



13th Annual Commemoration at
The Irish Famine Memorial,
Hyde Park Barracks, Macquarie Street, Sydney,
Sunday, 26 August 2012.

Address by Brendan Graham

From Famine to Freedom—Ireland to Australia.

[Brendan Graham, photography by Kerry Myers]

Section 1: An Gorta Mór

It is last Monday, 20th August 1845. You are David Moore, Curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Dublin. You do your rounds. You stop at the Gardens' vegetable patch. You are expecting to see bloom there, the tiny white flower of the potato, signalling the growth of a new crop. What you find instead, was to forever change not only Ireland ... but Britain, America, Canada ... and Australia.

Blight—black, rotting blight was on the whitest flower of the potato patch. It and **An Gorta Mór—The Great Hunger**—that followed, devastated Ireland and its people. It changed the land and its usage. It changed the social, cultural and religious dimensions of the country. Mass death and emigration followed, leaving a deep wound in our people even to this day. It was, as they say '*a defining moment*' that changed our history as a people, forever. We are all part of that changed history. Particularly so are those of you who are descendants of the many who left Ireland for Australia during and after **Aimsir an Drochshaol—The Time of the Bad Life**.

Sometimes, at home I think we forget that much of our history is ‘abroad’—out of Ireland. So, it is my honour and my privilege to be here amongst you today to learn about my own ‘out-of-Ireland’ history and to see it acknowledged by your presence and commemoration at this annual remembering.

The Census of 1841 gave the population of Ireland at almost 8.2 million people. In the Famine years of 1845-1852, up to one and a quarter million of Ireland’s people perished as a direct result of The Great Hunger. Almost another one and a quarter million fled the country. By 1900, 4 million Irish had gone to the ‘The New World ... or the Next’.

The London Times in 1848 enthused that: ‘*In a few years more a Celtic Irishman will be as rare in Connemara as is the Red Indian on the shores of Manhattan*’. Long under British Rule, Ireland and its people were nevertheless a place and a race apart. Lord Clarendon, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, from June 1847, had this to say: ‘*The wretched people seem to be human potatoes ... a sort of emanation from ‘the root’—they have lived by it and will die with it*’.

Lunasa—the pagan festival at the beginning of August—saw much music and rejoicing as the new crop of potatoes grew, their pretty white flowers dancing with the promise of a good harvest. It was a sign to Ireland's tenant farmers that, with careful rationing they would have enough potatoes to see them through another winter. The Catholic church frowned on all such celebrations, remnants of a pre-Christian Ireland, and denounced the people for engaging in such pursuits as '*the carnal pleasures of the waltz*'. The Church therefore, saw the onset of Famine as the Hand of God visiting retribution on a people already blackened by sin. If Rome used the Famine to subjugate the people, so too did London.

Charles Trevelyan—Permanent Assistant at the British Treasury, charged with responsibility for Famine relief in Ireland, concluded that: '*The judgement of God sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated*'. The following August of 1846, a strange white vapour was reported in the skies over the west of Ireland ... and, almost overnight, the entire potato crop was destroyed.

Father Mathew, founder of the Temperance Movement, described this in a letter to Trevelyan: '*27th (July) this doomed plant bloomed in all the luxuriance of an abundant harvest. Returning on 3rd inst (August) I beheld with sorrow one wide waste of putrefying vegetation*'. There is a quote from a Maire ni Grianna, of County Donegal, which says: '*Poetry, music and dancing stopped ... the Famine killed everything*'.

And sometimes, it *is* only through song that we can express what is otherwise inexpressible. This first song you will hear—***The Whitest Flower***—is a *caoineadh*, or lament. In it I sought to capture the emotions of a people who, ravaged by death and starvation now had the additional burden of guilt thrust on them—of being told that this was their own fault. That, as Father Mathew saw it, '*Divine Providence has again poured out on us the vial of its wrath*'. Please welcome to sing ***The Whitest Flower***, Sarah Calderwood accompanied on piano by Fiona Ulrick.

Section 2: From Famine to Freedom—Ireland to Australia: The Orphan Girls

I preface this part of my talk by acknowledging the painstaking work of historians like Richard Reid, Cheryl Mongan and Trevor McClaughlin. Their work is invaluable to anybody undertaking individual family research on the Orphan Girls. It is work being done by these and others which so informs the whole Australian—Ireland experience. They are due our thanks.

If, in the Famine Years, Ireland was a land of too many people, Australia was a land of too few people, particularly females. Ireland's Poor Law Unions were constantly short of money, the workhouses over-crowded, under-staffed and with disease rampant, were still a last refuge for a famished people. By instituting his Orphans and Paupers Scheme, Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies fulfilled two needs. He reduced the demand on Irish workhouses and he helped populate the colonies.

The scheme saw some 4,112 female orphans, mostly aged 14-18 from every county in Ireland, arrive in Australia between 1848 and 1850. Some 2,200 came to Sydney, the remainder to other Australian ports. The cost of getting them here was borne by the Colony itself. The passage to Australia, while lengthy was a different voyage than that of the notorious 'coffin ships' that ploughed the North Atlantic taking those fleeing Famine in Ireland to America and Canada.

A Surgeon saw to the care of the girls on board ship, none more diligently so than Surgeon Charles Edward Strutt of the Thomas Arbuthnot. Ships were inspected on arrival in Sydney and reports sent back to London: '*In no port in Her Majesty's Colonial Dominions ... is more regard paid to the Immigrant's welfare ... than in the Port of Sydney*', recorded Immigration Agent Francis Merewether in 1849. Less than 1% of the Orphan Girls died on the passage to Australia.

The arrival of 200 girls on the *Earl Grey* from Belfast in October 1848 commenced the role of the Barracks here as an immigration depot for 'unprotected female' immigrants. Here in this very spot, these girls started their new lives. This was 'home'. There was a 6 am rise. Later, cleaning the barracks. Then, from 2 until 4 the girls would present themselves in the hiring room to be viewed and interviewed by the ladies of Sydney.

Religion was also catered for and how wonderful that we will shortly hear the bells of Saint Mary's Cathedral ring out in remembrance of those orphan girls.

Frances Merewether also recorded: '*Girls should at first go into service where they will of course have opportunities for forming matrimonial connections based upon previous acquaintance with their husband*'.

And what did Australia think of the Irish in those times? A quote from 1837 from a Reverend Gunther an Anglican Missionary: '*Our Natives commonly attach some idea of inferiority to what is Irish*'. The *Melbourne Argus* had this to say of the Orphan Girls: '*A set of ignorant creatures whose whole knowledge of household duties barely reaches to distinguishing the inside from the outside of a potato*'. The branding of these pauperised young females continued: 'Workhouse sweepings', 'barefoot beggars', and 'professed public women'. But perceptions were not universally so and the town of Yass in NSW took a different view and that they were, as Surgeon Strutt had described them, 'a decent set of girls'.

And what of the lives of the girls? Some suffered at the hands of employers and husbands. Others had a better experience. They married men of every trade and creed and led tough but fruitful lives in Australia. Each story is unique and that is why the individual family history, in which many of you are engaged, is so important. History is not just official reports or newspaper headlines or a series of statistics. These *are* important and can give the totality of the picture ... but the sum of the parts of each lived life is significantly much greater than the whole.

The scheme lasted a mere two years as many saw Australia being overrun with Irish immigrants. When I was invited to give this address, I thought I should try to do something to give another dimension to the voice of the orphan girls. So, over the past few months I have been writing a song called *Orphan Girl*. In it I wanted to try and capture that moment when the orphan girl had volunteered to go to Australia ... but hadn't yet been 'inspected' for suitability by the Workhouse Guardians. Many people died in those workhouses, their diseased bodies let slide down a chute into a lime pit, or buried with a hinge-bottomed coffin that could be re-used, again and again and again. Once you went into a workhouse you often only came out again in a coffin. So, selection for Australia was very much a matter of life and death. These young girls had no parents, no homes and no hope. I wanted to set the song in that place between suspended hope ... and no hope ... between, as it were, life and death.

I was blest when Sarah Calderwood and the Australian Girls Choir conducted by Jane Hennessy, so generously offered to be here with us to perform it. It will not pass you by that the ages of these young Australian choir girls are approximately the same as those of the Irish orphan girls. And there is an extra dimension to the performance today. Only yesterday did I discover—and did *she* discover—that, our piano player Fiona Ulrick is a descendant of an Orphan Girl ... and that behind her, on this glass wall is the name of her great, great, great grandmother, Catherine O'Donnell—as it were looking over her shoulder. So, what a moment is it for Fiona to be here today.

So we ask all the great, great, great grandmothers—to look over us as we dedicate this song to *their* memories ... and to *you* their descendants. Here is ‘Orphan Girl’.



Sarah Calderwood with a few members of the Australian Girls Choir behind her [photograph Kerry Myers]

Section 3: Ireland to Australia

As a group—and as individuals—the Orphan Girls are not ‘invisible’ to history. The records kept of them in New South Wales were detailed, exemplary for the times. They are not invisible because the wonderful artists, Angela and Hossein Valanamesh have forever etched out their names at this historic site. The Hyde Park Museum itself proclaims their presence here. They are not invisible because the historians have been faithful to their calling and brought them to life for us. They are not invisible because two of Ireland’s former Presidents, Mary McAleese and Mary Robinson, have come here to this very place to pay homage to them. They are not invisible because their blood still flows in all who are their descendants; who gather here today to honour them and who shoulder their heritage so nobly.

Today, emigration is still a blight on Ireland’s social landscape. Of course it is good that our young Irish can come here and find jobs and a good life. Of course we send them out with hope and a smile and a brave front. They are not orphans, forced out to survive. Nevertheless, despite Skype and text and email ... and that Qantas goes both ways, it is a degree of physical separation and un-nearness that is unwanted by those of us who remain behind. The cry of the heart still is *‘farewell my children’*, as William Fife lamented when he stole down to the Quay of Derry to watch his children leave for NSW in 1859. He couldn’t bear for them to see him. It is why it is still hard today for us parents to sometimes go to the airport. We do not want that *‘second parting’* there—we want that moment of parting, past. I know that feeling—my two youngest daughters are in Australia. They are here today ... but distance has its own tyranny.

And Australia has generously received our daughters and sons and taken them to home and heartland. In return our young people have worked hard and contributed in so many ways to the growth of this great nation. For every story we hear back home of the young Irish acting

up in Perth or in Queensland, or here in Sydney, there are thousands upon thousands of unheard stories of the younger and older Irish who contribute so much to this, their new country. These are the stories that we should, as well, be hearing. Stories like the Sydney Young Leaders programme whose mission is to provide a forum for networking and mentorship and to encourage a new generation of Irish philanthropists to support worthy Irish and Australian causes.

Your former Prime Minister, John Howard acknowledged the Irish contribution to Australia in a statement he sent me for my first book:

'The Irish influence on Australia has been immense. About one third of all Australians can claim some Irish heritage. Irish culture and values have helped shape many aspects of Australian society, from literature and music through to politics and religion. One of the great catalysts for Irish Emigration to Australia was the Great Irish Famine of 1845-1852. Fleeing suffering and hardship, many thousands came to Australia to build a new life. It was a Famine which changed both Ireland and Australia'. [John Howard, August 1998].

Finally, thank you all for being here and making today so special. I would like to thank the Great Famine Commemoration Committee for inviting me and in particular former Chairman Tom Power, who has done so much to ensure that there is a lasting place of remembrance in Sydney. Thanks too, to newly elected Chairman, Perry McIntyre. I would also like to thank the Director of Historic Houses Trust, Ms Kate Clark & Staff: here in this most memory-evoking place of Hyde Park Barracks Museum. To Ireland's Consul-General, Ms Caitriona Ingoldsby and the Consular Staff—they do such good work on behalf of all our people and keep nourishing the bonds that bind our two countries together.

It has been such an honour to have had my songs given voice in this sacred space. Sarah Calderwood is a wonderful *teller* of a song ... and has certainly raised these songs up out of the ordinary in which they were written.

To the outstanding young voices of the Australian Girls Choir and their director Jane Hennessy—doesn't it give you hope for the world just to hear them sing? Throughout, Fiona Ulrick on keyboards kept us all together (with the help of great, great grandmother, Catherine).

As this part of our re-memoration draws to an end, we realise that *nothing* ends. Life, with all its circular motions has brought *us* here—even if one hundred and sixty years later. Emigration from Ireland continues. Famine is ever-present in our world. Race and social status is still demonised. But, in whatever dark times there are, hope and courage and love still survive ... to uplift us out of hopelessness, selfishness and lovelessness ... to bring us onwards ... to raise us up.

Some of you perhaps might know the chorus of our final song and I am sure that the Australian Girls Choir, who are about to sing it, will not be put off if you decide to join in and sing it with them.

Thank you again. This is ***You Raise Me Up.***

END

(c) Brendan Graham