

**Third Famine Memorial Anniversary
9 September 2002
Memorial Address (extract)**

**Dr Shirley Fitzgerald
Sydney City Historian**



Preamble and introduction by Chairman, Tom Power

On behalf of the Great Irish Famine Commemoration Committee it is with great pleasure that I welcome you once again to this our third Annual Celebration. In particular we give a special welcome to our recently arrived Ambassador, His Excellency, Declan Kelly (pictured below) and his wife Bernadette Kelly, Consul-General Anne Webster and her husband Gerry Clarke, also recently arrived as well as Mr Michael Keavney, the Vice-Consul. We wish them well and hope their stay in Australia will be a happy and productive relationship with all sections of the Irish and the Irish-Australian community.



A special welcome to the descendants of the orphan girls, the young and the elderly. Some have come a long way like the Scaife family from New Zealand. They were also among the eight hundred descendants who were here for the opening of this memorial three years ago.

Welcome to Peter Watts, Director of the Historic Houses Trust (HHT) of NSW and Jack Munday the former Chairman of the HHT. Without their help and support this dream would never have been realised at least on this historic location. This **is** the most Irish precinct in Australia and to quote our former Ambassador, Richard O'Brien, it is the location where the Irish Australian relationship was born. I would like also to welcome Dr Trevor McClaughlin, the foremost authority on the famine orphans. Also all historians, especially family historians, and genealogists present who have assisted us so much.

Your Excellency, the inspiration for this memorial came from a speech by the former president of Ireland Mary Robinson, at Grosse Isle in the St Lawrence River, in 1994. In her speech she asked that the lives of the thousands of victims of famine who lie buried there not to be confined in a prison of statistics but rather they should be a reminder that in today's world similar tragedies occur that cry out to us for our support and compassion. And so it was in 1995 a group of us got together and after much deliberation, endless discussions, agreements and disagreements interspersed with some great, happy fundraising events such as the one at Parliament house last Friday, the monument came into being. You may notice

that we refer to this sculpture both as a memorial and a monument. It is a **memorial** to the victims of famine everywhere. Where you have famine you have disruption and dislocation which is symbolised by the broken wall. In particular it is a memorial to the Irish Famine victims. On the glass panels we have the names of hundreds of Irish orphan girls that fade away as you read from left to right indicating the frail and inconstant nature of memory.

The bowl on the table has no bottom and consequently is always empty while in stark contrast inside there is a place set for someone about to sit down to a meal.

It is a **monument** to the achievements especially of these women who overcame so much adversity to come here and survive and in the main rear successful families. They had very little to give in the material sense but yet they gave everything. They gave love and comfort where no love or comfort was to be found. They gave support and consolation where there was none. Yet newspapers of the day decried their coming, describing them as filthy brutes, useless creatures; however a male dominated colony welcomed them with open arms as their future wives and mothers of their children.

The **purpose** of today's gathering is to remember these women as we intend to do every year around this time. Monuments live by use they die by neglect. Today also we will unveil a plaque. The plaque and its text were exhibited in a different format on the day of the unveiling 3 years ago. This week it has been fastened to the ground forever. It will serve to tell visitors why the monument is here and indicate some milestones in its construction such as the inauguration by President Mary McAleese and the unveiling by Sir William Deane, our former Governor-General.

The plaque also acknowledges the Governments, public bodies and institutions, together with the thousands of individuals who contributed towards its construction. That includes all of you and may I thank you once again for standing by the committee when at times it seemed the memorial would always remain a dream.

It also acknowledges the designers, Hossein and Angela Valamanesh. Their design was received with mixed feelings, initially, however it has received nothing but positive comment since its completion. We thank them for their inspiration and I thank you for listening.

I will now ask Dr Shirley Fitzgerald to address us on what she has discovered about the orphan girls in the City of Sydney in the 1850s.

ADDRESS by DR SHIRLEY FITZGERLAD SYDNEY CITY HISTORICAN

This memorial, this beautifully simple and evocative memorial, commemorates the Great Famine. But the story it tells is not just a story of the past. It is an ongoing story of the world. The right of the rich to sell into the highest market, the system that allowed the selling of grain out of Ireland is still the system that today allows men and women and children to starve and die in many parts of our world. Like the 13 million at risk of starvation in southern Africa today.

But this monument is not only about famine. Because of its location and because of its design, this memorial also commemorates the lives of the Irish orphan girls the 4000 girls between the ages of 14 and 18 who came to Australia under Earl Grey's pauper immigration scheme from October 1848 and August 1850. About 600 went to Adelaide, 1200 to Melbourne and 2300 to Sydney.

On the morning of the 21 October 1848 the first shipment of girls walked through these gates into these barracks. What would they have been thinking? How would they have felt? The locals were not backward in slandering them as 'human dross' or 'Papist rubbish'—even the Protestant ones. In this tough little Sydney town, built on the labour of convicts and

criminals, many of the newly respectable were very ready to judge these girls as immoral or criminal or ignorant, on little or no evidence. They were young, they must have felt scared, many spoke little or no English, they were a world away from home and they could not have felt welcomed.

And how different are we today? We locals do not seem to behave any better towards the current crop of unwanted arrivals. There is our preparedness to let desperate people drown. To believe fabricated stories of parents behaving with brutality towards their own children. The stories we tell each other of the strangeness and ‘otherness’ of people from a war-torn and hungry Middle East have strong resonances with the ill informed prejudices levelled against the Irish in the mid-nineteenth century. The self satisfied smugness of we Australians who are of English or Irish or of any other kind of descent who have lived lives of relative ease in this wonderful country arguing that we have some kind of God given right to be here and that for others the wretched of the earth their just lot is to starve.

If we can stand here today to commemorate the Irish Famine and also condone the current situation, we have learnt very little from the past. These high walls were built for a convict institution, and they must have looked foreboding to a little fourteen year old girl newly arrived in this town in the 1848. But not as foreboding, perhaps, as the workhouse walls of home. And not, I think as foreboding as the razor wire fence of a Villawood or Womerah Detention Centre. Those girls, we know their origins: Belfast and Ballina, Cashel and Clonmel, Limerick & Skibbereen. And we know their names, from Aikens, Boyle and Brady, Cahill and Casey, Devlin and Dooley, through to Ryan and Rooney, Shanahan and Shea, Troy and Whittaker. But we know too little about their lives here. They left no diaries or memoirs, fragments of bureaucratic records hint at the hardships endured. ‘Bridget Armshaw, 16, Tipperary, Roman Catholic, parents unknown’ died in the Sydney Infirmary just down the road; a sadly unfulfilling end piece to a long journey from darkness to death.

For others the possibilities were more positive. For all the prejudice, the colonists needed labour and they needed women, so work was found for the girls as domestic servants and as wives. There was probably not much difference between servitude and marriage in many cases but marriage offered at least a chance to ‘get on’ and so many of them married young. In a colony with too few women they contributed much as the mothers of this nation. Some died of ‘exhaustion’ and too much child bearing. Some lived well and long, like ‘Catherine Naughton, 18, Galway, father living in Sydney’. Sister, Mary, migrated too in 1849 and sister, Bridget, in 1854. Catherine married in 1852, had eight children and died in 1901, in very comfortable circumstances.

A few became wealthy. And in the end, if there was not wealth, we want to believe that for some at least there was hope. Did girls who dreamed of nothing in Ireland learn to dream here in this building? We hope that they did. This memorial is finely simple. A breach in the wall. Crossing the world. Crossing the divide from famine to life. An empty bowl on the outside and bread and the utensils of daily life on the inside. It is a memorial to the reality and to dreams. Today more than ever we need to contemplate its meaning.