

**Arrows of Futurity?
Art and history in the Dublin 1913 Lockout Tapestry project**

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Abstract

The Dublin 1913 tapestry project (2011-2013) was a collaborative venture in participatory art, under the auspices of the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) and SIPTU, the largest trade union in Ireland.

The Tapestry project involved two lead artists working with some 300 volunteers from community collectives, specialist textile workers, unskilled community groups, school children, prisoners, adult education groups, drug rehabilitation groups and many other diverse groups and individuals. The experience was designed not just to commemorate but to reflect the communal values of solidarity and support that characterised the Lockout experience in Dublin 1913. The completed tapestry was unveiled in September 2013.

This paper addresses issues that pertain to the evaluation of this project. What are the criteria or reference points most appropriate for such an evaluation? To what extent does the visual imagery and textile construction of each panel in the narrative reflect the engagement of the volunteer workers, the artist-designers, the sponsoring agencies or a co-opted political agenda? Taking as a premise the concept of socially engaged art as proposed by Pablo Helguera and in particular his concept of 'transpedagogy', the methodological challenges of evaluation of such a large scale, politically-charged project are discussed. The different perspectives of the sponsoring partners, artists, participants, funders and other interests are examined. Perceived conflicts between current practices in socially engaged art and such a large scale participatory project are identified. The role of an arts-based research methodology for evaluative judgement is explored, within a frame of applied historical analysis suggested by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur.

Key Words: socially engaged art; collaborative art; community education; tapestry.

Introduction

This paper considers some research dimensions of the Dublin 1913 Lockout Tapestry Project¹. This participatory, community-based art project was conceived as an art-based commemorative process, with permanent and tangible outcome, to mark a significant but historically eclipsed social upheaval in Dublin in 1913. The research dimensions include political, social, gender and educational issues as experienced through and shaped by collective engagement in an art project that extended over a three year period. In particular, the main issue considered in this paper is the relationship between the

materiality of textile work and the nature of the personal reflection and social engagement of the participants.

Context: the ‘decade of centenaries’

In Ireland, the decade from 2012 to 2022 is already being referred to as the ‘decade of centenaries’. Historically, the years 1912 to 1922 were definitive years for the subsequent history of Ireland, north and south. Indeed, it could be said that we have been reliving those years repeatedly through the subsequent short 20th century.

The landmark events of those years are bound up with world history – notably the trauma of the Great War 1914-18 – and especially the localised history of pent-up national conflicts on the island. The Easter Rising of 1916 remains the seminal event of contemporary Irish history, begetting the war of independence (1919-21) and leading to the establishment of the Irish Free State (1922) and subsequently the Republic of Ireland. The nationalist narrative of liberation however tends to marginalise the counter-history of Northern Ireland (also established in 1922) and the protestant unionist tradition, as well as the bitter civil war of 1921-23): what the poet W.B. Yeats referred to as ‘great hatred, little room’. The dominant nationalist rhetoric, reflected in the political and educational orthodoxies of a conservative Irish state, had the effect of erasing the immediate pre-history of 1916: thus the Irish participation of over 200,000 soldiers in the British Army, with the loss of nearly 50,000 lives in battle received little recognition in formal education or in state recognition through the twentieth century. Similarly, the labour dispute of Dublin in 1913 was effectively ignored in Irish political life. The Lockout Tapestry was then as much a work of historical reclamation as an act of art production.

Landmark events frequently eclipse and obscure the hidden histories and forgotten features of the lives lived by the powerless. In that context, the Dublin Lock-out of 1913 was for many years a forgotten and frequently deliberately ignored event. A classic dispute between capital and labour, the lock-out involved over 20,000 workers and their families in Dublin in a prolonged eight month dispute essentially premised on the right to join a trade union of their choice (Granville 2013). Dublin was a divided city at the time, with a relatively prosperous middle class contrasted with a large working class population living in some of the poorest conditions found anywhere in Europe at the time. Overcrowded tenements, poor or non-existent sanitary facilities, low pay and limited employment were endemic. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) was founded and led by Jim Larkin, a dynamic, radical and charismatic personality in the broadly syndicalist vein of labour activism. The most prominent businessman in Dublin at the time was William Martin Murphy, who owned many companies including the Dublin tramways as well as media and hotel interests. Murphy was trenchantly opposed to Larkin’s tactics and issued an ultimatum to his workers that they either sign a pledge not to join his union or else forfeit their jobs. He secured the support of a federation of employers in the city for his action. The outcome was an extended Lockout of workers from August through the bitter winter of 1913, which induced major hardship for starving families. The violent intervention of police to arrest Larkin at a public meeting resulted in bloodshed and death on the main streets of Dublin. Food kitchens, with food shipped

from England by other unions, kept death by starvation barely at bay, but ultimately, Larkin and the workers conceded defeat by late January 1914.

Yet the trauma of the city in those months from August 1913 to February 1914, has been more or less elided from the conventional narratives of twentieth century Irish history until quite recently. Thus, for example, a standard history of Ireland used in colleges and school in Ireland up to the 1970s made only the following inaccurate and dismissive reference to the event:

The condition of the poor, and the low wages paid in the Irish capital, shocked all fair minded men, but a General strike organized in 1912 (sic) by James Larkin had been defeated by the employers...’ (Curtis, 1966, p. 405).

The inadvertent placing of the ‘strike’ (not ‘lockout’, the use of term being significant in itself) in 1912 was telling: the year ‘1913’ had no resonance for the general reader in Ireland, in the sense that 1847 evoked the image of the ‘Great Famine’ or 1916 that of the ‘Easter Rising’. The fact that it would be inconceivable for such an error today to escape the attention of an editor or a proof-reader, or indeed a general readership, is itself a small testament to the recent sea-change in awareness of the Lockout and the significance of the year 1913 in Irish history.

Dublin 1913: history and imagination

The initial idea for the 1913 Tapestry Project came from a couple of retired trade union officials and labour activists, an idea formally adopted by SIPTU the largest trade union in Ireland. As that union is the direct descendent of the ITGWU founded by Larkin whose members were locked out by employers in 1913, it was seen to be a natural and appropriate form of centenary celebration. The approach to and involvement of NCAD brought another dimension to the project. SIPTU sought the technical support in textiles assumed to reside within the college; from the NCAD perspective, the project opened up other possibilities in terms of engagement and education, features which were already implicit in the SIPTU thinking.

Ricouer (1996) talks of three ways of engaging with the past: re-examining our own narratives; hearing and engaging with the narratives of others; and, significantly and provocatively, forgiveness. He comments –

... the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted. The unfulfilled future of the past forms perhaps the richest part of a tradition. The liberation of this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives (p. 8).

This sense of re-engaging with the past underpinned the rationale for the Tapestry Project. It was envisaged that the project would provide an opportunity for participants, in the first instance, and for various audience during and after the process of construction,

to engage with the experience of Dublin 1913 (for the first time in many cases), to reflect on that experience and to apply its meaning and relevance to contemporary Dublin and Ireland.

Thus from the outset there was an implicit, if not explicit, educational orientation in the project. The criteria or principles that Stephen Brookfield (1986) applied to transformative education resonate with the experience of the Tapestry Project. Brookfield (1986) proposed six principles of effective practice in facilitating adult learning:

Participation in learning is voluntary; Effective practice is characterised by a respect among participants for each other's self-worth; Facilitation is collaborative; Praxis is placed at the heart of effective facilitation; Facilitation aims to foster in adults a spirit of critical reflection; The aim of facilitation is the nurturing of self-directed, empowered adults.

The tapestry project manifested all these principles to one extent or another. Community collectives, specialist textile workers, unskilled community groups, school children, prisoners, adult education groups, drug rehabilitation groups and many other diverse groups and individuals were all engaged on a voluntary basis. The range and diversity of participants involved in the project along with the coherence provided by the process of direct 'hands-on' engagement with material within the social, political and historical frame of the 1913 centenary, was a 'perfect storm' of educational opportunity.

NCAD has adopted the concept of 'expanded academy' as an underpinning strategic principle: this enshrines the recognition of learning that takes place outside the formal structures of the college or academy, the need for a partnership of equals between colleges and communities and the construction of education programmes outside the formal academic curriculum. Pablo Helguera (2011, p. 80) suggests that socially engaged art offers an alternative to traditional education models in recognising first, the creative performativity of the act of education, second, the collective construction of knowledge and third, the fact that knowledge of art is tool for understanding the world. Helguera proposes the concept of 'transpedagogy' in referring to

...projects by artists and collectives that blend educational processes and art making in works that offer an experience that is clearly different from conventional art academies or formal art education (2011, p. 77).

While there are dimensions of the Tapestry project that can be described under such a description, the extent to which the project matches the frame of Helguera's socially engaged art remains to be assessed.

The 1913 Lockout Tapestry project

The 1913 Tapestry project commenced with the invitation in late 2011 of SIPTU, the biggest trade union in Ireland to the National College of Art and Design to collaborate in a community art project informed by the famous Bayeux tapestry of Norman history and the more recent Prestonpans tapestry in Scotland that recounts the story of that mining

community. Two artists were recruited to provide the general design and specific imagery of the Tapestry – Robert Ballagh and Cathy Henderson. Crucial to the concept of the project was the involvement of a diverse range of participant groups and individuals in the actual construction process. About 400 volunteers and helpers engaged with the project, through direct textile work or various processes of support and facilitation.

The defining characteristic of the Dublin Lockout has been repeatedly described in terms of *solidarity* of the workers and their families. In a crucial respect, that concept of collective solidarity and inter-dependence was a central motif in the conception and in the implementation of the tapestry project.

As Cathy Henderson, one of the lead artists, records:

Most visual artists work in isolation and enjoy the solitary aspect of creative work. We are used to making our own decisions about the images we make. Working collectively and making joint decisions about all the aspects that pull images together is often a demanding way for us to embark on a creative endeavour. At the briefing stage it was clear that one of the primary reasons for commissioning the project this way was to involve as many people as possible from across the community to commemorate the people's history (Henderson, 2013, p. 19).

Robert Ballagh, her fellow lead artist, notes that 'the collaborative nature of our project involving so many people represents a truly fitting commemoration of an historic event in which ordinary people combined together in a titanic struggle for justice and equality one hundred years ago' (Ballagh, 2013, p. 22). Angela Keane, research officer with the project and an artist and teacher in her own right, reinforces the point: 'Social engagement with the project thus honours both the participatory experience of making and the social history of the commemorative work' (2013, p. 23).

The narrative of the 1913 Lockout was recounted through a story-board design utilising a comic-book or graphic novel approach. The final narrative consisted of 30 panels each depicting a scene or scenes from the story of the Lockout. It was always intended that each group coming to engage with a particular panel would bring their own creativity to the work. While the extent to which this materialised in terms of the images themselves varied according to the technical experience of the group, their historical or cultural familiarity with the narrative and not least, the pragmatic pressures of deadlines, there was a very clear process of ownership, not just of the panels per se but of the incidents, events and locations depicted. As Keane notes

the volunteers have brought the capabilities of the textile process to reflect and enhance the design through the many decisions made. It is a measure of how immersed the participants became in the progression of their work that each design, each panel worked on, became personal to them. Participants have kept photographic records of the stages they took in making a costume through appliqué, or kept a record of different types of cords hand-constructed in order to achieve the perfect couched outline for definition of garment edges. Volunteers

have visited buildings depicted in their panel design to be certain of the aspect of sunlight on the facade, or look again at the railings in front of a building in order to best choose an appropriate stitch to render them (p. 24).

The relationship of the volunteers to the artists' design was necessarily one of interpretation, not translation. In some cases this interpretation was manifested through image design, augmentation and development. In other cases it was demonstrated through adaptation of task assignments to match available skills and techniques. The experience of the tapestry project provides evidence that the materiality of the textile design and construction process was itself a definitive element in the engagement of participants in technical research (the tapestry), in historical research (the lockout) and in a deeper sense in a reflexive process of personal growth.

According to Keane, as a participant observer, the fact that 'the participants have interpreted rather than simply translated a design into textiles, is an integral part of the collaborative creative process. The knowledge and skill applicable to the craft process have informed an aesthetic and engaged participants to bring their own ideas and preferences to the work' (2013, p. 23). Thus one participant, a skilled and experienced textile worker notes that

the 'tapestry' was not presented as a completed project ready to be stitched, but as an organic project which it appeared would grow with those who were taking part... Probably the most important reason for many of us was the challenge of interpreting the artists' ideas in stitch, the combining of fine art and craft' (V7)²

The facilitator of one group comments on the process: '... it is the heated debates, strong opinions voiced and full-on arguments that made me as a community artist, realise how passionate these women were in their work. The care and interest they gave to these pieces of thread is what will stay with me' (F20).

The work of the lead artists was expressed both in the overall thematic design of the full thirty-panel narrative, and in the individual panel scenes depicting moments in the Lockout story. Interpreting these images and mediating them through the textile processes was a task shared among participants and facilitators. Thus, workshops and 'drop-in' facilities were provided, the artists were regularly available to advise volunteers, and the project research officer visited groups at work, provided technical advice and support in relation to particular design problems and facilitated as required.

In some cases, the volunteers were highly skilled and experienced and brought their expertise to bear on the process with dramatic effect. Thus, an early panel depicting Bloody Sunday, the day a police charge resulted in death and injury on Dublin's main street, went through a number of iterations with members of the Irish Patchwork Society (IPS), as they engaged with the technical, artistic and design issues generated by the initial sketches.



Figure 1: *IPS volunteers pinning up sketches*



Figure 2: *IPS volunteers at work*



Figure 3: *An early sketch (by artist Cathy Henderson) of the Bloody Sunday panel. (The blue uniforms were later changed to green for historical accuracy, only uncovered through the work process)*



Figure 4: *Bloody Sunday* - the finished textile panel

In contrast, the engagement of school-children involved quite a different approach, eventually resolved through each child's individual stitched icon being embedded within a flaming torch. This solution honoured the naïve and beautiful images of the children though incorporation within a collective context. This panel was conceived as the final panel in the narrative, as a metaphor of the torch being passed on to a new generation. It also provided an appropriate top and tail imagery for the tapestry: the first panel depicted the foundation of the union in a tenement room, lit by a candle in a bottle, which found its echo in the flaming torch of union growth in the aftermath of the Lockout.

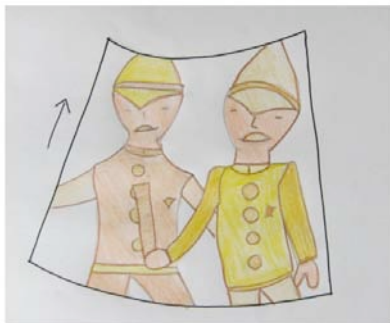


Figure 5: *Child's sketch of Bloody Sunday*



Figure 6: *The Torch* – finished panel

Gender roles

A feature of the project, frequently commented upon throughout, was the prominence of women working on the tapestry, contrasted with the actual Lockout, which was dominated by men (although women and children bore the burnt of pain). This gender dimension was significant in the type of conversations that were generated through the process.

A mother and daughter describe the challenge of one particular panel depicting living conditions in the tenement city:

... it has deepened the strong bond between us as we worked together, discussing the finer points of whether we should use one thread or another in a particular section. We discovered our styles complemented each other, and we learned new techniques together. Along the way the vibrant history behind the images came to life, as we connected with the family in our piece... (V3)

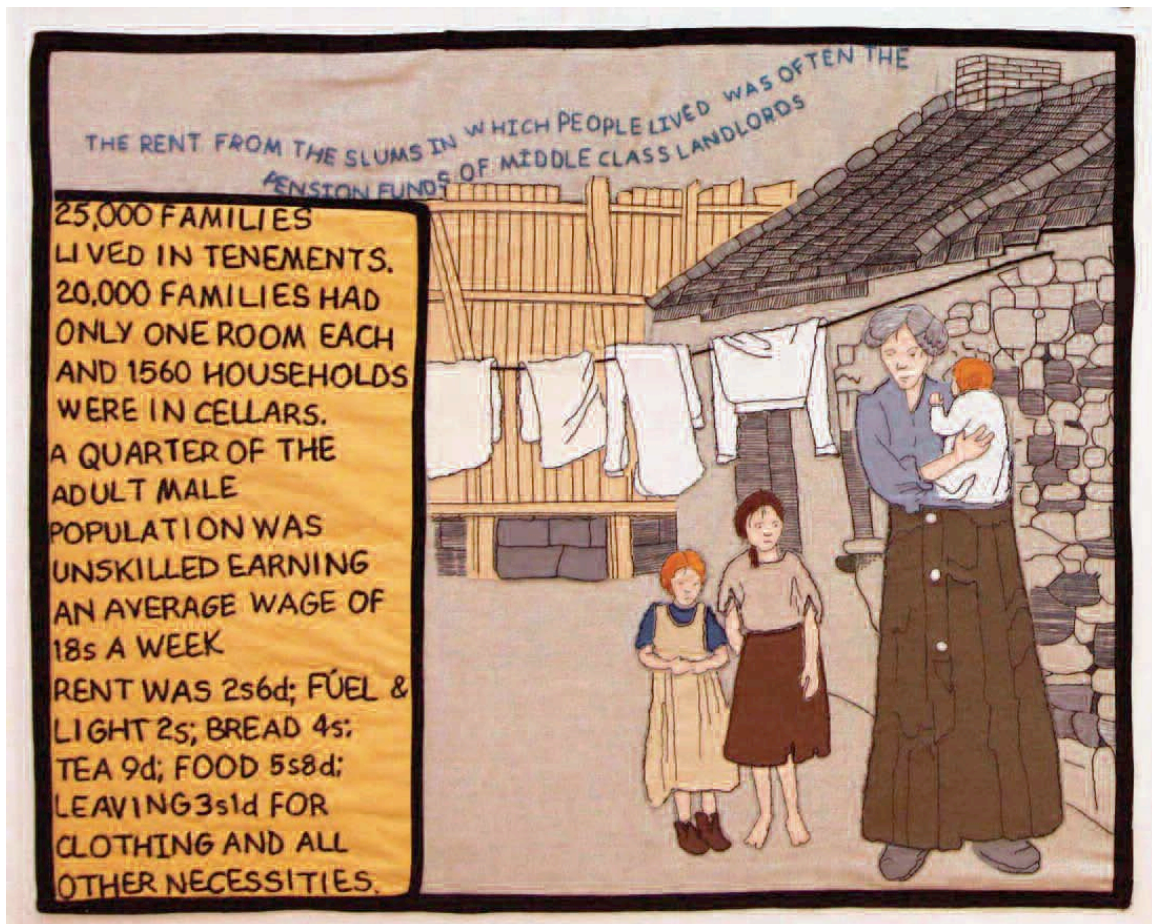


Figure 7: *Living Conditions* – finished panel (embroidery and appliqué)

A group of women who worked on a panel depicting the food kitchens that were the source of sustenance for many families, described their interactions while working: ‘... many conversations arose on the history of our city, the plight of women and children affected by the Lockout, particularly in relation to the distribution of food as depicted in one of our panels’ (V14).



Figure 8: *Food Parcels* – finished panel

Another group, depicting a controversy that arose around a ‘save the kiddies’ scheme to take children from starving Dublin families to English foster-homes for the duration of the dispute, reflected on the contemporary resonance of

... the pernicious influence of the Catholic hierarchy and its propaganda machine ... We stitched our panel of priests stoning the children of 1913 to the backdrop of news stories surrounding the survivors of the Magdalene Laundries, the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar³ and changes in law to protect the lives of mothers and we realised that much needed to be achieved for women 100 years later (V 17).



Figure 9: 'Save the kiddies' – finished panel

Research issues

This paper has been an initial attempt to unpack some of the art-based research components of the 1913 tapestry project. Specifically it has been concerned with one such thread of research – the extent to which the materiality of the textile construction process was in itself an active ingredient in the personal reflection and social engagement of the participants.

There are a number of other fault lines within the project which are rich veins for further research over the coming months and years. For instance, the sponsor partners SIPTU and NCAD achieved a constructive and complementary working relationship from an early stage. Yet there are significant points of interest potentially in exploring their distinct perspectives and evaluating possible divergence of interest. Beyond the main sponsors, the varied forms of engagement, expectation and experience of participants will be rich in insight.

Politics was at the heart of the 1913 Lockout and so it echoes throughout the Tapestry. However, in the changed landscape of contemporary Ireland, the simple polarities of left

and right are much more complicated than in the past. For instance, some groups on the left today view SIPTU and other such trade unions as part of the political establishment. Thus, scepticism or opposition to the tapestry project itself has not been noticeable from the conventional right wing of politics and society: that sector has been noticeably silent, almost as a calculation that silence was the most effective response until the centenary year was over the fuss died down. Instead, such dissonant voices as were heard tended to come from the extreme left, some of whom viewed the project as a cynical public relations act.

Similar views can be discerned within the arts community. The idea that the tapestry project is a manifestation of socially engaged art (SAE) can be disputed. If a criterion of SAE is that the work be defined by the participants themselves, certain elements of the tapestry project can be contested – the top-down nature of the project management, the central design of the work and of its constituent images, even the narrative of the tapestry itself. These and other related lines of research remain to be excavated in the months and years ahead. However, the specifically arts-based research components with which this paper has been mainly concerned will continue to offer a substantial field for researchers. This paper has only opened the ground.

Conclusion

While the political orientation of the Tapestry project was unequivocal from the start, the nuanced variations, interpretation and narratives of any historical event or process also came to the surface in this project. Thus one participant, depicting a scene with the British Monarch's representative in Ireland, Lord Aberdeen, and his wife (Figure 10), records that she 'became very fond of Lady Aberdeen when I discovered that she devoted herself to health and housing issues, and delivered food parcels to the poor in central Dublin' (V 5). Even within a polarised conflict, differentiated personal dispositions, whether charity or rights based, can be discerned.



Figure 10: *Lord Aberdeen at the Horse Show* – finished panel (appliqué and embroidery)

The 1913 Lockout is often described in terms of the dominant personalities – Jim Larkin the firebrand workers’ leader contrasted with William Martin Murphy, the powerful, iron-willed employer. While the immediate outcome of the Lockout was a victory for Murphy, in the longer term Larkin’s union has grown to be a powerful force in the country. The centenary has been marked as a validation of the stance of Larkin’s stance. Larkin is today commemorated in a prominent public sculpture in the centre of Dublin (Figure 11) an iconic image replicated in the Tapestry (Figure 12).



Figure 11: *Statue of Jim Larkin*, by Oisín Kelly (1980)



Figure 12 : *Jim Larkin, centrepiece of tapestry – finished panel*

By contrast, Murphy's reputation has languished over the years, his triumph in 1913 seen as a pyrrhic victory. Yet, in the summer of 2013, a ceremony took place in a tiny country village in the south-west of Ireland. At a small cottage, the modest birthplace of W. M. Murphy today used as a farmer's shed, a plaque was unveiled (Figures 13 and 14) to honour a man still highly thought of by his family and the community from which he sprung.



Figure 13: *Birthplace of W. M. Murphy*



Figure 14: *Plaque to W.M. Murphy*

In a beautiful phrase, Ricoeur says that ‘the past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept’ (1996, p. 9). The lockout tapestry was an attempt to revisit ‘the unfulfilled future’ of the Lockout and to make it meaningful in the contemporary world. But Ricoeur also implicitly warns of both triumphalism and resentment in the engagement with the past. He writes of three processes through which the past can be made to serve the present and the future: the processes of *tradition* (the transmission of things said, of beliefs professed, of norms accepted), of *innovation* (the reinterpretation of accepted truths) and of *forgiveness* (the presence of what he describes as ‘narrative hospitality’ where other stories and experiences can be acknowledged).

The tapestry project embodies elements of those qualities. It has been essentially concerned with a re-validation of the values of community and solidarity displayed through the agony of Dublin 1913. But it has also provided the opportunity, through textile art construction, for participants to re-examine those values, to locate them in the context of contemporary Ireland and to reflect on the nuances of history in a spirit of ‘narrative hospitality’.

Endnotes

¹ For an overview of the 1913 Lockout in Dublin, see Granville (2013). A description of the 1913 tapestry project is provided in *The Making of the Great 1913 Lockout Tapestry* edited by Yeates (2013).

² Quotations from participant volunteers (V) and facilitators (F) are coded according to the panel on which they worked. Thus V7 refers to a volunteer who worked on panel 7.

³ The Magdalene Laundries were the subject of major review published in 2013 into the conditions and treatment of women who were sent to these institutions throughout the twentieth century. Savita Halappanavar was a young woman whose death in 2012 while pregnant in an Irish hospital prompted a major debate on women’s rights, and on abortion legislation.

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