

Julia Molony



It will take more than token museum to tell the story of women

Women make up half of the population. But, according to the British historian Betty Hughes, women occupy only 0.5pc of all recorded history.

You can't rewrite stories that were never written down in the first place. But a revisionist mood is taking hold among the keepers of culture and history in this country. There is a new willingness to engage with this imbalance, and invest time and money in the attempt to redress it. It comes not a moment too soon.

Last week, Catherine Martin, Culture and Arts Minister, announced the first organised and co-ordinated effort to officially acknowledge the disparity and take steps towards better representation of women in cultural institutions.

"On this island and around the world, women's voices, experiences and interests remain under-represented and women's contributions are under-acknowledged and insufficiently harnessed. That's the uncomfortable truth," she said.

Now she plans a publicly funded committee to "advise on the representation of women and women's stories within the collections of the National Cultural Institutions".

It's a crowd-pleasing initiative, likely to be greeted with approval from the mainstream. After all, when you consider that in Dublin alone just 13pc of the statues in public places commemorate women, it's clear we have a problem.

More questionable to my mind, however, is a proposal to establish a Women's Museum in Ireland, which will be examined by the committee.

Must women's stories really be annexed from the broader culture, housed in their own dedicated space? Wouldn't the existence of such a museum mean that pressure on other cultural institutions to re-examine their own archives and histories would be reduced?

The notion of a museum about women, grouping together a gallery of disparate figures from the arts, popular culture, history and politics on the basis of their femaleness, feels patronising. Surely, in the context of better representation more broadly, this kind of gender apartheid is counterproductive? It reinforces the entrenched idea that women's stories, like women's interests, are somehow marginal to society at large.

In politics, we speak about the concept of gender mainstreaming — which refers to the goal of embedding principles of gender equality into the very fibres of political strategy on every level. The idea being that if you want to make change on a structural level, you need to think about what ingredients you put into your bricks and mortar.

And so it applies, too, in culture. For women's contributions to have the full, fair heft they deserve, their stories should be fully integrated into existing structures. Isn't the point of better representation to prove that women's stories are not niche, even if they have been treat-

ed as such? A museum about important women would be a pretty broad church. As such, there is the risk it would lack the specificity to provide adequate context for women's struggle against social and political obstacles for achievement that often required herculean efforts to overcome.

Take for example, the story of Dr Kathleen Lynn. She was elected to a house surgeon post at the Adelaide Hospital, Dublin, but couldn't take up the post as the general committee refused to accept her because she was a woman. Despite this setback, she went on to take up a fellowship in surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons and become a distinguished physician.

In a museum about women in general, this story is reduced to anecdote. But if properly situated in the appropriate cultural context, for example within the Heritage Collections in the Royal College of Surgeons, her story becomes a vivid riposte to the established narrative, illuminating the shameful parts of her chosen discipline. Her story throws into sharp relief the complicity of the medical establishment in Ireland in actively suppressing female achievement. Her story forces the reader to re-evaluate this history



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of medicine in its own home.

Context is everything. To group together high-achieving women solely by gender and celebrate them in a museum amounts to little more than an expensive gesture of cheerleading. Position them properly within the hallowed, often self-referential institutions of their respective fields and you invite the public to ask much more pointed questions.

Similarly, consider the meteoric rise of women's Gaelic games. After languishing in unfunded obscurity with just two high-profile matches a year, it exploded in popularity in the last 20 years. This becomes a much more eloquent story if positioned front and centre at the GAA Museum than if it is excised from its proper surroundings.

That we need to take a revisionist look at the role of women in Irish history and culture goes without saying. But that goal would be better served by putting pressure on existing institutions to step up and properly examine the injustices of the past.



Dr Kathleen Lynn