



15th Annual Commemoration  
at  
The Irish Famine Memorial  
Hyde Park Barracks, Macquarie Street,  
Sydney

Sunday, 31 August 2014

**Address by Former Irish Ambassador, Richard O'Brien**

Descendants of the Orphan Girls and distinguished Friends. I want at the outset to thank Dr Perry McIntyre and the members of Sydney's Famine Commemoration Committee for their kind invitation to me to share some reflections with you at this great annual gathering of commemoration and of celebration. It is 15 years ago almost to the day - it was in fact on Saturday 28 August 1999 - that I had the privilege of addressing another large gathering - one that had assembled here on this most hallowed ground for the official unveiling of a truly inspiring, imaginatively conceived and superbly constructed Irish Famine Memorial, dedicated to the Orphan Girls by the then Governor General of Australia - Sir William Deane and his wife Lady Helen.

It was an impressive and distinguished gathering at which some 700 descendants of the Orphan Girls - who had travelled from across all the States and Territories of the Federation - were joined by Australia's former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his wife Margaret who was ever conscious and proud of her own Irish heritage. Senator John Herron (later to be appointed Australia's Ambassador to Ireland who was then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs) represented Prime Minister John Howard; Laurie Ferguson MP represented the Federal Opposition Leader, Mr Kim Beasley; Susan Ryan represented the long established Australia-Ireland Parliamentary Friendship Group in the Federal Parliament and two much-loved and deeply-respected Sydney-siders and NSW State Parliamentarians Jonno Johnson and Brian Vaughan together represented Premier Bob Carr.

From across the tyranny of distance the Presiding Officers of the Irish Parliament - the Cean Comhairle of Dail Eireann and the Cathaoirleach of Seanad Eireann - were both represented by Deputy Michael Ferris T.D. of the Irish Parliamentary Labour Party. Michael was a native of Bansha in County Tipperary, the birth place of many who were transported in its early years to the then new colony of New South Wales and a place that had been home to many of the Orphan Girls we have gathered to honour today.

Tipperary was also the birth place of that gracious and courteous, kind and gentle man, the ever determined and highly persuasive Chairperson Emeritus of the Famine Commemoration Committee, Tom Power! I am especially conscious as I stand before you today of the enormous debt of gratitude we all owe to Tom for his foresight in initiating this magnificent Memorial and for

his unrelenting determination in promoting the Memorial; his enormous energy in persevering with, and indeed for his outstanding dedication in ultimately establishing this Famine Memorial. I know that we were all over-joyed late last year when the Australian Government honoured Tom with the distinguished Order of Australia for his outstanding contributions to expanding, deepening and celebrating the relationship between Australia and Ireland; a relationship dear friends that was forged in this very place, in what is now this renowned World Heritage Listed Building. This historic Hyde Park Barracks - at the heart of Sydney - is the birthplace of the great saga of the Irish in Australia.

Indeed it has always struck me that the pathway along Macquarie Street that stretches from this historic site, past Parliament House and the Sydney Hospital and on to the Mitchell Library, bears eloquent and tangible testimony (like no stretch of road elsewhere across this vast continent) to the vital and vibrant contributions of Irish women and men to the making of this great nation. In front of the Mitchell Library stands the imposing statue (the first ever erected in Australia by public subscription) of Limerick-born Richard Bourke, the first Irish-born Governor of New South Wales and cousin of the renowned Edmund Burke, the foremost Irish-born parliamentarian of the 18th century. During his term in office, Governor Bourke legislated for religious toleration, the introduction of a system of national education, the protection of aboriginal rights and the expansion of international trade. When he returned to Limerick in 1837 he campaigned relentlessly - including in testimony to a Select Committee of the House of Commons at Westminster - to draw attention to the developing problems of poverty and the increasing risks of famine across rural Ireland - an energetic campaign that was to be so tragically ignored.

As you walk back in this direction from Richard Bourke's imposing statue you pass Sydney Hospital where so many nurses and doctors of Irish birth and heritage have given service and comfort across the generations to the injured and to the infirm. And you will then come to the Parliament of New South Wales - to the centre of State governance - to the People's House - to a Parliament which supported Governments that had within them more Irish Ministers than were found in any other Government elsewhere in the world throughout the latter half of the 19th Century.

It was here in these resonating surroundings and in this historic location that Tom Power and his Committee decided to locate the Memorial to the Great Irish Famine. Yes - initially there were ideas about erecting a statue - there was talk of naming a parkland - there were discussions about street names and public buildings - and there were the ever present concerns about fund raising. I can vividly recall conversations about options and strategies with Trish Power who was the constant supporter at Tom's side - as well as with the dedicated Martin Folan who was there from the very beginning as indeed were Martin Coleman, Ian Caruth and Terrie Pollard. And I know that they - the core committee - would want me to acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of so many from across all sections of the Sydney Community and indeed from beyond who responded to their call for support. And in a special way I would want to acknowledge that small group of dedicated supporters who came together at the very outset and who pledged to underwrite any shortfall that might remain outstanding after the fundraising campaign had run its course - that small group included such staunch supporters as Steve Carey, Michael Daly, Fergus Doyle and Frank O'Connell.

Then there were those - the guardians and administrators of historic sites and public places - who were essential partners in this great undertaking. I well remember the thoughtful Peter Watts then Director of the Historic Houses Trust; the generous David Mulcahy (whose ancestors had travelled from County Cork) who was then Director of the neighbouring Land Titles Office as well as the

ever available Curator Michael Bogle and the Staff here at the Barracks who were constant and committed in their enthusiasm and encouragement.

There were two other inspiring people who remain firmly fixed in my memory from those early days of Tom's campaign - the eminent environmentalist Dr Jack Mundy who was Chair of the Historic Houses Trust and who is again with us today, and the late and much missed Professor Joan Kerr of the University of New South Wales who played a central role with Tom and others in deciding on the precise location of the Memorial. As many of you know it is located directly above the kitchen area from which the Orphan Girls received their daily meals.

That seemingly trivial fact - if such facts are ever trivial - was known to Tom Power and Professor Kerr because of the painstaking scholarship of a number of dedicated historians and researchers who over the years connected all of us to the lives and times - to the triumphs and traumas - to the faith and to the fears - to the everyday challenges and to the journeys - of those who came across the oceans in the period of the major transportations to the Great South Land.

Richard Reid and Cheryl Mongan have meticulously surveyed this entire landscape and through their discovery and publication of the Diary of Surgeon Strutt in '*A Decent Set of Girls*': *The Irish Famine orphans of the 'Thomas Arbuthnot' 1849-1850*, have together brilliantly reconstructed the voyage of the Orphan Girls who came here on the *Thomas Arbuthnot*. Their work inspired the talented Evelyn Conlon, who was with us last year, to write her absorbing novel *Not the Same Sky* in which she brought us on a series of memorable journeys with Honora Rafferty, Julia Cuffe, Bridget Joyce and Anne Sherry as they sought their place and carved their futures in this new and different land. Evelyn's work followed in the wonderful tradition of the evocative writings and musical compositions of Brendan Graham who has returned to be here today to launch a CD of three of his renowned pieces: *Orphan Girl*, *The Whitest Flower* and *You Raise Me Up*.

The present Chair of the Famine Commemoration Committee, Perry McIntyre, who dedicates so much energy and enthusiasm to this and other events of the Commemoration Committee, has published extensively on convict family reunification and, with her colleague Liz Rushen, has brought us *Quarantined!*, *Fair Game* and *The Merchant's Women*, and in so doing have deepened our awareness and understanding of the mass migration of women to the Australian colonies in the 1830s. Perry has also worked on migration issues with Anne-Maree Whitaker who also gave us *Unfinished Revolution*, a unique insight into the earliest days of life in the colony and of the enduring impact of the 400 United Irishmen who were transported to Botany Bay following Ireland's ill-fated 'Year of Liberty' in 1798. In Melbourne Elizabeth Malcolm has reflected on so much of relevance to all of these themes including on the crucial role of 'Bridget' in Australian Society, while her eminent colleague and friend, the dedicated Val Noone, has done so much to illuminate the great experiences of the 'hidden' Irish across the State of Victoria and well beyond.

I also think of Professor Trevor McClaughlin and Dr Siobhan McHugh and the vital contributions they have made in researching and broadcasting - in exploring individual lives - and in bringing the migration stories of this and other places to much wider audiences through radio and television. And indeed both Trevor and Siobhan - together with a strong cast of historians from the University of Tasmania - have contributed substantially to a magnificent new documentary - *Banished Women (Mna Dibeartha)*, a meticulously researched, brilliantly scripted and vividly enacted portrayal of the experiences of an entire generation of single, married and widowed Irish women including many of the Orphan Girls. As the series confidently and accurately asserts they became the 'founding mothers' of contemporary Australia. The creators and producers of *Banished Women* - Siobhan Lynam and Barrie Dowdall - have travelled from Ireland to be with us today. They will be available

later to talk to each of us individually about their magnificent series which will also be available to purchase. I warmly and enthusiastically recommend it.

And I make that recommendation - in the same spirit that I have mentioned some of the academics, authors and community activists who have directly engaged with - and actively supported - the work of the Famine Commemoration Committee - because I am firmly convinced - as I know they are - that history really does matter! It matters to identity and to heritage; to culture and to civilization; to the quality and character of our communities and to the direction and destiny of our societies. For history is not just the story of our past; it provides us with both instruction and inspiration about the present; it deepens our understanding of ourselves on familiar ground and it enables us to look to the future with that essential combination of ambitious optimism informed by the reality of lived experience.

Those thoughts were very much in my mind as I read through the fascinating chapters of Babette Smith's recently published *The Luck of the Irish* which - often in a challenging and even occasionally in a confronting manner - reflects on the many roles played by Irish women and men in the development of 19th century Australia. It explores their contributions to the underlying dynamics of today's Australian society. For surely it is in that period, as Babette suggests, that we find the origins of Australian egalitarianism - Australia's unique form of mateship - in the shared traumas of transportation. For indeed on those ships a unique sense of solidarity undoubtedly developed and those who travelled as 'shipmates' invariably forged the enduring bonds of 'mateship' and thus they passed to succeeding generation one of the most enriching legacies of their harsh experiences. But theirs also was a period of which the towering historian of the Irish in Australia - Patrick O'Farrell - once remarked: 'historical understanding of the Irish in Australia has been so contaminated by stereotypes ... that they have left virtually half a century prior to the 1840s ... as a kind of prehistory, unexplored'.

Indeed the challenge of exploring all the richness of that history - the enduring legacy of those who were transported here - of those who came as free settlers - and of course of the Orphan Girls and their descendants from across the generations - continues as an exciting and exacting preoccupation for so many talented people of dedicated scholarship. They give enormously of their genius and time to enriching us with an ever deeper understanding of our history and heritage in this great land. That was why a group came together in late 1998 - just as the fundraising for this memorial was being completed - to launch a campaign to ensure the continuation and further development of Irish Studies - so carefully nurtured over many years by the late Professor Patrick O'Farrell - at the University of New South Wales. That great effort spearheaded by Mary Lee and generously supported by many gathered here today, brought us the great gift of Professor Ronan McDonald and the Global Irish Studies Centre at UNSW where Dr Perry McIntyre is an adjunct Lecturer, as indeed is Dr Jeff Kildea, who currently holds the Keith Cameron Chair in Australian Historical Studies at University College Dublin.

However, the task of seeking additional financial resources has again become an urgent challenge if the Centre is to continue its valuable and vital work beyond early next year. In ten days' time - on Wednesday 10 September - the immediate Past President of Ireland - Dr Mary McAleese who came here to Hyde Park Barracks in September 1998 to formally launch the construction of the Famine Memorial - will attend a special function hosted by Professor McDonald to re-launch the fundraising campaign that was so successful in the past. As the Chair of the Centre's Advisory Committee, and on behalf of Ronan and the team at the University, I am delighted to invite you to join us in a special evening with Mary McAleese beginning at 6pm on Wednesday 10 September in the John Niland Scientia Building at the UNSW Campus in Kensington. On the previous evening

the Australia Ireland Fund will also host a dinner in support of the Chair at which Dr McAleese and her husband Martin will be guests of honour.

Dear Friends and Descendants of the Orphan Girls, one of the great giants of Australian literature and an enthusiastic supporter of Australian Irish Studies, Tom Keneally who this year celebrates the 50th anniversary of the publication of his first novel, has written much about the Great Irish Famine and indeed of Famines that have decimated men, women and children elsewhere across the international community. I know how much all of us value and treasure his remarkable book *Three Famines* in which he graphically and movingly recounts the Famines of Bengal, Ethiopia and Ireland and how brilliantly he underscores that horrifying truth that while famines may be triggered by nature their outcomes are so often determined by politics and ideology. In his contribution to that other monumental volume, *The Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*, Tom pays tribute to that ‘almost lost’ generation mentioned by Patrick O’Farrell when he notes that ‘a great deal of Famine relief was collected in Australia, most but not all of it through parish churches, where former Irish convicts joined with settlers in giving. Hugh Larkin, serving a life sentence for Ribbonism, received his conditional pardon in 1848, and thereafter with his time-served Irish convict wife, Mary Shields, heard of the famine from the pulpit in Saints Peter and Paul’s bush Cathedral in Goulburn, and listened to the Famine Encyclical of Pope Pius IX. (They gave more than they could afford.) Altogether Australians collected £98,000, a higher proportion than of any other national group’.

When I spoke here on the 28 August 1999, I had the opportunity to recall that the surviving records of that appeal also reveal that among those who so generously contributed here in Australia was an elderly Aboriginal man from Queensland who on hearing of the Great Famine in Ireland shared what little he had to bring relief to those who were suffering so greatly in a distant country on the other side of the world. In recalling and acknowledging that deeply caring act of kindness and humanity again today I also want to recall and to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land on which we meet and where we have gathered to celebrate and to commemorate ‘a decent set of girls’!

Thank you for your warm welcome and for your patience and if I may once again thank Dr Perry McIntyre and the Famine Commemoration Committee for inviting me to reflect with you at this truly exceptional gathering.

Following Richard O’Brien’s speech Brendan Graham launched the CD of his three songs – see next page





Brendan Graham, Sarah Calderwood & The Australian Girls' Choir

At the 2014 Annual Gathering and launch of CD Orphan Girl, available for order from the front page of website [www.irishfaminememorial.org](http://www.irishfaminememorial.org)

The songs are magnificent and Brendan Graham's explanation of how and why he wrote these songs is essential listening.

