

Tenth Famine Memorial anniversary
30 August 2009

Memorial Address

Rev James Haire

Preamble

Chairman, Tom Power: Ladies and gentlemen this is our 10th year of gathering at this spot to remember and honour the victims of famine. You may ask why build a monument to famine and why at the Hyde Park Barracks? The 'why build' may be answered in your programme booklet but the why at the HPB is another interesting story.

Our former Ambassador Richard O'Brien always referred to the Hyde Park Barrack as the birthplace of the Irish-Australian relationship. Long before the famine orphans took up residence here the Hyde Park Barrack was a convict institution that housed many Irish rebels. In selecting the Hyde Park Barrack as a possible location our first inclination was to erect a figurative monument in the remaining vacant corner of Queens' Square. The other three corners were and are occupied by Victoria, Albert and Greenway. Word soon spread that the Irish were about to take over the vacant corner of Queens' Square and this raised some bitter comment from certain sections of the public. 'An famine orphan girl on an equal footing with her Queen and consort' - NEVER.

Rather than enter a war of words the late Professor Joan Kerr and Mr Jack Munday suggested a compromise. Why not build an appropriate sculpture on the southern wall? Was this inspiration from on high? Was it or sheer good luck or just a coincidence? Someone has said that a coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous. Ladies and gentlemen, the site suggested by Joan and Jack and later ratified by the Historic Houses Trust was at one stage the kitchen of the original Hyde Park Barrack. The location of the Famine monument stands today directly on the foundations of the original kitchen. A famine monument located over the kitchen of plenty. There is food for thought here. For me it was not only a coincidence but an inspirational selection.

Little did these lowly orphans, the lowest rung on the social ladder, your brave and resilient ancestors, think for a moment that they would have their names inscribed on such a wonderful sculpture in the heart of a wonderful city and be honoured, as they are today, in such a significant way? Of course there are thousands of famine orphans whose names do not appear here and who lie in unmarked graves all over this land.

In Galong last October I, and many of you here today, had the privilege of attending the dedication of a commemorative plaque in memory of Anne Ryan and the hundreds of other Famine orphans who lie in unmarked graves throughout the Australian bush.

This sculpture then is our gift to you all especially to the descendants of these women. May it stand for all time as a memorial to the famine dead and a monument to those who survived, your ancestors, but above all may it be an inspiration for love, concern and compassion for those people from other countries who are less fortunate than ourselves and who through no fault of their own have found themselves in the same circumstances as our orphan descendants of 160 years ago.

This memorial will only be kept alive for generations to come when our children and our children's children will ask how **they** can support a better and more just world such as contributing to the outreach programmes we have initiated. We appeal to you and to the better angels of your nature to see that this objective is carried out.

The Reverend Professor James Haire AM KSJ MA PhD DD DLitt DUniv was born and brought up in Northern Ireland, and was a Minister of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. He served in Indonesia, and then moved to Australia in 1985. He is Professor of Theology, Charles Sturt University (CSU), Canberra; Executive Director, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture (ACC&C), CSU; Director, Public and Contextual Theology (PACT) Strategic Research Centre, CSU; Past President, National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA); Past President, Uniting Church in Australia (UCA); and a Member of the Executive of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).

Reverend Professor James Haire AM
‘Learning from Tragedy: the Great Irish Famine and Our Humanity’

First, I want to examine the Irish potato famine (*An Gorta Mór*) and its consequences, especially for Australia. **Then secondly**, I wish to see how our humanity relates to that. I shall make four points about the first topic and four points about the second topic.

So first, the consequences of the Irish potato famine. If we look at what occurred in the famine we need to bear in mind the following facts. One million Irish people died as a result of the famine, particularly in the worst year 1847, commonly known as ‘Black ’47’. A further one million people emigrated from Ireland in the years that immediately followed. Before the beginning of the famine, the Irish population stood at slightly over 8 million. In fact, it had grown between 10 and 15 per cent during the first four decades of the nineteenth century.

After the famine, it fell drastically and until today has never recovered. Currently the population of the island stands at 6.3 million. When I was a child, it was only 4.4 million (2.9 million in the Republic of Ireland and 1.5 million in Northern Ireland). In the ten years from 1841 to 1851, the population fell by 20 per cent. The worst was in Connaught, where the population fell 28.8 per cent. Even in the two provinces where things were easiest, Leinster and Ulster, it still fell 15.3 per cent and 15.7 per cent respectively. The famine was indiscriminate—Catholic and Protestant both died. It began with the most vulnerable and poorest part of the population but gradually moved up into the middle classes and from the rural area into the towns. Of course, death came not only by starvation, but also as a consequence of disease, particularly typhus and cholera.

The consequences, especially for Australia, were four-fold.

First, there was an abiding determination among Irish people that democracy should at all times work. The problem had been that under the Act of Union of 1801, Ireland was part of the United Kingdom but had no real democratic representation. Between 1832 and 1859, Ireland sent 105 members of the House of Commons and 28 to the House of Lords. But of these people, 70 per cent were either land owners or the sons of landowners and did not truly represent the interests of the Irish population. Once in Australia, the Irish were determined that there should always be a vigorous and vibrant democracy. Today we question the efficiency of three levels of government. For the Irish efficiency was not to be the criterion. Democracy was to be the criterion even if that meant excessive layers of government and constant debate. The price of democracy was constant debate.

Second, there remained among the Irish in Australia constant scepticism of government and of the public service. During the years of the famine, both governments and public service failed the Irish people. In 1997, at the commemoration of the famine at Millstreet, County Cork, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said: ‘Those who governed in London at the time failed their people through standing by while a crop failure turned into a massive human tragedy. We must not forget such a dreadful event. It is also right that we should pay tribute to the ways in which the Irish people have triumphed in the face of this catastrophe.’

The Tory governments under Sir Robert Peel, and the Whig administration under Lord John Russell, exhibited both malice and incompetence. Some analysts have gone as far as to speak of genocide. I do not think that that term is appropriate. However, I think that malicious incompetence is perhaps more accurate. Grain in an inappropriate form was imported to Ireland, however, throughout the years of the famine, Ireland still exported food, and the Whig's insistence on *laissez faire* made things worse for the poorest. This scepticism of governments was to be a hallmark of the Irish contribution to the political system in Australia.

Third, there was an insistence on the centrality of human dignity in political and social life. At the foundation of the Hyde Park Barracks Memorial to the famine in Sydney in 1998, President Mary McAlesse said: 'Beyond the shores of Ireland itself the famine resulted in the formation of another Ireland—the Ireland of America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand—and indeed Irish communities elsewhere. These communities of the Irish world were determined themselves never again to accept the human degradation of the famine.' The centrality of human dignity has had an abiding effect in Irish life in Australia.

Fourth, there has been strong impetus for communal support as an Irish contribution to Australia. The Irish contribution places human dignity as the basis of egalitarianism, and communal self-help as of great importance to social life. The reaction of the British government to the Irish plight made a mockery of the Act of Union of 1801. The Irish were treated as second-class colonial people and not as equal citizens of the Union. The realisation in Ireland of the hypocrisy of the Union led to the beginning of its end. Moreover, within 30 years of the famine, the Irish who flooded into Britain to seek there a viable life were portrayed in *Punch* and other satirical magazines, and on the stage, as apes—lazy, stupid, drunken and incompetent. How the victims could be attacked in this way in English society beggars belief.

Secondly, let us now look at our humanity. Here we see a number of things.

First, we need compassion. The Greek word for compassion (*splanchnizomai*) means to have fellow feeling with, to let your stomach go out to, in a very physical way, similar to the African term *Ubuntu*. This is something which came very powerfully into the Irish consciousness in Australia.

Second, we see the need for all to be fed, not some to be fed more and some to be fed less. Ireland in recent years has sought to play its part in international aid. Even in the poor days, before the growth of Ireland as a Celtic Tiger, it came in as the fifth or sixth most generous country in the work in terms of International aid. It has kept up that percentage of international aid in the years it has prospered. Australia, under the influence of much Irish sentiment, now seeks to raise its figure to the same as that of the Irish. National boundaries cannot be absolute in terms of human need. Australia gave the Irish immense hope and they were never to give it up.

Third, governments may be more or less competent, but they have a duty to give hope. The Irish were betrayed by lack of hope in the 1840s and both nations and citizens need to give those who are distressed hope.

Fourth and finally, the victims cannot be blamed for their own troubles. That is a double form of abuse. To blame the victim is also the easiest way out of a problem.

Let us give thanks for those orphan girls who came here to this good land and who began the Irish contribution to Australian life in this way. Among their descendants are you who are here today.