

By **Aine Lawlor**

Aine Lawlor interviews former President of Ireland and Chancellor of the University of Dublin, Dr Mary Robinson LL.B., M.A., S.C., LL.D. (h.c.), H.F.T.C.D. (1967), about her journey from would-be nun to a rebel with many causes.

# Sophisticated Bad Girl

**H**er story could have been so different because Mary Robinson wanted to be a nun. The woman who would become Ireland's first female President, first UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, first female Chancellor of the University of Dublin, Trinity College, wanted to be a missionary nun with the Society of the Sacred Heart when she finished school.

She had initially wanted to be a poet but couldn't summon the creativity necessary, despite attending the Yeats Summer School. So a nun it was. The Reverend Mother in Mount Anville agreed that she would be welcomed as a postulant, but first recommended a year away. In the heady atmosphere and change of the 1960s. Mary Robinson spent that year in Paris and that was the beginning of a remarkable journey for this bright and brave woman from a studious would-be nun to an atypical rebel.

"That changed everything. I began to see from a distance so many things I'd resented for so long but didn't voice." Boys serving on the altar while girls wore mantillas. The marriage bar that meant a woman had to leave the civil service upon marrying. The stigma against single mothers and their children.

Her choice? Trinity and the law. So her father won the approval of the Archbishop over a glass of sherry and she followed her elder brothers to Trinity.

There was a freedom in her student days in Trinity that she revelled in.

"There were quite a number of English students and Northern Ireland Protestant students, so we actually had some pretty tough debates."

And shades of what was to come, Mary Robinson, as auditor of Trinity's Law Society decided to debate on the theme of law and morality in Ireland. The late John Morris Kelly, Professor of Roman Law and Jurisprudence at UCD, advised her against this theme – there was "no law in it", he said. But stubbornly, she persisted. Trinity's Exam Hall was packed. Prominent English philosopher, teacher and author, HLA Hart came over from Oxford. Mary Robinson stood up before them all in 1967 and argued for the legalisation of family planning, removal of the ban on divorce, the decriminalisation of homosexuality and suicide, but – "I didn't go one step further on the abortion issue. It seemed radical enough in those days."

She was to learn more about radicalism at Harvard University in 1968, and she is proud to have been part of the class of 1968, where she received her masters degree in law.

"My American colleagues were avoiding a draft and criticising an immoral war. Law teaching was at a very interesting place, it was being challenged. Martin Luther King was assassinated in April, we mourned him, and I was absolutely devastated and then just after we graduated, Robert Kennedy was assassinated."

Before Harvard, she was a shy girl who had taught herself to overcome her shyness by debating. To train herself against freezing up, she debated as much as possible – not just in Trinity, but also going over to the Literary & Historical Society in UCD for extra practice. After her time at Harvard, she became not only radical, but impatient.

Her husband-to-be, Nick Robinson, called it her "Harvard humility".

"I had a feeling in Ireland, whether you were male or female you had to wait your turn... you get into your early forties and then you could do something. That's why I stood for the Seanad at the age of 25."

She wanted to change the law and to start with family planning. She couldn't see why she should wait. She complained about the senate being full of elderly male professors. She was an uppity young Catholic woman in a hurry to change the status quo.

Later at the United Nations, she would learn that change is harder won. "You can't just expect to change a deep cultural issue quickly. It's got to be done by a process of wide discussion and deliberation."



**“I had a feeling in Ireland, whether you were male or female you had to wait your turn... you get into your early forties and then you could do something. That’s why I stood for the Seanad at the age of 25.”**

Bourke, as she then was, won the personal award that night, “I don’t know, there was something about the excitement of the night, but anyway, his approach changed towards me, I’ll always remember this was the start of the romance.” It was, however, a one-sided romance for quite a while. He was keen, but she was determined to go to Harvard. And while her American contemporaries in the class of 1968 were going into poverty programmes, or Civil Rights in the South, Mary Bourke came back to Nick, to Trinity, and to try to change Ireland.

She needed all the support both Nick and Trinity could give in the years ahead. Her support for the so-called “liberal agenda” kept her in the spotlight and on the firing line; not just contraception, but the right for women to sit on juries, an end to the marriage bar and the campaign for homosexual law reform – Mary Robinson fought the fight. In the mid-1970s, she joined the Labour Party and ran for the Dáil and Dublin City Council, without success. She concedes that the party political system was uncomfortable for her, that she was seen as too independent-minded. She resigned from the Labour Party over the exclusion of Unionists from consultations on the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985, continuing as an independent senator for another four years.

In 1989, after two decades in the Upper House, it was time for a change, and she decided not to run again for the Seanad. She and Nick were enjoying their involvement in Trinity’s Centre for European Law, their three children were growing up, and through her involvement with a Chambers in London, Mary Robinson and her friend Anthony Lester were dealing with cases that went before the European Court – work she felt could really empower Irish women and change their lives. After two decades on the front line, she was enjoying her life at work and at home, while still making a difference.

She soon learned how hard change could be when, with John Horgan and Trevor West, they attempted to legalise family planning. It was the only bill in the history of the Oireachtas that was never given a first reading. One member of Fianna Fáil wore gloves so as not to contaminate his hands with holding such filth on the order paper. Archbishop McQuaid required a letter to be read in every diocese in Dublin containing a message that their bill would be a curse on the country. She says simply, “I got a lot of hate mail at the time.”

There was huge comfort however, in the support Mary Robinson won and continued to win for 20 years from her senate electoral base in Trinity, knowing that constituency completely supported the agenda she was trying to implement. By now, she was Reid Professor of Law – appointed in the same year she was elected to the Seanad, 1969. In 1970 she married Nick, the other huge support in her life.

“We’d been very friendly, but he had lots of girlfriends, and then in my final year in Trinity he came to this debate with me.” Mary

That is until John Rogers, former Attorney General and friend of then Labour leader Dick Spring, called around on Valentine's Day, 1990, with the left-field proposal that she run for President of Ireland.

"I thought he had a family problem. I wasn't even thinking. When he posed the question, my face just fell, and he saw that." Polite as ever, she told him it was an honour to be asked, and she would think about it over the weekend and get back to him on Monday. When she rang Nick, he laughed and took her to lunch, but then posed the serious question: "You're the constitutional lawyer, have you read the provisions that relate to the presidency as a start?"

"I took out the constitution and I read that oath 'Aláinn lándícheall a dhéanamh', to do my best on behalf of the people of Ireland." She felt that as a president she could do so much more.

The message to the Labour Party from Mary was yes, she was interested – but on her terms, not theirs. She wanted to be a candidate for a more active and modern Presidency, but she wanted to be an independent candidate, not at all what Party leader, Dick Spring, had in mind. Then there was the constant warring between the other parties backing her and the Labour Party when he finally agreed to nominate her as an independent candidate.

Against the formidable Fianna Fáil machine and their veteran candidate Brian Lenihan, the bookies had her at 100/1 against. Perhaps they should have spoken to that Reverend Mother from Mount Anville, who could have told them a thing or two about Mary Bourke's ability to overturn the odds. But even Mary Robinson didn't really think she would win to begin with.

"I was walking down streets in various places and nobody knew who I was."

Eoghan Harris had a big influence on Mary – not just the signature polo necks and bright three-quarter length coats, but on how a new activist presidency could be one for all the people and not just those who had always supported her liberal agenda.

As she went around the country, Mary Robinson, once a girl who would freeze at speaking in public, and who had held her father on a pedestal all her life, now, when she needed it most, found her mother's warm personality coming out.

"My mother was a great people person, very warm, never forgot anybody, never forgot a name, going down Grafton Street would take a long time because she knew everyone."

Photo: Naíise Cullhane



Áine Lawlor and Mary Robinson in the Alumni Room, Trinity College Dublin

**"I was pleasantly surprised, I must say, at the size of the vote. And I think it was good that it was very decisive. It's been tough for everybody and it's great that it ended with a strong affirmation of women's rights and women's choice."**

And suddenly, Mrs Bourke's shy daughter began enjoying the same interaction with people on the campaign trail. When she had run for the Dáil, she had not yet learnt that message of service to all the people, she had been focused on rights and entitlements. An activist in the Áras yes, but now she had to develop an increasing connection with people on that tough campaign.

We meet for this interview in the days after the two-to-one yes vote in the referendum to repeal and replace the 8th amendment to the constitution, one she had argued against with Professor William Binchy when he first campaigned for the anti-abortion amendment in 1983. After 35 years, she's in a reflective mood about the change that has happened – and in which she played no small part along the way.

"I do remember the John Bowman debate between myself and William Binchy, it got

a lot of airing in recent times. Looking back at it, I felt that there was a certain amount of patronising going on. But if you look at the issues I was worried about, most of them came true, unfortunately.

"I was pleasantly surprised, I must say, at the size of the vote. I think it was good that it was very decisive. It's been tough for everybody and it's great that it ended with a strong affirmation of women's rights and women's choice."

Long being an advocate for women's rights, Mary Robinson famously said upon her election as Ireland's first female President in 1990 that, "I was elected by the women of Ireland, who instead of rocking the cradle, rocked the system."

Being Ireland's first female President in the heady early years of the 1990s put Mary Robinson on the world stage. The developing peace process gave extra attention and

significance to her meetings with the Queen, President Clinton and to her visits to Northern Ireland. However, when I ask her about her role in the peace process, the former President's first memory is – "having the women from Northern Ireland, either from West Belfast or from another community, and dressed to kill on their first time in Dublin and here they were in this fancy house", and she smiles at the happy memories.

Nonetheless, there were less happy memories – such as shaking Gerry Adams' hand on a visit to a women's centre in loyalist West Belfast in 1996 – much to some political displeasure.

"But that visit to West Belfast was a tough one. There was a poll taken in *The Sunday Independent* expecting that I would be excoriated and about 92% of who approved of my visit to West Belfast, approved of the fact that I had met Gerry Adams along with all the other political figures. So somehow the people were a bit ahead of the politicians."

As with any time that I have interviewed her, there is a warmth in Mary Robinson as she talks about those years in the Áras and she's now frank about what happened next: how it all went wrong when under pressure from then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and she left her post early to take up the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

She says that leaving early and not doing a second term was the hardest decision she ever made, and her regret is evident. But she also concedes that: "I'm an impatient person who wants to push the frontiers, and while it didn't seem so at the time, it was a big mistake to leave early. Kofi Annan accepted me but put pressure on because the first High Commissioner had resigned."

Things didn't get better, and soon, she was in a dark place.

"I took on a very tough job, and it nearly broke me. By Christmas I was not sleeping properly and beginning to lose my cool, my head was in a very bad place."

Once again, her stubbornness was Mary Robinson's best friend.

"My brother came back from New Zealand and said I was close to a mental breakdown and I said by God I'm not."

So, in the next year she hauled herself back to her normal self. She can't remember exactly when but probably when she was in South Africa with Nelson Mandela for the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, she got a phone call from

Provost Tom Mitchell. He was calling to offer her what she calls the most difficult job in the world – Chancellor of the University of Dublin, Trinity College.

Tom Mitchell couldn't see at the other end of the phone, but once again, Mary Robinson's face dropped at this outlandish job proposal.

"I said absolutely not, the most difficult job in the world, Tom you can't be serious."

But the Provost had a better riposte than John Rogers calling about the Presidency.

"He said I'm very serious Mary. Don't forget this University was founded by a woman and has never had a woman at the top."

Being Mary Robinson, Harvard class of 1968, the impatient 25-year-old who couldn't stand a Seanad full of stuffy old men, who upset bishops and politicians and fought doggedly for the human rights of women and for gender equality before that term had been invented – being Mary Robinson, how could she resist. She didn't.

Hanging in the corner, we admire her gorgeous Chancellor's robe, all black and gold and beautifully crafted for a provost who would never have imagined this stylish subversive – and a 'she' to boot – wearing it in his place. She tries it on for the photographer, talking about her happy connection with Trinity which has lasted since she first arrived as a nervous young fresher, shy and awkward, though brilliant – right through to the assured Chancellor and world figure who will hang up her Chancellor's robe for the last time in May next year.

"In many ways I have had that happy connection with Trinity since I walked in as an undergraduate, which is amazing. I was a student here, I lectured here, I represented Trinity for 20 years in the Senate, I barely retired and I became President, I'm an honorary doctor, I came for our 400th anniversary – Nick and I came through the Front Gate in our Rolls Royce – there were speeches and champagne and everyone jumping up and down – it was joyful, great. And then to be Chancellor since 1998, I'll have to step down in May next year, it will have been 21 years."

The Provost is keen that she stay involved with the University. There is also the work of the Mary Robinson Climate Justice Foundation, her book on climate justice coming out this year, her role as world leader and as an advocate on the world stage.

We finish the interview by discussing her passion for the issue which has synthesised all of her beliefs from her experience of many

decades of campaigning, at home and abroad – the issue of climate justice.

"I think when I was a student in Trinity, I never thought about the climate. I was never particularly engaged with it when I was a lawyer. When I served as High Commissioner for Human Rights I didn't make the connection between climate change and human rights. It was when I worked in African countries from 2002 to 2010 that it became so clear to me that I had missed a very important dimension of human rights, the impact of climate change."

Back to the start of the interview, when I pressed her on what it was that turned this painfully shy and seriously bright young wannabe-nun into the woman she is today, why she didn't settle for the easy life a Mount Anville girl in the 1960s might have wanted, and what made her the successful rebel that she became she said: "You remind me, I was at a women's conference in Ottawa about a week ago, women on climate change, and I couldn't get to the evening reception on time. Somehow the discussion was about bad girls, and a friend of mine said she calls Mary Robinson a sophisticated bad girl."

A sophisticated bad girl. A stylish subversive, with a sense of fun too.

"Nick always says whatever we do let's enjoy it. That's very important. It does help. One thing I've learned from Archbishop Tutu is to be a prisoner of hope. If I talk about climate change as I can in scary terms – because we're not on course for a safe world, we're on course for a world with about 3.5 degrees warming above Celsius, above pre-industrial standards. And that means life is intolerable, catastrophically. Today's generation is the first to really understand the danger of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it. I talk about why we need to stay on this course, I spend more time talking about the benefits and the opportunities because that's what gets people moving."

So she smiles warmly and moves on to her next appointment; moving on, moving minds. Dr Mary Robinson: Former President of Ireland, Chancellor of the University of Dublin and sophisticated bad girl.

---

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Áine Lawlor B.A. (1982) is a radio and television broadcaster.