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ROBINSON, Mary Therese Winifred (née Bourke)

Irish politician and seventh President of Ireland and second United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997-2002

By **Michael G. Schechter** · Version 4 March 2014

Was born 21 May 1944 in Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland. She is the daughter of Aubrey Bourke and Tessa O'Donnell, both medical doctors. On 12 December 1970 she married Nicholas K. Robinson, solicitor and cartoonist. They have one daughter and two sons.

Biography

Bourke, the third of five children and only daughter, grew up in fairly prosperous circumstances. While her mother gave up medicine to raise a family, her father continued to be active in the profession for more than fifty years. Bourke began her education at a small private school in Ballina, but at age ten she enrolled in Mount Anville in Dublin, a small, strict convent school. Although at one point her scientific curiosity made medicine a likely ambition, she eventually gravitated toward the law. Her older brothers became doctors like their parents, but her younger brothers followed their sister into the law. It has been suggested that her belief in the legal system as an instrument of social justice and protection of individual rights is rooted as much in her grandfather Adrian Bourke's influence (a Ballina solicitor with a passionate commitment to justice) as in her own idealism (Mary Robinson 1944- 1993: 278). Upon graduation she spent a year at Madame Anita's, a finishing school in Paris. In 1963 she won a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin, where, as a Catholic, she was a minority. Two years later she won a scholarship to the university's law school. In 1967 Bourke was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in French and a Bachelor of Laws, both with first class honors, and was called to the bar in the same year. Her credentials attracted the attention of some Harvard Law School professors, who suggested that she study there for her Master of Law. She attended Harvard Law School on a

scholarship, where her thesis focused on the Treaty of Rome and she learned 'that law is an instrument for social change' (Horgan 1997: 18).

Upon her return to Ireland Bourke joined the faculty of Trinity College, becoming the Reid Professor of Constitutional and Criminal Law. At age 24 she was the youngest professor in the school's history. Under Irish law, Trinity College was entitled to three seats in the Éireann Seanad, the upper house of the parliament, with the school's graduates serving as the electorate. Bourke ran on the Labour ticket, then Ireland's third largest party. She won the seat in 1969, becoming the youngest member of the Seanad and also the first Catholic ever to represent the college. Although the powers of the Seanad were limited to introducing legislation to the lower house (Dáil Éirann) and delaying legislation that the lower house had endorsed, Bourke quickly made her presence known as a champion of liberal causes. Only a year after her election Robinson (her surname since her marriage in 1970) introduced legislation to legalize the sale of contraceptives in Ireland. Throughout the 1970s she worked to improve the lot of Irish women. From 1977 to 1987 she chaired the Parliamentary Joint Committee's social-affairs subcommittee and from 1987 to 1989 she chaired its legal-affairs committee. At the same time that she was serving in the Seanad Robinson was making a name for herself as a barrister in the Irish and European courts as an outspoken advocate for liberal causes, including calling for an end to homosexuality being treated as an offense punishable by life imprisonment and bringing an end to the legal stigma imposed on those born out of wedlock. Although personally opposed to abortion, she promoted greater access to information about abortions. Perhaps because of her 1970 marriage to Nicholas Robinson, a Protestant fellow student at Trinity College, as well as a conservationist and a published authority on eighteenth century graphic arts, especially caricature, Robinson was one of the few Irish Catholic politicians to sympathize with the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland (Robinson, Mary 1991: 477). For almost seven years Robinson was one of the European members of the Trilateral Commission, resigning in 1980 because she came to believe that it lacked a real commitment to leadership and creativity in examining issues of North-South relations and because she felt that Henry Kissinger was exerting undue personal influence (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 85). In 1979 she was elected to the Dublin City Council. However, in 1981, running as a Labour Party member in an anti-Labour constituency, she failed for the second time to be elected to the lower house, a venue where she thought she had a better opportunity to advocate for social change. Robinson parted from the Labour Party in 1985 and declared herself an Independent. The precipitating issue was Labour's support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, a top-down approach to conflict resolution in Northern Ireland that she believed had been crafted without consulting the North's Unionist community. She also found wanting the party's policies toward women (Horgan 1997: 108). In 1988 Robinson and her husband founded the Irish Center for European Law at Trinity College and the following year she decided not to run for re-election to the Senate.

In April 1990 the Labour Party nominated Robinson, in spite of her defection from that party, for the Presidency, which was soon to be vacated by the retiring Patrick J. Hillery. Robinson explained that she was willing to be nominated by Labour, but would run as an Independent. Labour reluctantly agreed. The presidency of Ireland, a largely ceremonial position, had long been the domain of the ruling Republican Party (Fianna Fáil). Not only had the Republican Party never lost an election, but for the prior 17 years the party had run unopposed and their nominee this time, Deputy Prime Minister Brian Lenihan, was probably the most popular politician at the time. Dublin bookmakers listed Robinson as a 100-to-1 underdog. The final tally was 44 per cent for Lenihan, 38.9 per cent for Robinson and 17 per cent for Austin Currie of the United Ireland Party (Fine Gael). Under Irish law, however, voters mark a first and second preference for presidential candidates and, if no one receives the required majority, then the second preference votes of the minor candidate are tallied and combined with the first preference figures. The overwhelming majority of Currie's supporters had voted for Robinson as their second choice, giving her 52.8 per cent of the vote, compared to Lenihan's 47 per cent (Robinson, Mary 1991: 478). In the aftermath of the election the Prime Minister

announced that his government would repeal the statute threatening homosexuals with life imprisonment and review the constitutional ban on divorce.

On 3 December 1990 Robinson was sworn in as the first female President of Ireland. She soon proved to be the most liberal and active president in the country's history (Robinson, Mary 1991: 475). One of her priorities as President was to visit deprived or disaster-stricken areas of the world. She likened the history of the Great Irish Famine to modern nutrition, poverty and policy issues, thus creating a bridge of partnership between economically developed and economically less developed countries: 'My own approach to human rights is based on an inner sense of justice. Perhaps because I am from Ireland and have my roots in a past of struggle for freedom, of famine and of dispersal of a people' (Robinson February 1998: 45). She received the CARE Humanitarian Award in recognition of her efforts for Somalia, after she responded to the request of various aid agencies for help in that famine-ravaged country by being the first head of state to actually go to Somalia. She was also the first head of state to visit Rwanda in the direct aftermath of the country's 1994 genocide. More locally, Robinson visited Warrington and Manchester to show solidarity with the victims of the Provisional Irish Republican Army bombings in those English cities, but was also known for meeting politicians from all sides during her various visits to Northern Ireland, including Gerry Adams, the President of Sinn Féin, in July 1993, during what she described as her 'most significant, certainly most controversial' visit (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 173). She worked to stem the Irish diaspora, the exit of Irish to other countries owing to Irish unemployment. By the midpoint in her presidency her popularity rating reached 'an unprecedented 93 percent' (Murphy 2006: 25). In 1996 she became the first Irish head of state to pay an official visit to the United Kingdom, where she was received by Queen Elizabeth II, whom she had first met the year before, but that was a 'state' visit as her earlier invitation was not issued by the British government. That same year, as rumors swirled that Boutros Boutros-Ghali might not be supported in his quest for a second term as United Nations (UN) Secretary-General, Robinson's name appeared on many lists of potential successors (Spillane 1996: 12). Yet that was not to come to pass, nor, she has claimed, was it something that she was seeking: 'I felt instinctively that the role would be too political for me: I was less skillful in the arts of compromise and diplomacy and preferred to speak truth to power. But it was flattering to have my name canvassed' (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 185). When Robinson announced her resignation on 24 July 1997, effective a few months ahead of schedule, she was the most widely recognized president in Irish history. The 1990s were now referred to in Ireland 'as the "Robinson years," a time of rapid economic improvement and movement toward a more honest and socially inclusive society' (Boyle 2006: xi).

Robinson resigned to become the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights effective 12 September 1997, following her nomination by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who had succeeded Boutros-Ghali with the strong support of the United States (US), and endorsement by the UN General Assembly. Annan wanted Robinson to take over as soon as possible (thus the early resignation) and he reportedly wanted someone to assume an advocacy rather than an administrative role (Murphy 2006: 24). She took over as High Commissioner right after the Office of High Commissioner and the Centre for Human Rights were consolidated into a single office, which at a time was suffering from minimal resources and, relatedly, low morale. As High Commissioner, Robinson gave priority to implementing the Secretary-General's proposal to integrate human rights into all the UN's activities. This led her, among other things, to press for human rights to be linked to each of the Millennium Development Goals because she firmly believed 'that extreme poverty is itself a human rights violation, [and] that eliminating it was an essential part of state's obligations to its citizens' (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 207). During her first year as High Commissioner she travelled to Rwanda, South Africa, Colombia and Cambodia. As she later explained, 'I tried to go to areas where there was conflict, and where there were gross violations of human rights and listen, and by listening empower those who were victims of these violations to try and help them to get their voices heard. I tried to make it clear to them that someone was listening and that it was important we respected and cared about the terrible suffering and the terrible violations that they had endured' (Living History 2004-

2005: 198). Early in her tenure she criticized the governments of Algeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo for their human rights violations. In September 1998 Robinson visited China, the first High Commissioner to do so. She made seven visits to China overall, often criticizing its imprisonment of political dissidents and labor protestors, but she also signed a wide-ranging agreement with China to improve human rights in that country. In 1998 she controversially visited Tibet, meeting with the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyato. In September 1999 she was the first High Commissioner to report to the UN Security Council, referring to events in East Timor. She also received attention for criticizing Ireland's immigration policy, the practice of capital punishment in some states in the US, human rights violations by the Russian military in its fight in Chechnya and by Israel in Israeli occupied territories, both of which she visited in 2000. She worked to strengthen human rights monitoring in Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Yugoslavia and she engaged with the boards of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to improve their human rights records. She singled out World Bank President James Wolfensohn as being particularly receptive (Williams 1998: 6).

Robinson decided not to seek a second term as High Commissioner for several reasons, 'foremost among them being that I lacked a clear signal from Kofi Annan about his support'. Aware that she had been an outspoken High Commissioner, she knew that Annan, 'whose role as Secretary-General necessitated conciliation and diplomatic compromise', was on occasion 'less than comfortable with my assertive style'. But 'I took seriously the UN Charter, which begins, "We the peoples of the United Nations..." That's who I believed I represented, the people – not the governments – of the member states' (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 247). She told the Commission on Human Rights that she believed she could 'achieve more outside the constraints that a multilateral organization inevitably imposes'. Her announcement 'caused a furor among many governments and human rights organizations who appealed to her to stay' (Boyle 2006: xii). She and Annan worked out a compromise and extended her term by a year, which allowed her to preside as Secretary-General over the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination and Xenophobia in Durban, South Africa in 2001. Her role at the pre-conference held in Tehran and at the conference itself proved controversial, as the US delegation walked out of the conference, asserting that the meeting had become a forum for anti-Semitism and blaming Robinson for not keeping the conference on track. Robinson admitted herself that she was a bit naïve in the handling of the controversy and 'underestimated the hurt and anxiety words in a document would cause' (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 251). Yet, she also argued that many in the US delegation did not fully comprehend the bureaucratic and formalistic ways of UN negotiations in world conferences or the limited power that she had as conference Secretary-General (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 254). While Robinson's role at the conference was a major reason for US opposition for her to stay on for a full second term, she had also raised the ire of many in the US for criticizing the treatment of prisoners from the Afghan war in Guantánamo naval base, Cuba and her 'high-profile discussion of human rights violations in places like China and Israeli-occupied territories did not coincide with the US policies' (Weiss 2012: 36). Her position on Chechnya also lost her Russian support and she sensed she lacked Annan's backing for three more years as well (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 270-271). On her last day in office, 11 September 2002, Robinson complained about how the US, Russia, China and others were abusing human rights under the cover of fighting terrorism and again criticized the administration of US President George W. Bush's defiance of international law in its treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo. She said that while she knew that the events of 9/11 were going to have a terrible impact on human rights in the US, she did not 'think it was going to be so bad... the dipping of standards is quite shocking' (Realizing Rights 2008: 153). At the conclusion of her service, Robinson (Ten Priorities 2003: Appendix 1) set forth a summary of own accomplishments as high commissioner: making the office of the high commissioner more effective, international understanding of human rights, raising the profile of human rights, mainstreaming human rights in the UN, developing regional approaches, strengthening national capacity, linking with civil society,

promoting international commitments and their implementation, addressing globalization, and increasing resources.

After leaving the UN, Robinson, with the assistance of the Aspen Institute and funding from Atlantic Philanthropies, formed the New York-based Realizing Rights: The Ethical Globalization Initiative, which came to a planned end in 2010. The mantra was that everyone should have the birthright to realize his or her human rights, with a focus on fostering equitable trade and decent work, promoting the right to health and more humane migration policies, working to strengthen women's leadership and to encourage corporate responsibility in economically less developed countries, with an initial focus on Africa. Since 1998 Robinson has served as Chancellor of the University of Dublin, the first woman to hold that position since the Tudor monarch Elizabeth I. She was Honorary President of Oxfam International from 2002 to 2012. Beginning in 2004 she was appointed as Professor of Practice in Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, teaching a graduate course on human rights and globalization. She also served as an advisor to Columbia's Earth Institute and as a senior research scholar at Columbia Law School's Human Rights Institute. Since 2005 she has served as Honorary President of the European Inter-University Centre for Human Rights and Democratization, has served as Chair of the International Institute for Environment and Development and was also a founding member and Chair of the Council of Women World Leaders. In 2007 Nelson Mandela invited her to join a group known as the Elders, whose initial goal was to work to end ongoing conflicts, but expanded its agenda to encompass human rights, broadly understood. She also served as President of the Club de Madrid, a group of former democratic leaders who work to strengthen democratic leadership and governance and serves as the Extraordinary Professor in the Centre for Human Rights and the Centre for the Study of AIDS at the University of Pretoria. Robinson has served on many boards, including until 2010 as chair of the GAVI Alliance whose focus is on saving lives in poor countries through increased access to immunization, on the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, an organization which supports good governance and effective leadership in Africa, and on Silatech, which addresses youth unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa. She served on the board of the Vaccine Fund and chaired the Irish Chamber Orchestra. In 2007 she joined the Arab Democracy Foundation as a founding member of its Board of Trustees. In January 2009 she was appointed as head of the International Commission of Jurists. In 2010 Robinson returned from New York to Ireland and set up The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice, which aims to marry the principles of human rights with issues of sustainable development and responsibility for climate change. In March 2013 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon chose her to oversee the implementation of a UN-drafted peace accord in the Congo. Over the years Robinson has accumulated a huge number of awards and honors, including being a member of the Royal Irish Academy and the American Philosophical Society, and receiving honorary doctorate degrees from Brown University, the University of Cambridge and McGill University. In 1997 she was one of two winners of the North-South Prize. In 2002 she was awarded the Sydney Peace Prize, in 2003 the Otto Hahn Peace Medal in Gold of the UN Association of Germany, in 2004 the Amnesty International's Ambassador of Conscience Award, in 2005 the first 'Outspoken' award from the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and in 2009 the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award given to a civilian by the US government. Although they 'are in no hurry', Robinson and her husband have plots in Addergoole Cemetery in Lahardane in County Mayo (Robinson with Robinson 2012: 329).

Archives

Robinson's archives will be available at the Mary Robinson Centre in the Victoria House in Ballina, County Mayo, Ireland. The National University of Ireland in Galway is responsible for advising on the cataloguing and making the archive available

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(all websites accessed on 20 February 2014)

How to cite

Michael G. Schechter, 'Robinson, Mary Therese Winifred' in *IO BIO, Biographical Dictionary of Secretaries-General of International Organizations*, edited by Bob Reinalda, Kent J. Kille and Jaci L. Eisenberg. <https://sandbox.zenodo.org/records/506583> (sandbox preview)

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