

## Energy Poems Podcast - The Lighthouse

You are listening to Episode 1 of the Energy Poems podcast, thanks to the wonders of electricity.

Today, each of us in Ireland - and many other countries - use electricity almost continuously throughout the day: to light our rooms when it's dark; to power our devices and appliances; to heat our buildings; to preserve and cook our food... it's hard to imagine life without all these conveniences.

But just three generations ago, two out of every three households in Ireland had *no electricity* at all. Immediately after the Second World War, in the late 1940s, the majority of Irish people lived in farmhouses and cottages in the countryside. At that time, electricity was a strictly urban phenomenon: the wires that carried electric current never left the towns and cities.

However, starting in 1947, the Rural Electrification Scheme began extending the electric wires out to villages, cottages, and farmhouses all over the country. Over a 30-year period, switch-on ceremonies happened in townhalls in every parish, as electricity was brought to over 400,000 homes. Ireland's electricity system changed from being city-wide to being nation-wide. This new and much larger electricity network had 1 million extra electricity poles, 40 times more length of electrical wires and 80 times more distribution transformers!

These numbers and facts tell us something about the technology of the electricity system, but they don't tell us what it was like for the people themselves, the users of this new technology. For most people, their first electrical technology was the lightbulb. What was it like for them when that lightbulb first switched on?

“The Lighthouse” – Vona Groarke

I heard her tell the story another way.  
She set it, not in the village, where  
the parish priest was telling the crowd  
about light in the darkness  
and the dawn of a new age -

she set it in the kitchen of their house,  
with three women resting  
and the day's work done. She told it  
so we would listen for the music  
of the room when it was still:

the rustle of the fire in the grate;  
the single held note of a teaspoon  
from which the knitting needles take their cue;  
the steady flutter of the carriage clock  
that kept their breath in check.

One of them might sleep and her nodding glasses  
snag the firelight and scatter it  
around the room to return in the more  
familiar shine of cups on the dresser,  
copper pans, her sister's wedding band.

In the village, a crowd of overcoated men  
sent up a cheer for progress and prosperity  
for all...

And in the length of time  
it took to turn a switch and to make light  
of their house, three women saw themselves

stranded in a room that was nothing like  
their own, with pockmarked walls  
and ceiling stains, its cobwebs and its grime:  
their house undone and silenced  
by the clamour of new light.

## Electrification and Stories

This poem is about the *stories* we tell about electrification. One of the most well-known stories of electricity is “*progress and prosperity*”, access to services such as light, heat, and modern appliances. I mentioned that story at the beginning of this podcast. But in the opening lines of *The Lighthouse* by Vona Groarke, a different less well-known story is introduced.

We are explicitly told this “*I heard her tell the story another way*” and our attention is also directed away from “*the village, where the parish priest was telling the crowd*” to the “*kitchen of their house,/with three women resting and the day’s work done*”.

This poem pays close attention to the story – to the lived experience - of women when the Rural Electrification Scheme was launched. Compared to today, during the 1940s, women were much more likely to be home-makers and to spend most of their time at home. “*The day’s work*” was at home and there was a lot of it: gathering water and fuel, preparing and cooking food, washing and repairing clothes, cleaning the house... all manual labour.

The day’s work or housework is obviously a story about work, but it’s also a story about the house, and the people that are in the home. Housework is a story of friendship and shared intimacy in the place where the women spend their days. The kitchen, the fireplace, the hearth, objects such as *the carriage clock*, and the level of lighting from the fire were all the environment that they inhabited, knew deeply, and felt comfortable in.

There are few things as intimate as falling asleep in each other’s presence, as happens here to one of the women. The poem lingers in this moment when it describes the sleeping woman’s *glasses/snag the firelight and scatter it/around the room to return in the more/familiar shine of cups on the dresser,/copper pans, her sister’s wedding band*.

The low level of lighting conducive to nodding off is significant. The dramatic moment in the poem - the big switch for the new electricity - happens offstage of the poem, “*in the village*” with “*the parish priest*” and “*a crowd of overcoated men*”. When the big switch arrives at the homeplace, that familiar world is suddenly defamiliarized and the women find themselves:

*stranded in a room that was nothing like/their own*

We all know the experience of being jolted awake after a nap. Here the big switch arrives with a similar shock to the system. It’s a disturbance and a rupture in their lives.

## Changing norms

The brightness that electric lights now provide is a norm we all take for granted. We're so used to it we can't see it anymore. The lighting before the electric lightbulb – candles, oil lamps, firelight – provided a much dimmer type of light, with a softer quality. It too was the norm of the time that people adjusted to so much they didn't see it.

The lines at the end of the poem *their house undone and silenced/by the clamour of new light* shows how startling and disorientating the lightbulb was for these women. And it wasn't just that their eyes needed a few moments to adjust to the new brightness. Norms about levels of lighting in the household strongly influenced norms about the level of hygiene and cleanliness. When the electric light bulb was switched on, it suddenly highlighted "*pockmarked walls... ceiling stains... cobwebs... grime*".

When electricity arrived in rural Ireland it brought many new appliances, but it also prompted many new norms; the new appliances were easy to see, the new norms less so. Cultural expectations around cleanliness were transformed by the electric lightbulb. In some instances, many people didn't like the new light bulb because of the way it spotlighted previously hidden corners. In response to this, some canny promoters of electrification first offered the low watt light bulbs - 40 watt and 60 watt - to more gradually accustom people to the new technology, a lesson about change we should perhaps heed for today.

The poem makes explicit the pre-electrification norms by lingering in the quiet moment before the big switch. The story that the women are telling in this poem is a counterpoint to the big story of progress and prosperity. The story of progress and prosperity may be true, but it shouldn't crowd out or hide other stories, such as how strange the new light bulb felt or how much it disrupted many norms that were woven into daily life.

A great way to observe changing norms is by looking at contemporary advertisements and how they change over time. ESB advertisements from the 1950s and 1960s often contrasted a dirty non-electric kitchen with a clean well-organised electric kitchen, full of bright lighting and happy house-wives.

## People

There's a contrast in the poem between the electrification story as told by men and as told by women. In part these differences reflect the roles these different groups had in society at the time. There's the priest and the overcoated men in the village cheering for progress and prosperity and there's the women in the kitchen "*stranded in a room that was nothing like/their own*". These contrasts also reflect the places where men and women tended to spend their time: men were outside the home and women were in the home.

The priest in this poem describes electricity as a light in the dark. This wasn't strictly true, there were already many sources of light such as firelight, candlelight, whale-oil lamps, town gas street lighting. However, this metaphor does highlight the priest's Christian

language and worldview, which at the time would have been much more mainstream and commonplace than the technological language we're more familiar with now.

Priests were one of the key influencers – to use a modern term – in the rollout of electricity across Ireland. Their endorsement of the technology was crucial to its acceptance by many people. They gave the technology their blessing by liberally splashing holy water on the large metal switch box used during the switch on ceremonies: a practice that might not pass health and safety standards today, those changing norms again.

### Analogy today

From the perspective of the people – both men and women - in this poem the scale of change that electrification brought to their homes and lives was radical. It's easy to forget this now in our modern lives saturated with electricity. But today, there's a different electrification story from that of rural electrification: electrification of heat and of transport.

Electrification of heat and of transport is a story in the context of climate change and a future sustainable energy system. Today, most of energy for heating our buildings and transporting our cars and trucks comes from fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas which is causing climate change. We need to change that, rapidly.

Now there are many ways to make our heat and transport energy needs less reliant on fossil fuels. One way is to electrify a lot of our heat and transport while at the same time generating more and more of our electricity from renewable energy sources such as wind turbines and solar panels.

A lot of this is already happening in Ireland – around 40% of our electricity currently comes from renewables (mostly wind). There is a lot of policy focus encouraging and incentivizing people to switch to electric heat pumps at home and to electric cars for transport. However, these stories of electrification of heat and transport have a tendency to leave out the lived experience of real people.

The hiddenness of energy in our daily lives is a common feature of energy systems from the past and the present. It contributes to the difficulties of changing the energy system since many of its features are embedded within our habits, norms, and routines.

The uncomfortableness of change often makes us look away or resist the change, but we shouldn't perceive the uncomfortableness as evidence of a reason *not* to change. It's just part of the experience of coming out of our comfort zones. Our energy system is changing and our stories about the energy system also need to change. The energy system is a human system full of stories that we just need to listen to.

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## Thanks

'The Lighthouse' comes from Vona Groarke's collection *Other People's Houses* (1999).

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For a transcription of this podcast and to read the poem please visit [marei.ie](http://marei.ie)

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