

Forth Famine Memorial Anniversary
31 August 2003
Memorial Address (extract)

Cheryl Mongan
co-author of '*A Decent Set of Girls*':
The Irish Famine orphans of the 'Thomas Arbuthnot' 1849-1850

Preamble

The Chairman, Tom Power, emphasised that monuments live by use and die by neglect. He noted that the committee is very conscious of this; that is why we endeavour to gather here each year to, first of all, remember our Famine dead and secondly to recognise the contribution these, the survivors, made to this great country at a time when men outnumbered women 5 to 1. And in remembering our famine dead I am reminded of those fading names.

We had two very important visitors this year: Mary Robinson in November and Mary McAleese in March.

Our special guest, the Consul-General Anne Webster from Wexford, was welcomed by the Chairman, Tom Power who also welcomed distinguished guests and descendants of the Irish Famine Orphans. He emphasized the notion that monuments live by use and die by neglect. Due to the high cost of Insurance we had to abandon our Incorporated status. It is our intention to form a Trust in the near future to care for the memorial and promote the history and culture that surrounds the Irish Famine. What has been achieved here at the Hyde Park Barracks could not have been done without the cooperation of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW. To Jack Mundey, the then Chairman of the Trust, we owe a deep debt of gratitude. To Peter Watts, the Director of the HHT and his staff we say thank you for all the assistance you have given over the years and still give and particularly to John Petersen, Curator, and his staff for wonderful cooperation on days like this.

Tom Power introduced Cheryl Mongan, co-author of '*a decent set of girls: The Irish Famine orphans of the 'Thomas Arbuthnot' 1849-1850*' who is a resident of Yass and very involved in the history of that southern area of New South Wales and the nineteenth century Irish contribution to that community. Cheryl gave an uplifting account of the orphans who came by the *Thomas Arbuthnot*, focusing on those who went to Yass to settle, initially accompanied by Surgeon Charles Strutt, who had cared for them on their voyage. Following are a few paragraphs from her very thorough narration that emphasize the young women's role in family reunification:

Cheryl Mongan

The girls were unconditionally accepted by Yass and district residents and were placed in suitable employment with settlers, storekeepers and government officials—Catholics and Protestants alike. This arrangement was carried out under the watchful eye of Charles Strutt, the Surgeon-Superintendent of the *Thomas Arbuthnot* in consultation with local magistrates and clergy. It was a necessary precaution that the orphans should not be employed in inns and other houses of public entertainment, as unscrupulous persons frequently tried to exploit the vulnerability of the orphans...

After many years of separation, individual orphans successfully reunited family members, sometimes paying their fares to Australia out of their meagre earnings as domestic servants. Bridget Davies, a 16 year-old hired by Mrs Lucy Howell of Arkstone Forest, received letters from her uncle Matthew Kennedy in Gurtaveha, County Clare, imploring her to send money

for the fare of her brother Patrick. Shortly after receiving the letter Bridget deposited the sum of £4 with the Immigration Office in Sydney to obtain a free passage for Pat who arrived on the *Maidstone* later the same year...

In some cases, the orphan scheme was a means to bring about family reunions ... the Stephens sisters, Jane and Ruth, had upon the arrival of the *Thomas Arbuthnot* stated that their parents were in Sydney. Their father John Stephens was not in Sydney. He had been convicted on a charge of stealing two cows at the Wicklow Summer Assizes in July 1846 and was transported on the *Tory* to Tasmania in 1847. Soon after his arrival he obtained a Ticket of Leave and started a new life working for the Archer family at Longford. The girls' mother, Eliza, was in Sydney having arrived as a single woman on board another orphan ship, the *Lismoyne* in November 1849, shortly before the *Thomas Arbuthnot*... In September 1850 Jane Stephens married William Caldwell in Longford in Tasmania. In early May 1851, her mother, Eliza was delivered of another daughter, raising the likelihood of a family reunion in Tasmania by July 1850, only five months after the girls arrived in Sydney.