



PREMIER OF NEW SOUTH WALES

TRANSCRIPT OF SPEECH BY PREMIER CARR FUNDRAISING DINNER FOR IRISH FAMINE MONUMENT FRIDAY, AUGUST 7, 1998

His Excellency Richard O'Brien (Ambassador for Ireland), and Mrs Bernadette O'Brien, Jack Munday (Chairman of Historic Houses Trust) and Tom Power (Chairman, Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee)

Sydney is a great place for monuments, memorials and landmarks. In number and variety, we far surpass any city in Australia and most cities outside Europe, except Washington.

What is the Opera House itself, if it is not the greatest piece of modern sculpture in the world?

In Sydney, we take a robust, perhaps idiosyncratic, attitude to the erection of new monuments and statues. What other city in the world would have had the self-confidence, the audacity, in 1988, the year of the Bicentenary, to erect a new statue to Queen Victoria?

That's the statue now standing between the Sydney Town Hall and the QVB. It was a free gift from the City of Dublin.

And, one may ask: What other city in the world would have had the wit to get rid of Queen Victoria by transporting her to Sydney in 1988, except Dublin? Of course, that wasn't the first Sydney controversy over a statue of Queen Victoria.

Our forebears, in their wisdom, chose to celebrate Queen Victoria's Jubilee—50 years on the throne in 1887—by erecting the great monument to Governor Phillip in the Botanic Gardens.

Then, the next year, 1888, they celebrated the 100th anniversary of Phillip and the First Fleet by erecting the statue of Queen Victoria, in Queen's Square. As you know, that statue stands directly opposite the statue of her husband Prince Albert, near Hyde Park Barracks and the Mint.

Another Bicentenary project was to restore Albert to that position, after years of being hidden away in a corner of the Botanic Gardens.

When the statue of Queen Victoria was erected in Queen's Square in 1888, that old reprobate, John Norton, one of the earliest Australian Republicans, and an original 'wild man of Sydney', wrote in his newspaper, *The Truth*: 'There she stands in her typical attitude. Keeping one eye on Albert and the other eye on the Mint'.

So it's in this great Sydney tradition that I welcome this proposal to erect a memorial to the Irish Famine of the 1840s—in the bicentenary year of the Rebellion.

Such a monument will commemorate two things!

First, the terrible suffering imposed upon the people of Ireland; not less than one million men, women and children starved to death because of a system of government which had failed completely.

Second, for Australia, its consequences: the great Irish emigration; the reason why most of us of Irish descent are here today.

But what all of us here should remember—never more relevant than today—is that the Irish immigration to Australia after the Famine was a thing feared and resented by the established society of the day.

The Irish who came here because of the Famine, and after the Famine, found no welcome, no support, no acceptance, no tolerance—nothing, save their faith and their Church.

Let me, for example, quote my distinguished predecessor as Premier of NSW, Sir Henry Parkes—a great man, but a terrible bigot.

Speaking in this Parliament, here on the question of Irish immigration in 1869, Parkes said this:

Have these Irish people come to mingle with us—to assist in forming one common Australian people? No! Is it not the case that they bring with them the memory of their Irish wrongs, and reproduce amongst us their seditious agitations charged with senseless insults to the nationality of England?

This was in 1869.

Change one or two words—does it not all have a familiar ring in 1998?

Ladies and gentlemen, let us erect this monument. Let it stand as the memorial to the victims of a tragic and needless human wrong.

And let it represent what Australia is really about—that no amount of religious or racial intolerance, no amount of sectarian bigotry or prejudice, no amount of wilful ignorance, shall prevent our advance in the 21st century towards what is essentially the best thing, perhaps the only thing, we have going for us—the possibility that we can still create on this continent of ours, the most free, the most fair, the most tolerant and the most generous of spirit nation on earth.