

Mary Carr



Dear St Brigid,

I HOPE you are enjoying the first bank holiday bearing your name and getting a kick out of your new-found fame.

Up until recently, you were rarely mentioned in public life but this weekend your name has reverberated throughout the land from as far afield as California, where former US speaker Nancy Pelosi tweeted her homage.

She praised you as 'a great leader... a woman ahead of her time: establishing schools and churches - and encouraging women to lead. May she continue to inspire women and girls today'.

How's that for applause?

Your followers predict your day of days will grow in popularity but more as an occasion of contemplation or perhaps celebration of women's achievements, rather than as the bacchanalian kind of celebrations for St Patrick.

How do you feel about that? Despite all the virtues attributed to you - your generosity, your strength of character and your nature-loving instincts - it's hard to get enough of a sense of you to know whether you would prefer a raucous party in your name or a quiet reflection.

In the sixth century when you blazed your trail, setting up monasteries around the country - most notably your church in Kildare, the most powerful centre of Christianity in the country for almost a millennium - women were second-class citizens, vassals of husbands or fathers.

EVEN a woman of your calibre, one of the most celebrated women in Western Christendom, whose modern appeal flows from how you embody pagan traditions from your father's side and newer Christian influences from your mother, both goddess and saint, did not attract the interest of the monks, custodians of the official record.

You bristled at that and, like generations of Irish nuns who chose the religious life rather than suffer the obeisance of marriage, you cherished your freedom and independence.

Legend has it you plucked out one of your eyes to turn off a local chieftain who wanted to marry you and take you away from your vocation.

As a practical person willing to do whatever is necessary, you are possibly more interested in hearing about the progress women have made in finding equality than anything else.

The first thing that should be said, Brigid, is that the world you left behind in the year 524 has bent out of all recognition thanks to the wonders of science and technology and the mixed blessings of industrialisation.

Yet, funnily enough, patriarchal power has persevered through the different epochs and historical convulsions and survived the momentous ideological shifts that have radically altered our view of the world and our place in it. The



New-found fame: Lizz Pickard of Colorado looking at a statue of St Brigid, our 'matron saint' last week

You'd approve of modern Ireland, Brigid, despite advancement of women moving at a snail's pace

patriarchy's staying power has been almost miraculous.

We don't need men to be hunter-gatherers any more than we need them to be stalwart protectors of womenfolk and children from hostile raids by neighbouring tribes or clans. Yet, society is still organised so that men are the default power-holders.

The pattern persists regardless of the strides women make in education and training or even in shattering the glass ceiling.

Female students leave school with better exam results than boys in most higher-level subjects. Significantly more women complete third-level education than men. Yet, in the workplace, the trend is reversed with women taking less than 25% of the seats at boardroom level.

Within the hierarchy of Irish universities there are plenty of women on the teaching staff but women's chance of having a professorship is 1:13 compared with a 1:5 chance for men.

This picture of male domination at the top and female saturation at the lower tiers is replicated across the workplace.

In the current Dáil, less than 25% of the seats are taken by female TDs, a negligible change since 2016 when 22.3% of TDs were women and just four Cabinet ministers were female. We have never had a female taoiseach. Or a female Catholic priest.

And CSO figures reveal women are just as severely under-represented in decision-making roles in the private sector.

Just 26% of all senior roles in

large enterprises were held by women in 2019. Women occupied only 11.5% of chief executive officer positions and 28.3% of senior executive roles.

Yet, parallel to the painfully slow rate of female progress, a new narrative is developing around the rising numbers of men and boys underachieving at school, stagnating in life and unsure of their place in the modern world.

Their frustration feeds into an ugly mindset of toxic masculinity, which celebrates misogyny, aggression and homophobia as markers of true manliness, harking back to a more primitive time when men were men and women were taken.

Society has always contained an element of 'toxic masculinity' but, thanks to its cheerleaders on the

internet - from influencers like Andrew Tate to conservative thinkers like Jordan Peterson - it has gained extraordinary traction among impressionable teenage boys, some of whom will go out into the world believing that women are trophies to be controlled and owned like the latest Bugatti.

Alongside that, we have the normalisation of violent porn on the internet and the risk of it disturbing young minds with its degrading stereotypes of female sexuality and male brutality.

None of this augurs well for the next generation of young women, or indeed young men, and their chances of forging healthy friendships and relationships.

It will have one effect only on the already damning statistics about violence against women or spiralling cases of coercive control, where people are psychologically dominated by a bully who pretends to love them.

AS the country celebrates your legacy this weekend, it's also hearing the harrowing details of the killing of Natalie McNally in Lurgan, Co. Armagh, in December last year. The 32-year-old woman was 15 weeks pregnant when she was stabbed to death in what a court has heard was a 'sophisticated and cool-headed plot' to kill her.

Last year's murder of schoolteacher Aisling Murphy while jogging along a canal towpath in Tullamore, Co. Offaly, in broad daylight struck a chord with the country, and triggered a tsunami of accounts from women about the heart-stopping fear they experience as they go about their business, or the terror they have encountered in abusive relationships.

With the war in Ukraine rumbling in the background, forcing women and children to flee for their safety, it might seem that this is still a man's world bubbling over with the same uncertainty and danger that you encountered, Brigid, as you fought to make your mark.

Statistics showing the snail's pace of women's advancement in the workplace, the stubborn prevalence of domestic violence, not to mention women continuing to shoulder most of the caring duties in society, prove how deeply attitudes about gender roles are entrenched and the distance we must travel before we reach equality. If we ever get there.

But nevertheless, this is still a far better world than the world that our ancestors, or even recent generations, inhabited.

It would be trite to claim that the kindness extended to refugees or the special payments from Government to assist with the cost-of-living crisis, or indeed the tougher sanctions against domestic violence is all down to female leadership, but it is beyond doubt that female influence has had a significant effect.

Women are helping to strip society of its harsh and unyielding veneer and replace it with a more caring and empathetic face.

And it benefits us all. I doubt you'd recognise the country today, Brigid, but I think you would approve of it. You helped to start the transformation, so take a bow.

Mary Carr



Action on violence is the best tribute to Ashling

FOR the heartbroken parents of Ashling Murphy, the Fleadh Cheoil in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, was the perfect occasion to pay tribute to their beloved daughter.

Along with GAA, traditional music was one of the primary school teacher's major passions, the conduit to her vibrant social life and the cornerstone of her high standing in her community.

Ashling performed at the fleadh religiously every year – another reason why it was so fitting that this, the first time the event has been held since her death, was taken as an opportunity to pay homage to the vivacious teacher whose killing on the banks of the Grand Canal outside Tullamore, Co. Offaly, shocked the country and generated a wave of protest about violence against women.

The suddenness of Ashling's death blew her family's world into smithereens.

Ashling would have turned 24 last month but she would always be the baby of her family.

Her parents Ray and Kathleen described in their one-off tribute, which is part of TG4's coverage of the fleadh, the 'void' that their daughter's death has left in their lives.

In the family home, their ineluctable loss is felt in the silence that has replaced the constant soundtrack of traditional music provided by Ashling – from her own expert fiddle-playing to the din of bows scratching across strings courtesy of the beginners to whom she taught music after school. One of the things Ashling's father said he misses most is hearing her play her instrument at weekends.

'Of a Saturday I'd come in... from the farm. Kathleen would have the dinner ready at 1pm or half past one,' he recalled.

'I would sit into that chair there after and Ashling would be inside in the front room and there would be music going 90... I'd sit and listen for maybe a half hour when I was drinking a cup of tea after dinner. It was lovely to hear that... That's gone now. None of it any more,' he said.

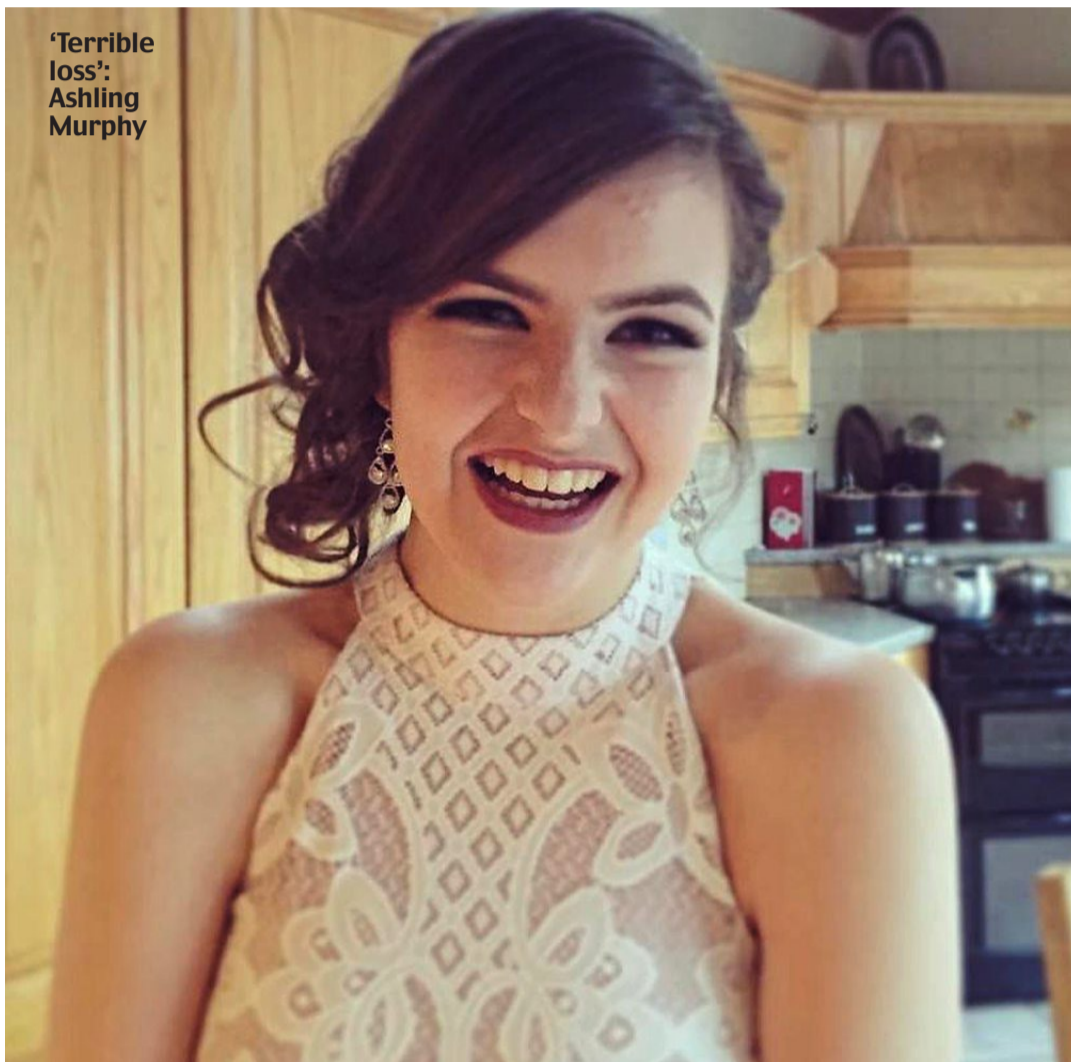
It's likely that Ray and Kathleen found some consolation in returning to the traditional music

scene that meant so much to the daughter who, they said, 'always had a big smile for everyone'.

The friendly buzz, the line-up of enthusiastic musicians and bands, which once included Ashling, the

adagio and allegro of the familiar pieces were a bittersweet reminder of times past and may even have prompted Ray's vow to remember the good times they shared. 'She had so much more to give to everyone.

What she done in her short 23 years, if she had another 23 years, what would she have achieved? It's a terrible loss, and I can say no more than that,' he said, fighting the tears. During the



'Terrible loss': Ashling Murphy

tribute, Ashling's talent was recalled in recordings of her playing solo and with the Ballyboy branch of Comhaltas from a very young age. The tribute ended with a performance from the Ballyboy band, with Ashling's sister Amy leading the group in a series of reels, a lively and hopeful counterpoint to the sorrow of the earlier part of the film.

There's no doubt that this moving tribute, along with President Michael D Higgins' heartfelt words about Ashling during the opening ceremony of the fleadh, will be treasured by the Murphy family.

Neighbours from Blueball, Co. Offaly, rallied around the family and Ashling's boyfriend, Ryan Casey, in their hour of need.

Politicians and councillors expressed compassion and empathy for their dreadful loss, while candlelit vigils were held across the country in an extraordinary outpouring of grief on behalf of the family and simmering anger that a woman could be killed in broad daylight.

BUT only families who have suffered similar losses can truly appreciate the depth of the Murphys' grief, how losing a loved one to an unnatural or violent death creates a trauma that can be almost impossible to survive.

We have heard the bereft families of murdered women and girls – like teenager Ana Kriegel, and Nadine Lott, the mother of one who was killed in her home by her on/off boyfriend, and Sarah Everard, killed in London while walking home – describe the darkness descending, the scaffolding of life collapsing, and how, in an instant, the world turns into a hostile place.

There are no words of comfort for these families. Most of what springs to mind sounds like platitudes, served up to fill an awkward silence more than anything else.

The most that can be hoped for is that Ashling Murphy's horrific death prods Justice Minister Helen McEntee into pressing ahead with her reforms and legislative changes to make zero tolerance of violence and abuse against women a reality rather than an ideal.

The Minister's five-year plan, which doubles the number of refuge spaces and increases the maximum sentence for assault causing harm from five to ten years, is a start.

But more practical changes are needed too, from putting more gardai on the beat to adopting a collective mindset of looking out for people in vulnerable situations rather than looking the other way.

With Government determination and State investment, zero tolerance could be Ashling Murphy's legacy.

Irvine sees the joy of hanging up your wig

IN light of the controversy caused by the (now abandoned) retirement plans of two eminent judges, Frank Clarke and Peter Kelly, to work in the Dubai International Financial Centre Court, high-flying Mary Irvine's hopes for a low-key life after the bench sound novel indeed.

The 65-year-old surprised many when she stepped down as president of the High Court a few weeks ago.

But after a hectic 44-year legal career, Ms Irvine's ambitions may surprise them even more, given that they involve nothing more onerous than spending more time with her family and doing lots more of the things she loves, like

travel, sports and holidays with her partner.

'There is a whole lot of a stuff we want to do together while we still have the health and energy. We have loads of sporting interests to pursue and we love travelling,' she explained.

Contrast her lust for life with the workaholic tendencies of others, including many of her fellow professionals who, it appears, can't countenance their existence without a career.

The Government's proposed scheme to encourage more of us to stay in the workforce past 65, by increasing our pension payments, is predicated on the belief that many people want to keep up the daily grind. Life

spans have increased, our health has improved, 60 is the new 40 and all that.

These factors contribute to the pension time bomb and to the Government's hope that 65 will become obsolete as a retirement age.

But there must also be more people like Ms Irvine who had fantastic careers, worked hard for over 40 years and are counting the days until they can enjoy the fruits of their labour and a sizeable pension.

And good luck to them. Indeed, Sinn Féin's success at having the higher retirement age scrapped during the last election campaign might suggest that the majority view aligns with Mary Irvine's.



Retirement: Judge Mary Irvine



Mary Carr

The Gardai's handling of Moody case shows new human face of the force

WITH his self-regarding need for deference at every turn, joining the Garda Síochána was probably an obvious career choice for a peacock like Paul Moody.

The natty uniform and clean-cut appearance appealed to the sharp dresser who, according to colleagues, spared no pains over his personal grooming. And while unquestioning obeisance to the gardai may be a thing of the past, the job still carried enough kudos to flatter a power-hungry thug like Moody and give him a sense of impunity to do as he pleased.

But those benefits were nothing compared to the X factor which membership of the Garda anointed Moody with as he negotiated the online dating world, seeking out women to psychologically torture and control.

As Moody waded into the choppy waters of the Dublin dating scene, he knew that for women trying to find the eligible men among a pool of strangers, a garda cuts a reassuring figure, solely by virtue of their position of public trust.

He probably fancied that his 20 years in the force would be catnip to women.

We have no idea of the precise number of women the swaggering police officer caught in his trap, submitting them to a reign of ter-

'He is being investigated for historical sexual abuse'

ror like that suffered by his terminally ill former partner, a litany of lurid violence and sadistic cruelty that seems straight out of a crooked-cop TV thriller, rather than life in suburban Dublin.

Over a four-year period, Moody beat his partner repeatedly, once forcing her to climb out of a window to seek help.

He swiped her hospital bag from her when she was going to the hospital for chemotherapy. He goaded her about killing herself, took secret photos of her naked and threatened to post them online. He sent her about 30,000 abusive messages.

He used the confidential Pulse system to investigate her family and friends for material so that he could threaten them with blackmail. He is also under criminal investigation for historical sex abuse with sources saying he has a string of ex-girlfriends who he tried to control.

But even without those cases, Moody has become the face of coercive control, a fairly recent crime under the Domestic Violence Act 2018 which broadens our definition of domestic abuse to include psychological torture alongside assault and battery.

Thanks to his job, he cuts a disturbing figure. We will not forget him, unlike Dean Ward, who took all of six weeks to invade Donegal

woman Sinéad O'Neill's life and turn it into a living hell and has already slipped off the radar.

Moody's case gives rise to fears, particularly among women, about whether he is a one-off or if there are more bad eggs in the force. In its chilling aftermath, many people may ponder the wisdom of trusting gardai, particularly disclosing confidential information.

They may wonder if our neighbourhood gardai whose bungled attempts at crime fighting we fondly compare to the Keystone cops are, in truth, closer to the

ruthlessly corrupt law enforcement officers in the brilliant TV series, *The Wire*.

It's true that the gardai do not have an unblemished record when it comes to recruitment. No State or private employer has, so inevitably there are rotten apples among the rank-and-file. At the moment a garda is awaiting trial on charges of sexually assaulting and falsely imprisoning a woman while a second garda has been charged with coercive control.

Paul Moody worked in recruitment when he applied for the

gardai and convinced them he was an honourable character.

Members of his extended family were in the gardai so that would have helped his application, as undoubtedly did his vast reserves of oily charm which he worked so effectively on the ladies.

But while he passed the vetting process, the gardai can take credit for never promoting him over two decades. According to sources, right from his days as a recruit in Templemore his behaviour attracted comment.

He ogled female gardai, was

ridiculously vain and boastful of his sexual exploits. A childhood friend says that growing up in Templeogue in Dublin, Moody was from a decent family, but he was 'always a black sheep, always running into trouble'.

Far more significant perhaps than the number of monsters who, like Moody, may be using the uniform and emblems of our guardians of the peace as cover for committing sex crimes, is the Gardai's handling of these cases.

Aside from the outrageous liberty that occurred when 'Nicola', trying to report Moody to a senior colleague at Irishtown Garda Station - where he was stationed - had her call diverted to him, garda performance was warmly praised by Nicola and indeed by Sinéad O'Neill.

Despite her conviction that the gardai would never pursue one of their own, Nicola was eventually persuaded by investigating gardai to make a lengthy statement of complaint which culminated in last week's sentencing.

Sinéad O'Neill said that it was very easy to talk to the gardai and contrary to her expectations that they would not believe her, they were utterly supportive.

'I never felt like I did something wrong. I never felt that I should be ashamed. They were just unbelievable, and I couldn't say more about them. They are just amazing people,' she said.

Paul Moody has disgraced himself but not the Garda Síochána.

They have come a long way from the bad old days when they left women to suffer unspeakable degradation rather than interfere in a 'domestic'.



Shame: Former Garda Paul Moody is now serving his prison term

One way Sabina Higgins might get around presidential constraints...

IT'S impossible to guess how Sabina Higgins feels about the reaction to her well-meaning missive pleading for peace talks between Ukraine and Russia.

Amid calls that the President clarify his position regarding her heartfelt letter, which was published on his website and then rapidly taken down, Sabina has won kudos from the Kremlin, a damning verdict from a Ukrainian MP about her being 'underinformed', and several verbal tickings-off from Irish political figures.

But Sabina is nothing if not fearless and outspoken, with a track record in anti-war activism that makes her different from previous presidential spouses. She might not bend easily to demands that she help shore up the country's reputation in Ukrainian eyes.

She visited her great friend Margaretta D'Arcy in prison after she was jailed for damaging US

planes that landed in Shannon. While her loyalty to her pal was admired, her perceived stand against American militarism did not sit well in a country that depends on the US for security.

The visit took place years before her husband had set his sights on the presidency but, even in the Áras, Sabina didn't hesitate to give her thoughts on abortion.

During a Trinity College debate, she described Irish abortion law as 'outrages against women and outrages against the world and nature'. While the referendum two years later showed most of the country was in tune with her, pro-life groups were incensed, accusing her of abuse of privilege.

There are limits on what Sabina Higgins, like all presidential spouses, can say. The only way for this passionate woman to get around that would be to run for election. Perhaps she should.