

New exhibition revisits rural electrification

by Paul O'Malley

Former president Mary Robinson returned to her native Mayo to launch a fascinating new exhibition at the Museum of Country Life in Turlough.

'Kitchen Power — Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification' examines the effect of rural electrification on women in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s. The exhibition was curated by Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University and Noel Campbell of the National Museum of Ireland.

Mrs Robinson said the exhibition resonated deeply with her. "I was delighted when I received an invitation to open this exhibition because, in my presidential inauguration address, I

said that I wanted women who were outside history to be written back into history. This exhibition speaks to my own childhood growing up in Mayo, as the only daughter of a doctor from Ballina. I remember him talking passionately about the differences made to his practice as a doctor when rural electrification came," she continued.

The exhibition comprises various artifacts from this era, including a portrait of the Sacred Heart on a laminate backboard, lit with a red electric bulb which replaced the oil lamp previously used to light up the common Catholic household feature.

There is also a range of ESB advertising and objects from the museum's and the ESB's archives as well as objects from

the Irish Agricultural Museum and from private collectors.

A reconstruction of a 1950s ESB model kitchen, which was used to promote rural electrification to women in the 1950s, features prominently in the exhibition. It was constructed by Phillip Carey, a final year Furniture Design and Manufacture student from GMIT-Letterfrack.

The exhibition also has recordings of voices of women who lived through the era, telling their stories in their own words. "We're lucky that we have the generation who lived through that period still with us and still healthy," said Noel Campbell, co-curator of the 'Kitchen Power' exhibition. "We've invited first-hand testimonies from the time and the woman who lived

through this can tell us first-hand the impact that it had on their households. This is important as it's not just two curators telling these stories, it's the women themselves telling their stories."

Mrs Robinson talked about rural electrification in the context of the wider world. "I'm very conscious that a very large portion of our world never switched that switch for electricity. We have a long way to go and it won't be the same, it won't be like the grid that the ESB wheeled out. It will be a much more diverse use of lights and solar panels and all these solutions exist. The only thing we lack is the prioritising of getting these solutions to those who never switched the switch," she continued.

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Noel Campbell, Curator, the National Museum of Ireland – Country Life and Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University, who curated the new exhibition are pictured with former president Mary Robinson.
Picture: Keith Heneghan

finds its voice in new exhibition



Former President of Ireland Mary Robinson and her husband Nick chat to Catherine Heaney, chair of the board of the National Museum of Ireland, at the opening of the new exhibition in Turlough House. Picture: Keith Heneghan

The co-curator of the exhibition, Dr Sorcha O'Brien, said that while rural electrification had a huge impact on women's daily lives, it didn't challenge the existing gender roles in society directly.

"This doesn't really challenge the gender roles an awful lot but it sets the groundwork for freeing up women in rural Ireland from this drudgery of everyday life," said Dr O'Brien. "You're talking about women not having to spend an entire Monday washing the family clothes by hand and then all day Tuesday ironing them. These become shorter jobs that could be spread out over the week."

Dr O'Brien said the oral history interviews revealed that the arrival of electricity allowed women to get more involved with textile work, such as knitting, sewing and crocheting.

"On the one hand you have women getting more involved in organisations such as the ICA and community work but what a lot of women were doing was textile work. For some of them that was paid work, particularly things like Aran sweaters in the west of Ireland where people would make the product and get paid by the sweater.

"But a lot of the work was quite practical; for example, you had women who were making and repairing clothing for their families."

The idea behind the textile element of the exhibition, which was created by Sligo-based artist Anna Spearman in collaboration with ICA members in Mayo, was to highlight how these skills are still utilised today in a much more creative way.

"What they've been doing is a creative response to all these materials and all these ideas," explained Dr O'Brien. "They're producing artwork with those amazing craft skills they have, they are expressing themselves through textiles."

Dr O'Brien co-curated the exhibition with Noel Campbell of the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life. Mr Campbell has said this exhibition is a natural next step for what

“From my own childhood, from what I recall, the washing machine was the best thing for my mother. It rotated and it squeezed with a mangle on the top of it. It was still hard work but it was better than what we had

the museum has to offer.

"What the museum focuses on in our permanent galleries is pre-electrification and pre-industrialisation and with 'Kitchen

Power' we're looking at the decades after that, which is the first time the countryside really sees widespread electrification," he said.

The 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification' exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland - Country Life in Turlough takes a unique and personalised look at what was a revolutionary period in Irish history for women.

In the words of former president Mary Robinson who opened the exhibition, instead of rocking the cradle, Irish women rocked the system. Rural electrification was a vital first step down a long road that would lead to greater freedoms for the women of Ireland.



Dr Sorcha O'Brien of Kingston University, Senior Lecturer in Design History and principal investigator for the Electric Irish Homes research project; Lynn Scarff, Director of the National Museum of Ireland and Maura McGuinness, Castlebar viewing the new exhibition 'Kitchen Power - Women's Experiences of Rural Electrification'. Picture: Keith Heneghan