

**Annual gathering at the Australian Monument to the Great Irish Famine
Sunday, 26 August 2012**

Speech by Melissa Plant

Descendant of Mary O'Hara from Galway on the Lady Kennaway to Port Phillip

Thank you, Perry, for that lovely introduction and good afternoon to everyone on this lovely day. As Perry mentioned, I am a descendant of one of the Irish Famine orphans so very well honoured by this wonderful site. Before I talk about that, I am going to briefly go through how I came to discover both my ancestry and this Irish Famine memorial.

For quite a number of years now I have had what might have initially been termed a curiosity, developing into a fascination and then bordering on a bit of an obsession with the Emerald Isle. Any time I saw pictures or films of Ireland, I longed to go there in a way I couldn't really explain. So in 2008 I packed my bags and headed off to Ireland. I was a bit worried that it really couldn't be all I hoped it would be, because I had built it up so much in my head. But it was everything I wanted it to be, and more. The countryside is breathtaking, the cities and towns are quaint and picturesque. The people are charming, warm, chatty and so witty. Despite how different it can be to Australia, it is somewhere that truly feels like a second home to me.

I spent three years in Ireland—a year in Dublin, about six months in Derry and a year and a half in Belfast. I visited 26 of the 32 counties, and never got tired of exploring. As the Irish say, wherever you go, there you are—and life isn't always perfect. But no matter what was going on, if I jumped in a bus or a car and headed out into the countryside I was always soothed and amazed by the beauty, in all its forty shades of green—some of them SO green it almost looked like the grass was glowing.

I was humbled by the Easter Rising stories in Kilmainham Gaol, saw a concert at Malahide Castle, viewed the 300 year old remains of an Irish saint in Drogheda, and did a sorry attempt at an jig on the stone formations at the Giants Causeway. I was dazzled by the beaches on the North Antrim coast, learned about the Troubles on the Falls Road in Belfast and the Bogside in Derry, and was thoroughly inspired by the legacy of John Hume. I saw surfers on a rocky beach in Sligo, had great nights filled with Guinness and trad music in Galway, and fell head over heels in love with Connemara.

I wanted to set up house on the Dingle Peninsula, had a carriage ride through Killarney National Park with a driver called Patrick and his horse called Captain, and lunged backwards off a castle to kiss the Blarney Stone. I went to a pub not much larger than my living room in Cork, saw black sheep teetering around the cliff tops at Slieve League in Donegal, and visited the landmarks of Dublin with the great local monikers: the Spire in the Mire, the Tart with the Cart, the Hags with the Bags, and in a different vein, but perhaps one of my favourites, the Natural History Museum—otherwise known to the locals as the Dead Zoo.

In the time I lived in Ireland, back home in Australia, my father was researching our family tree. We had known that my mother had Irish ancestry, but it was whilst I was away that my father found out that my great-great grandmother was an Irish Famine orphan who had travelled to Australia in a ship. Her name was Mary O'Hara, and at the time she was a teenager from County Mayo, in a workhouse in Galway. She came to Australia on a ship called the *Lady Kennaway*, which was one of the ships that travelled directly to Melbourne. She worked in a brewery for six

months, then married an Irishman and had twelve children, the youngest of whom was my mother's grandfather.

My Dad had told me there was a Famine Memorial in Sydney at Hyde Park Barracks, but I have to confess, by the time I returned to Australia in October last year, that detail had somewhat slipped my mind. I was busy settling back in Sydney, starting a new job, finding somewhere to live—all those necessary things that get in the way.

One day, at work, my boss said that I needed to visit the Land and Property Information office for him. I was hurrying along, past this corner behind me [Melissa was standing with her back to the Memorial], and as I walked I happened to glance down at a plaque on the ground and noticed that the wording at the top was written in Irish, which stopped me in my tracks. As I read it and noticed the plaque referred to the Great Famine, my memory sparked back to life. I looked up and saw the memorial site in front of us, so I walked over to the glass and scanned the names. And there it was. Mary O'Hara. I rushed inside the Land and Property Information office, did what I had to do, and came back out to have a proper walk around for about 15 minutes—but my boss doesn't need to know that! I felt excited and proud and honoured all at the same time. I called my parents and told them I had seen it, and we made plans to visit the Barracks and see the exhibition together one weekend soon after, which we did.

This memorial and the dedication of the people who manage it means a great deal to me and my family. It has reinvigorated my interest in finding out more about my Irish ancestry and learning more about our family history. Of course, I am just absolutely devastated that this may mean I have to return to Ireland again!

On behalf of myself and my family, and for all descendants of the orphans of the Great Famine who are here today, I would like to thank the Historic Houses Trust, the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee, and the Irish and Australian governments for establishing and maintaining this beautiful site. It is something that I treasure and something I look forward to bringing my children to see one day.

Thank you.

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