

14 December 2011

Great day if you're Irish!

By Sharyn McCowen



'Important to Remember': Jim Edwards with Caitriona Ingoldsby after the presentation at the Famine Memorial at Hyde Park Barracks (Photo: Sharyn McCowen)

Sydney man Jim Edwards has become the first Australian to receive a Certificate of Irish Heritage at a ceremony at the Irish Famine Memorial at Hyde Park Barracks. The Consul General of Ireland in Sydney, Caitriona Ingoldsby, presented the framed certificate to Mr Edwards, 86, whose great-great grandmother was Irish, at a ceremony on December 9.

Hannah Rafferty, of Co Roscommon, was one of more than 4000 Irish orphan girls who were sent to Australia between 1848 and 1850 following the Great Famine.

The Irish Government is now issuing the certificates to applicants who can prove their Irish ancestry. 'The certificate represents an important acknowledgment and appreciation by the Irish State of the strong and enduring connection to Ireland felt by many people abroad,' Ms Ingoldsby said. 'Jim first came to my attention at the annual commemoration ceremony at the Irish Famine Memorial in August last year, at which he had a beautiful framed photograph of his Irish great-grandmother Hannah. It struck me that behind this apparently ordinary Australian man was an extraordinary story of Ireland and of Australia, and of a young Irish girl who, like many emigrants before and since, had the courage to embrace the opportunity this wonderful country gave her.'

Mr Edwards has long been involved in preserving Hyde Park Barracks, where the Irish orphan girls, including his great-great-grandmother, were first housed in Sydney. 'It's very important [to remember our Irish heritage], and I've always been interested in tracing the family tree,' he said. It was 'quite a shock', he added, to be named as the first Australian recipient of the certificate. 'I wasn't expecting it!'