

THE SUNDAY TIMES
September 7, 2025

Culture.

Michael D Higgins

The president of
Ireland on poetry,
place and protest



Between politics and poetry is the truth of feeling

Michael D Higgins's second term as Irish president concludes in November. He talks to *Pavel Barter* about his plans for the future, his political legacy and his debut spoken word album

Michael D Higgins welcomes me into the library of his home in Galway, where his book collection spans language, travel, poetry and philosophy. It is a modest house in comparison to the 92-room Aras an Uachtairain, the presidential residence in Phoenix Park in Dublin that he's also called home since becoming the ninth president of Ireland in 2011. Soon, when his second term concludes on November 11, Galway will become his sole residence again. Higgins takes a seat beside a fireplace where the mantel carries ephemera from his travels: a globe, an ornate antique clock and small figurines that include a wooden carving of a woman with her hands clasped in prayer.

"My first appointment is try and move with the least stress as possible," he announces. There are "boxes and skips and documents" to transport from Phoenix Park. "My [children] have been very helpful." There's also a large and playful pup to carry west: Misneach, his four-year-old Bernese mountain dog, named for the Irish word for courage. "One of my great transitions," he nods. "Misneach has been in the Aras since he was five months old. How do I get him back here?"

Higgins, 84, is in fine, loquacious form. "I've overcome the setback I had in February last year when I had a stroke on my left side and occasionally I have to be careful about my balance. My knees are fine. The only thing that didn't recover fully from my stroke was my left ankle and that's why my balance [is off]. But all the rest of it ..." His mind is certainly sharp and for an hour the president discusses consciousness, reason, philosophical principles and his great love of poetry. I am reminded of a line from Christy Moore's recent spoken-word tribute to Higgins: "Your quiet measured oratory speaks volumes to keenest ears."



Dog days
Michael D Higgins with Misneach. Inset: his spoken word album

We meet Higgins at the end of an era. Was the presidency everything he thought it would be?

"What you bring to the presidency, in many cases, is the fullness of your being: your capacities and your vulnerabilities and your concerns and restraint. You're on call every day. I am pleased that I was able to keep some of my connections, particularly in the human rights area. It was a great honour and a great privilege. What I used to like mostly, though, was my regular returns to the embrace of normality – events and so forth. When I look back on it, if there was a category of people to which Sabina [his wife] and I owe so much in life and which gave us support and friendship and solidarity, it's the artistic community."

Across his 14 years as president and his preceding 40 years in politics, the arts have been a constant presence. From 1993 to 1997 he was Ireland's first minister for arts and his achievements included the creation of the Irish language television channel TG4, the revival of the Irish film industry, and the abolition of the censorial Section 31 of the Broadcasting Act. Long before that, in the early 1960s, when he

was studying at University College Galway (UCG), he was exploring his own artistry. "I wrote short stories first. In my second year I edited the literary magazine *Criterion*. Then I edited the [student] newspaper."

Poetry came later. Throughout his public life in the 1970s and 1980s – when he was twice mayor of Galway, chairman of the Labour Party, a TD and senator – politics and poetry were inseparable. "Well, you can't divide them. Politics has never captured poetry nor would I want it to, but neither is poetry independent of it. The middle ground is the truth of feeling ... I probably have taken risks in disestablishing any distance between them."

The Betrayal, his first volume, was published in 1990 with encouragement from the late Kerry

poet Brendan Kennelly. Higgins recalls walking from Leinster House to Kennelly's apartment at Trinity College, where he could barely open the door on account of the writer's vast book hoard. Higgins wrote Kennelly a poem, *When the Muse Visits*, which Kennelly hung on the wall above his bed.

Higgins was always a comfortable public speaker and so the performative aspect of poetry came naturally. "It's a very good question about performance because it was there where I started," he says. At UCG he was auditor of a literary and debating society and president of the student union. In 1969 he met Sabina, an actress and a founder of the Focus Theatre in Dublin, and the pair celebrated 50 years of marriage last year. "You could say we were performing independently for a long time. Sabina spoke with me on campaigns. Both of us were performers. As Sabina would say, 'When the curtain goes back, you're on.'"

Higgins toured Ireland every so often, giving readings of his work with occasional musical accompaniment. "There was an element of performance always envisaged. If you want to

communicate the full piece you have to put a bit of work into it. Something incredibly valuable in Irish culture is the respect for the performer. I've seen it again and again."

The poet is in full flight in *Against All Certainty*, his debut spoken word album in which his recitals are accompanied by music by the composer Myles O'Reilly. The poems are culled from across his collections but mostly chart his early, formative years. Higgins was born in 1941 in Limerick. His parents struggled with health issues and poverty and when he was five he was sent with his brother to live with an aunt and uncle in Co Clare. *Brothers* explores the bond with his sibling through terrible circumstance. *Katie's Song* is a tribute to his saviour aunt. *Dark Memories* recalls his mother. *The Betrayal* is a meditation on his father, John, who served as an IRA officer during the War of Independence and with the republican anti-treaty side during the Civil War. John was later ostracised by pro-treaty supporters, refused land and employment, and never recovered from the stigma. Is this collection a way to make sense of those years?

"There's more than making sense to it. [These poems are] an encounter with life. But it's an encounter that must be straight about the vulnerabilities. They're a fantastic guide to a history of feeling. You have to go near the bone in relation to intimacy. A thing running through my poems was the importance of belonging and the importance of being attached."

Higgins's father died in 1963. His mother died in 1969, the same year he met Sabina, the same year he first ran for a Dail seat with the Labour Party. Was it a regret his parents never witnessed the man he became? "Of course it was." Perhaps then these poems, in particular the one about his father's experience, make sense of his later life. "My reason for [campaigning for] my second term [as president]," he explains at a later point in our conversation, "was entirely because I wanted the War of Independence to be interpreted properly. How did the new state come to establish itself?"

Higgins has always been an advocate for human rights and equality and a promoter of inclusive citizenship within Ireland. Ireland's language of protest has long been through the arts – a faculty we still possess, he believes. "That is the incipient thing. The poetic instinct, the artistic instinct, is always ahead. It is not limited to the bounded version of the rational, which is always a bit suspect."

Last month Higgins condemned "despicable attacks" on members of the Indian community in Ireland, describing those acts as being in "stark contradiction to the values that we as people hold dear". Migration has concerned him since the early 1980s, when he contributed papers on the subject to the Patrick MacGill Summer School in Glenties, Co Donegal. "I'm interested in transience," he insists. "That's in the poetry as well. It breaks my heart now when I see the people of Gaza pushed into tents."

An Arid Season (2004), his third poetry collection, anticipated ecological crises. "Why is it in some of the South American countries Mother Nature is regarded as a person? In some parts of the world people have such a respect for a river or for a forest or for trees, or for the capacity for reproduction after great droughts, they are willing to give that a personality. Whereas, in so many parts of the West, people want to give personality to a corporation that is robbing people."

These big-ticket concerns – climate change, inclusion, equality, migration – worked their way into his creative writings and so too did his experiences of protest. His poem *Of Saturdays Made Holy* harks back to weekends spent on the streets, handing out flyers and campaigning on issues such as Aids, South African apartheid or opposing a visit by the US president Ronald Reagan over America's subversive involvements in Central America.

In 1982 he accompanied the Trócaire missionary Sally O'Neill on a fact-finding mission to El Salvador, where government death squads roamed the country killing activists, journalists and ordinary citizens. "Most of the killings were between two and six in the middle of the night and [the bodies] were dumped on the rubbish dump," Higgins tells me. "We would go out and we would do a count

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Cover story

and then the bodies would be moved at about five or six o'clock into the mortuary."

Higgins investigated reports of a massacre at a village, El Mozote, where over a thousand civilians were killed. "There was one woman [Rufina Amaya] who escaped, hid in a patch of trees, and survived." Higgins heard her testimony before his deportation to Nicaragua. He informed US media about the actions of the

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Marriage material Higgins with his wife, Sabina, in 2014

intentions. They find it very difficult to see the person who has a different relationship to nature, economy, culture, belief. That is a deep, deep barrier, which I hope to write about. That's what I'm going to write about."

Higgins has a lot to reflect on from his time as president. In 2014 he became the first Irish president to address the Houses of Parliament in England. "Something that has been very pleasing to me has been the good relations with Northern Ireland," he adds. When I ask about how the Ireland of 2025 differs to that of 2011, the year he became president, he dwells on missed opportunities.

"We never really came to terms with the role of the state. I think that is a great pity. We were suspicious of the state. There are religious and secular reasons as well as historical reasons for that. It will be impossible to meet ecological requirements, sustainability, without a significant role for the state. That debate has to happen. Globally, and particularly in Europe, I'm disappointed that the realm of unaccountability is extending. The monopolistic ownership of technology? That's serious. The biggest disappointment for me? I'm 84. I saw the capacity in existence for the elimination of global hunger, for ecological justice and for fair trade. All these things were celebrated for a moment through recognising universal human rights. Now we hear, in many cases, that security is defined not as freedom from poverty. Actually, the possession of armaments is defining security."

These are now matters for successive generations to address and Higgins is keeping his slate clean as his presidency ends. "People want me to do things but I have taken no advances. I'm still hoping to be a bit free." Will he keep writing poetry? "I will, yes, almost certainly. I have arthritis and I can't stay at the kitchen table for as long as I did before, but I'll manage. I intend to write a poem, for example, for a young journalist who was murdered in Gaza."

The statesman may be retiring but the poet continues.

Against All Certainty is out now on Claddagh Records



The possession of armaments is defining security

US-backed Salvadoran government and it prompted an international outcry. Sally O'Neill wrote in 2013: "Today, few Irish people are aware of how significant a role [Higgins] had in bringing to an end one of the bloodiest chapters in recent Latin American history. In El Salvador, however, he is remembered."

His "biggest and probably most risky" assignment, as he describes it, was in 1988 as primary observer for an election in Chile to support or reject the dictator General Pinochet. The country voted to overturn the dictator.

Higgins acknowledged many of those historic struggles for equality as president. In 2013 he revisited the site in El Salvador where army soldiers killed six of his Jesuit friends in a massacre in 1989. "I insisted, when visiting Vietnam [in 2016], to visit Laos because that was one of the most criminal acts." He refers to America's nine-year bombing campaign of Laos, ordered in part by Henry Kissinger. In 1999, when Kissinger visited Trinity College in Dublin to deliver a lecture, Higgins confronted him. "How do you justify the bombing of Laos, Cambodia and non-combatants in the Vietnam War? Do you regret it?" Kissinger replied, 'I'm afraid I could never produce enough regret that would satisfy you, Mr Higgins.'

Surely such experiences moved him to poetry?

"Oh, it's indelibly imprinted. There is a terrible legacy of imperialism still existing in the minds of people with the best

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