

INAUGURATION & UNVEILING

On 2 September 1998 Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, removed the first stone from the wall in preparation for the erection of the sculpture. She pledged \$55,000 as a gift from the Irish Government which was matched at a later date by the Commonwealth of Australia.

Unveiling the Monument

On a beautiful and historic day, 28 August 1999, St Mary's Cathedral, adjacent to the Monument at Hyde Park Barracks, was full to capacity for an ecumenical service of remembrance and thanksgiving in preparation for the unveiling of the Irish Famine Monument at Hyde Park Barracks later that day. One thing that brought them together was a link in some way to an event in Ireland over 140 years ago when a relatively small number of girls found refuge in Australia from the Famine. Thirty-two descendants representing the thirty-two counties of Ireland entered the cathedral in a procession with the officiating clergy. The memorial service was a modern combination of drama and prayer. The drama was in the form of a liturgical dance performed by girls from the Janice Currie Academy of Irish Dancing who were dressed as orphan girls.

The prayers were led by Dean of St Mary's Cathedral, the Very Rev Tony Doherty, supported by Bishop David Dremmin, Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney, Fr Michael O'Sullivan, Rev Richard McCracken of the Presbyterian Church and Rev Dennis Wann of the Anglican Church. The haunting but comforting surrounds of St Mary's Cathedral played a perfect host to an ecumenical service that was moving and poignant. The assembly left the Cathedral for the unveiling of the Monument at Hyde Park Barracks.

Claire Dunne was the master of ceremonies at the official speeches in the courtyard of Hyde Park Barracks. William Deane, the Governor-General spoke of his own Irish background which, while not from an orphan girl, was Irish and therefore his ancestors had, like the girls who were remembered on this day, a memory of the Famine which they brought with them to Australia. There were also representatives of various political parties, various organisations and the aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. Of course, the day could not have happened without the drive and enthusiasm of the Chairman, Tom Power, and the support of the Irish community in Australia.

Like the 4114 orphan girls who came to Australia from the workhouses of Ireland between 1848 and 1850 the crowd, while all from Australia, were from diverse experiences and backgrounds the descendants in the cathedral procession each represented a county of Ireland and I like to think that the orphan girls also represent the many thousands of other emigrants who not only passed through Hyde Park Barracks but who left their homelands to come to all parts of Australia. The names on the monument are not just the names of the girls themselves but representative of the many thousands who left, and indeed continue to leave, political and social conditions which are no longer tolerable. As Richard O'Brien, the Irish Ambassador said, it was an 'occasion for Ireland and Australia to share together a memory from our common heritage' but it was also a 'powerful contemporary image of humanity, and, indeed also, a challenging vision for the future'.

Chairman, Tom Power, noted that this was a day marked with fervent emotion, particularly for the descendants of the orphan girls who had travelled from the United States, New Zealand, Ireland and from all over Australia.

The officiating clergy entered in procession to the words of 'The Itinerant Boy' (Lady Jane Wilde) and set to music by Patrick Cassidy in 'Famine Remembrance'. In the presence of 2500 people, including 800 Famine orphan descendants, the monument was unveiled by the Governor-General of Australia, Sir William Deane.

The Ambassador of Ireland, Richard O'Brien, also spoke on this day:

'In recent years we have not sought to look back in search of a lost identity or of a vanished coherence ... this commemoration has instead allowed us to acknowledge the pain and the hurt of that horrifying period while at the same time leaving us to create a living, dynamic relationship with our past. We have recognised that we can neither be handcuffed to history nor should we be needlessly fugitive from it. This event for me is the most meaningful, poignant and historic I have experienced during my 30 years with Foreign Affairs'.



**A Message from Her Excellency Mary McAleese
President of Ireland
on the occasion of the opening of
the Irish Famine Memorial in Sydney, Australia
28 August 1999**

It is with great pleasure and pride that I convey warm greetings on behalf of the people of Ireland on this historic occasion of the unveiling of the memorial to the legacy of the Great Irish Famine at Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney. I had the great honour and privilege of inaugurating the Memorial project during my State Visit to Australia in September 1998, and of meeting on that occasion with so many of the committed individuals involved with this project, as well as with the descendants of so many Irish men and women whose lives were affected by the Irish Famine and who found a home away from home in Australia. It was a deeply moving and emotional experience, and the memories of the stories and experiences of those people will stay with me forever, just as the memory of those who left Ireland in those tragic and traumatic times stays in the hearts and the spirit of the Irish family.

This memorial not only marks, with great respect and dignity, the suffering, pain and displacement of those lost generations of Ireland's sons and daughters, including the heroic and resilient 'Orphan Girls' and their descendants, but it also celebrates the contribution which these Irish people have made to the development of Australia and so many other nations over the years.

In sending my congratulations on this occasion, I want to pay particular tribute to the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, led by Tom Power, who have worked so tirelessly to make this dream a reality. Their efforts have been fully and generously supported by many organisations and individuals, including the Government of New South Wales, the Lord Mayor and the City of Sydney, the Historic Houses Trust, and the New South Wales Land Titles Office, but most of all by the Irish community across Australia. For all involved, this is a proud and historic day.

The Great Irish Famine has left permanent scars on our society and on our psyche. It is fitting that we should have a permanent memorial to help us to remember and reflect on those harrowing times and their consequences, so that through our reflection, we may seek to understand- going forward into the future, holding dear to us the values which have sustained us through the past.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary McAleese". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mary McAleese
President of Ireland