

## Reflection given by Pat Gaffney, at Irish Chaplaincy event to celebrate

### St Brigid's Day, 1 February 2023 at St Bride's Church, London

A while ago I came across a poem entitled *Our Future Will Become the Past of Other Women*: that was written to commemorate Irish women winning the vote in December 1918. It is by the late **EAVAN BOLAND** an Irish poet and author. I want to share part of it now. And while it is about women in Ireland, as you listen, let it conjure up the women in your own life...

Show me your hand. I see our past, your  
palm roughened by heat, by frost.

By pulling a crop out of the earth,  
by lifting a cauldron off the hearth.

By stripping rushes dipped in fat  
to make a wick, make a rush light.

That was your world: your entry to our  
ancestry in our darkest century.

Ghost-sufferer, our ghost-sister, remind  
us now, again, that history changes in one  
moment, with one mind.

That it belongs to us, to all of us.

As we mark these (hundred) years we will  
not leave you behind.

No one is left behind or should be as we  
honour this centenary:

A hundred years ago a woman's vote  
becoming law, became the right

of Irish women. We remember them as  
we celebrate this freedom.

Freedom is not abstract, is not a concept,  
is not an ethic only, nor a precept.

It can also be a hope raised,  
then defeated, then renewed.

It can be a voice braided into the silences  
of other women who came before

If we could only summon or see them,  
these women, foremothers of the nurture  
and dignity  
that will come to all of us from this day

We could say across the century to each  
one—give me your hand:

It has written our future.

Our future will become

The past of other women.

The 'passing on' of hope and spirit and tradition and persistence runs through this poem. Passing on truths, weaving together voices calling for social justice, dignity and peace. All of these convey the tasks of peacemakers – women peacemakers in this instance.

Louie Bennett was a woman in this 1918 struggle. From a Church of Ireland background, she worked for women's suffrage and was a founder-member of the Irish Women Workers' Union. A committed nationalist, she had a life-long opposition to militarism and was early Irish member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

born out of the International Women's Congress held in the Hague in 1915

Another was Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, whose husband was the pacifist Francis Skeffington. In 1918 she campaigned against conscription then travelled on a speaking tour in America where she later acted as a mediator during the Civil War. She had a vision for Europe after the First World War: Her words then are rather poignant today as we mark 3 years of Brexit: *At the end of the war we hope to see a 'United Europe' on the model of your own United States, where each state is free and independent, yet all are part of a greater federation.*

Across the channel Edith Cavell, was acting out her convictions as a nurse in war torn Belgium. Whether British, French or German, for Edith, **all** wounded were to be treated equally. Edith was executed by the Germans for treason for helping soldiers to escape and before her death wrote: "Patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone."

Her statue just down the road, outside St Martin the Fields, is a meeting place for weekly vigils held by a group I am a part of Women in Black – an international network of women against war and violence. Our messages call for an end to the global arms trade; the just acceptance and treatment of refugees from conflict; the end to all forms of violence towards girls and women. We see our presence as a continuum of that of women in other times and places.

Speaking up and speaking out are essential skills of peacemaking. Think of the work in the 1970s of Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams. They turned their personal suffering and loss into action for change, establishing The Peace People, becoming Nobel Peace Laureates. Mairead continues this work tirelessly today. In the late 1990s the spirit of the women of 1918 led to the creation of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition – of ordinary women, led by Pearl Sagar and Monica Williams, women tired of violence and tired of having no voice the political process. I believe their images are currently part of an exhibition at the Irish Embassy. They knew that deep, sustainable peace could only be achieved with the involvement of women.

And in this place, we cannot but remember the truth telling peacemaking of journalists in times of war and conflict ... those who have become victims of violence, such as Irish women, Veronica Guerin in murdered in 1996 and Lyra McKee murdered in 2019. Along with sister journalists today, in Iran, Russia, Afghanistan, Ukraine, they used their gifts to unveil atrocities and call us to change our ways.

So Brigid, and all the foremothers seeking justice and peace and dignity, hold our hands, be with us today and spur us to action for the future peace of our world.

***The full poem can be found here: <https://www.irishtimes.com/history/century/2022/05/10/eavan-boland-poem/>***