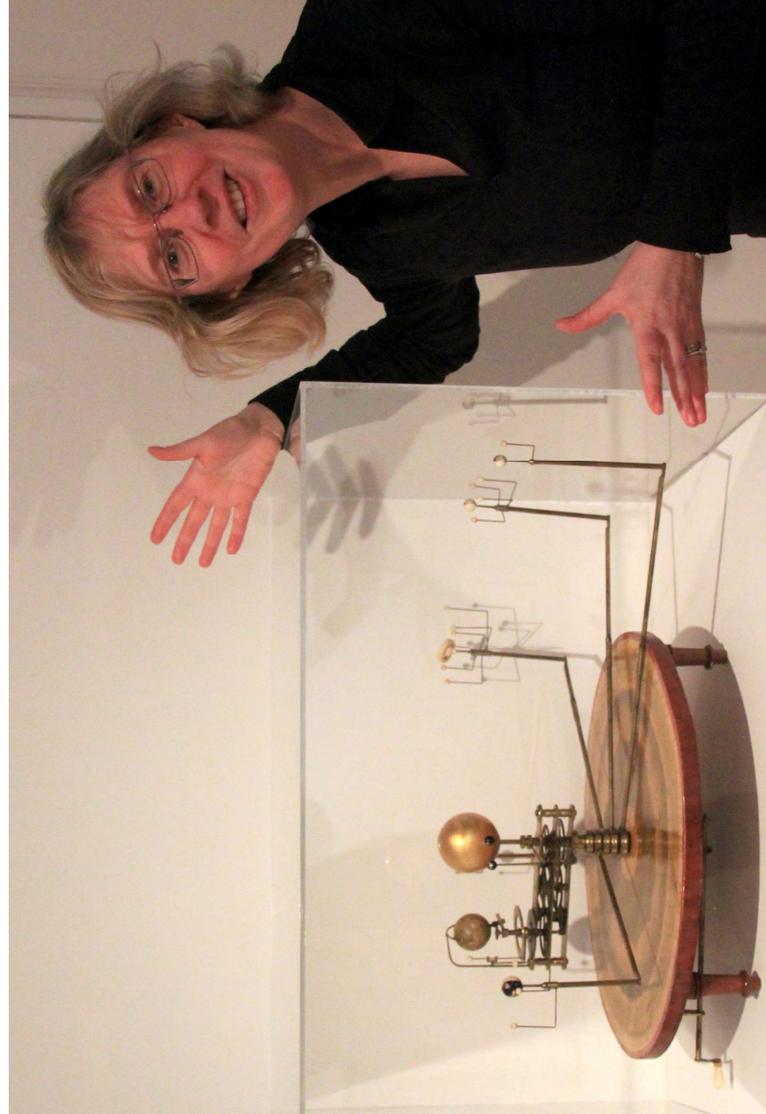


A Blue Plaque for Mary Mulvihill: Pioneer in Science Communication in Ireland

By Patrick Roycroft



^ Figure 1 Mary Mulvihill and orrery. Photo: Brian Dolan.

Introduction

Mary Mulvihill (Fig. 1) was one of Ireland's greatest science communicators. She was a powerful advocate for Ireland's immense, fundamental, yet still vastly underappreciated, contribution to world science, medicine, and engineering. She was also a determined advocate for women in the subjects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, founding an organisation for this purpose called WITS (Women In Technology and Science) and writing several books on the subject. Her best-known written work was the multiple award-winning publication *Ingenious Ireland: A County-by-County Exploration of Irish Mysteries and Marvels*, which was

originally published in 00 but that has been republished by Four Courts Press in 01 with a new Preface by Jocelyn Bell Burnell (the Irish-born astronomer who first discovered pulsars in 1967) (Fig. 2). Mary, a woman of phenomenal dynamism, vast knowledge, a passion for Irish heritage, and huge charm, died at the relatively young age of 55 on 11 June 2015 after battling a vicious cancer. In typical Mary style, she opted for a modest wicker coffin and cremation; her funeral service at Mount Jerome Cemetery (at which I was honoured to be present) saw hundreds of people both inside and outside the cemetery's Victorian Chapel.



< Figure Front cover of the 01 reprint of Mary's magnum opus, the multiple award-winning book *Ingenious Ireland: A County-by-County Exploration of Irish Mysteries and Marvels*, currently available from Four Courts Press. This book had an initial -month time allocation: it actually took years. Anyone with an interest in Ireland, period, should own a copy of this magnificent publication.

By one of those odd quirks of fate, and before I became a genealogist and editor, I worked for Mary Mulvihill as a tour guide and researcher for four years (01 – 01). This was a very different experience from my previous job of editor at the (now defunct) H.W Wilson Co, being largely confined to an office and beaver away in oft-times monk-like solitude. Now, I was employed to give walking tours around the raucous streets of Dublin to groups of any size (from just one person to a large group of 0) and in all weather conditions (from sweltering heatwaves to full-on blizzards, always in my 'uniform' of a white laboratory coat). And if the weather was bad, Mary was always concerned for my well-being. I appreciated that no end: she was a superb person to work for.

Mary's most visual legacy will be the Dublin Diving Bell Museum (Dublin's smallest museum, apparently) now on Sir John Rogerson's Quay, and beautifully lit at night. Mary was instrumental in making this happen, along with a team of architects, artists, and the Dublin Port Authority. She gave me the task of getting together the history of the bell and that of its inventor, Rindon Blood Stoney. Coming from a research background, I grabbed this task with both hands. My proudest moment was finding the last man alive to have gone down in the diving bell – a fine old Dubliner named Dermot Heron (who passed away in 00). I set up an interview with him at his home in Raheny, which Mary and myself conducted. When word got out, Dermot was subsequently interviewed and filmed by several other journalists and organisations, and he can be seen recounting the experience of working in the bell at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EMy-QTEsqYUA>. Mary and myself worked on the information panels that surround the inside of the bell and that tell its story, and that of the men who worked in it. It was a great moment when the Diving Bell Museum was officially opened to the public on 14

July 01, with Dermot himself, dressed to the nines (Fig.), as a guest of honour and being feted by press, politicians, and photographers. The painful absence at that ceremony was Mary herself: she had passed away barely a month beforehand. I now see that diving bell every day on my way in to, and out from, my current job as a genealogist at the Irish Family History Centre (in the CHQ Building, which is just down the road from the Diving Bell on the opposite quay). Always that bitter-sweet memory. Every time.

Mary's accomplishments were many and varied, and I encourage readers to 'Google' her for much more. Blue plaques are not awarded lightly. Mary had a terrific influence and impact on promoting, by every means possible, Ireland's science heritage, scientists, and inventions, including women in the sciences (both past and present). Arguably more important than the information was that she managed to communicate this in a friendly, inimitable style, with authority and humour, to the Irish public and to international audiences. Mary wrote books, newspaper and journal articles, blogs, appeared on numerous television programmes, and spoke at conferences and at many special events. It is completely appropriate that Mary Mulvihill should be given a Blue Plaque for Science Communication (Fig.).

The official plaque ceremony (though not the actual fixing of the plaque to the outside front wall) took place on the afternoon of Saturday, November 01 in the back garden of Mary's house, 51 Manor Street in Stoneybatter, north Dublin City (Fig. 5). The host was Mary's husband, Brian Dolan, who lives there still. At the event were a fine array of Mary's friends and colleagues and those involved in keeping her memory – and her mission – alive (Fig.).

Mary's is a life that will always be remembered.

> **Figure** Dubliner Dermot Heron as a guest of honour at the 1 July 01 opening ceremony of the Dublin Diving Bell Museum on Sir John Rogerson's Quay. The photo shows Dermot in and under the diving bell, which is painted orange and has been raised up so the walk-in museum part is effectively contained under its original work space [Amazing view looking directly upwards now in there]. Myself and Mary worked on the large blue information panels you can see all around the edge. The previous time Dermot was in here was during the late 10s when he was in a hot pressurised environment shifting mud at the bottom of the River Liffey. Photo: Patrick Roycroft.



< **Figure** The Blue Plaque for Mary Mulvihill, awarded for her achievements in Science Communication. The plaque is being held by Mary's husband, Brian Dolan, and standing next to him is Rebecca O'Neil, National Secretary for the National Committee for Commemorative Plaques in Science and Technology. Note the picture of Mary herself in the background! Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.

< **Figure** The assembled group for the celebration of Mary Mulvihill being awarded a prestigious Blue Plaque. This event took place 6 November 2021 in the back garden of Mary's house (still occupied by her husband) at 1 Manor Street, Stoneybatter, north Dublin City. Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.

Speakers at the Ceremony

Noírín Mulvihill

Noírín, Mary's younger sister (Fig. 7), spoke about Mary's love of the advancement of technology and used the development of the telephone – and, in particular, the development of the telephone system in Dublin, quoting a section from *Ingenious Ireland* – as an example because that could be linked to the house in which Mary lived. When Mary bought 1 Manor Street it had an old coin-operated phone with the Press Button A and Press Button B system [Older readers in Ireland and Britain will remember these, and possibly the 'tapping' method by which one could ingeniously circumvent payment!]. This then evolved into the modern digital phone (without a dial). Noir n told us also that one of Mary's great legacy pieces, *Ingenious Ireland*, was written in this house.



^ **Figure** Speaking at the ceremony, Noir n Mulvihill, Mary Mulvihill's youngest sister. Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.

< **Figure** A group photo of the Committee Members of the Mary Mulvihill Association. From lower left winding up and round to lower right: **Liam Ryan** (*Irish Times*, member of the Mary Mulvihill Association Exec. Committee); **Fionnuala Murphy** (Secretary of the Mary Mulvihill Association); **Professor Margaret Kelleher** (UCD, former Chairperson of the Mary Mulvihill Association); **Aileen McGrath** (Treasurer of the Mary Mulvihill Association); **Anna Heussaff** (former member of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Brian Trench** (science communicator, member of Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Anne Fitzgerald** (former Secretary of the Mary Mulvihill Association); **Cormac Sheridan** (science journalist, member of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Carmel Hennessy** (member of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Nigel Monaghan** (Keeper, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, member of Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Marion Palmer** (academic and former member of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Ena Prosser** (former Treasurer of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Rebecca O'Neill** (project coordinator, Wikimedia Community, Ireland and a member of Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Therese Caherty** (Co-Chair of the Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Dr Brian Dolan** (Mary Mulvihill's husband, recently retired from the Department of Theoretical Physics, NUI Maynooth, Patron of the Mary Mulvihill Association); **Anne Mulvihill** (sister of the Mary Mulvihill, member of Mary Mulvihill Association Executive Committee); **Noir n Mulvihill** (sister of Mary Mulvihill and Co-Chair of the Mary Mulvihill Association). Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.



Óran Grehan

Óran is Mary's nephew and godson (Fig.). He remembered Mary as a wonderful and caring aunt and godmother: she was always sending him videos of experiments and other things to try out, much to the occasional consternation of his mother. Óran also told us that although Mary was largely a classical music fan, she did have a soft spot for Simon and Garfunkle and for Joni Mitchell.



> **Figure** Speaking at the ceremony, Óran Grehan, Mary's nephew and godson. Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.



^ **Figure** Speaking at the ceremony, Rebecca O'Neil, the National Secretary for the National Committee for Commemorative Plaques in Science and Technology. Photo: Patrick Roycroft.

Rebecca O'Neil

Rebecca is a committee member of the Mary Mulvihill Association, is Chair of the Women In Technology and Science group (WITS), an organization that Mary helped found) and – most pertinently here – is the National Secretary for the National Committee for Commemorative Plaques in Science and Technology (Fig.). Rebecca was inadvertently introduced to WITS by Nigel Monaghan (Keeper of Natural History at the National Museum of Ireland) after she got curious, while working at the museum, about some human remains about which there was a question over their gender and, making quite a leap, were there any notable women in Ireland's scientific past. Nigel put Rebecca in contact with Mary and that meeting largely set the tone for Rebecca's future career. Rebecca, being on the plaque committee, noted that this is the first plaque to be given for science communication – yet this, in itself, was but one facet of Mary's extraordinary life, albeit possibly the most appropriate one.

Leo Enright

Leo and Mary were very good friends for many years. Leo is a highly respected broadcaster, reporter, and science communicator and is on the Board of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies' School of Cosmic Physics. Leo gave an emotional speech about Mary, starting by noting it is terrible to talk in the past tense about Mary. He said that walking about Dublin he feels her presence everywhere, because she would enthusiastically explain about the building stones and their geological origins and how she would perennially get very annoyed at the use of a rare form of limestone outside Dublin Bus headquarters on O'Connell Street that people would

just cover in mud and litter. Leo also talked about the Dublin Diving Bell (on Sir John Rogerson's Quay), which is now a fantastic public museum, and how Mary was key to making this installation happen. He also noted another facet to Mary: She was gently spoken ... but had a spine of iron! For example, she absolutely hated it when Irishmen and women, who should know better, actually went out of their way to undermine Ireland's place in the history of world science by *openly and willfully* ignoring Ireland's scientists and scientific heritage, as if we didn't have any. This type of wilful ignorance she would counter with full force! A fantastic lady.



^ **Figure 10** Speaking at the ceremony, Leo Enright. Photo: Nicholas Bradshaw.



^ **Figure 11** Final speaker at the ceremony, Brian Dolan. Photo: Patrick Roycroft.

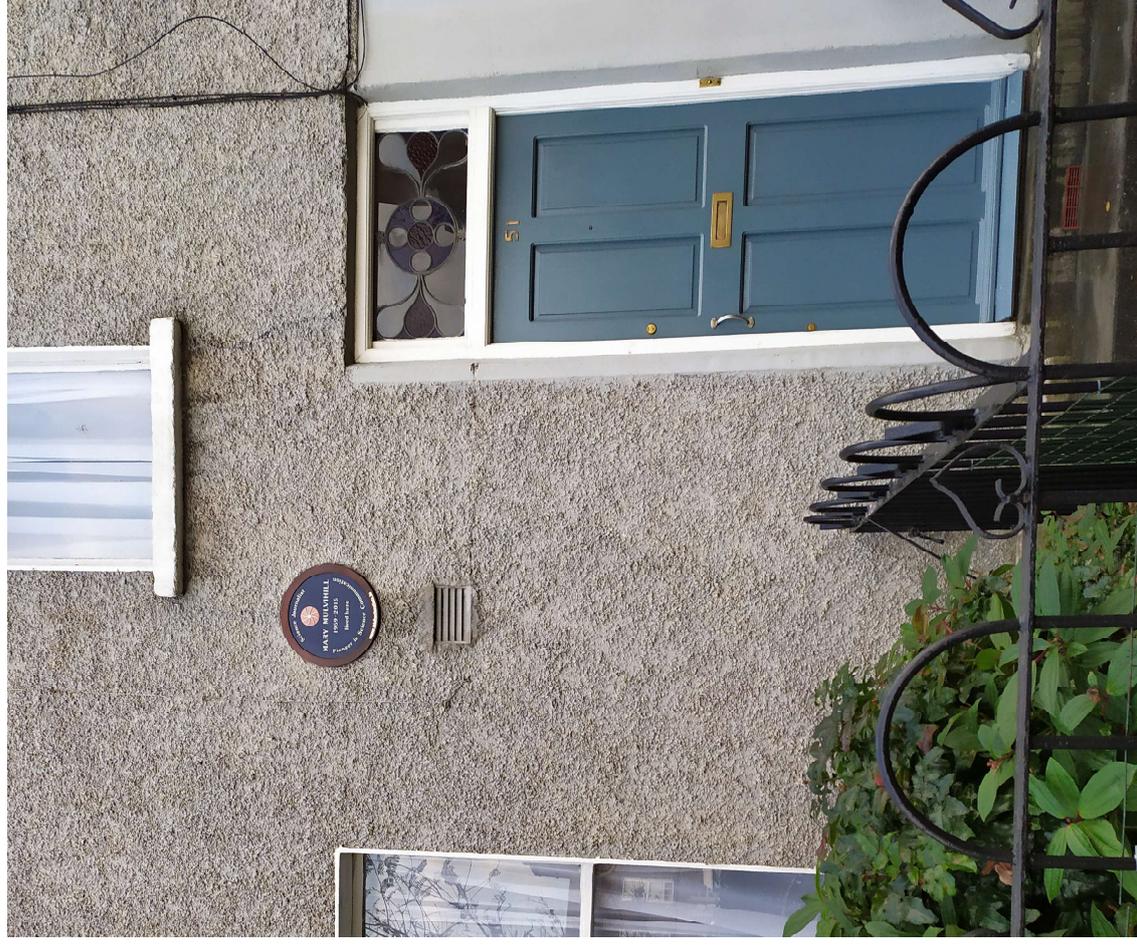
Brian Dolan

Brian is/was Mary's husband. He is a Scottish theoretical physicist working at Dublin's School of Cosmic Physics. He spoke about Mary's time at 51 Manor Street where she had lived for the best part of 0 years (but she had grown up in Rathfarnham in south Dublin), and that the house had had to undergo a major renovation after she bought it in 1987 to make it even habitable – a massive job that Mary undertook while she was still at university! Brian remains

deeply involved in Mary's legacy to Irish science communication: her archive is now in Dublin City University, there is the Mary Mulvihill Association, and there is an annual memorial lecture and an award in her name. Keeping Mary's legacy alive also keeps Irish science alive in the public consciousness. And he, Brian, is probably the only person in Ireland who is an active scientist living in a house where there is a Blue Plaque to a former Irish scientist.

Coda

The Blue Plaque went up on the wall of 1 Manor Street November 0 1 (Fig. 1).



^ **Figure 1** The Blue Plaque, now with surrounding brass ring, affixed to 51 Manor Street (Dublin). A permanent reminder of one of Ireland's most remarkable women. Photo: Brian Dolan.