death of Savita Halappanavar - we haven't mentioned her.

TC - Kitty Holland of The Irish Times reported Savita's death by sepsis on October 28th. As with Miss X, her treatment in Galway University Hospital was unconscionable. She was discharged from the

hospital after arriving there with back pain when 17 weeks pregnant. On readmission, she was miscarrying and asked for a termination. "We don't do that sort of thing here, dear," staff told her. Savita was 31 when she died after the foetal heartbeat took medical minds off her own heartbeat and physical condition until it was too late. The streets erupted at the news as they had 20 years earlier in 1992. The X Case ruling, allowing abortion when a woman's life as opposed to her health was under threat, had still not been legislated for. The unsatisfactory Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 with its cumbersome process of investigating a woman's veracity wasted time in circumstances when it was crucial to act quickly. But Savita's tragic and unnecessary death, as with the ordeals of Mrs McGee and Miss X, moved us a step closer to abortion rights in Ireland - like I said, it's a pattern. The Road to Repeal is paved with the suffering of women in crisis pregnancy.

JM - The big point that emerges from 1992 onwards is that a majority was against the Eighth Amendment. But the state refused to allow a new abortion referendum during 1992-2018 to repeal the Eighth. This was a big conflict between people's actual lived experience and the lethargy of the State in dealing with it. And in between these two, of course, there is the moral and political collapse of the Catholic Church.

TC - 170,000 women and girls left Ireland for abortions in Britain and the Netherlands from 1980 to 2018. The hypocrisy of both Church and State in exporting the issue to other jurisdictions while claiming there was no abortion here remains shocking. So you're right. There was a disparity between lived experience and the law. We've spoken previously about the Catholic Church's waning authority due to abuse and other scandals that came to light.

Some court cases showed the world what the Eighth was capable of and strengthened the prospect of a referendum.

In 2014 Ms Y, an asylum seeker who arrived here pregnant by rape, wanted a termination. She couldn't travel because she didn't have the papers but somehow managed to get to England where entry was denied and she was considered a danger to herself. On return here, the Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act 2013 required "an inquisition" to ascertain if she was genuinely suicidal. Eventually, when she refused fluids and food the HSE got a court order to hydrate her. She was later delivered by Caesarean and the baby given up for adoption.

Ms P followed in 2014. She was pregnant and admitted to hospital. A cyst on her brain was detected and she was declared brain dead. Her family wanted life support turned off but the presence of a foetal heartbeat meant the doctors felt obliged to protect the pregnancy as stipulated by Art 40.3.3 so it remained on. They turned to the courts to end the ordeal. A month later Ms Y was allowed to die with the dignity the court had referenced.

People just couldn't believe that vulnerable women could be infantilized to the point where what they wanted was automatically disregarded.

JM - In light of Roe v Wade what does the future hold for abortion rights in Ireland?

TC - Ireland is different from what it was in the 1970s, particularly in the workplace where women make up 51 per cent of workers - a 71 per cent rise since 1998. We are fixed in the public sphere, organizing visibly in and outside our unions around our specific demands and needs. Reproductive rights are now a mainstream topic or agenda issue in widely divergent public and private bodies. There is no going back to the kitchen - unless it is our choice.

Road to Repeal shows how women's lot has improved during half a century, but it also shows the need for qualities of vigilance, endurance, activism and alliances, all of which must remain on stand-

by today. The US Supreme Court ruling reversing Roe v Wade, which guaranteed a right to abortion in specific circumstances, shows no law is written in stone. It can be gradually diluted and eroded by restrictions or reversed altogether.

The 2022 review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 is awaited with interest by many who contributed to its enactment. Over 4,500 women and pregnant people had abortions here last year - but barriers still exist for those in Direct Provision with no PPS number. 200 women had to go to Britain to end crisis pregnancies; poor women had to import the abortion pill. Only one in 10 GPs and 10 out of 19 hospitals provide full reproductive health services. All this shows how the 2018 Act requires constant surveillance as does the right to pregnancy termination north of the border.

Road to Repeal acknowledges our enormous debt to previous women activists, including those outside this island since birth control is an international issue. Emma Goldman said in 1916 "... when a law has outgrown time and necessity, it must go and the only way to get rid of the law, is to awaken the public to the fact that it has outlived its purposes" and to make Emma Goldman's words our own, that is precisely what we have been doing and must continue to do in the future.

And we'll take her other advice and dance while we do that because history has taught us another lesson - we can have fun while fighting for our human rights.

About Road to Repeal

On 23 May 2018 the Together For Yes campaign succeeded in overturning Article 40.3.3 marking a watershed moment in the history of Irish women's liberation. In a carefully crafted merging of imagery and text, Road to Repeal provides exceptional insight into the 50-year journey of the struggle for contraception and abortion in Ireland.

The unfolding story, co-edited by Therese Caherty, Pauline Conroy and Derek Speirs, provides vital political and social context, outlining the many twists and turns of half a century of resistance to social conservatism. Road to Repeal opens with an iconic image, taken by Eddie Kelly of The Irish Times, of the 1971 contraceptive train protest, and closes with another by Derek Speirs of five women involved in the original protest, who still stand together in 2017.

This is an accurate and highly evocative record of one of the most important struggles of recent Irish history.

John Meehan
Therese Caherty

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P.S.

Tomás Ó Flatharta

<https://tomasoflatharta.com/2022/11/19/road-to-repeal-50-years-of-struggle-in-ireland-for-contraception-and-abortion-an-outstanding-photobook-interview-with-co-author-therese-caherty/>