



Thekla Beere

(1901-1991)

Memorial Discourse

Trinity Monday

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Provost, Fellows, Scholars, Colleagues, Guests and Friends,

I'm greatly honoured by this opportunity to deliver the 120th Trinity Monday Memorial Discourse. In a series dating back to 1895 these annual lectures have celebrated the scholarship, service and work of 116 Trinity men - and just four Trinity women. This is in many ways a fitting context for my reflections on the life and times of a woman who, to paraphrase John McGahern, was educated and rose to prominence 'amongst men'.¹

Thekla Beere was among the first generation of female students to attend Trinity College. The only woman in her law class, she graduated in June 1923 with a first-class honours degree in Legal and Political Science. She entered the labour market in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War – a time of widespread unemployment and political instability. Starting in such unpropitious times, Thekla had within four decades won a position of power and influence, as the first woman to head an Irish government department.

This was no token appointment. By 1959 she was an acknowledged expert on shipping, railways and labour issues, a skilful negotiator and manager, and had guided many key decisions on her country's modernisation. It would be thirty-six years before another Irish woman was appointed to such a position. In her retirement she chaired the Commission on the Status of Women and was mooted as a potential candidate at three successive Presidential elections.

She made a contribution to Irish life that, although subtle and understated, was by any historical yardstick, substantial. This will indeed be a recurring theme as I attempt to tease out Thekla's various and wide-ranging contribution to Irish society. To begin I'll shade in some biographical detail – formative influences and education – before turning to her civil service career. I will then attempt (within the confines of the available evidence) to get behind the public persona - to a life significantly touched by humanity, imagination and love. Having pulled at the threads of Thekla's public and private life, I'll conclude by offering a few reflections on the role of the subtle and the understated – both in Irish history and in Irish life.

¹ John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (Faber and Faber, 2008).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before turning to the substance of the lecture let me take a moment to offer a few words of gratitude and welcome. Firstly my thanks to the Provost for inviting me to give this Memorial Discourse. It really is an honour and one that I think Thekla Beere eminently deserves. In spite of her wide-ranging contribution to Irish society she faded from public consciousness in the decades after her death. Her fellow Alexandran, Hilda Tweedy, had in mind to commence a biography shortly after her death but commitment to her ailing husband precluded her from completing the task. Some years later Beere ignited the interest of RTÉ librarian, Jane Hall, but again professional and family commitments forced the suspension of the project. In 2007 the idea for a substantive biography was seized upon by then Secretary General of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Sean Aywлад. Sean contacted the Institute of Public Administration where Thekla's papers had been deposited and they in turn invited me to undertake the research and writing. There wasn't a huge amount of raw material upon which to draw but three small boxes of private papers – newspaper cuttings, photographs, letters and ephemera – laid the foundations for the biography titled *No Coward Soul* that I published with the IPA in 2009. That book was a celebration not just of a female trailblazer but also of the contribution of our public servants to broader society. In that regard I'm delighted to welcome - alongside members of Thekla's family and close friends – some of her successors at the Department of Transport and other former and serving members of our public service.

On a personal note this lecture has provided me with a very welcome opportunity to return to my alma mater. It so happens that this is the anniversary of my namesake and maternal grandmother – a proud South Armagh woman who was born just a few years after Thekla in 1908 - and who, through her shaping of my mother and godmother – both with me here today - played no small role in paving my way to read History and Politics here from 1994-1998. I went on to complete a PhD in modern Irish History under the supervision of the recently deceased and greatly missed David Fitzpatrick. Indeed, as I put together my notes for this lecture I was periodically reminded of his kindly critical voice, the voice that once cautioned me to 'please avoid purple prose, journalese and cliché'! I have no doubt that I still occasionally stray into such hazardous territory but I am nonetheless confident that David – with his dogged commitment to the 'forgotten people' - would today be very pleased to see Thekla Beere take her place in this series, amongst men like Walton, Beckett, Carson and Pearse.

FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

Daughter of the Manse

Thekla June Beere was born in June 1901 at the vicarage, Streete, Co. Westmeath, the eldest child of Francis and Lucie Beere. Her unusual Christian name was apparently inspired by her father's study of Greek here at Trinity.² Her only sibling, Joy, arrived in 1906. Although there were strains of grandeur in her mother's family, Beere recalled that her father's income as a country clergyman was modest and, although they were never 'on the starvation line', money was 'very close'.³ She clearly enjoyed a warm and loving relationship with her parents but later reflected that her childhood was quite lonely as a chronic illness precluded her from attending the local school.

Alexandra School & College

By the age of fourteen she was deemed strong enough to leave home and in January 1916 took up an entrance scholarship to Alexandra School. The following year she graduated to Alexandra College. Having taken junior and intermediate examinations she successfully sat for the senior grade in 1919, applied for the University of Dublin matriculation examination, and entered Trinity College in April 1920.

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Academic Accolades

Beere was, as noted, among the first generation of women to attend this College.⁴ She initially enrolled to study English and German but, convinced that she would not secure a first-class honours

² According to ancient Syrian and Greek manuscripts, Saint Thekla was born into a prosperous pagan family in the Lycaonian city of Iconium (present-day south-central Turkey) in A.D. 16. Beere noted that this saint was buried in present-day Turkey and that many European cities had streets named in her honour. Interview with Rosemary Cullen Owens, 'Moments in Time', RTÉ Radio One, 1987. The surname Beere, relatively rare in Ireland, is most commonly associated with the forty or so places in south-west England which derive their names from the Anglo-Saxon *beara*, meaning grove or wood. See P.H. Reaney, *A Dictionary of English Surnames*, 3rd edn (London, 1991), p. 34 and Patrick Hanks, Flavia Hodges, A.D. Mills and Adrian Rooms (eds) *The Oxford Names Companion* (Oxford, 2002), p. 58.

³ Interview with Tom McGurk, 'One Man's Ireland' series, RTÉ Radio One, 1974. R.B. McDowell estimates that the national average for an incumbent's salary in 1900 was approximately £265. This compared favourably with that of a Protestant secondary school master who earned less than £100 per annum. R.B. McDowell, *The Church of Ireland, 1869-1969* (London, 1975), p. 73. By November 1920, however, a special session of the General Synod noted that, since World War One, the tide of emigration had risen and inflation had become severe, subjecting many clergy in Primate D'Arcy's words to 'the grinding tyranny of an abject poverty'. See Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland 1691-2001* (Dublin, 2002), pp. 218-219.

⁴ The university first opened its doors to women in 1904. Brigid Stafford who entered the Department of Industry and Commerce ahead of Thekla Beere, was among the first three women to enter Trinity College in

degree in these subjects, transferred to the law faculty at the end of her first term. The only woman in her law class, she was subject to the early rules governing female attendance at the College. She was unable to visit fellow students at their private rooms on campus without a chaperone, had to vacate the college precincts by 6pm, and was debarred from most college societies (the College Historical Society did not admit women until 1969).⁵ With few of the normal undergraduate distractions available to her, it is perhaps not surprising that she enjoyed considerable academic success. In her sophister years she won numerous prizes in her honours examinations, culminating in a first class honours degree with a gold medal and second place overall in her Legal and Political Science class.

Politics & Irish Life

As a final year student here at Trinity I studied the Revolution and Civil War period. As such, I was well aware of the turmoil that gripped this city and indeed this College in the years that Thekla studied for her degree. As I mined her private papers I was thus hoping to uncover some evidence of her views on what Tomás Irish recently described as Trinity's reconciliation with the new state⁶ – or indeed her reflections on the campaign to expand women's access to education and public life. There was none. This silence is at least partly explained by practical considerations. Given her father's modest income, she remained on at Alexandra College as a housemistress for all but the last six months of her time here at Trinity and during this time was utterly consumed with the twin goals of excelling at her studies and making ends meet. In return for a rigorous daily routine at Alexandra that involved rising at half past six, supervising breakfast, taking students for a walk, monitoring study, ordering books and music, filing lost property and organising plays she was afforded her board and a laundry allowance of half a crown per week.⁷

Whilst the pressure to make ends meet and the limited opportunities for female involvement in student life convincingly explains Thekla's uneventful passage through College her studious avoidance of political matters was I suspect more than just a bread and butter issue. In an interview

1904. She graduated in modern literature in 1906. As late as 1931 the number of female graduates in the entire country was 345 (Dublin University, 76; National University of Ireland, 147; Queens University, 122). Bridget Stafford Papers, UCD Archives, P63/4.

⁵ Oonagh Walsh contends that women's entry to Trinity College did not establish a radical feminist intellectual tradition partly because they were integrated from an early stage into the university structures, and not placed in distinct women's colleges such as emerged in Oxford and Cambridge. Oonagh Walsh, *Anglican Women in Dublin: Philanthropy, Politics and Education in the Early Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 2005), p. 79.

⁶ Tomás Irish, 'Ostriches and Tricolours: Trinity College Dublin and the Irish State, 1922-45' in Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne (eds), *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland* (Cork, 2019), p.136.

⁷ Interview with Frances O'Rourke, 'Dr Thekla Beere – A Profile', *Administration*, Spring 1975, Vol. 23, No. 1.

with Frances O'Rourke in the early seventies, Beere responded to a direct question about community relations by stating that her family never experienced any sense of being different or isolated during the years of revolution and civil war, adding that her father had a pass from the local ‘powers’ to enable him to travel unhindered throughout the countryside.⁸ Loyalties within her family, like many others, were nonetheless divided by independence. Her sister Joy apparently treasured her British identity and emigrated to Gloucestershire in the 1930s whereas Thekla clearly embraced the Free State and – armed with her own particular brand of understated, secular and pragmatic patriotism - played no small part in its modernisation.⁹

EARLY DAYS AT THE CASTLE

In Search of Employment

A first-class honours degree from Trinity was no guarantee of employment in the aftermath of a brutal and costly civil war. The demobilisation of soldiers together with heavy reconstruction costs were among the many factors denting employment prospects. Beere recollects: ‘*Trinity had a structure for finding jobs, but...there weren’t any...it was a very bad time.*’¹⁰ In common with many graduates she travelled to London in search of employment but the economy there had not yet fully recovered from the devastation of World War One and she failed to secure any suitable offers.¹¹ Upon her return from London, a message from Trinity alerted her to a vacancy in the Statistics branch of Industry and Commerce and she duly applied.¹² A number of Trinity academics testified to her good character and qualifications. Olive Purser, lady registrar noted that she was ‘*extremely keen and thorough in her studies.*’¹³ M.J. Ryan, Reid Professor of Law, offered further sureties, listing her many prizes and concluding that he could ‘*confidently recommend Miss Beere for any position,*

⁸ Ibid, p.21.

⁹ The rate of migration of Irish Protestants remained higher than that for Irish Catholics until after the Second World War. See Daithí Ó Corráin, *Rendering to God and Caesar: The Irish Churches and the Two States in Ireland, 1949-73* (Manchester, 2006), p.21.

¹⁰ Interview with Rosemary Cullen, ‘Moments in Time’, RTÉ Radio One, 1987.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Established in 1924, the Department of Industry and Commerce had no counterpart in the preceding British administration. Its functions had been the responsibility of Dublin-based units of British administration such as the Board of Trade, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Employment and the Ministry of Labour. The Statistics Branch (which became the Central Statistics Office in 1947) was housed in the old Ship Street barracks in the grounds of Dublin Castle.

¹³ Thekla Beere, personnel file, Department of Transport. Interestingly, Oliver Purser cited Beere’s nationality as ‘British’ but added that ‘she has claimed university vote as citizen of the Irish Free State.’

*administrative or otherwise, where her undoubted abilities and industry will be utilised to the best advantage.'*¹⁴

A Modest Start

Armed with prizes and accolades and a raft of glowing references Beere was underwhelmed by her experience at interview. She later recalled: '*I went up there [to Dublin Castle] and was interviewed but all I was asked for was for a specimen of my handwriting.'*¹⁵ The test was however commensurate with the post. In January 1924 she commenced her civil service career as a temporary Grade III woman clerk on a salary of 43/4 per week, a position she later described as 'a very lowly form of life.'¹⁶

The conditions of her employment were indeed bleak: the appointment could be terminated by one week's notice; she had no right to pension, gratuity or allowance upon termination; she was not entitled to any expenses; and she could be required to attend - at her own expense - one of several offices of the Department in Dublin. Adding further cheer the offer concluded that: '*the whole of your time must be at the disposal of the Ministry. The minimum number of hours per week you will be required to work is 44; and you may be required to render assistance in excess of the minimum. In the event of your being absent from duty on any week-day from any cause payment of salary in respect of that day will be withheld.*'¹⁷

Within six months Thekla was promoted to Grade 2 Temporary Clerk with a modest pay increase to £2 per week. The 1924 Ministers and Secretaries Act held out the prospect of a more direct route to the Junior Administrative grades for university graduates but before the dust had fully settled on a row about whether or not women could sit the exam¹⁸, Thekla's fortunes were transformed by dint of a once in a lifetime opportunity.

¹⁴ IPA: Beere Papers, reference written by M.J. Ryan, Barrister at Law and Reid Professor of Penal Legislation, Constitutional Law and History, Criminal Law and the Law of Evidence, dated 13 August, 1924.

¹⁵ Interview with Rosemary Cullen, 1987.

¹⁶ Interview with Tom McGurk, 'One Man's Ireland Series', RTÉ Radio One, 1974.

¹⁷ Thekla Beere, personnel file, Department of Transport.

¹⁸ Mrs M. Murphy, a former TCD graduate and employee at the Department of Industry and Commerce, urged the lady registrar at TCD to encourage women to apply in spite of their apparent preclusion. She stated: 'A woman graduate of whom I know applied, but was told that women were not eligible, but that there would shortly be an exam for typists! Since then we have been investigating the matter and find from the regulations that anyone 'born in Ireland of Irish parents' or who is 'a citizen of Saorstát Éireann' is eligible, and that accordingly women cannot be excluded. I was wondering if there were any T.C.D. women who wd [sic] think of trying for these jobs. The pay is good for Dublin, though of course otherwise life in the Irish Civil Service is not a bed of roses...I thought it wd [sic] be a pity if anyone who wanted a job in Dublin shd [sic] miss this

International House

In the summer of 1925 Beere was deemed eligible for a Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) scholarship. This entitled her to two years' study and travel in North America – years that were undoubtedly the most formative of her life. Although she later suggested that there was an element of chance in securing the scholarship, her association with Trinity was in fact key. Shortly after joining the civil service she had been invited to act as secretary to a committee tasked with reforming the Statistics Office. It was comprised mainly of university professors and it was they who nominated her for the scholarship. Her former professor at Trinity, C.F. Bastable, was particularly keen that she should secure the scholarship and testified in his reference to her glowing academic record and to her achievements since joining the statistics bureau, adding: '*Her legal and linguistic attainments would be of great service in dealing with matters of an international character.*'¹⁹

Having secured the necessary unpaid leave from the civil service, Beere sailed for New York in September 1925. At International House she enrolled alongside more than a thousand other students representing some sixty-six different nations.²⁰ Thanks to a generous travel allowance she was able to intern at the Graduate School of Colombia, the Brookings Graduate School in DC, Harvard, the Institute of Politics at Williamstown and the Canadian Bureau of Statistics in Ottawa. She heard the anti-fascist campaigner, Salvemini, take on Mussolini; sat in the US senate while the Prohibition Act was being debated; and in San Francisco witnessed one of the first lie detector machines in operation. In DC she met with both the US Attorney General and then President, Calvin Coolidge. Whilst delighted to meet the former, she was underwhelmed by the President. In a letter to her parents she recorded: '*Cal is the most wizened, miserable looking specimen you can imagine - without a spark of life or animation. He lived up to his reputation for silence. Our conversation was brief - and uninteresting.*'

opportunity...P.S. A. Johnston & T. Beere know about this'. Mrs M. Murphy, Department of Industry and Commerce, Lord Edward Street, Dublin to Miss Olive Purser, Lady Registrar at TCD, 6 November 1924, TCD Manuscripts Department, MUN/WOMEN/8/1/67.

¹⁹ IPA Beere Papers, reference for Rockefeller committee by C.F. Bastable, 25 April 1925.

²⁰ Although the student body comprised almost seventy nationalities, Beere noted that there were only two black students. Interview with Tom McGurk, 'One Man's Ireland', RTÉ Radio 1, 1974.

Carpe Diem

In contrast to her time at Trinity, Beere now had the means to a social life and demonstrated that, given half a chance, her inclination was to seize the day.²¹ On her International House diary I noted that she had taken the trouble to circle every ‘Friday night dance’ for the entire first year. In an interview with Tom McGurk in 1974 she later reflected on the excitement of Jazz Age America - of learning the Charleston and the Black Bottom, and even dancing the tango on Broadway. The diary of her time in Washington DC is awash with invitations to restaurants, movies, theatres, orchestra performances, tennis matches and bridge tournaments. She learned to drive and overcame her fear of water through swimming lessons. Not surprisingly, she attracted much chivalrous attention and was quite open in communicating these proposals to her parents. In August 1926, for example, she describes a train journey from Sacramento to Portland and states: *‘a man asked me to play bridge, but I did not care for his looks, so as the Yanks say, “I gave him the bird”.*²² Having settled in Portland she noted: *‘waiting for Glen Bunch to call – he’s the young journalist I played tennis with in Berkeley, a nice quiet shy boy with quite a care on me – very uninteresting but he’ll be useful to show me the sights!’*²³ A more serious contender was Kenneth Lindsay [future independent MP for the combined English universities]. In May 1927 she recounted a date with Lindsay: *‘off we went to the Spanish Village and danced till 2.30am – he’s a lovely dancer and I had a topping time. He is going home in September via the Orient and has ideas that I could do likewise and eek out my finances by public speaking. He had to dash up to New York by the early morning train to have dinner with Ramsay McDonald.’*²⁴

Glimpses of Politics

Given her inclination to avoid overtly political discussions, it is not surprisingly that she declined an invitation whilst in Quebec to speak on *‘political conditions in Ireland’* and agreed instead to address the less thorny issue of *‘Irish economic policies’*.²⁵ The letter diary she maintained during the course of this scholarship nonetheless offers some rare glimpses into her broader political views. It betrays first and foremost her loyalty to the new Irish state and her desire to ensure that her country was fairly and positively represented internationally. She was particularly proud of the Shannon scheme

²¹ Her first stipend amounted to \$1800 (approximately £360). This was a most generous allowance and, for the first time since 1919, Beere did not have to seek extra employment to supplement her income.

²² Letter-diary, 6 August 1926.

²³ Letter-diary, 7 August 1926. On 5 April 1927 she recorded another rebuff: ‘Mr Micklin – the sociologist called to see me and stayed three hours – he is a sentimental southerner and almost 30 years older than I am so that I’m not interested!’. Later that month she also came home to find that a ‘secret admirer’ had left her a huge bunch of flowers.

²⁴ Letter-diary, 13 May 1927.

²⁵ Letter-diary, 12 August 1927.

describing it in an interview as '*the greatest and bravest enterprise attempted by the Free State government*' adding that the British had 126 years to establish industries in Ireland but had failed to do so.²⁶ She was, however, firmly in favour of Ireland remaining within the Commonwealth and as such was not surprising uneasy at Fianna Fáil's entry into the Dáil in 1926 and in particular at the stirrings of what she described as '*an enormous Republican propaganda campaign*' in the US.²⁷ In April 1927 De Valera's visit to Washington DC provoked further comment. She noted:

The people at the top of this house went off to greet de Valera at the station. He [Russell] is so anti-English that he turns all his books by Englishmen or on English subjects upside down in his library...his wife, whom I know slightly, is, I hear, trying to keep us apart in case Charles Edward would use abusive language about the Free State! Of course I always keep out of arguments here, and reply in Mr Hooper's words, 'I'm Irish, and my heart's in the right place'!...I did not feel called to go and hear de Valera at the Auditorium!²⁸

To her great relief a fellow Trinity graduate arrived on the scene to offset her irritation with Dev. In February 1927 she recorded her delight at meeting Frederick Boland, the new Rockefeller scholar who had studied law at Trinity the year after her:

He is a barrister and got a studentship in TCD and is awfully [sic] nice – the very best type of Trinity product and I felt very proud of my country-man. He is as brilliant as Duncan but has also plenty of savoir-faire. His father is Boland of the Civil Service Commission who gave me my leave of absence. Boland considers my chances very good [sic].²⁹

Views of Catholicism

Perhaps not surprisingly, Beere occasionally expressed a degree of antipathy towards the Catholic Church³⁰ but it's interesting to note that – in marked contrast to some recent historical accounts³¹ – She strongly believed that Protestants had received a fair deal in the new Free State. She was thus

²⁶ *New York Times*, 12 August 1926.

²⁷ Letter-diary, 31 January 1927.

²⁸ Letter-diary, 23 April 1927.

²⁹ Letter-diary, 26 February 1927. Frederick Boland later became Ireland's first ambassador to Britain and to the UN. He served as secretary of the Department of External Affairs (1945-1950) and as President of the UN General Assembly (1960-61). He was appointed Chancellor of Trinity College, Dublin, in 1963.

³⁰ Beere recorded attending a meeting of the Knights of Columbanus so as 'to hear what they had to say about Mexico' and added that the Knights were the 'R.C. Klu Klux Klan' but added that, 'I am glad it is a Bolshevik v Catholic argument and not Protestantism v Catholicism.' Letter-diary, c April 1927.

³¹ See, for example, Robin Bury *Buried Lives: Are the Protestants of Southern Ireland Really Under Siege?* (Dublin, 2017).

quite irritated by a letter to the *Irish Times* suggesting the opposite. On 3 September 1927 she wrote to her parents: '*I wish someone would choke people like Gatenby for that letter of his in the Irish Times*'. Gatenby, one of Trinity's most distinguished graduates, had claimed that a TCD candidate had been ranked first for a position at UCD but that the governing body had subsequently overturned the decision. His letter concluded by suggesting that '*No country which drives its best abroad can have a bright future*'.³² In Beere's opinion, however, what she described as '*all his "bla" at the end can only have an irritating affect, especially when government positions are freely open to Protestants in the Free State and are absolutely closed to RCs in the north.*'³³

Whilst in America, a number of potential job opportunities had arisen but Beere was wholly committed to returning to Ireland. She later stated: '*My determination had always been that I was going to live and work in Ireland. I formed that determination in my childhood before I went to school.*'³⁴ She was, moreover, firmly committed to pursuing a career in the civil service. Following a conversation with Frederick Boland she stated: '*Frederick Boland was so enthusiastic about the Free State that I am feeling quite excited at the prospects of starting work in Dublin again, even though I fully realise it will be the devil to settle down to office life again and to leave all the friends and excitement of America.*'³⁵ True to form, she was determined to make the most of every last moment of her scholarship. She departed Boston in September 1927 with a liberal sum of money to spend within a short space of time. She boarded first class with a bountiful supply of fruit, flowers and chocolate and noted that she intended sending '*several boxes down to the steerage children.*' Not for the first time she was the only woman in her class. Far from being intimidated in male company, she simply lamented in her diary that: '*There is nobody interesting to flirt with, the only thrilling men are all safely married. The French and Italians are very amusing, some of them seem to pass the time*

³² *Irish Times*, 17 August 1927. This letter provoked a string of angry letters to the editor of the *Irish Times* including a response from Professor Seaghan MacEnri of UCG who suggested that, 'When Professor Gatenby next beats the Orange drum he had better have his facts more correctly. Being a TCD graduate, I know a good deal about the anti-Irish bigotry of that institution and, if put to it, I may beat another drum.' *Irish Times*, 24 August 1927.

³³ Letter-diary, 3 September 1927. Beere's stance chimes with the sentiments expressed at the opening a special conference on the Church of Ireland AD 432-1932 on 11 October 1932. Reflecting on the state of community relations Right Reverend H.E. Patton, D.D., Bishop of Killaloe reported that: 'In remote places in the south and west, where our people are but a mere fraction of the surrounding population, we find the members of the Church of the minority trusted and respected...we exercise, I believe, an influence far beyond anything that mere numbers can suggest, and in the exercise of this influence we experience the kindness and courtesy of our fellow-countrymen'. Bell, Rev. William and Emerson, Rev. N.D., *The Church of Ireland AD 432-1932; The Report of the Church of Ireland Conference held in Dublin 11th-14th October 1932*, p. 14.

³⁴ Interview with Tom McGurk, 'One Man's Ireland', RTÉ Radio 1, 1974.

³⁵ Letter-diary, 28 February 1927. As the time for her return to Dublin drew closer her enthusiasm was curbed by news of the dissolution of the Dáil. On 27 August she stated: 'I see dissolution of the Government in paper today. I wonder what will happen at the new election. I hope I'm not just arriving home for another Civil War.' Letter-diary, 26 August 1927.

*hand-kissing, which is a very boring proceeding – je pense!*³⁶ She describes a lazy time on board, sleeping till eleven, taking a short walk before lunch, listening to the Russian orchestra, sipping champagne, playing cards and dancing. Having stopped off in Lisbon, Sicily, Naples, Paris and London, she landed back to the rather less salubrious setting of the Statistics Office.³⁷

BACK TO BASICS

Making Ends Meet

Having followed her studies in the USA with great interest and determined to keep her, John Hooper persuaded the Establishment section of Industry and Commerce to create a new post appropriate to Thekla's newly acquired skills and experience. Although the position of 'technician' didn't signify a significant promotion she was gratified to be classed as something of an '*expert*' and thus different to the '*general run of Executives*'.³⁸ She later quite rightly reflected that her sex had prevented her from being admitted to a higher level, noting: '*They hadn't any women at that level...and so they just weren't sure they ought to promote me.*'³⁹ Whilst she seems to have been quietly accepting of the reluctance to promote women, Beere was disappointed that in the deflationary climate of the 1930s her salary of £105 per annum did not provide for any great degree comfort. Her finances were further stretched following the death of her father as she subsequently assumed responsibility for the care of her invalid mother. In order to supplement her income she offered grinds and wrote editorials for the journal of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce. In June 1932 she turned her hand to teaching and became the first female lecturer in statistics in Ireland, leading a BComm module in statistical method here at Trinity - a position she maintained until July 1942.⁴⁰

Attitudes to Women in the Civil Service

The Department of Finance's reluctance to promote Beere was of course indicative of a widespread anxiety within the public service about the perils of female advancement. This was reflected in attempts to prevent women from applying for senior posts by competitive examination, the fixing of separate pay scales for men and women, and legislative provision for the preclusion of women from certain positions. The rationale for restricting certain positions to either men or women was based

³⁶ Letter-diary, 14 September 1927.

³⁷ Letter-diary, 22 August 1927.

³⁸ Letter-diary, 2 September 1927.

³⁹ Interview with Etnine Loughrey, *Woman's Way*, 11 November 1988.

⁴⁰ The Dublin University Calendar, Trinity College, 1932-1942.

on two core arguments – one physical, the other moral. Thus for example a 1926 Commission upheld the Department of Deed's contention that female clerks should be precluded from their ranks as it was not appropriate for a woman to incur the risk of climbing a step ladder to retrieve books.⁴¹ A few years later the Lord Chief Justice and other judges objected to the employment of female typists in the court service on the grounds of '*medico-psychology*' and another committee was set up to investigate.⁴²

The Marriage Bar

The policy of pay differentials between men and women in the public service was upheld by the 1935 Brennan Commission⁴³ which cited two 'objective matters' in defence of their decision, namely sick leave and retirement on marriage.⁴⁴ Reflecting on the latter issue, John Gorman who served in the Department of Finance between 1939 and 1946 told me that young ambitious civil servants kept a close eye on the romantic pursuits of their female colleagues. He noted that Tom Murray, later Chairman of the ESB, was always able to produce a slip of paper from his hip pocket which conclusively demonstrated that the key to promotion was to get Thekla Beere and another woman, Máire Breathnach, 'married off somehow', so as to provide a vacancy for 'more deserving people'.⁴⁵ Indeed in an addendum to the Brennan report Mary S. Kettle made clear her view that: '*Women from their entry until they reach the ages of 45 or 50 are looked upon as if they are loitering with the intent to commit a felony – the felony in this case being marriage*'.⁴⁶

The Irish civil service was, of course, far from unique in its attitude to the employment of women. For example, it was not until 1928 that women in Britain were admitted to the open competitions for clerical and executive grades.⁴⁷ Despite the increasing opportunities that then opened up during

⁴¹ NAI: Department of Finance, E109/18/26, 'Registry of Deeds: unsuitability of women for certain posts in government departments, committee's report'. This is in keeping with a prevailing misconception that women might damage their internal organs by over-stretching.

⁴² NAI: Department of Finance, E121/7/29, 'Committee of inquiry into questions arising out of employment of women in public departments'. It was considered inappropriate and indeed dangerous that women be exposed to the foul language and sordid details contained within certain criminal and civil cases.

⁴³ *Commission of Inquiry into the Civil Service, 1932-35, Volume 1* (The Stationery Office, 1935), p. 86.

⁴⁴ Section nine of the Civil Service Regulation Act, 1924, stipulated that 'Female Civil Servants holding established posts will be required on marriage to resign from the Civil Service.' In 1933 the requirement to retire upon marriage was extended to female national school teachers. Any lingering doubts about the enforceability of the bar were taken care of in the Civil Service Act of 1956 which clearly stipulated that the vast majority of women in the civil service were required to resign on marriage and upheld the commissioners right to confine civil service competitions to persons of either sex.

⁴⁵ Interview with John Gorman, 7 January 2008.

⁴⁶ *Commission of Inquiry into the Civil Service, 1932-35, Volume 1* (The Stationery Office, 1935), Addendum C. by Mrs Mary S. Kettle, pp. 126-7.

⁴⁷ In a memorandum on equal pay dated 18 February 1937, H.P. Boland noted that, following discussion in the House of Commons in April 1936, the British government had refused to adopt the principle of equal pay for

the War years an excerpt from the July 1943 issue of *Transportation Magazine* is indicative of prevailing attitudes towards the employment of women.

A series of tips for male supervisors of women in the work force during World War II included the following: '*General advice indicates that "husky" girls – those who are just a little on the heavy side – are more even tempered and efficient than their underweight sisters... Give every girl an adequate number of rest periods during the day. You have to make some allowances for feminine psychology. A girl has more confidence and is more efficient if she can keep her hair tidied, apply fresh lipstick and wash her hands several times a day... Be tactful when issuing instructions or in making criticisms. Women are often sensitive... Never ridicule a woman – it breaks her spirit and cuts off her efficiency.'*'

SCALING THE RANKS

Obstacles to Progress

Beere clearly enjoyed her time in the Statistics Office working on the first Census Reports and implementing ideas developed in the course of her engagement with the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland.⁴⁸ She nonetheless faced a very obvious obstacle in that the next grade up from her was occupied by a youthful Roy Geary. In 1934 she thus decided to take a backwards step to the position of staff officer so that she could then apply to the general services grades. In spite of strenuous attempts to retain her within the statistics branch⁴⁹, she was finally promoted to the post of Superintending Officer in the Transport and Marine section of Industry and Commerce in July 1941.⁵⁰

equal work. He referred to the Report of the Royal Commission on the British Service (1929-31) and noted that it found that, although a majority of senior female civil servants opposed the marriage bar, the majority of the staff side of the National Council (representing over 40,000 women civil servants) favoured its retention. NAI, Department of Finance, E130/50/36.

⁴⁸ Interview Rosemary Cullen, 'Moments in Time', RTÉ Radio One, 1987.

⁴⁹ Extract from Secretary's minute to Minister for Industry and Commerce, 21 March 1941, Thekla Beere Personnel File, Department of Transport.

⁵⁰ A colleague in the statistics branch wrote to Beere to congratulate her on her promotion to superintending officer. He stated: 'Indeed the only regrettable part of the proceedings is the length of time it took to place you in the position, which you should have been occupying for the past few years at least. I will refrain from puffing the incense, but I know you will always live in the warm hearts of your old staff for your kindly interest in their individual welfare, in their worries, amusements, ailments and recoverys [sic], for your straightforwardness, and above all for your scrupulous justice, probably all inherited attributes, which are sadly lacking among most of the Superior Officers of my acquaintance, therefore I was delighted to learn that your great talents had at length been recognised.' IPA: Beere Papers, Thomas J. Hill to Beere, 18 July 1941.

Department of Supplies

The creation of the new Department of Supplies during World War Two then provided her with an opportunity to shine. This new department, headed by Lemass, was central to Ireland's economic survival during what was dubbed the 'Emergency'. It was tasked with ensuring that essential supplies of food, fuel, clothing and machinery were distributed fairly and efficiently and Beere quickly became associated with issues as the transportation of milk, turf and wheat. Her talents were immediately recognised by her superiors and within six months she was promoted to assistant Principal Officer and then acting Principal Officer in December 1943. As Principal Officer she became more closely involved with the major wartime and post-war developments in transport and in the negotiations, financial arrangements and intricate legislation that this entailed. This included the development of the Transport Act of 1944 (which created CIÉ), the Irish Shipping Act of 1947 which radically restructured Irish Shipping and the Harbours Act of 1946. An acknowledged expert on shipping, railway and labour issues, she was appointed Assistant Secretary in November 1953. Beere continued her responsibility for transport and marine issues, helping to develop the legal machinery for an Irish merchant Shipping identity, overseeing the distribution of food subsidies and assuming direct responsibility for the labour division. Her dedication, commitment and hard work during the busy post-war period did not go unnoticed. Lemass, in particular, had kept a watchful eye on Beere's progress and, when the opportunity arose, she reaped a just reward.

APPOINTMENT AS SECRETARY

Secretarial Servitude

On 1 August 1959, Beere was officially installed as secretary of the new Department of Transport and Power.⁵¹ The many letters of congratulation she received testify to the high esteem with which she was held within both the public service and the wider public. Congratulating her on her '*entry into the Order of Secretarial Servitude*', T.K. Whitaker noted that '*the servitude will be nothing new – no one has worked harder, been more devoted, or earned the highest recognition better than you.*'⁵² The majority of well-wishers not surprisingly referred specifically to the fact that she was a woman. For example, Eleanor Battersby noted: '*Your whole career has not only been a source of pride to women in Ireland, but will continue to serve as an inspiration to many, who might otherwise feel they*

⁵¹ In addition to the normal running of the department, Beere was appointed in December 1959 as accounting officer for the vote of Transport and Power in December 1959. This appointment, made by convention and not by statute, rendered her personally responsible for the Appropriation Account of the department.

⁵² IPA: Beere Papers.

would never have a chance to give of their best to their own country, and whom we can ill afford to lose.'⁵³

Double Minority

While it was undoubtedly her sex that most set her apart in the higher echelons of the civil service, Beere's Church of Ireland background was also somewhat unusual.⁵⁴ Ronan Fanning noted that, in December 1933, no fewer than three of the ten senior officers in the Department of Finance were Protestants and a fourth was born a Protestant but later became a convert to Catholicism.⁵⁵ By 1970, however, the number of Protestant officials in senior grades in the civil service and local authorities had dwindled and Beere was undoubtedly one of an increasing minority.⁵⁶ It is thus not surprising that several letters of congratulation made explicit reference to her religious background. E.G. Dawton commended her foresight in entering the civil service in the early days of the state's existence: '*Your entering the Government Service at a time when our community cherished foolish prejudices revealed great courage and independence. You were a pioneer then, and it is good to see once more that you are the first woman to hold this high office.*'⁵⁷

Dinners and Doors

Although there was widespread acceptance within the civil service that Beere's appointment was entirely on merit, the appointment of a female Secretary not surprisingly occasionally ruffled diplomatic feathers. She later recalled, for example, that there were endless arguments about whether or not she should precede the Minister.⁵⁸ There was an embarrassing delay at the door of the Stephen's Green club as signatures were hastily gathered to enable her to offer the vote of thanks at a male only dinner.⁵⁹ Beere also later recalled with bemusement that, as Secretary to the Department, she was invited to the annual dinner of a state company that she had minimal dealings with. She noted that she was all the more confused to discover that she was the only female guest. When she finally plucked up the courage to ask why she had been invited she was told that two women were shortly due to qualify for this profession and, to allay the fears of those who were against admitting them, she had been invited along to see whether or not having a woman present

⁵³ IPA: Beere Papers.

⁵⁴ Many commentators noted that it was particularly unusual that both Secretary and Minister on this occasion adhered to the Protestant faith.

⁵⁵ Ronan Fanning, *The Irish Department of Finance, 1922-58* (Dublin, 1978), p. 535.

⁵⁶ Jack White, *Minority Report: The Protestant Community in the Irish Republic* (Dublin, 1975), p. 162.

⁵⁷ IPA: Beere Papers.

⁵⁸ Interview with Frances O'Rourke, 'Dr Thekla Beere – A Profile', *Administration*, Spring 1975, Vol. 23, No. 1.

⁵⁹ Interview with Donal O'Mahony, 7 May 2007.

would spoil the annual dinner. She was relieved to learn that the women in doubt were admitted the following year.⁶⁰

Transport and Power

The department to which Thekla was appointed Secretary took in all of the responsibilities previously contained within marine services and inland transport whilst the ‘power’ element embraced all matters relating to the procurement and distribution of all types of solid fuel, oil and petrol, the Gas Acts, the E.S.B. and Bord na Móna.⁶¹ One of the key challenges confronting her was the rationalisation and co-ordination of a complex constellation of state-sponsored bodies. By the 1960s the staff of these bodies outnumbered that of both the civil service and local authorities combined.⁶² The sector was dominated by a few giants with CIÉ, ESB, Aer Lingus and Bord na Móna accounting for two thirds of all employment in the state sponsored sector.⁶³ With some degree of truth Patrick Gilligan quipped that the Department of Transport and Power’s remit was essentially ‘*jets and other debts*.’⁶⁴ Holding her own with boards that in the words of Lemass, saw themselves as ‘*sovereign independent authorities*’⁶⁵ was no mean feat. She nonetheless shored up Irish Shipping, set about the renewal and modernisation of CIÉ, managed threatened industrial action in the aviation industry, led a delegation in sensitive commercial talks with the American government and was centrally involved in cross-border co-operation in electricity, transport and tourism. The latter of course helping to lay the foundations for the ground-breaking political meetings of the 1960s. Beere retired from the civil service on 20 June 1966. A few weeks before her formal departure a luncheon was held in her honour at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington DC. This was a fitting finale for a career that had in many ways been primed by a postgraduate scholarship to North America some forty years previously.

⁶⁰ Interview with Rosemary Cullen Owens, ‘Moments in Time’, RTÉ Radio One, 1987. In January 1975 Beere also became the first woman ever to attend the president’s night of the Marketing Institute of Ireland.

⁶¹ Dáil Debates, Vol. 176, 7 July 1959.

⁶² Basil Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland* (London, 1982), p. 237.

⁶³ *The Devlin Report: A Summary* (Institute of Public Administration, Dublin, 1970), p. 17.

⁶⁴ Bernard Share, *The Flight of the Iolar: The Aer Lingus Experience, 1936-1986* (Dublin, 1986), p.117.

⁶⁵ Sean F. Lemass, ‘The Role of the State-Sponsored Bodies in the Economy’, *Administration*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Winter, 1958), pp.288-9.

PUBLIC DUTIES

'Statutory Protestant' and 'Statutory Woman'

Like many illustrious public servants, Beere's pace of work scarcely faltered in retirement. As she quietly quipped to Kenneth Milne: '*I'm the statutory woman and the statutory Protestant. And if ever there's a small group, a small committee, and they want to make it really representative - I'm the one who gets caught!*'⁶⁶ First in line was the Public Services Organisation Review Group – the group established in 1966 to conduct a major review of the entire system of public administration. She also served on the council of Alexandra School and College; as a governor of the Rotunda Hospital,⁶⁷ as a member of the Protestant Education Committee; and was a committed and active member of the Irish Times Trust.⁶⁸

Commission on the Status of Women

Perhaps the most notable contribution Thekla made to public life in her retirement was her chairmanship of the Commission on the Status of Women. The campaign for women's equality in the 1970s is commonly associated with prominent individuals such as Nell McCafferty and Mary Kenny. Behind the scenes, however, this Commission painstakingly researched the various barriers facing women in Irish society and Beere's report was an important milestone with an enduring legacy. The establishment of the Commission came about as a result of international pressure, directly from the UN and indirectly in anticipation of EEC membership.

At the Fianna Fáil Ard Fheis in January 1970, Lynch announced the government's intention to set up the commission adding that it would be chaired by '*one of the greatest women ever in the history of Irish public life*'.⁶⁹ Reflecting her innate pragmatism, Beere was adamant that the committee would be comprised of an equal number of men and women. Having surveyed the experience of such commissions in other countries she was convinced that: '*No matter how good an all-woman Commission might have been it would in all probability have been accused of taking a prejudiced and emotional view of many of the controversial issues involved...with a report agreed by both men and*

⁶⁶ Beere communicated this quip to Kenneth Milne during her service on the Secondary Education Committee. Interview with Kenneth Milne, 29 January 2008.

⁶⁷ The Rotunda was founded by Bartholomew Mosse in 1745 as a 'lying-in' hospital designed primarily to cater for the poor of Dublin. While the hospital's clientele was overwhelmingly Catholic, the hospital's management traditionally reflected a Protestant ethos.

⁶⁸ Major T. B. McDowell suggested that Thekla was 'a natural' for the Irish Times Trust and that she entered into it wholly enthusiastically and was never afraid to speak her mind.' Interview with Major T. B. McDowell, 11 April 2008.

⁶⁹ *Sunday Press*, 18 Jan 1970.

women, and supported with facts, statistics and research, we stood a much better chance of success.⁷⁰

Within two years of their first meeting in April 1970 the Commission were in a position to present an agreed report to the Minister of Finance. Clear and succinct, it dealt in turn with equal pay, employment, social welfare, taxation, the law, politics and public life, education and cultural affairs, and women at home. It met with almost universal approval. The *Sunday Press* ran with a huge headline heralding '*A Radical Deal for Ireland's Women*',⁷¹ while the *Evening Herald* proclaimed it to be a: '*Leap Across the Years for Irish Women*'.⁷² Moving a motion of support, Senator Mary Robinson described it as '*the most important social document in recent Irish history*' and commended the fact that it was '*comprehensive, very well balanced and extraordinarily readable*'.⁷³

On the back of this report, the Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act was passed in July 1974 and provided for full equal pay by December 1975.⁷⁴ The marriage bar was removed first for the civil service and then from all categories of employment.⁷⁵ The Social Welfare Act of 1973 also responded to many of the report's observations on the plight of widows, deserted wives,⁷⁶ prisoners' wives and unmarried mothers. Beere estimated that, by the end of 1974, half of her recommendations had been implemented or were in the process of implementation, one-third had been accepted in principle with work proceeded towards implementation, and only one-fifth had not yet been acted upon.

This was clearly not the last word on women's issues. A controversial recommendation on contraception was deemed ahead of its time.⁷⁷ It must also be acknowledged that the introduction of equal pay and the removal of the marriage bar did not effect a revolutionary change in the proportion of women reaching the higher echelons of the civil service. At the instigation of the Council for the Status of Women, a second Commission was thus established by Charlie Haughey in November 1990. The members of this committee were, however, careful to acknowledge the success of the first Commission. Frances Fitzgerald (chair of the Council for the Status of Women,

⁷⁰ Frances O'Rourke, 'Dr. Thekla Beere – A Profile', in *Administration*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1975), p. 20.

⁷¹ *Sunday Press*, 25 February 1973.

⁷² *Evening Herald*, 10 May 1973.

⁷³ *Seanad Debates*, 25 July 1973.

⁷⁴ The coalition government attempted to delay the implementation of equal pay but, following a legal challenge from the chairwoman of the Women's Political Association, the European Commission rejected the government's appeal for derogation and the directive on equal pay was made binding with effect from February 1976.

⁷⁵ See Civil Service (Employment of Married Women) Act, 1973. The Employment Equality Act, 1977, categorically prohibited enforcement of a marriage bar in any area of employment.

⁷⁶ The rate of desertion was unusually high in Ireland due to the ban on divorce.

⁷⁷ *Commission on the Status of Women*, paragraph 574, p. 225.

1988–92), emphasised that the first Commission had brought about a change in attitudes because – ‘*there it was in writing – equal pay must come in – the marriage bar must go – very strong messages about the rights of women, about the way women should be treated.*’⁷⁸

Equality First

In an interesting reflection on her attitude towards female equality and indeed civil service values, Beere later reflected that she felt compelled to accept the invitation to chair the Commission: ‘*I felt it was my duty as a woman – I had got there and I felt I should do my best to help other women – that was the reason.*’⁷⁹ She added that she had in her own career done her best to help women advance and in particular tried ‘*to put them into a job where they would have a chance*’.⁸⁰ Former President Mary McAleese later attested to Beere’s unfailingly affirming and supportive nature and noted that she was a ‘*big role model*’ for her as a young professional.⁸¹ Whilst Beere is thus rightly held up as a trailblazer for the advancement of women,⁸² she was never overtly feminist. Her struggle to pay her way through university may explain her lack of involvement with the first phase of the women’s movement but unlike many other contemporary female graduates she seems to have made a conscious decision not to involve herself in the leading professional women’s organisations of her day: the Dublin University Women Graduates Association, the Irish Federation of University Women, the Irish Women’s Citizens and Local Government Association, the National Council of Women of Ireland or the Association of Business and Professional Women. Indeed in later years she remained uncomfortable with the term ‘feminist’, preferring to state that she was in favour of equality:⁸³

*If I saw anything unfair being done towards a particular person, then I’d do my best but I was not an active feminist. I think women got on much better if they were involved in anything that the men were also involved in. I think they were accepted then.*⁸⁴

With regard to the Commission on the Status of Women she emphasised that: ‘*My aim was to get a united report. I’m not a great liberationist. I’m just one for equality – equality of opportunity.*’⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Interview with Rosemary Cullen Owens, ‘Moments in Time’, RTÉ Radio One, 1987.

⁷⁹ Interview with Rosemary Cullen Owens, ‘Moments in Time’, RTÉ Radio One, 1987.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “Thekla Beere Well-Deserving of Biography” Says President’, *Irish Times*, 19 March 2009.

⁸² Fennell suggested that Beere’s role as chair of the Commission rendered her a ‘pioneer of women’s rights’. *Dublin Tribune*, 28 February 1991. Similarly, Mary Robinson paid tribute to her ‘pioneering contribution to equality issues’. *Irish Times*, 20 February 1991.

⁸³ Interview with Etnine Loughrey, *Woman’s Way*, 11 November 1988.

⁸⁴ Interview with Rosemary Cullen Owens, ‘Moments in Time’, RTÉ Radio One, 1987.

⁸⁵ Interview with Tom McGurk, ‘One Man’s Ireland’, RTÉ Radio One, 1974.

Perhaps not surprisingly Beere was somewhat intolerant of the more radical wing of the women's movement. Referring to the representations made by various women's organisations during International Women's Year (1975), she stated that she admired those women's groups that had pinpointed specific problems and set about solving them. She added that she was somewhat impatient with some of the younger women who had not clearly defined what they wanted: '*I got a bit fed up with some of the young protesters just waving their arms saying "We want our rights".*'⁸⁶

This pragmatic approach to female equality was evident in her assessment of her own career. As noted, she frequently insisted that she had not experienced prejudice in the civil service because she was a woman: '*I used to think that things could be weighted against me because I was a woman, and a Protestant at that – but it just wasn't so. In fact, I got ahead a bit faster than normal.*'⁸⁷ Perhaps not surprisingly, the report of the Commission on the Status of Women invoked the contemporary 'lean in' mantra, concluding that women must do more to help themselves. It urged women to seek out and accept positions of responsibility in trade unions, management, business, professional organisations and politics. Women's organisations were also advised to define their objectives more clearly and to focus their objectives more clearly on these activities. Beere was thus not openly associated with the 'cause' of female emancipation. Like Jane Addams, hers was a feminism grounded in lived and practical experience. And yet, in her own quiet and determined way, she undoubtedly made a significant and lasting contribution to the advancement of Irish women.

BEYOND SERVITUDE

What then of the woman behind the public persona? The *Irish Times* obituary of Beere's former Secretary at the Department of Industry and Commerce, John Leydon, suggested that he had 'no interests outside his work and his family.' The same could not be said of Thekla Beere. She was a founding member and later President of the Irish youth-hostelling association, An Óige, a long-standing member of the Irish Film Society and, as its President in the 1970s worked hard to have film recognised as an art, with significant knock-on effects for funding. She developed an interest in art through her association with the acclaimed Irish artist Cecil King, was a keen theatre and opera goer and commended the development of ballet in Cork in the 1970s as 'thrilling and wonderful'.⁸⁸ Those who attended her lunch and cocktail parties included artists, colleagues from political and public life

⁸⁶ O'Rourke, 'Dr. Thekla Beere – A Profile', p. 20.

⁸⁷ O'Rourke, 'Dr. Thekla Beere – A Profile', p. 20.

⁸⁸ Interview with Tom McGurk, 'One Man's Ireland', RTÉ Radio One, 1974.

(such as Erskine Childers, Ken Whitaker, Patrick Lynch, Todd Andrews and Liam Devlin), literary figures (such as Eileen O’Casey, widow of Sean O’Casey and Hugh Leonard) and academics (such as Roger McHugh, professor of English at UCD and her good friend, A. J. McConnell, former provost of Trinity).⁸⁹ Although she resolutely separated public and private life, it was clear from talking to Thekla’s family and friends that, behind the successful public servant was an unfailingly kind and supportive daughter, sister, aunt, and friend; a great lover of the arts; and a sparkling hostess who loved to party and dance.

Romantic Life

While most of Beere’s male contemporaries (or at least those that I interviewed) had not given much consideration to the fact that she did not marry, or indeed to the fact that the marriage bar might have dissuaded her from doing so,⁹⁰ many alluded to her feminine virtues. Major McDowell, former Chief Executive and Chairman of the *Irish Times* stated: ‘*She never married, but she was a very feminine woman. I don’t mean she used her feminine wiles and things, but she was always very carefully dressed and had her hair done . . . It wouldn’t surprise me, if I’d put it this way, if Thekla had a boyfriend*’.⁹¹

In the course of researching Thekla’s biography and speaking to her surviving relatives it became clear that Thekla did indeed have a ‘significant other’, namely leading Dublin businessman, J.J. O’Leary. O’Leary served on the board of Aer Lingus from its inception, owned Cahill Printing and was at one point the director of more than 50 companies.⁹² In many ways, they were an odd match. O’Leary was a gregarious character (he claimed, for example, to have smuggled Peadar O’Donnell in and out of Spain during the Civil War) whereas Beere was the essence of discretion. They had, however, many interests in common. Sharing a common passion for the theatre, they regularly frequented O’Leary’s box at the Gaiety. He became infected by her interest in golf whilst she in turn was introduced to the world of sailing.⁹³ In later years, the duo travelled widely together. The relationship was, however, complicated by the fact that O’Leary, a Catholic, had in his early life been

⁸⁹ A Presbyterian from Ballymena, Co. Antrim, A. J. McConnell became a firm friend of de Valera’s following his appointment as professor of mathematics at Trinity.

⁹⁰ See, for example, interviews with: T. K. Whitaker, 1 May 2007; Tadhg Ó Cearbhaill, 2 July 2007; and Noel McMahon, 18 July 2007.

⁹¹ Interview with Major T. B. McDowell, 11 April 2008. Liam Devlin similarly attested to Beere’s innate sense of style and noted that she directed his wife to the appropriate source for a Persian lamb fur coat in advance of one of the British and Irish Steam Packet launches. Interview with Liam Devlin, 28 January 2008. Gordon Lambert also stated that, ‘She epitomises the description “decorative”, being one of the most fashionable women in Ireland, and one of the most elegant hostesses.’ *Irish Times*, 2 February 1973.

⁹² *Irish Times*, 25 January 1978.

⁹³ O’Leary was a dedicated sailor and twice served as commodore of the National Yacht Club; Beere was a member of Carrickmines Golf Club and served as lady captain from July 1974 until July 1975.

briefly married and then separated. Whilst this would scarcely raise an eyebrow today it would undoubtedly have created something of a scandal at the time and, given Thekla's prominent public profile, she understandably never spoke publicly about the relationship. A couple of romantic letters survived amongst the private papers I surveyed when researching her biography but my inclination then as now is to avoid sensationalising the relationship and thus imposing on the past the prurient and present-centred preoccupations of our times.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Pragmatic Patriotism

For many of Beere's contemporaries commitment to the public service was broadly inspired by the politics of post-Independence Ireland. Liam Devlin suggested, however, that Beere was '*very different*' in that she '*hadn't any political alignments in any way*'.⁹⁴ Todd Andrews similarly claimed that she had no interest whatsoever in politics. In an interview with Frances O'Rourke in 1975 he said: '*Politics was too inexact a science, too intuitive maybe, for her brand of rationality. Her very real concern for the public good had a different origin.*' He went on to refer to Beere's religious background and suggested that her sense of duty had deeper roots in Irish history. She had, he said: '*the kind of public and private virtues, the community spirit, the cultural and intellectual values one associates with what Yeats spoke of as "one of the great stocks of Europe"*'.⁹⁵ Viewed in a certain light, Thekla was indeed of the line of Burke, Grattan, Swift, Emmet and Parnell but my sense of the woman is that she would have bristled at the inherent sectarianism of Yeat's boast. The simple fact is that Thekla was no '*made-to-measure*' Irish Protestant. She was neither especially privileged nor victimised.⁹⁶ She avoided politics but pursued her own brand of pragmatic patriotism. She had a seemingly endless capacity for hard work, could digest and retain huge quantities of technical information, and hold her own with ministers, semi-state directors and international delegations. Deploying these skills and attributes she broke plenty of glass ceilings and beckoned others to follow.

⁹⁴ Interview with Liam Devlin, 28 January 2008.

⁹⁵ Frances O'Rourke, 'Dr. Thekla Beere – A Profile', in *Administration*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 1975), p. 29. During a Seanad debate on divorce, W. B. Yeats famously referred to the Irish Protestant community as follows: 'We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.' *Seanad Debates*, 11 June 1925.

⁹⁶ See Joseph Ruane, 'Ireland's Mysterious Minority – A French-Irish Comparison' in Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne (eds), *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland* (Cork, 2019), p. 286.

Honours and Accolades

Given her outstanding public service career and her role as chair of the Commission on the Status of Women, it is not surprising that Beere was the recipient of honours and accolades. In June 1960 an honorary doctorate in civil and canon law was conferred on her by this College. Later that year she was invited to become an honorary life member of the RDS. In 1973 she became the first female President of the Social and Statistical Inquiry Society. Perhaps most interestingly she was, as noted, mooted as a possible candidate during three successive presidential elections. Beere herself was merely bemused by such suggestions and told *The Irish Press* in November 1976 that: '*It is a good idea to have a woman president, but maybe at another time.*'⁹⁷

Fading From View

While such tributes indicate that Beere's achievements were recognised in her later years and at the time of her death, she has since gradually faded from public consciousness.⁹⁸ There are no summer schools in her name, no lectures or buildings in her honour, and she merits but a passing mention – if any – in most surveys of twentieth-century Ireland. At one level this reflects broader trends. In 2016 the Cambridge historian, Bettany Hughes, estimated that women occupy 0.5% of recorded history.⁹⁹ Now, Thekla the statistician may well wish to wrestle with the precision of that calculation, but I think we can take the overall imbalance as read.

Celebrating the Understated

Given the relative underrepresentation of women in Irish history it is of course interesting to consider who makes the cut. As I dipped my toes back into the history of women in Ireland what struck me was the prominence of the overtly exceptional: *Broderick's 'Wild Irish Women'; Lenihan's 'Defiant Irish Women' and Matthew's 'Female Dissidents'*. Prostitutes, prisoners, those ensnared by poverty – and the occasional President – get a look in – but the understated are, well, understated. This is all the more apparent in the era of social media – of viral heat and noise. But in the wise words of my County Derry compatriot, Seamus Heaney: 'Anyone with gumption and a sharp mind will take the measure of two things: what's said and what's done.'¹⁰⁰ Thekla channelled her energies into the latter and in her own quiet and determined way made a substantive contribution both to

⁹⁷ *Irish Press*, 3 November 1976.

⁹⁸ A number of clergymen, including Beere's grandnephew Mark Beach and former Archbishop of Dublin Dr Henry McAdoo, officiated at her funeral service at St Brigid's Church in Stillorgan, Dublin. The funeral was attended by President Mary Robinson, the Taoiseach's aide-de-camp, former Taoisigh Jack Lynch and Liam Cosgrave and a number of leading politicians, business people and former colleagues from the public service. An Appreciation was read by Ken Whitaker. She was buried in a small cemetery adjoining the church.

⁹⁹ 'Why Were Women Written Out of History: An Interview with Bettany Hughes', *English Heritage*, 29 February 2016.

¹⁰⁰ Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, 2001.

the public service and to Irish life. It is in keeping with her style that her tombstone in Stillorgan is simply inscribed: "Thekla June Beere, 1901-1991, Civil Servant". But, as I hope you'll agree, she was much, much more.