'A personal reflection on the Hyde Park Barracks and the Memorial to the Great Irish Famine'
by Peter Watts AM
Emeritus Director, Historic Houses Trust of NSW

on the occasion of the
16th Anniversary of the unveiling of the Australian Famine Memorial

at The Irish Famine Memorial,
Hyde Park Barracks, Macquarie Street, Sydney,
Sunday, 30 August 2015.

It is now nearly 20 years since the idea of this monument was first discussed with the Historic Houses Trust (now renamed Sydney Living Museums). I still remember the day. It was in my office at Lyndhurst in Glebe and Tom Power, then Chair of the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee that developed the idea, arrived with a few others to talk to me about it. I was looking forward to the discussion which had been roughly outlined over the phone.

I was naturally cautious. The Irish can be charming – and I am prone to being disarmed by charm – especially when it comes with an Irish lilt. Tom, and his colleagues, proved the point when they visited me that first day!

I was cautious for a number of reasons.

Firstly because I was very aware how public sculpture has the capacity to generate strong feelings and the public can be very harsh critics of those – the institutions, artists and individuals – who engage public art. Dare I mention the extraordinary pasting the Lord Mayor is receiving in *The Daily Telegraph* for the public artworks the Council is currently commissioning in the city? Both the press and the public can be very unforgiving about public art.

I was especially wary at the time the Irish Famine Memorial was proposed to me since I had just come out of the experience of commissioning *The Edge of the Trees* in First Government House Place in front of the Museum of Sydney. That had been a complex project – fraught with difficulties as the first major public sculpture in the country created as a collaboration between an indigenous and non-indigenous artist – Fiona Foley and Janet Laurence respectively – and placed on the site of the first Government House – a place of many meanings to different sectors of the community. It was bound to be controversial – and it was.

Even though *The Edge of the Trees* had received wide critical acclaim – being nominated by the readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, within a year or so of its unveiling, as one of the most loved public sculptures in the city – it had left me highly sensitised – for reasons, perhaps, best left unsaid.

Secondly I was cautious too about the proposal because I had three Trustees who I knew would take a particular interest in the proposal – not <u>just</u> because they were all women – but because of their particular professional expertise – and I knew all three would hold strong views:

The late Joan Kerr was Professor of Fine Arts,
Dinah Dysart, a distinguished Art Historian, Curator and Gallery Director,
Dr Shirley Fitzgerald, the city historian.

There was a further reason for caution – which I mentioned in the Forward to the guidebook that was produced – and I quote – *The Barracks in Sydney is imbued with so much of this nation's history that it has almost sacred status in the minds of many Australian. As the custodians of this place we do not add to it lightly.* Since then, of course this place has been placed on the World Heritage List, which has only consolidated its significance. That means of course that this Memorial also is part of that listing.

These were pretty solid reasons for treading cautiously. And I did.

But – on the other hand I was immediately attracted to the idea of commemorating – here at the Hyde Park Barracks – the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first 200 Irish orphan girls on the *Earl Grey* in October 1848. It was, after all, in this very building that they were housed – as were the many thousands who followed.

If I go back a few years before these first discussions I well recall Peter Collins, a not very happy Minister for the Arts, rang me one day after he had been here and seen an exhibition on the history of the Coca Cola bottle. He asked me what I thought should happen to the building. I should note that it was not a museum run by the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) so I had no involvement with it. Being put on the spot – and not wanting to be critical of a sister institution – I said simply – 'It should be a museum of itself'.

By that – I explained to him – that I thought the building had such an extraordinarily rich history covering the themes of convictism, immigration and the development of government that it need do nothing more than tell its own stories.

I think I read in the following day's newspaper that the Barracks was being transferred from The Powerhouse Museum to the HHT to be 'a museum of itself'. Whilst that was flattering, it caused some considerable awkwardness with my colleagues at The Powerhouse Museum!!

And so it was. The building was transferred to the Historic Houses Trust and we went on to reinvent it – conserving its fabric so that it could tell its own stories and putting in displays and information amplifying those stories.

The revamped Barracks opened in October 1991 – just a few years before those first discussion with the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee about the possibility of the Barracks being the location for some form of memorial to the Irish famine.

In the reworking of the Barracks, whilst there was a primary emphasis on the place as a convict barracks, we had taken very particular care to make sure that the period of time the building served as a Female Immigration Depot, and later as the Government Asylum for Infirm and Destitute Women i.e. 1848 to 1886, – was given special treatment – and the proposal that came to us that day – for the Memorial – was a chance to further consolidate that position.

There was another reason too. The Trust had some of the best curators of historic places in the country on its staff. They were brilliant at conserving buildings and telling their stories. But I was also conscious that there were other voices that had interesting things to say. This was in part the result of our experience at the Museum of Sydney where we had to find different ways to tell stories in that museum since there was neither a surviving building – nor a collection. Engaging with contemporary artists had been one of the solutions.

However it was not the first time that we had collaborated with contemporary artists. Far from it in fact. As an organisation the HHT had played something of a pioneering role in encouraging contemporary artists to engage with our buildings and sites.

The amazing and brilliantly simple sculpture here – by Heather Dorrough and with an accompanying soundtrack by Historian Paul Carter – on the third floor of the Hyde Park Barracks, which we commissioned for its opening – showed just how powerful a message an artist could convey.

If you have not seen it I encourage you to take a look. To my mind that room – which remains empty, apart from the dozen or so cut-out figures that Heather placed along the windows on the north side – is one of the most poignant rooms of <u>any</u> museum I have ever been into – <u>anywhere</u>. It demonstrates that less can be more and an artist can sometimes say so much more than any panels of information and labels and other didactic displays.

That room – with Heather's sculpture and Paul's soundtrack – never fails to send a chill down my spine whenever I go into it – and I must have done that a thousand times.

There was a further reason I had to be enthusiastic – the Committee were offering to pay for it all. Now that happens rarely to a museum director!

So I was well primed to be receptive to some form of artistic intervention to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Irish Famine at that first meeting because I thought it had value in telling stories about this place – as well as being a memorial that had particular poignancy for the Irish community.

At that first meeting – in June 1996 – we chatted around the idea and I eventually suggested the best way forward might be a competition. It was then I was presented with photographs of 5 maquettes – the result of a competition already undertaken by the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee.

The criteria for that competition had been:

That the sculpture had to be figurative and in realistic costume;
It had to depict a 14-18 year old girl c1850;
She had to be shown either before leaving Ireland or after arriving in Australia;
She had to be depicted as a survivor – with spirit, courage and determination;
She must be symbolic of the famine;
She must be shoeless;
Potatoes must be included into the work;
As must a Celtic cross

It anticipated that the sculpture(s) would be located around the front gate of the HPB. In other words it was a very proscriptive brief.

I think it's fair to say that, whilst I was very warm to the idea, I felt that the options and the proposed solution would benefit from a more open brief. And I said so – in the nicest way I could.

I think Tom and his colleagues went away a bit deflated. And I felt badly about it because the idea was wonderful, as was the enthusiasm and commitment of those I had met.

Things went quiet for a while but six months later – in early 1997 we had re-engaged again and a Steering Committee was established that comprised:

Two Trustees of the HHT – one of whom, Dinah Dysart, chaired the committee and is here with us today, and the late Professor Joan Kerr;
Two representative of the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee: (Tom Power and Martin Coleman)
The Sydney City Council advisor on public art (Sally Coucard)
The architect who had worked on our reinvention of HPB (Peter Tonkin)
The Curator of the HPB — who played an instrumental role (Michael Bogle)
Later the City Historian was also added (Shirley Fitzgerald)

Having played the part of the bad cop I decided not to sit on the committee so I could continue to play that role should it become necessary. However I maintained close contact with the committee. By mid-1997 this committee had prepared a new Brief for an open competition.

The new Brief:
Located the sculpture on the Southern wall since both the Sydney City Council and the HHT had a strong preference for keeping the front of the Barracks clear. A new set of criteria ensured the work had to:

Have artistic sensitivity and strength;
Successfully integrate with the site;
Have empathy with objectives of the museum, and
The artist needed a demonstrated ability to carry out the commission;

The Brief said that 5 artists would be chosen from an open competition and each of those 5 would receive $1,000 to further develop their idea. The budget was set at up to $200,000.

About 40 submissions were received and the committee narrowed them down to five and each was asked to prepare a more detailed proposal.

By the end of 1997 the committee had selected the distinguished South Australian artists Hossein and Angela Valamanesh.

This was revealed at a press announcement here on 13 January 1998 where Tom Keneally and The Ambassador for Ireland, His Excellency, Richard O'Brien, were to announce the winner.

The artists described the work in their submission thus:

> *The rotated sandstone wall represents disruption and dislocation. While its rotation results in a gap which provides the viewer with a degree of visual accessibility to both sides of the art work, the effect of the observer being <u>unable</u> to view the work in its totality is maintained. The viewer is obliged to rely on memory in order to complete the image and make it whole. The dislocation also generates more intimate spaces (corners) in the otherwise exceptionally open area of the Barracks courtyard.*

I think it's fair to say I had one reservation. Though the wall on which the sculpture is located is not an original wall of the Barracks, nor is it even on the location of the original outer wall, the wall nevertheless provided the powerful sense of enclosure that is so important to this space and to an understanding of the purpose of the Barracks complex. My concern was that any significant disruption to this sense of enclosure, and especially by making it partly transparent, was risky and might compromise the integrity of the site.

Despite this reservation we nevertheless approved the sculpture and – as an organisation which had tax deductible status – we established an account into which donations could be made in order to assist the funding of the project.

7 August 1998 everything was buoyant and a Gala Fundraising Dinner and Auction was held at Parliament House attended by Premier Bob Carr MP, Lord Mayor Frank Sartor and Richard O'Brien, Ambassador for Ireland.

I was unable to attend but was amused to later discover that the:

> Highest price at the auction at that dinner was $7,250 for what was described as a *Nomination to a Sire (Danehill Dancer) for the 1998 breeding season.*
>
> Second highest price was for *Nomination to a Sire (Beautiful Crown) described* as 'the fastest sprinter in America in 1996'.

It's tickled my fancy to know such efforts help to fund this project!

The dinner made a staggering $100,000.

Everything was looking very positive and we had enough confidence that the funds would be raised to hold a ceremony to commence the project.

A State Visit to Australia by Mary MacAleese, President of Ireland, provided the perfect opportunity and on 2 September 1998 she visited and launched the start of the sculpture and moved the first stone.

I well recall meeting her motorcade in Macquarie Street, with Jack Mundey, Chairman of the HHT – who is here today and who was, and remains, such a great supporter of this project. We walked her into the Barracks courtyard to the cheers of a huge crowd of people who had gathered for the occasion – many of them descendants of those first Irish girls who arrived here in 1848. I think it was at that moment, with the outpouring of emotion from the crowd, that I realised just how important and powerful this project was to a large section of the community.

The President asked to briefly look in the building before the formal ceremony.

As she approached the door she stopped – held my arm tightly and said: *I feel I am crossing the threshold of history where so many of my countrymen did the same – though under very different circumstances*. The words were exact because I recorded them in my diary that day. It was a chilling moment and she made a very slow and deliberate step into the Barracks. It was not done for the cameras or the press. It was for her, and for the memory of her countrymen and women. It was a moment I will never forget.

That set the tone for the day. Later, at the official part of the ceremony, I seem to recall I had to speak after her. She had spoken with such dignity and emotion I was totally choked up and I seem to recall spluttering through my thank you speech.

If there were any doubters about the value of the project they were lost on that day – and henceforth.

A few months later, by the end of 1998 everything was ready. All the complex set of approvals and contracts were in place, a successful tenderer had been chosen, and we were ready to hit the 'Go' button.

I confess to hesitation. Despite the President having moved the first stone to start the project we always seemed to be just a little bit short of cash. My Trustees had made it clear that they did not want to have to bail out the project and we were running a very tight budget that year.

However by February 1999, though still $37,463 short of the final amount needed – but with Tom Power using all the charm and persuasive powers he could muster, and promising about $25,000 from a forthcoming raffle - we took the risk and gave the green light.

Usually this is where the problems on a project start. But this was the smoothest building project ever. I cannot recall a single matter of any real consequence that went wrong – perhaps largely because of excellent project management by Julie McKenzie from Tonkin Zulaikha Architects and the Curator of the Barracks, Michael Bogle, and the enormous commitment of everyone on the committee chaired by Dinah Dysart.

Of course I had no need for concern and the extra funds were raised, and on 28 August 1999 the Governor General, Sir William Deane, officially unveiled the work in front of about 2,500 people – thus starting this annual commemoration that has gone on for the past 16 years.

The biggest issue for the opening, as revealed by my recent review of the files, was how we were to feed and water such a large crowd. Because no Irish event could proceed without some good cheer!!

I said before that I had some preliminary reservations. Any I had were dispelled as soon as the monument began to take shape, and certainly as it neared completion.

It is, I believe, a hugely successful sculpture. It sits here quietly – but with great dignity – and yet asserts itself by disrupting the wall – and the ground plane – causing unease to pedestrians who never seem quite sure how to navigate around it. It's an unease that sits very comfortably with me – reflecting the dislocation and unease those first 200 girls must have felt in 1848 – and just as so many of us feel such discomfort about some current migration issues.

I like it also because it is easy to understand. Unlike some contemporary sculpture its meaning is clear and powerful. And I like that it requires effort to navigate around it so as to read both sides of the story – which was exactly the intent of the artists.

I also like the tactile quality of its detail, the empty bowl, the sewing basket and the books and the tarisker or peat cutting blade. And of course I like the way those names fade away suggesting that there are so many more (as there are) that could have been added to the list.

And I particularly like that it is a living memorial – as witnessed by this annual event.

Before I finish just let me reflect for a moment on two subsequent occasions after the official opening.

The first of these was on Sunday 10 November 2002, just over three years after the official opening, when Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland and a former UN High

Commissioner for Human Rights, came to see the Memorial. She was in town to receive the Sydney Peace Prize for 2002.

I recall the event for a few reasons:

1) It was boiling hot and we had to rearrange the ceremony so the speeches were in the shade of the Lilly Pilly Tree. It was in full bloom and everyone sneezed and was covered in blossom.
2) It seemed like it was Irish Week in Australia. There were many sore heads at the event as the previous evening Ireland had beaten Australia in rugby for the first time in 35 years at Landsdown Road in Dublin.
3) To cap it off, an Irish horse – Media Puzzle – had won the Melbourne Cup the previous week.
4) But the main reason why that day was so memorable – and the most important – was because of the extraordinary humanity that radiated from Mary Robinson. She talked of how the sculpture spoke so eloquently of dispossession and disruption. She recognised the unique insight Hossein Valamanesh had bought to the work as a refugee himself. But mostly she also picked up on the theme and extended the meaning of the memorial to be about <u>all</u> who felt dispossessed. She talked of the Woomera Detention Centre, then a major issue, and the appalling conditions there. Her deep insights and humanity left a lasting impression on me – and I am sure on everyone who was there huddled under that tree.

I had always felt that, perhaps, there was some disquiet and misgivings about the monument – that perhaps it has not been fully embraced by some of those who had worked so hard to bring it about. But when Mary Robinson said that it was: *one of the finest memorials to the millions who died* it gave the final seal of approval that I believe it so justly deserved. For that I will be eternally grateful to her.

At an Australian Ireland Fund Luncheon a day or so later she said that people should come and see this *monument and contemplate its meaning for today's world*.

Mary Robinson had given the memorial a whole new meaning. We need her to return again now and repeat that message more than ever at the present time.

I recall fondly too, the occasion when Mary MacAleese, still President of Ireland, returned on 13 March 2003, to see the completed memorial which she had commenced when she moved the first stone – when we had little money – but high hopes.

It was another huge event and in my formal welcome to her I recalled the time 4½ years previously when she inaugurated the Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine. When I sat down she took me by the hand [she seemed to have a habit of taking hold of me!] and said *Thank you so much for those very kind and generous words. I remember the occasion so well*. She gave another very moving and eloquent speech and again reinforced the simplicity and power of this particular memorial.

When the Governor General presided at the unveiling 16 years ago today he finished his very personal and moving speech by saying *from this day on this memorial will sing eloquently of Ireland and of Australia and of our shared heritage to all who pass by it*.

Nothing pleases me more than passing by this memorial – as I often do – on foot or by car – and noticing that fresh flowers or a wreath have been placed here, or someone – or a group of people – are quietly exploring the memorial.

I hope in this very busy city it has fulfilled its promise of being a living memorial and also a place of contemplation. This annual event is a wonderful recognition that this memorial has great meaning to so many people in our community. That brings a real warmth to my heart and great credit to all who were involved.

I hope, also, that it is a reminder, and one that we so desperately need at the moment, that this country has benefitted from so many waves of people, many fleeing persecution, hunger, oppression, dispossession and danger who have been welcomed here and have contributed to the great success that this country has become – as did those 200 Irish girls who arrived here in 1848.

In that regard I am really delighted to know that the Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, which started so many years ago, and whose work lead to this memorial, now funds three programs which support women affected by famine and political persecution which has caused them to flee their own countries and find refuge in Australia.

That brings even greater warmth to my heart in these times when refugees fleeing danger and persecution are so often demonized - and I offer my warmest congratulations to those who developed the idea of this memorial and who have nurtured it over so many years and who now keep the flame alive in ways that are so relevant to our community today.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these memories and thoughts. Of the 28 years I was Director of the HHT – and undertook so many different projects – this is one of those that I retain great warmth and affection for. In so many ways it was an exemplary project – building bridges between institutions and communities, bringing together history, art and interpretation. But also because of the powerful contemporary relevance that this memorial represents for us today and which Mary Robinson saw, and highlighted. At a more personal level it was a great pleasure and privilege to work with so many from the Irish community, and whose friendship endures.

Thank you.

Peter Watts

A few pictures from the archives of GIFCC to illustrate
some points made in this 2015 address by Peter Watts

2 September 1998

President of Ireland, Mary MacAleese and Tom Power when Mary MacAleese Inaugurated the Memorial by removing the first stone from the wall.

27 August 1999

Workmen etching the words in the surrounds of them Memorial the day before the unveiling!

28 August 1999

Just one view of the crowed the day of the unveiling of the Memorial by Sir William Deane.