SINÉAD MCCOOLE in conversation with VIRGINIE ROCHE-TIENGO AND ALESSANDRA RUGGIERO

Meeting No Ordinary Woman.
An Interview

Sinéad McCoole is no ordinary woman. She is truly a woman of parts and a changemaker. To use Mary McAleese's words, she is part of "a vast reservoir of female potential, talent, experience and knowledge, just waiting to change the face of the Earth".[1] We had the honour and the privilege to interview her in November 2025. Virginie had first met her in Toulouse in 2022 during an international conference on *Ireland and Human Rights, Idealism and Pragmatism, Discourse and Realities*. Sinéad's play, *Leaving the Ladies* (2019), published by Arlen House, Dublin, was staged for the first time in France, and Virginie was presenting a paper in connection with the play on human rights and women changemakers.

Sinéad has lived a thousand lives. Born in New York in 1968 to Irish parents, her family came back to Ireland in 1972 to live in Limerick. She is now a renowned historian of Irish History and Irish Art, a playwright, broadcaster and curator. She was the historical and curatorial Advisor of Ireland 2016 Centenary. One of her key achievements was the creation of the *100 Years of Women in Irish Politics and Public Life* exhibition for the commemoration of the centenary of women's suffrage (Vótáil100) first on show in Dublin Castle and 32 Kildare Street and all over Ireland in Limerick, Donegal, Roscommon, Tipperary and Wexford, welcoming 10,000 visitors for four years. She also created the Mná100 website, an online initiative of the Decade of Centenaries Commemorative Programme, highlighting and documenting the role and contribution of women during the Irish Revolutionary period, 1912-1923.

Her research interests range from Women in politics and public life 1900-2020 to Women's participation in the revolutionary period 1916-1923, focusing on those imprisoned and on women TDs, Senators and MEPs but also women who were the first to attain leadership roles in public life, and those who established groups such as Women Elect, Women's Aid, the Women's Political Association, the Women's Talent Bank. She is also interested in political party's literature relating to women and legislation and has scripted a 40-minute Film based on Pop Up Women's Museum.

She has written books on women in politics and public life from *Hazel: A Life of Lady Lavery* (1996) to *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol* (1997), *No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923* (2003), *Easter Widows* (2014), *Mná: Women of 1916* (2018), and *Mná na hÉireann, Irish Women MEPs Past and* Present (2023). She has in recent years written podcasts and plays, such as *Leaving the Ladies* (2019) and *Loving Wife* (2022), as a way of using the creative process to tell Irish women's stories to new audiences.

She is currently Head of Exhibitions, Learning and Programming at the National Library of Ireland. She has created exhibitions in Ireland and the US, films, radio programmes, catalogues and web pages. She is interested in the role of collectors, curators, and particular state collections, and examining exclusions, items deemed unimportant, while also looking more generally at gender orientated communications and gender specific language in the museum sector. She has also

developed a keen specialist knowledge on photographs from revolutionary period and her expertise in Irish visual culture has been sought by Collectors, RTÉ, Auctioneers, and Academics.

AR: We often consider political events like Brexit mainly in terms of treaties, borders, and economics. I'd like to explore with you how such a momentous change resonates in the realms of memory, identity, and cultural imagination. As a historian of Ireland's past and its collective memory, I'm interested in how you think Brexit might reshape not only national identity, but also the stories we tell – through history writing, theatre, fiction, and drama. To what extent might Brexit represent a turning point in how Ireland sees itself, and how its writers, playwrights, and novelists portray that self?

VRT: Absolutely, and as a historian and a playwright why would you see a connection between drama and Brexit?

SM: When we talk about drama and fiction writing – forms that hold a major place in the Irish literary tradition – I see them as deeply connected to education. At their core, they're about telling a story to an audience that wants to understand and learn. There's a certain openness in how people engage with drama for that reason. In the context of Brexit, what's crucial to grasp from an Irish point of view is the timing. The referendum happened in 2016, the same year we marked the centenary of our independence – an independence that was partial, because the island remained divided. One of the significant developments since Brexit, especially within the conversation about a 'shared island', is the way public narratives about Ireland are increasingly reaching back to the period around 1920, when the island was still united.

If you think about it, the last census before 1920 was an all-Ireland census. So, when Brexit happens a century later, our primary historical records from 100 years earlier all relate to a time when the island was still unified. That context is shaping the current conversation: people in Ireland are once again looking at the island as a whole, with all the complexities that raises around borders and identity. There's now a substantial amount of work being done on borders, border communities, and what it means to have a bordered identity.

A lot of recent research has also focused on family history – on which family stories get told and how they're told. In the political sense – political with a small "p" – there's a push to encourage people to talk about their familial connections across the island. This aligns with a long-standing tradition in Irish drama and fiction, where the family has often been the central unit, especially in stories about migration.

Much of our literature deals with loss – people leaving the island, generations scattered abroad. But now we're experiencing something very different: a sharp rise in people arriving in Ireland. Many are choosing Ireland instead of Britain, and that shift is beginning to influence our culture in profound ways.

There has been a noticeable shift in Ireland's relationship with the UK because Brexit has changed the political landscape in real time, and that shift is already influencing younger poets. Speaking from my perspective as a historian, I tend to see these developments through a longer lens. When I was writing *Leaving the Ladies*, I was deeply interested in the political processes of the period, and I've always found it difficult to separate my interest in politics from my understanding of history or from my literary work. For me, they inform one another.

What I try to do is find ways to express different histories without shying away from their complexity. One effective approach, I've found, is to make the historical complexity personal. A family's internal tensions can act as a metaphor for a political situation's wider complications.

In my play, I used the structure of a political meeting – the chair, the agenda, the debate – as a way to explore a breakdown in relationships. I blended formal political behaviour with people who were operating outside established political processes. This became a metaphor for how the State evolved after independence, especially as the political structures that emerged were gradually replaced by rural power and by the increasingly dominant role of the Catholic Church.

This shift had profound consequences, particularly for women who had been politically active during the revolutionary period – women who, in many cases, were unmarried or childless, which had allowed them the time and freedom to participate in public life. After independence, many of these women found themselves pushed to the margins as the new social order took shape. Sometimes the ambitions you have when you're young can't be realised later in life, because family responsibilities take over. That idea was central to what I explored in the play.

To finish on Brexit – and you can ask more about this if you'd like – the main thing I'm observing is a shift in how the Irish position themselves internationally. Increasingly, Irish people are identifying with others who were part of the wider British Empire, recognising a shared, complicated imperial history. At the same time, England is now having to reassess its own understanding of what "Great Britain" means. There's a growing awareness that the world has moved on, and that the historical role Britain once imagined for itself no longer aligns with contemporary global realities.

VRT: Absolutely.

AR: I've recently read that Keir Starmer is looking at ways for the UK to rejoin aspects of the EU customs union, which has sparked quite a debate. In your view, is the Irish border – the physical border itself – really the central issue that could make a difference in this process?

SMC: We've always had what's known as the Common Travel Area. The only time movement between Ireland and the UK was formally recorded was during the Second World War, when a permit system was introduced. That permit system – and this is shown clearly in the work of Dr Jennifer Redmond – reveals that the profile of people moving between the islands was very different from how it is often described or remembered. Once again, women's history in particular is not accurately reflected in popular narratives.

People often speak of walking between the two islands, and even at the height of the Troubles, travelling to Britain required no paperwork – it was something you barely thought about. The Common Travel Area just existed; it was taken for granted.

Now, however, that border is becoming more porous in a different sense: it's being talked about, problematised, and re-examined in ways it wasn't before. After the Good Friday Agreement and the uneasy peace that followed, one thing that was rarely acknowledged was how many farms and family lands were literally divided by the border. That physical, lived reality is only now coming back into the public conversation.

When the border was first drawn during the Treaty negotiations, it was mapped according to the topography rather than through any careful surveying or on-the-ground assessment. It wasn't measured in a scientific way, nor did people visit each area to understand the implications. As a result, some houses were literally cut in half, and many farms were split down the middle. People adapted as best they could – they found ways to work around the border. Trade continued in forms that effectively made the border functional, even when political tensions escalated and some areas became cut off. There were organisations and clubs that remained all-Ireland despite the border, while others split into separate Northern and Southern branches.

I remember on my first trip to England going into a post office and asking for a stamp for Ireland. The woman behind the counter asked, in a thick accent I could barely understand, "Southern or Northern?". I didn't know what she meant – because to me, Ireland was simply an island. And although it is an island that has been politically divided, the reality is that many in Britain didn't really think of part of it as belonging to the UK in any deep sense. There was constant movement between the islands; Irish people were familiar to them but often understood within a very particular class framework.

This is something we see worldwide: migrants and "others" are often perceived through a narrow lens shaped by assumptions about why they are in a particular country. Over time, we've also realised that the picture is far more complex. Many people – including myself – were born outside Ireland to Irish parents and later returned as citizens of another jurisdiction.

VRT: You are a daughter of the Irish diaspora. Your parents were both Irish, and you were born abroad.

SMC: Yes, I was born in New York.

AR: Of course, the US and the UK have traditionally been the main destinations for Irish emigrants, which made travelling along those routes much easier for the Irish. How do you think Brexit fits within the longer historical trajectory of Ireland–Britain relations: as a rupture or as part of an ongoing pattern of political realignment? And how do you see this being reflected – or resisted – in contemporary Irish fiction and drama?

SMC: Brexit represents both a social and political realignment. It is a rupture in the established political and commercial accommodations between the peoples of these islands. For example, the Northern Ireland peace agreement allows individuals to claim Irish citizenship, and many in Britain with Irish ancestry – often through a grandparent – are now reconsidering their identity and ethnicity through this new lens. Advances in DNA testing are reinforcing this awareness.

From a literary perspective, as both a historian and a playwright, I sense that contemporary literature is still in an early stage of grappling with these changes. We are only beginning to see the shaping of cultural narratives, perhaps ten years on. However, there are clear signs of a younger generation looking beyond the traditional Empire-focused narrative. In Ireland, for instance, emerging filmmakers are engaging with the Famine in ways unburdened by contemporary political concerns, and musicians are embracing the Irish language even when they are native English speakers.

What I would say about drawing straight lines, writing history, or telling stories is that theatre, drama, poetry, and language give you a kind of flexibility that traditional history books do not. They allow you to make inferences, suggest possibilities, and explore ideas that a strictly factual account cannot capture. History depends on sources – and sources depend on what survives – but much of our culture, particularly in Ireland, is rooted in oral history.

The Irish adopted English, but they made it their own. Irish-English developed into a distinct form of the language, different from the English spoken in England. This has interesting cultural consequences. For example, when people ask why certain bands are popular in Ireland, part of the answer lies in language: the musicians are singing in English, but with an Irish turn of phrase, or an Irish rhythm and cadence, that resonates in a uniquely Irish way.

The same dynamic applies to much of our contemporary theatre and creative work, particularly that produced by Irish people living outside Ireland. Take music, for example: Shane MacGowan and The Pogues, or the Gallagher brothers in Oasis – these are quintessentially Irish influences yet

expressed through a diasporic lens. They draw on the Irish oral tradition, just as earlier generations did in different forms.

Similarly, consider Martin McDonagh as a playwright. His work looks at Ireland in a way that feels almost like a Brexit reflection. He is somewhat disconnected, drawing on the past for influence, while portraying an Ireland that still exists, but only in pockets. His Ireland is real and familiar, presented in a form of dialogue that resonates with history and tradition, but it is not representative of the Ireland we see today – a multicultural, growing population. His stories are important, but they reflect a particular Ireland that is being played out elsewhere, rather than engaging fully with the contemporary lived experience of the island.

I see Brexit as changing not only the movement of people, but also how that movement is perceived and how newcomers engage with Irish culture. Some people come to Ireland, obtain Irish passports, and then move on again – often to areas or cities where they can find larger communities, more opportunities, or better infrastructure for their work and lifestyle.

Ireland's population is growing – projected to reach around 5.1 million – but by comparison with major UK cities, it is still relatively small. For someone moving here, it's not only an English-speaking country that is culturally different, but also a smaller, more limited environment. Many of these newcomers are highly educated and find that Ireland does not always offer the same access to international schools, specialised jobs, or broader professional opportunities that larger cities can provide. In that sense, Brexit is also reshaping education and professional mobility in Ireland. There's a noticeable shift in how people navigate the country and its institutions, reflecting broader changes in demographics, migration, and the expectations of highly skilled migrants.

AR: In what ways did Brexit reopen unresolved historical issues surrounding Partition and the symbolic as well as practical meaning of the border?

SMC: The border has always been a contested space, yet people managed to navigate it – even in cases where farms, or in one instance a house, were split between what was then the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. For a century, communities quietly adapted to this reality. The divisions we see today are largely rooted in politics, the segregated education system, and class structures – factors that continue to shape society.

As we move toward the idea of a Shared Ireland, attention increasingly turns to the middle ground – the communities and families that have maintained connections across the border. Art and culture offer powerful ways to explore these differences. This exploration is supported by substantial investment in the arts in the south, which provides both resources and platforms. Historically, those who have driven social or political change – much like the leaders of the Rising – have often turned to the arts to reach audiences, voice grievances, and open dialogue, particularly through fiction and other creative forms.

VRT: And would you write specifically about Brexit? You wrote *Leaving the Ladies* in 2019, and you intermingled real figure, historical figure with fictional characters. Would you do that about Brexit, and current political issues? Would that influence your writing or your research? Would you focus more on a specific topic that would deal with that issue?

SMC: It's interesting you mention that, because part of my current work involves the National Library of Ireland, where I'm engaged in exhibitions, learning, and programming. I've been thinking a lot about how we've documented the "new Irish" over the past thirty years, since changes in emigration laws opened Ireland to EU migration. I'm trying to develop a deeper understanding of Ireland's

memory and cultural context, so we can design programs that attract people to the library – whether through drama, poetry, or the written word.

I haven't really focused on my creative side in the traditional artistic sense; my creativity has been about designing programming that makes the library more accessible. So, in a way, some of the reflections I've shared today come from trying to understand where we are now and asking the kinds of questions necessary to build audiences for a national cultural institution. It's a different kind of creativity from what I practiced in theatre, but it's informed by similar principles: connecting people to stories, history, and culture in meaningful ways.

For a long time, my focus has been on how women's stories are told and how those stories can be made visible. But often, it's theatre and artists who are witnessing change as it happens – they're recording it in real time. That immediacy gives their work an authenticity that I, trained as a historian, sometimes struggle to engage with. When I approach historical material, I am constantly evaluating its credibility: would people have said or done this at that time? Does it reflect the social norms and context of the period?

Younger artists, however, often take historical events and make them modern, blending fact and fiction in ways that can feel jarring to me. When I write about the past, I feel confident navigating it, knowing the sources I'm drawing on and understanding the context of the language and behaviour. Writing about the contemporary world is harder for me, because it requires capturing authentic voices in real time – a challenge I haven't fully explored.

Yet, what I am observing now, particularly in light of Brexit, is Ireland in transformation. One thing that stands out is a newfound confidence in the country. We are embracing the European Union in a way that feels less complicated than our historical relationship with England or America, where so many Irish people emigrated. It's remarkable to think that, for much of our history, we had limited direct contact with people across Europe, and now that dynamic is changing.

There has been a significant surge of interest in Ireland from across Europe, and through our national cultural institutions and networks, we've been reconnecting with cousins, friends, and cultural partners around the world. Many visitors come from countries like Italy, and in conversations at the library, I've discovered that some schools there teach Joyce.

What's emerging now is a shift in focus: it's less about Shakespeare and traditional English literature, and more about Irish writers such as Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and others. Their English, while historically rooted, feels more modern and resonates strongly with international audiences. Brian Friel, for example, is strikingly international in his outlook; as Virginie could tell, speaking to his family and listening to their stories highlights the global dimensions of his work.

Even Yeats, whose background was English merchant stock, had a cosmopolitan perspective – he looked far beyond Ireland, even as far as Japan, in his thinking. This global perspective allows audiences to see that Ireland was not simply inward-looking or obsessed with its own past. As a result, the Irish characters and stories being highlighted today – especially in the wake of Brexit – are less about poverty, hardship, or the Troubles, and more about figures and narratives that can transcend national boundaries and speak to a wider, international audience.

VRT: And would you like your plays to be translated into Italian?

SMC: It would be a privilege, in the past, I would have thought my work focused on Ireland would not be of interest to those outside Ireland, or beyond our diaspora, but are increasingly we are transglobal, although Irish people over 40 were not particularly multilingual, that is changing. Own education system in 1970s and 1980s was narrow in focus. The assumption, historically, was that most Irish people would move to America or England, so our teaching of language or lack of, reflected that.

The shift you're noting – such as Italians reading Irish work – highlights how universal themes resonate beyond our borders. For example, *Leaving the Ladies* explores democracy, women's empowerment, and the gendered nature of political systems. These are themes that can speak to anyone, anywhere, without requiring detailed knowledge of Irish history.

If someone in Italy – or anywhere outside Ireland – is interested in reading about Irish experiences, it doesn't need to be through the detailed lens of our national history. What resonates are the broader, universal themes: the fact that Ireland has one of the more stable democracies in Europe, a legacy of neutrality after the Civil War, and an ongoing struggle with gender equality in politics. These questions reveal something about the national psyche and the persistent inequalities we face. What fascinates me is having someone from another place reflect on these themes and discuss them with me, offering a fresh perspective. They don't need to dive into the microscopic details of our complex history. This removes some of the complication and creates a more fluid dialogue focused on shared ideas and commonalities, rather than the 'mud and weeds' of history, where I often find myself immersed.

AR: You mentioned Joyce and how he taught in Italy, but we teach him as an English author. The same is true for writers like Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Swift, and George Bernard Shaw – they've been absorbed into the English literary canon. When I speak with students, I emphasise that they are Irish, yet their Irishness is often overlooked. Do you think there's a risk that the distinctly Irish identity of these authors is being dismissed, even as their work engages with broader, global themes in English literature? How important is the role of the Irish language when we speak about identity?

SMC: If you understand the cadence of the Irish language and the way Irish people speak, it becomes clear why language is so central to our culture. There has been a renewed interest in the Irish language in recent years, and many books have been written exploring its richness. One notable figure in this area was Manchán Magan, who unfortunately passed away recently in his fifties from cancer – a significant loss to the country.

Magan produced popular books that captured the essence of the Irish language and landscape. For example, Ninety-Nine Words for Rain (and One for Sun) and Thirty-Two Words for Field: Lost words of the Irish landscape explore the expressive depth of Irish vocabulary. One striking feature of the language is its wordiness: Irish speakers often use six, seven, or eight words where two might suffice in English. This linguistic richness is part of what makes Irish culture and expression so unique.

The reason Irish people speak in such a descriptive way is that they are always striving to capture as much detail as possible. As a result, Irish storytelling often moves in a circular fashion, with the listener waiting for the narrative to return to its starting point. Storytelling is central to how people speak and interact, and this style carries over when Irish people go abroad – they often cluster together, partly because they seek the familiar rhythms and patterns of Irish dialogue.

When people from other nationalities encounter this style, they often enjoy its conversational quality. It flows naturally, without rigid formality, and allows for nuance and playfulness in language. Writers like James Joyce take this even further, capturing the continuous flow of everyday speech in a way that is uniquely Irish, lending a distinctive rhythm and intimacy to the narrative.

I would also say that there's something about the mundane in Irish storytelling – how people can make a story out of seemingly nothing. This is connected to the social structure of Ireland. Having lived under colonial rule, there was a built-in level of non-compliance with authority, and one way people expressed themselves was through informal socializing rather than formal structures. This created a kind of unstructured freedom in how they approached life and storytelling.

There are regional differences as well. The East Coast, shaped over centuries by plantations, administration, and Viking settlements, developed differently from the West of Ireland, which often

operates on its own rhythm and clock. Even for Irish people, it can be challenging to enter certain social groupings, especially those centred around the Irish language. Access to these groups is limited, as they tend to accept only those with a high level of fluency, preserving a unique linguistic and cultural space.

When people talk about Ireland, tourists often say that the Irish are friendly. I would frame it differently: the Irish are curious. There's a subtle but important distinction. This curiosity comes from our colonial past – people instinctively want to "place" you, to understand who you are and why you're there, before deciding what to share. That instinct still shapes social interactions in many parts of the country.

This curiosity and attentiveness also play out in Irish drama and storytelling. Recently, I saw Barbara Bergin's newest play, *Dublin Gothic*, set in a Dublin tenement and spanning a hundred years. One reason it has been so lauded is the sheer number of characters on stage – over a hundred – and the interwoven narratives. Seeing it on one of the first production days, it captures the complexity of human interconnections: the stories and traumas of women passed down across generations, and the shifting realities of different eras. It's a remarkable example of how Irish drama can convey the richness and layered authenticity of everyday life.

As a historian, I appreciated the play from that perspective, but as an Irish person, I found it difficult to follow. I'm not sure how it would translate for a foreign audience. The accents were very heavy, particularly the inner-city Dublin speech, and some words were almost swallowed, making it hard to understand certain characters.

This habit of "swallowing" words has an interesting historical context. In the west of Ireland, people speak more from the throat, whereas Dubliners speak in this muted, swallowed way – a practice that originally helped people avoid being overheard by authorities. It's another form of subtle non-compliance embedded in language. I'm always intrigued by these habits and ask myself, "Why do people speak this way?"

My curiosity has always been heightened, partly because I was born outside Ireland and returned with my parents. I often felt like an observer – watching people who were closely related to me by blood, yet very different in behaviour and outlook. That perspective shaped how I understand social dynamics.

When something disrupts those dynamics – whether Brexit or other societal changes – it highlights the fact that we are an island nation. Unlike a country like Italy, where people can travel long distances by land, we are geographically constrained and have historically relied on boats and planes to connect with the wider world. Being islanders has shaped our culture, our interactions, and our adaptability.

The English haven't really experienced being islanders in the same way, especially since the advent of trains. It's quicker to reach Paris than it is to travel to Dublin, for example. In many ways, England embraced Europe – but on its own terms – whereas Ireland embraced Europe because it actively helped us modernize. The EU improved our laws, upgraded our infrastructure, and gave us access to more cultural and consumer products, which made us feel more European.

When I talk to my children, they identify as both Irish and European seamlessly. My son, for instance, had the opportunity to travel extensively across Europe. Unlike previous generations, who might have travelled primarily to family in America or England, the younger generation sees Europe as vibrant and full of possibilities. It's a shift in perspective that has really shaped how Ireland connects with the wider world.

AR: How do you think historically rooted identities in Northern Ireland have shaped not only political responses to Brexit but also their representation in contemporary cultural production?

SMC: Brexit has brought the question of the island sharply back into focus. Europe, in many ways, had unified us: we became part of a larger grouping, while Britain now finds itself isolated. This moment has encouraged the Irish to reconnect with what, in my youth, was referred to simply as 'the continent' – then, in the 1980s, it felt very distant. Many of us were not linguistically equipped, due to our education system, and our economic and social connections tended to North America, England, and Scotland – centres of emigration.

Joining the EEC in 1973 transformed Ireland: our laws, our rights, and our infrastructure were all reshaped. Over the past fifty years, it has been overwhelmingly positive – a unifying force, albeit sometimes an overarching one. Yet when the Brexit vote came, Northern Ireland chose to remain in the EU, sparking another layer of division.

Culturally and socially, it has raised questions of identity. It has allowed the Irish to feel confident as Europeans, not merely as an island on the edge of Europe. The growing number of Europeans living in Ireland has contributed to a more multicultural, mobile, and educated population, proud to be both Irish and European. At the same time, divisions have emerged.

In Northern Ireland, poets and playwrights have flourished during the peace process, often drawing on narratives of the Troubles. Yet the decades following that conflict remain marked by a lingering silence, and these voices continue to negotiate the tension between memory and cultural expression.

AR: Today, we increasingly see archives preserving personal recordings and individual materials that help construct narratives and histories. Do you think Brexit-related cultural works – such as staged performances, community theatre, or other cultural productions – can play a role in documenting this period?

SMC: I think Brexit will always mark a significant date in the calendar of change. One of the ways this cultural shift is being recorded is through the opportunities it has created for Ireland to redefine itself. We are seeing a greater diversity of people coming to the country – bringing both expertise and, in many cases, arriving as refugees – which is enriching our society.

In contrast, Britain is experiencing a crisis of identity, rooted in a flawed narrative of empire as inherently successful or benevolent. Ireland, however, has the ability to absorb and reinterpret these changes in its own way. I've already observed this in the approaches of younger Irish filmmakers, who are including these new perspectives for the first time in Netflix dramas and other contemporary media.

Until recently, discussions of the Irish Famine were often muted. Previous generations were cautious about delving too deeply into its details, partly because of economic pressures and the fear that revealing certain stories might affect the livelihoods of the wider Irish community.

In terms of drama, this caution shaped how famine stories were portrayed and how Irish audiences engaged with them. Few famine-themed films have been well financed, so it has been difficult to capture the full catastrophic scale and human impact of the event. As a result, the magnitude of the Famine has often been underrepresented in cultural productions.

What I would add is that the Famine has been referenced in historical dramas set in later periods, such as The House of Guinness and other productions. There was even a film specifically about the Famine, in which the characters spoke both Irish and English, with English subtitles provided for audiences.

The way the Famine has been represented also informs how the Irish respond to other crises. For example, Ireland's strong sympathy for Palestine resonates with the historical experience of being trapped during the Famine – people were confined to a land without access to boats or the ability to leave. One question often asked is, "Why didn't the Irish leave?" The simple answer is that they didn't

have access to the beaches – they didn't own the means to escape. This sense of entrapment and resilience continues to shape cultural memory and empathy in Ireland.

When you understand the history of Ireland and the experience of separation, the narrative that emerged from Brexit becomes clearer – it was largely manufactured to achieve a particular form of freedom. As Irish people, we deeply understand the importance of autonomy, especially after one hundred years of striving for it. We recognize that when mistakes are made, we must take responsibility ourselves, rather than blaming others. Yet alongside those mistakes comes a strong sense of empowerment.

One hundred years on, Ireland has made significant strides in self-determination. After seven hundred years of being told we couldn't rule ourselves, we've managed to chart our own path and assert our independence with confidence.

Brexit also brings into focus questions about education and the way history is taught – particularly the "mythical" stories that glorify making money at the expense of other nations, through exploitation and plundering. There's little discussion about repatriating Irish cultural or historical materials from that period.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that Ireland was deeply intertwined with England's history. For a long time, we were part of a Greater Britain, and in some ways, we were enforcers within that system. The challenge now is recognizing that history while choosing to take only the positive lessons from that imperial past – and leaving behind the negative legacies we don't want to perpetuate.

We have a long history and many difficult lessons to learn, and often the best way to explore them is through drama and poetry. That slight distance – what you might call a soft lens – has been used by the government for years to support and justify strong investment in the arts in Ireland. We see the arts as a core part of our identity, and as a way to work through challenges and past troubles by staging them, examining them, and then reflecting on what they mean.

VRT: And can you tell us more about the importance of women as narrators in your work?

SMC: Absolutely – I'm very invested in the idea of telling a story with women as narrators, because the narrative perspective matters deeply. Yet, even when I watch my own play, I often find myself drawn to the male characters. I give them strong, distinctive lines, and their way of speaking is engaging in a particular way.

When I've done scripting workshops or thought about how to make women's drama appealing to audiences, one recurring insight is that including a compelling male character within the dialogue often helps attract attention. Just as men might be drawn to a "Bond girl," women in all-female casts often look for characters who provide contrast or a point of difference. It's about creating dynamics within the story that resonate with everyone, regardless of gender.

While I've focused much of my writing on women's stories –and have spent a lot of time in archives uncovering them – ultimately, when you're writing, you often lose yourself in the story. You stop noticing individual characters or details; you're carried along entirely by the words and the narrative. I think that's an important part of storytelling.

Another point to consider in relation to Brexit is the question of Irish authors being labelled as "English" authors. For example, Sir Tom Stoppard passed away this week, and he's widely being called the greatest writer in the English language of our generation. Yet, he was born in Czechoslovakia and educated in Europe – not England. His mastery of English was shaped by his own culture and sensibilities, but because he lived and worked in England, he is claimed as an English

playwright. This highlights a tension around identity: sometimes a country will take the best from elsewhere and claim it, even when the origins and influences are more complex.

Whenever an Irish actor is introduced internationally, they often reply saying, "I'm Irish". Then immediately, people will add, "Oh, you're one of England's…" and the list goes on. But the actor insists, "No, I'm Irish".

So, in that sense, Brexit has reignited questions and issues around identity that the Irish have been negotiating for a long time – how to assert and maintain a distinct national identity even when closely intertwined with England culturally and historically.

We've always lived our lives very publicly through drama, poetry, and comedy, and as commentators – whether in sports, television, or other media – in England. In the past, we would often conceal our accents to blend in, to morph into what was expected. But now, it's completely acceptable to speak and sing in your own voice, with your own accent, without trying to imitate someone else.

This shift began with the Abbey Theatre, promoting Irish voices for Irish audiences, and a hundred years on, we're really making our mark. We're punching above our weight in the dramatic and cultural world, asserting a distinct and confident identity that's finally being recognized both at home and internationally.

AR: What about the relationship with Northern Ireland? You've spoken about the Republic of Ireland and its evolving relationship with Europe, but the border issue remains central and has always been crucial for the peace process – something that now seems potentially threatened. When I was in Dublin last year, I saw *Agreement* by Owen McCafferty at the Gate Theatre. The play doesn't mention Brexit directly, but it reflects on the Good Friday Agreement and the labour that went into reaching it. That moment now seems fragile. In your view, is it true that while the Republic of Ireland has made significant economic and social progress, Northern Ireland has not seen the same improvements?

SMC: I suppose the first thing to note about *Agreement* is that it was created in the context of a historic commemoration. It wouldn't surprise me if there was even specific funding provided to support the production. Beyond that, theatre provides a unique way to explore complex issues. Even people who claim they're "not political" can engage with these topics when they're presented on stage as a dramatic piece – it allows the ideas to be experienced and reflected upon in a way that traditional discussion often cannot.

There's an element of message-carrying in all of this. I think one of the key differences between the North and the South stems from a long-standing issue that has persisted since the foundation of the Northern state: a partitioned education system. There were no significant efforts to integrate different communities into a single schooling system.

At the same time, the class structure was closely tied to religion, which meant there were very few opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet outside their neighbourhoods, schools, or religious communities. So, what we've been seeing is a continuation of these divisions, affecting how communities interact and perceive one another.

It doesn't matter what your politics are – on the island of Ireland, you're entitled to an Irish passport. And now you see people who might otherwise identify with Britain carrying an Irish passport simply because it gets them through queues in places like Spain. Personally, I find that a bit difficult, because for me a passport carries far more significance than just a convenient travel document.

That said, I also hold dual nationality, so I understand that the situation isn't always straightforward. People often have to trace their family background and look for relatives who were born in Ireland before the partition in order to claim citizenship. They're not claiming to be Irish in identity, but they're using their Irish heritage as a means of gaining mobility and access to Europe.

There's a certain irony in that. Historically, we were a very subdued and constrained people – when we left Ireland, we usually left on foot, with very little, and often with nothing at all. Now, generations later, people are leveraging that same heritage in ways we could hardly have imagined.

What I would say is that this really shows how the Irish have embraced their European footprint. The peace process has opened doors to far more people than we might have expected. I think that can only be a positive thing – people are beginning to see that peace has given them access to other places and opportunities.

The concept of a "shared island" is particularly interesting. Whoever coined that term captured a unique way of thinking about living into the future: lines and divisions may remain, but we have to find ways to coexist and live in harmony. There are examples from other parts of the world where this has been managed, and the Irish have a certain resilience in that regard.

Consider this: we've had a partition running through farms for over a hundred years, and for generations, people simply adapted without much discussion. I think that sums up a lot about the Irish approach – pragmatic, resilient, and focused on living alongside divisions rather than being defined by them.

There was a real subjugation of women in this country, both politically and socially, which I was very familiar with and which I explored in the play. But I would say that people made an accommodation with that subjugation in order to live in harmony.

So, when we talk about the Irish being very talkative and very good communicators, it's really about what they choose to talk about. So you'll often find that Irish people talk a lot but say very little. You've heard that said about us, of course. And even when you read it in theatre dialogue, it often becomes the source of the laugh.

There's an advertisement on television at the moment where a young man rings his father and asks, "How are you, Dad?". And the father replies, "Ah sure, you know yourself". That's a quintessentially Irish phrase. "You know yourself". In English, it doesn't really mean anything at all – but every Irish person knows exactly what it means. "You know yourself". You're saying to somebody: you know what I'm feeling, you know the situation – and the answer is "yourself". It's not English; it's an Irishism. And it comes straight out of the Irish language. In Irish you say, *Tá an t-ocras orm* (the hunger is on me), or *Tá an fhuacht orm* (the cold is on me). There's a physicality to it, a sense that emotion or experience sits on the person. And "you know yourself" carries that same sensibility: the meaning rests between the two speakers, not in the words themselves.

When you watch Irish drama or listen to Irish poetry, something of this rhythm – this cadence I mentioned earlier – comes through. It's the feeling carried inside the language, a sort of warmth that exists even when you're only hearing a handful of words. Take that advertisement, for example: the young man calls his father and asks, "How are you, Dad?" and the father replies, "Ah sure, you know yourself". The line on its own means almost nothing in English, but everything in Irish speech. There's something in the tone; in the way he says it. The son knows his father isn't well. He is checking in. And the father, as many Irish fathers would, tells him nothing. But in that little exchange – and in the silence around it – you hear the whole story. That is Irish dialogue: saying nothing, but meaning everything. And the audience, when they hear it, understands it instinctively. It is as much in the interaction as in the words themselves.

When you speak in, say, the United States, everything tends to be very literal. People often miss the multiple layers of meaning that a single word can carry. But when someone integrates into Ireland, they eventually begin to understand that it's not just the words themselves that matter – it's the tone, the context, and the interaction. That's when they start to grasp the rhythm of Irish life, the collective memory, and the way language is approached here. It's not simply communication; it's a reflection of history, culture, and identity.

I would say that Brexit has brought a flowering of Irish culture. It has changed us – not completely, but in a way that endures. As they say, "A terrible beauty is born," and in this case, it's change that lasts. I can see it most clearly when the English ask us about our history – I've experienced this several times, both in Ireland and in England. You notice the difference in perspective: the Irish will say "England," "Scotland," and "Wales," identifying the distinct countries on the island, whereas the English often say "Great Britain." Even my children are starting to use "Great Britain," but my generation is much more careful about the words we use to refer to those places. It's a subtle thing, but it speaks volumes about identity and awareness.

AR: From a methodological standpoint, how might contemporary fiction, theatre, and other cultural materials serve as future historical sources for understanding Brexit's impact on Ireland?

SMC: Ireland has always maintained a cultural archive that shaped how its people engaged politically – both locally and nationally – to preserve the culture they valued. Often, political activists were also the collectors and custodians of that culture. Culture tends to be safeguarded when it feels threatened. So, the question arises: is Brexit a threat to Ireland?

I see it differently. Ireland has accepted and embraced the change, and we are navigating the world in new ways. How the literary and historical canon will interpret it remains unknown now. I suspect Brexit will serve as a touchpoint – a marker of a particular moment in time – similar to how female historians use 1990, when Mary Robinson's election redefined the presidency and her decision to welcome home the diaspora reshaped Ireland's national imagination.

Brexit has already changed Ireland, contributing to rapid population growth, and its effects will continue in my lifetime and beyond. It may even prompt a rewriting of Irish history, by someone who came to the country as a direct result of Brexit, such as EU students studying here.