

Ninth Famine Memorial anniversary
31 August 2008

Memorial Address by
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Curator of the 'Not Just Ned Exhibition'
at the National Museum of Australia

*'That famine is pressing most heavily each day upon them:
Australia and the Great Irish Famine—some connections'*



Preamble

Chairman, Mr Tom Power welcomed the Diplomatic Corp., Rev Fathers Tom, John & Michael, Politicians, Senator Stephen Hutchins whose ggggrand mother was a Maria Lydon, who came on the *Thomas Arbuthnot* as a 16 year-old from Galway in February 1850, Hon Bryan Vaughan, Hon Johnno Johnson and Dr Jack Munday, and Professors Anders Ahlquist and Mary Spongberg. Above all, welcome to the descendants of our famine orphans. This is our biggest gathering to date.

To all our visitors from out of town and overseas: Srs Brid and Catherine, Mrs Butler, Charlie & Fionnula Eastwood here celebrating 35 wedding Anniversary, Michael Scullion, our friends from Mackay, Rockhampton and Laura from Port Douglas.

Apologies from Ambassador Mairtin O Fainin, Bishop Brady, Hon Tony Kelly, Hon Paul Lynch, Tom Keneally, Dr Peter Watts, Denis O Flynn, Judge John O Meally, Jim & Marie Joyce who are the parents of Senator Barnaby Joyce whose g-g-grandmother was Mary Troy from Charleville, County Cork who arrived in Sydney in 1849 on the *Lismoyne*.

This is a very special occasion because in two days time it will be 10 years since President Mary McAleese inaugurated this monument by removing a stone from this wall and one year later it was completed and unveiled by the then Governor-General of Australia, Sir William Deane, who, on that memorable day, spoke so movingly about the journey of his grandparent and his g-g-parents from Tipperary in 1852.

Since then the monument has been visited by many distinguished people including ex-President Mary Robinson, PM Bertie Ahern, Ministers of State and Ambassadors.

Many of you here today would have been present on the 2 September 1998 and would recall very vividly her very touching speech. But there was one very touching moment which I have not forgotten. As the President was about to enter the front door of the barracks Museum she stopped haltingly for a moment or two and said, 'I feel I am stepping over the threshold of history following the footsteps of so many orphan girls ... it is a chilling experience'.

During the intervening years the Monument has received critical acclaim from visitors all over the world. It has been mentioned in many publications and in January this year it featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as one of Elizabeth Anne Macgregor's (Museum of Contemporary Art) favourite pieces of public art.

It is currently being written about by a lecturer at University College Dublin who has visited over 140 famine monuments worldwide and she maintains that this is one of a few monuments that work. In other words it is a monument that lives. How often have we said that monuments live by use, they die by neglect. It is my **hope** that this monument will not suffer the same fate of so many others we see around the country but if today's gathering is any indication then my **hope** is greatly reinforced.

President Mary McAleese returned to visit the work she commenced four and half years later. This is an edited version of her speech on 13 March 2003.

Following his address, Dr Reid was thanked by Mr Patrick Scullion, Irish Consul-General in Sydney. As is the custom, a wreath was laid, a minute's silence observed and a long line of people queued to place flowers at the monument. The company (and it was heartening to see our 'Famine family' increasing in size) then retired to the rear of the Barracks for sustenance, good cheer and a renewal of the ties that bind us.

Dr Richard Reid's Oration

In 1846 the second year of the Great Famine in Ireland, the government of New South Wales, which then included the Moreton Bay District, which became Queensland after 1859, and the Port Phillip District which became Victoria after 1851, conducted a census. From an Irish perspective that simple head count revealed a startling statistic: 25 per cent of the total population, more than 47,500 men and women, was Irish. Among the foreign born, virtually all made up of immigrants from England, Scotland and Ireland, the Irish were an astonishing 38 per cent. More than half of these colonial Irish were recent arrivals nearly 26,000 of them having reached these shores between 1839 and 1845 as free immigrants. Never again, for the great 'gold rush' immigration was soon to hit eastern Australia, would the Irish form such a high proportion of Australia's population. New South Wales had a distinctly Irish tinge to it during the years of the Great Famine between 1845 and 1850.

The point of this little statistical preamble is this—what was happening in Ireland all those thousands of miles away during that terrible time had a big impact in Australia. Proportionately, given the numbers of Irish here, a bigger impact perhaps than in North America, although, of course, the overall numbers are very small by comparison. That impact, however, can be measured, in one way, by the fact that between 1848 and 1850 more than 10,000 Irish immigrants arrived in Sydney, Port Phillip and Moreton Bay directly from scenes in Ireland of starvation, dislocation and widespread emigration. Few of the Irish-born who lived here at that time would have been untouched or unaware of the first-hand stories from home brought by these new arrivals. There is no particular evidence for it but surely those in the colony with relatives at home sought out these newcomers who could give them news of the situation in parishes in Clare, Cork, Tipperary or Fermanagh and in many other places throughout Ireland. Anxiety for relatives at home would have been widespread. One way to deal with it was to subscribe to the collections being made throughout Australia for famine relief. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 5 October 1846 that over one week more than £600 had been collected in Sydney and how much the situation in Ireland was bringing out the best in the city's inhabitants:

However widely they may have differed upon other matters, each one has vied with his neighbour in contributing towards this good object, and the large subscription which has been raised in so short a time redounds much to the honour of the Colony, and will, no doubt, be duly appreciated at home.

In those days newspapers published long lists of subscribers to public causes and the *Herald's* Famine relief lists make interesting reading. During the week just referred to, the English Governor of New South Wales, Sir Charles Augustus Fitzroy, led the donations with a gift of £10, followed by £5 each from the Colonial Secretary, Edward Deas Thomson, married to the daughter of earlier Irish governor, Sir Richard Bourke, and the famous politician and later framer of the New South Wales constitution of the mid 1850s, Sir William Charles Wentworth of Vaucluse House. William's father, we might recall, was Darcy Wentworth from County Armagh, given the option of transportation or self exile in 1790 by a London judge for an alleged spot of highway robbery. While Irish names are prominent in the lists for donations of between £1 and a few pence—'sundry small sums' the *Herald* called them—there were many others personally moved by Irish distress. Mr Birnstingel, a Jewish jeweller, gave a pound as did a Mr Milatovich. Three pounds was subscribed by the government employees here at the Barracks, then still a convict establishment.

Later lists carry the name of Dean John McEncroe, from County Tipperary, one of New South Wales's pioneer priests, honoured in 1901 by re-burial in the Chapel of the Irish Saints in St Mary's Cathedral. He gave £10. Other donors were described as 'A Friend', 'A Liberal Protestant' (presumably illiberal Protestants gave nothing!), '26 labourers in the blue metal quarry', 'Biddy the Orangewoman' (there was no corresponding reference to 'Pat the Rebel' on the lists). 'For the Irish poor with a prayer', a 'Connaughtman', a 'Widow's Mite', a 'Jewess', and most wonderful of all—2 shillings and sixpence from Mundahalay, an Aborigine living in Braidwood.

Sydney's Catholic paper, *The Sydney Chronicle*, also reported that a mechanism had been set up to allow local people to remit small sums in safety to their relatives in Ireland. One local who certainly sent money home was Peter Reilly, a builder, from South Head Road. In a letter he wrote in September 1846 to his mother and his brother accompanying the money, and later published by Caroline Chisholm in her book *Emigration and Transportation Relatively Considered*. Peter referred to the 'lamentable news' from Ireland of 'starvation' and 'sickness' and of how glad he was that he had left the country:

I thank God for leaving it at the time I did ... This is a fine plentiful country—there is no person starving here—I am sure the dogs in Sydney destroys more beef and bread than all the poor in Ireland can afford to eat—there is one good thing in Sydney, that the poor man can afford to eat as good beef and mutton as the rich man—we are very comfortable thanks be to God.

The 'we' there refers to Peter's family who had arrived in 1842 with him in Sydney from Ballyhaise in County Cavan on the government immigrant ship *Margaret*. At least, not his whole family for Peter had, for lack of money at the time, been forced to leave one very young daughter at home in Ballyhaise with her grandmother. From other records we know this daughter's name was Mary Anne but in the Ballyhaise of 1846-7 Peter and his wife, Anne, in far away Sydney must have trembled for her safety. In his letter, which included a much needed £2 for his 'poor broken-hearted mother', Peter begged his brother and his mother to send Mary Anne out to them through arrangements being made by one known then as 'The Emigrant's Friend', Caroline Chilsholm.

In the mid 1850s Caroline Chisholm had been collecting names of children left behind by government immigrants of the early 1840s who had found themselves in a similar financial situation to Peter Reilly. She convinced the New South Wales colonial government to set up a special state funded immigration scheme to reunite these families and indeed 38 of these children, virtually all Irish, arrived in Sydney on the *Sir Edward Parry* in February 1848. It is worth noting that this ship, the story of which has been largely forgotten, carried the first group of what might be called Irish ‘famine refugees’ to Australia well before the first ship carrying the now well-known Irish orphan girls, the *Earl Grey*, anchored in Sydney Cove on 6 October 1848.

All told 69 children had been applied for by 4 July 1846 under the government regulations of 26 May of that year. Mary Ann Reilly was one of them. Another was Kitty Minehan, daughter of Pat Minehan who had emigrated from Knockadereen near Killaloe, County Clare, in 1841. The copy of a letter, doubtless passed on to her father in New South Wales and written by local Knockadereen farmer, John Crowe, to the Emigration Commissioners in London in July 1847—‘Black ’47’, the worst year of the famine and a terrible one in east Clare—tells us something of Kitty Minehan. According to Crowe she was now eight years old, in good health and in the care of Bridget Keif:

On the first day of July I went to Bridget Keif’s house and I asked Kitty Minehan would she go to her parents (parents, remember, she had last seen aged 2); answer, NO—I caught her by the hand and said she should; she began to cry—nor neither can she clothe herself, nor pay her passage to Plymouth. Bridget Keif only said she would not let her go until she should get some money for her support, They are very poor living on one pound of Meal each of them in the day.

Even more tragic was the news relayed to Patrick Considine who had come to Sydney in 1841 leaving behind his daughter Catherine in County Clare. Another Patrick Considine, perhaps a relative, wrote in May 1847 to the Emigration Commissioners from Ennis Gaol to say that she had been dead for over twelve months. Henry Blake, Milford, County Carlow, was also sent for by his parents in New South Wales but they were informed that he had left New Ross in the spring of 1847 heading for Quebec. Did he make it? Did they ever hear from them again or is he one of those hundreds of Irish buried in Canada’s most famous immigration site, the quarantine station of Grosse Isle in the St Lawrence? A memorial at the cemetery there, erected to the immigrants who died at Grosse Isle in ‘Black ’47’, carries these words:

In this secluded spot lie the immortal remains of 5424 persons who fleeing from Pestilence and Famine in Ireland in the year 1847 found in America but a grave.

What was the Ireland like that Australia bound emigrants were leaving? In the era of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ and the new form of Irish public relations which keeps telling us what a changed Ireland there is over there today—high tech, productive, wealthy and peopled, in Dublin at least, by hordes of bankers and financial services gurus— it’s hard to imagine the place in the Famine years. One spot that I once spent much time researching was the parish of Clonoulty, County Tipperary, lying a few kilometres west of the Rock of Cashel. Despite its position in the ‘Golden Vale’ of Ireland this parish was hard hit by the catastrophe of 1845 to 1850; in 1841 its population was more than 6,900 falling to 4,500 in 1851, a 35 per cent decline. Most of this decline occurred in the period 1848 to 1851 as we know from valuation records that there were 862 dwellings there in 1848 but only 608 by 1851. At the centre of this housing loss was the village of Ballagh.

The Irish census commissioners classified Ballagh in 1841 as a 'town'. In 1848 it had 58 houses but by 1851 there were less than 20, in fact 15, and in the official classification of the census it no longer qualified as a 'town'. Indeed, by 1851 it was a place of ruins, of roofless cabins, practically a 'deserted village'. One historian has written that 'these deceptively simple figures bankrupt the imagination as to the degree of human anguish contained in them.' One pre-Famine Ballagh resident whose imagination undoubtedly told him that there was no future among those empty cabins in the village and its adjacent townlands was 26 year old Timothy Maloney, a schoolteacher at the National School in the townland of Ballagh. Timothy applied for and received an assisted passage to New South Wales where two of his sisters had preceded him in the early 1840s and he arrived in Sydney aboard the *Elizabeth* on 16 April 1850. The sight, the memory, of the destruction of his home village by starvation, disease and emigration would have stayed with Timothy Maloney until the end of his days.

For New South Wales, I should add, Clonoulty was no ordinary place. Between 1851 and 1871 the parish population fell by 1304 people and approximately 434 of those, 30 per cent, sailed in through Sydney Heads during those 20 years as government assisted immigrants. A similar number most likely left for other Australian destinations—gold rush Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. What is their connection with the Great Famine, with this memorial at which we are gathered this morning? Simply this—they were all by definition famine survivors and had witnessed the devastation it had wrought in Clonoulty and surrounding parishes. It is impossible for us to know precisely what the effect of that knowledge had on the rest of their lives but they would readily have understood the meaning behind the inscription on this memorial—'The Great Irish Famine of 1845 to 1850'.

Of all the Australian records which tell us something about the Great Famine one, in my mind, stands out. It does so because it takes us straight into the effect of that event on the lives of ordinary people. Predictably it is a letter— after what I have been treating you to, you may be glad to know it contains no statistics. It was written in 1848 by a parish priest to an ex-convict and this priest signed himself at the end of the letter as 'Your friend Owen Feeny' although I am sure he never met the recipient of the letter. When I read that out to an audience at a historical society in Sligo town nearly 26 years ago one lady said in an awed tone—my God, a parish priest who signed himself as 'your friend'! I suppose that tells us something about how priests were sometimes sadly perceived in rural Ireland.

Feeny was writing in August 1848 to John Tighe of Wollongong, New South Wales. John had applied under an Imperial government scheme administered by New South Wales as a time expired convict—he had been transported in 1833 from County Sligo for manslaughter—to have his wife Margaret and daughters Honora and Mary brought to the colony. He had also contacted Caroline Chisholm who had persuaded the British Colonial Secretary, Earl Grey, to re-establish a scheme, dropped in 1840 at the cessation of transportation to Sydney, to reunite convict families. As Feeny penned in his letter from the parish of Riverstown, County Sligo, possibly in the presbytery, he said this in a postscript:

Your wife is at my side while I write this letter: She requests me to send you her most affectionate love—she has never forgotten you and never shall—the children also have desired their fondest love to you.

In the body of this letter Feeny outlined the family's situation. They had been evicted from their small cabin in the townland of Heapstown along with all the other smallholders. They had been taken in by Margaret Tighe's brother Pat McDonough and were living with him in the townland of Annaghcarty, but 'in very poor circumstances'. Any financial help John could send from Australia would be welcomed. John's brother, Hugh, had left the previous

year for New York from which place Feeny had received a letter from him telling of Hugh's safe arrival. The priest also remembered the time—probably in mid 1847, 'Black '47' again—when a letter had come from Caroline Chisholm in London offering the family free passage to Sydney from London but they were not able to get there in time. Another offer came to sail on the *Waverly*, a ship contracted to carry female convicts from Dublin to Hobart. This time the family was 'in the fever, some of them recovering slowly, others in the commencement of it'. No other offer came from Caroline Chisholm, Feeny reminded John in Wollongong of the 'great poverty and distress in this country for the last two years' and painted a terrible prospect for the parishes of south Sligo in the coming year: *the potato crop is entirely blighted in this district and the accounts from all parts of Ireland as we read in the newspapers confirm the sad prospect*. It was a prospect John could read about in Wollongong as similar accounts were printed in the Sydney press and it is no surprise that John's name turns up on those lists of subscribers to Irish famine relief published in those same papers.

That letter encapsulates the situation in rural Ireland during the Famine years—eviction, hunger, destitution and emigration. The original can be found in the collected inwards correspondence of the NSW Immigration Department between 1847 and 1892 now in the State Records of New South Wales. I well recall the first time I ever handled the original in the then Archives Office of NSW Search Room in the Rocks just metres away from where John Tighe disembarked from his convict transport in 1833 and where he possibly stood on a day in 1858 when his family finally made it to Australia on a ship direct from New York. And how about young Mary Anne Reilly of Ballyhaise, County Cavan, left behind by her family in Ireland when they came to Sydney in 1841? She did not come during the Famine. Amazingly her mother went home to Ireland in 1853 and came back to Sydney with her in 1854.

There were other Famine survivors connected with New South Wales. In 1847, 'Black '47' once again, Anne Sharkett of the townland of Doon, parish of Kilfree, County Sligo, wrote an appeal to London, to the British Home Secretary, the cabinet member with responsibility for transportation to the Australian colonies, Sir George Grey. Anne's husband, James, was transported to Sydney in 1829. She told Grey that she had heard that James had received a conditional pardon in NSW and that she felt his loss 'in these days of famine and misery'. Grant him, she begged, an absolute pardon and he could return home for her children were 'helpless and desolate, bereft of their father's protection, that Famine is pressing each day most heavily upon them, that time as it progresses seems to grow darker'. Basically she didn't want to go to bountiful New South Wales but to have James back where he could support them. The documents give no indication of James' possible reaction to the idea of returning to Ireland at such a time.

Head Constable, Second Class, of the Royal Irish Constabulary, James Patterson, was sent to Doon from Ballymote to enquire into Anne's circumstances. She was, he reported, living on four acres of land in an 'indigent' condition; her son, aged 15, was working on relief works as a day labourer; and her married daughter was dependent on her mother. On the Constable's report were written the words—'His Excellency cannot interfere.' What happened to Anne Sharkett? The County Sligo valuation of 1858, ten years after her efforts to bring James home from New South Wales, shows an Anne Sharkett renting six acres of land in Doon, Kilfree parish, and living in a house rated at 10 shillings a year, a fairly miserable dwelling. Is this the same Anne Sharkett? Possibly. If it is then she has survived. James Sharkett, as records show, did indeed receive his conditional pardon in 1846 and Anne must have know this when she wrote to Sir George Grey in 1847. However there is no evidence that he ever sent for her or her family. A James Sharkett died, aged 66, in Liverpool, Sydney, in 1866, the only person of that name in 19th century NSW official death records.

The Great Famine was a terrible event. How should we remember it? How do we remember it? I have an elderly Australian friend in Canberra, Frank McMahon, whose ancestors were from south Cork. Frank loves Ireland and has visited the country on a couple of occasions. He is a well known and published local poet and on one of those Irish journeys he stood in front of a Famine grave near Clonakilty. This is how he reacted in verse and I think these are very appropriate words to read to you this morning as we recall the Great Famine, and its connections with Australia, beside this evocative memorial:

Famine Shadow
Clonakilty, County Cork

This ditch ran through our family's legends—bleak and gully-deep with tellings handed down from stories that her mother's mother told. Of how they lay the dead here heads to feet, blessed them, tipped them in then turned away to bring the others out. How in the time they counted dead by miles not heads, they line the road to Castlefreak. And standing where that half-seen scar runs on through granite, green and lean, unyielding hills the ditch seems such a narrow thing—four five feet wide, three deep perhaps—no more— But God, it's long.
Frank McMahon