

Fifth Famine Memorial Anniversary  
29 August 2004

Introduction & Memorial Address (extract)

Memorial Address by  
Susan Ryan AO

**Preamble**

The national anthems were sung by Kim Pearse (Australian) and Shay O Hara (Irish). We were welcomed, as usual, by Chairman Tom Power who particularly welcomed the long distance travelers: Carole Eastaughff (Gladstone, Qld), Mr & Mrs Phillips (Canberra) & Maryanne & Sal Caleo (Melbourne). Thanks also to Consul-General Hon Brian Vaughan, Muris O Sullivan, Jack Munday and Dr Trevor McClaughlin. Apologies from the Irish Ambassador, The Hon Paul Keating, Hon Tony Kelly, Hon Grant McBride, Peter Watts & Mons Tony Doherty.

The Chairman noted that there were visits from two Irish Parliamentary delegations during the year who were surprised and impressed with the Monument and its simplicity, eloquence being sweetly abstract, dignified but not grim, symbolic but not trite. He noted that we are all grateful to Hossein Valamanesh for designing a public commemorative monument that has freed us from traditional figurative bonds. We are proud of it. You should be proud of it as it was you who supported it during in our fundraising days.

And speaking of fundraising I see a gentleman here today who gave us great hope when we thought we could never make it. Funds were slow in coming. He happened to be working away from Sydney on a project in Mt Isa. He approached the Irish Club there and put our case before them. Before he left that town to come home he had succeeded in getting a donation of \$10,000. Phil Garde, we have never acknowledged your effort in public but it gives me great pleasure to do so today.

In a short while I will ask The Hon Susan Ryan to give the oration. After that there will be a vote of thanks by our Consul General, Ms Anne Webster. Following the laying of wreath there will be a minute silence during which Kim gives us a most wonderful rendition of Danny Boy. However, before that our Vice Chairman, Mr Ian Caruth, would like to address you. He comes from the other tradition in Ireland as you will readily realise when you listen to his accent and compare it with mine. He telephoned me almost every day for four years urging me to hang in there.

Chairman introduced Susan Ryan: What can I say that hasn't been said before? The Hon Susan Ryan was born in Maroubra just down the road from here. She grew up with an innocent childhood as a catholic schoolgirl in the '50s before going to the University to face a life of challenge and change, a life adorned with much success and I suppose some disappointments. After graduating she became a teacher and later a tutor of English at the ANU.

Susan had a deep involvement in the processes of Labor reform and in 1975 became the first Labor Senator for the ACT. She was also the first woman to hold a ministry in a Federal Labor Cabinet when she became the Minister for Education and Youth Affairs. She was also the Minister assisting the PM on the Status of Women. She was deeply involved in the campaign against drug abuse and was a strong advocate for the elimination of all forms of discrimination.

Susan Ryan is well qualified to deliver the oration here today, not only because of her mission for the equality of opportunity for all women, but also the name Ryan appears more often than any other Irish name in the documents associated with the Earl Gray Famine Orphan Scheme. Even the name Murphy is outnumbered by the Ryans and all the Ryans did not come from Tipperary.

Ladies and gentlemen the Hon Susan Ryan.

## Hon Susan Ryan's Address

This 5th celebration of Sydney's memorial to the Irish famine is an inspiring and moving occasion. I am deeply honoured that the Memorial Committee Chair, Tom Power, invited me to talk to you today. I am very pleased to be with you, the Irish Australian community of our city, to revisit this vital link with our shared history.

The famine memorial itself is an emotion-laden work of art. It takes us back, powerfully, to the worst of tragedies, the Great Irish Famine. The extent of that tragedy places it high on the scale of global disasters.

In the famine years of 1845 to 1850, out of a population of about 8 million, over a million Irish lives were lost to starvation, disease and despair. Another million were forced to leave Ireland, never to see their homeland again. Over one quarter of the entire Irish population was lost, and Ireland today, even with the great prosperity she has enjoyed in recent times, still has not replaced those lost citizens. The memorial reminds us of all that sorrow.

At the same time, however, as we grieve for the many victims of the famine, we are reminded of the importance of hope and opportunity. The lives of so many of the thousands of orphan girls who were sent away from the suffering in Ireland, here to Sydney, were transformed. Many of them, like other Irish men and women who came as convicts, or as assisted migrants or free settlers, thrived, prospered and established families that continue vigorously to the present.

Today is a chance to acknowledge that what is bold, joyful, and dynamic in our contemporary lives owes much to the spirit of the orphan girls commemorated here. And so we rejoice at the same time that we grieve.

The purpose of any great memorial is twofold: to link us again to those we commemorate, and to lift up our spirits by contemplation of the good that has come out of tragedy and loss. This famine memorial serves its purpose brilliantly. Its design by artists Hossein and Angela Valamanesh from Iran, with the soundscape by Paul Carter, is powerful in its simplicity. The old sandstone wall, dissected by a plain table, empty at one end, a simple bowl at the other, with a few modest objects on a small shelf, conveys more about hunger and poverty than vastly more elaborate structures could do. As has been noted by President Mary McAleese when she visited the memorial, the simple elegant listing on a glass panel of the names of hundreds of young girls draws us back to the reality of those girls' lives and the tragic circumstances from which they took refuge.

It was former President Mary Robinson who, as the 150th anniversary of the Great Irish Famine approached, initiated the idea of famine memorials in those places that like Sydney had received many refugees from starvation and persecution. We are grateful to Mary Robinson for starting the process that culminated in this wonderful reminder, a true enhancement of Sydney's historical precinct.

We should also express again today our thanks to Tom Power and all who assisted him to make this idea a reality.

Listed on the memorial, faintly on a subtle glass panel, are the names of 400 of the thousands of girls who did not die of the famine but were orphaned by it. As the famine grew worse these girls were turned out of the workhouses of starving Ireland, transported here to Sydney, and consigned to these barracks. The barracks were put to this new use from 1848 on, after their function as a compound for convicts ended. The orphan girls lived and worked right here. Today, over 150 years later, their names speak directly to us.

Names are at the core of our being, our identity. In the end, when our lives are over, all that is left of most of us is our names. And those often disappear quickly enough. The names of the orphan girls were memorialised when five years ago they became part of this structure.

By being named again in this work of art, these girls, or their memories have been revived and given longevity. It may be that some of the girls left other information, other memories behind them. Some of you here today are direct descendants of those girls and know more of them than their names. But for most of the girls, their names are all we have.

Catherine Armstrong  
Anne Brady  
Mary Brandon  
Elizabeth Brennan  
Susan Brien  
Anastasia Brophy

Mary Burne  
Ellen Carroll  
Elizabeth Connolly  
Mary Ann Connor

Mary Doyle  
Mary Flannigan

Harriet McManus  
Theresa Nevin  
Mary Power  
Margaret Ryan  
Ellen Vaughan  
Ann Whittaker

And so on.

These are just some of the names, chosen at random. But as you listen to them you recognise that they are our names too, the names of many women here today, myself included. If we added to the panel the names of all the Irish Australian women here present, the list would flow naturally. Whether or not we share their DNA, we belong to them and they to us.

This deep connection helps us to think of how they felt.

Their lives in Ireland had been terrible. The young girls, many not even in their teens had already known hunger and loss, and had been consigned to the harshness and squalor of workhouses. The authorities in Ireland wanted to get rid of them. Because the colony suffered from a shortage of women, the authorities here in Sydney agreed to take them.

Although by the mid-nineteenth century, at the time of the Great Famine, several assisted immigration schemes for the colony were operating, these schemes mainly assisted young men, or established families. Of immigrant groups in Australia at the time, only the Irish sent as many single women as men. The other groups had what we would call these days a gender deficit, that is, a shortage of women. The orphan girls program brought much wanted female numbers to Sydney.

This circumstance not only gave those girls a new opportunity for a decent life, but also created a defining influence of the Irish in Australia.

Eminent scholars have written much on that topic, the Irish in Australia, and their scholarship has established the formative role of the Irish in the development of the Australian character. Of those scholars, none was more eminent than the late Dr Patrick

O'Farrell, whose extensive and brilliant works on this topic are a lasting gift to all Australians.

Perhaps this eminent historian would have agreed with my view of the particular influence of the orphan girls on our national temperament.

While most of the girls were put into domestic service, they eventually married. They married Irishmen, but they also married Englishmen and other settlers. In this way, through the formation of families by the orphan girls, the Irish culture, the Irish personality spread widely throughout this colony as it did in Victoria and to a lesser but still marked extent in the later colonies.

I would like to make the personal observation that these girls must have been of strong and lively character, and great optimists. How else could they have survived the terrible famine, the loss of their parents, the desperate conditions of the workhouses in which they were incarcerated, the long dangerous sea voyage to Australia, the cultural shock of colonial Sydney, confinement in these barracks, and no doubt, a fair amount of discrimination, and bad behaviour by some of the colony's males.

Only the strongest girls, girls who were determined despite everything to find some happiness and fun, could have got through all that.

I like to think of the girls having some fun, perhaps hooking up with some fiddlers and pipers and having a bit of a dance over there in Hyde Park before going back to scrubbing floors and washing dishes. After attending Mass of course.

The memorial reminds us so powerfully of those young girls, the mothers and grandmothers of Australians, the creators of so many of today's Australian families, that we can feel a personal affection for them.

**The memorial is also notable for its unique contribution to the cultural landscape of this seminal part of Sydney.** The area where we are gathered today, the Hyde Park Barracks once a jail for convicts, not only links us with the birth of our city, but indeed the beginnings of our Australian nation. The several memorials surrounding us all mark that history, but each in its own way, and each evokes a different aspect of our story.

The simple design and human scale of the famine memorial stands in evocative contrast to other nearby memorials. If we look around, first we see from here, just a stone's throw from the girls, our fine cathedral. There is an important relationship between the two structures, different as they are.

St Mary's Cathedral, now fully spired, is both an icon of our built culture, and a memorial to those Irish men and women, and their priests, who determined on the huge and bold task. The cathedral became both a massive symbol, and a centre for the practice of the faith they had brought, despite centuries of cruel repression, to the strange new land. After St Mary's was opened in 1900, some of the orphan girls, by then perhaps grandmothers, would have attended mass there.

A little further along from the Cathedral, in Hyde Park, stands a giant statue of a male figure in eighteenth century dress. It is Captain James Cook, the English navigator. He explored and documented the barely known southern continent prior to the British Government's claiming the land and in 1788 establishing its first colony on this continent. This expropriation was carried out, as we know only too well, in complete disregard of the existing owners, the indigenous tribes of Sydney. It is worthwhile I suggest considering the connection between the granite giant Cook dominating the skyline of the park, and the faint and modest appearance on the delicate transparent wall of the names of the Irish orphan girls. Who contributed most, I wonder, to our thriving 21st century society?

Further along again, at the other end of Hyde Park stands a tall, handsome memorial built in Bathurst granite in the solid, dignified style of its time. This is the ANZAC memorial, a reminder of another massive human tragedy, one that deprived Australia of so much

potential. In the First World War the young nation of Australia lost, perhaps not one quarter of its population but a hugely disproportionate number of its rising generation. Since its opening in 1934 the prominent ANZAC memorial has been a fitting and very visible tribute to the generations felled in that terrible war.

The famine memorial, in contrast, almost hidden from the busy passer by, reminds us gently of those Australians we gained from the tragedy of the Irish famine, the 400 orphan girls along with many other Irish women and men. It is a great commemoration of those who were lost, and of those who survived.

**It also speaks powerfully to us today.** Because of its openness, almost since that first colony, to people from various troubled parts of the world, Australia has become a vibrant, successful multicultural democracy. Whether they were convicts, adventurers, free settlers, assisted migrants, official refugees or asylum seekers without papers, newcomers to this land found a home, freedom and opportunity.

Our willingness to welcome desperate human beings fleeing wars, poverty, starvation, or oppression of their human rights has made us what we are today. We Australians of the 21st century must continue this proud and humane tradition. No short term or narrow political objective should be allowed to undermine this fundamental strength of our nation. As we recall the names of those girls who escaped the Great famine over 150 years ago to become Australians, we should also renew our determination to continue to provide opportunity and asylum to those who are seeking it from us today.

In this way, the beautiful memorial to the Irish famine will retain its meaning and power for decades, even centuries to come.

The spirit of the orphan girls deserves no less.

After the speech Tom Power thanked everyone for their attendance, particularly, the Hon Susan Ryan, the Staff at the Hyde Park Barracks, Kim Pearce, Shay O Hara, Brian O Kelly, Marie Tunks, Perry McIntyre & all the other helpers and sponsors: Pam & Ned Sheehy of the Illinois Hotel, Daniel Gray from PJ O'Briens and Dr Bill Tierney.