

AUSTRALIAN IRISH FAMINE MONUMENT

7 June 2005

Mr Rod Manning

To the Dead of 'Ninety-Eight'

*God rest you, rest you, rest you Ireland's dead,
Peace be upon you shed,
Peace from the Mercy of the Crucified,
You who for Ireland died.*

*Soft fall on you the dews and gentle airs
Of interceding prayers
From lowly cabins of our ancient land
Yours yet, O Sacred Band.*

Lionel Johnson

In the period between 1845 and 1848, 4 112 Irish orphan girls and young women between the ages of fourteen and twenty – with the overwhelming majority between sixteen and eighteen – sailed into three Australian ports: Sydney, Port Phillip (Melbourne) and Adelaide. They spread to other settled parts of the country, including Moreton Bay.

They were refugees from the Great Irish Potato Famine, now known to be one of the worst famines in history.

The first Asian winner of the Nobel Prize in economics and an acclaimed expert in welfare economics, Indian Amartya Sen, says that in no other famine was the proportion of population killed as large as that of Ireland – which lost about a quarter of its people. One million died from starvation and disease, another estimated one and a quarter million fled the country, most to North America, in what were called ‘coffin ships’ because of the high passenger death toll, mainly from typhus.

Thousands more died of famine-related illnesses after arrival. The orphan girl refugees – not the poorest of the poor, mostly Gaelic-speaking, but probably not very literate in either Gaelic or English – were given a trunk, a sewing basket, a bible, a couple of books in English and a few odds and ends for the voyage which usually took 120 days or longer. They came from every county in Ireland. Most were Catholics.

They were assisted migrants under The Earl Grey Scheme, named for the British Colonial Secretary of the time, an autocratic Whig politician who supported Catholic emancipation (the granting of some civil rights for Catholics in England and Ireland) but who opposed home rule for Ireland. Earl Grey preferred to see Irish migrants going to Australia rather than to North America where he felt they were more likely to align themselves with active groups seeking alleviation of oppressive conditions in British-controlled Ireland – perhaps even seeking Irish independence. Their ten pounds fare was met from the sale of Australian Crown lands.

The Scheme aimed to ease the burden on the disease-ridden, overcrowded workhouses where conditions were deliberately harsh to discourage the poor. Another aim was to make available a supply of women for wives and ease ‘fractiousness’ in the colony where men considerably outnumbered women. In fact, most of the girls married in three years – seventy per cent across national and religious boundaries.

The Earl Grey Scheme, one of the most significant in Australia's early history, was ended mainly through the protests of noted Presbyterian clergyman, John Dunmore Lang, who favoured Irish Home Rule and a republican Australia – but was bitterly anti-Catholic. He saw the Scheme as a Jesuit plot to Romanise Australia. The Scheme ended just as the decision was made in Rome (in 1851) to tie the Australian Catholic Church to the Irish Catholic Church.

The proportionately large emigration of women from Ireland at the time made that country unique in Europe. The Irish orphan girls (a fairly embracive description because some were not orphans) – women pioneers of Australia – are often overlooked in Australia's history, as is the famine itself. They are the focus of our country's major memorial to the famine. Other than the innumerable religious memorials – churches, schools, hospitals, other works of mercy etc. – public memorials to the Irish in Australia are few. An exception is the huge memorial in Sydney's Waverley Cemetery to those who took part in the 1798 Irish uprising against British rule and subsequent Irish struggles.

The orphan girls' monument/memorial ('monument' is the preferred word of its originators, but I may use both) is much smaller, and requires more effort of understanding by the observer to penetrate its significance. It is in the heart of Sydney, at Hyde Park Barracks (now a popular museum), on the corner of Sydney's famed Macquarie and College streets. The barracks, which first housed the orphan girls on their arrival in Sydney, is about two minutes walk from St Mary's Catholic Cathedral, Australia's biggest mainstream church, and hard to miss.

Though the memorial basically concentrates on the orphan girls, they are symbolic – representative of all refugees. These extra dimensions are usually elaborated on by the speakers who annually mark the memorial’s establishment. It is also usual for the speech to reflect what was in the minds of those responsible for its inception: the members of The Great Famine Appeal Committee based in Sydney.

For those associated with the memorial, it is certainly seen as a tribute to the Irish contribution to Australia; particularly that of the pioneer women. However, it is also a reminder that, despite the advanced technology and sophistication of our age, the scourge of famine is – to a shocking degree – still with us, and close to us (for instance in West Papua). Appeal Committee Members look back positively, without trying to airbrush history), and are mindful of the apology made by British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for his country’s role in the horrific tragedy that befell Ireland between 1845 and 1848. Man-made as famines often are, the Great Irish Potato Famine lingered physically until 1852; and, understandably, is continuing psychologically today.

Blight, a fungal disease, came to Europe from the United States of America. It hit the potato crop which, cultivated on small plots, was the staple food of millions of Irish. The grain and other crops they produced were not used as food for many, but sold to pay exorbitant rents to landlords; rents that were 80 or 100 per cent higher than what were paid in England. This was due to the land system then prevailing in Ireland.

The Irish starved – in huts, on the roadsides – with bodies awaiting burial piled nine deep in places; with grass, weeds, sawdust, seaweed, or stinking diseased potatoes in their mouths.

[I find the approach of the Famine Committee members to the Irish famine, similar to that of the Berlin Historical Museum’s deputy director who, at the Museum’s Australia National Conference in Sydney in 2004 – referring to new war museums in Germany – said that remembrance of World War II should help lead to world peace.]

The orphan girls had sailed mainly from Dublin, Cork and Belfast, in small boats, to Plymouth in England from where they set out in bigger ships for Australia. The first ship arrived at Sydney on October 6, 1848, the last, also at Sydney, on August 1, 1850.

The three-level brick-built Hyde Park Barracks, the site of their monument, was designed by the convict architect Francis Greenway and constructed between 1817-1819, at the direction of Governor Lachlan Macquarie. The Macquarie Street area is, in the words of former Senator, Susan Ryan, who spoke at the anniversary commemoration in 2004, a seminal part of Sydney. She said the barracks links us with – not only the birth of Sydney – but, indeed, the beginnings of our Australian nation.

Adjoining the barracks in College Street is the impressive Land Titles building and further up Macquarie Street is The Mint building, constructed between 1811 and 1816, and now open to the public; then Parliament House, in continuous occupation since the granting of responsible government in 1856, and various other historic sites. Further along is the State Library – with its Mitchell wing – in the grounds of which stands the statue of Flinders, perpetually observed by the bronze representation of his cat, Trim, behind him on a window sill. Across College Street is Hyde Park with its delightful avenue of Hills figs, its Archibald Fountain, War Memorial, and various statues and monuments. Hyde Park Barracks was built to house male convicts, and was adapted in 1848 as an immigration depot for unaccompanied female migrants.

To the Famine Appeal Committee – with Tom Power (who has degrees from the Gregorian in Rome and who then headed the NSW Corrective Services Programmes) as its driving force – goes immense credit for having obtained a site in such a setting.

The Historic Houses Trust (which is headed by Jack Munday and maintains Hyde Park Barracks) describes its approval for the memorial as ‘an exception’. Munday – a Member of the Order of Australia, with honorary doctorates from the University of New South Wales and Western Sydney – has, among his many awards, received a National Trust Life Achievement Award for his immense

efforts in saving huge, historic and architecturally significant areas of Sydney, such as The Rocks and Woolloomooloo. Tourists and residents now regard such areas as treasures; and Munday is proud of both his Irish heritage and the role he and other Trust members played in the famine monument's erection.

Recently, I looked at the titles of a list of books dealing with the famine. It is more properly described as 'the hunger' as there was plenty of food in the land; but the famished people could not afford, or otherwise obtain it. There were titles such as: *The Great Hunger*, *Mapping the Great Irish Famine*, *The Great Irish Potato Famine, Ireland: The Great Tragedy*, *This Great Calamity: the Irish Famine*. Australia's Thomas Keneally also called his history of Ireland, *The Great Shame*.

Most of the titles are of fairly recent vintage because, despite the magnitude of the famine, it had slipped through the cracks of history. Many, apparently, largely avoided it as a subject for research or as a matter for remembrance. In some circles, even the Irish themselves seemed to go quiet when it was mentioned.

The adjective most frequently used in the books referred to above is 'Great', a word once used to describe the first world war – The Great War. 'Great' is the best word authors and editors can find to describe the famine's enormity. As with the European Holocaust during World War II, or the statistics of wartime, the reality of the famine is too much for the mind to grasp.

How could a Sydney monument/memorial properly reflect a death toll ten times greater than that of all Australians killed in the wars in which we have participated?

How could it reflect the loss to their native land of more than a million others who emigrated from Ireland?

How could it reflect the averted births, and the wrecking of a Catholic society which, when the Reformation overwhelmed England, Scotland and Wales, retained its ancient faith – one history book says stubbornly – but a truer description would be heroically, and at enormous cost?

Father Walter Ebsworth in his admiring biography of Archbishop Mannix writes of those social consequences:

The famine stamped the broad arrow on the back of Ireland.
It left the country exhausted, dispirited, divided.
Ireland lost confidence in itself and became slowly Anglicised.
It was a disaster not only in loss of population but spiritually and culturally as well.¹

When the famine struck, Ireland still carried memories of the black centuries of the penal laws (imposed with the approval of the British Government) which oppressed Catholics, and others who were not members of Ireland's official State Church – the Church of Ireland (a branch of the Church of England) – and often referred to then as a Protestant church.

Cecil Woodham Smith (Cecil was a woman), in her 1962 book *The Great Hunger* (my edition, Old Town Books, a division of Harper and Row, 1989) also wrote of what she called the disastrous moral outcome of the penal laws. [Her best seller, though highly praised at the time, did not find favour with all historians at first but now appears to be back in vogue. I have used it to some extent but have consulted many other sources.] She wrote that the penal laws of Ireland, also known as the Popery laws, aimed to destroy Catholicism in Ireland by a series of ferocious enactments. These laws dated from 1695 and were not repealed in their entirety until Catholic Emancipation in 1829; although by then they had been considerably modified.

For example, the British Government had approved a grant, which became annual, for the establishment of Maynooth Seminary in 1795 and this grant was tripled amidst House of Commons uproar and turmoil in the first famine year, 1845 (the year incidentally, of Newman's conversion to Catholicism). Under the penal laws no Catholic could vote, hold public office, or purchase land. If a Catholic did own land, at his death his land was to be divided among his sons unless the eldest became a Protestant (that is, a member of the Episcopal Church of Ireland referred to above), when he would inherit the whole.

Catholics were forbidden to attend schools, keep schools, or send their children abroad for education; although some clandestinely did just that and sent their children to about thirty colleges on the Continent. The practice of the Catholic faith was banned. Bishops and religious order priests were banished; with death if they were captured returning. Parishes were allowed to retain one priest who could not be replaced when he retired. Tithing – support for the (Protestant) Church of Ireland – was obligatory; although the overwhelming majority were not members of that church. The tithe wars virtually ended in 1838, after Catholic emancipation with the last remnants swept away by the disestablishment of the official Protestant Church (effective in 1871).

The ban on Catholic practice was only rigidly enforced at the time of political unrest. The bans on property ownership and admission to the professions were more strictly observed. If everybody was discreet, officials turned a blind eye to Catholic practices and to hedge schools. The Irish always had a love of learning and, in a bid to circumvent the penal laws' ban on education, a system of hedge schools (not exclusively Catholic) was developed. Catholic teachers, financed by the local people, taught – in the fields or in make-shift buildings – a mixture of spelling, reading, arithmetic and religion and, amazingly, in some instances even Latin and Greek. Officialdom often looked the other way. The laws also forbade inter-church marriages; probably strictly enforced where property was involved.

Edmund Burke's description of the Penal Laws is worth quoting. He said they were:

a machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man.

Although the monasteries had been destroyed during the Reformation, a number of women's orders – such as the Poor Clares and Carmelites – survived the penal laws. Nuns were vital in the later growth of Irish Catholicism.

Woodham-Smith writes that the penal laws brought lawlessness, dissimulation and revenge in their train and that the character of the Irish peasantry did become, in Burke's words, debased and degraded; Irish peasants became, in the eyes of many in authority, outlaws in their own country. The Protestant ascendancy was unimpaired by the repeal of the penal laws. There are some contradictions, referred to later, with regard to character debasement.

In the 16th century, Catholics had owned most of the land. By 1788, the year of British settlement in Australia, Ireland was still overwhelmingly Catholic – yet Catholics owned less than five per cent of the land.

The immediate pre-famine years – those prior to 1845, in the autumn of which (September) the potato started to fail – reveal a battered (though never thoroughly beaten, as later history shows), rapidly-growing Irish population. Many lived in appalling poverty, having no control over their own land and existing at the whim of landlords, some of whom did not even live in Ireland (the absentee landlords).

Even before the famine, poverty was extreme and emigration was running at a high level. Woodham-Smith wrote that in the eighteenth-forties, after centuries of English domination, Irish poverty and Irish misery appalled the traveller. The Frenchman de Beaumont found in Ireland the extreme of human misery, worse than that of the Negro in his chains, he wrote. The German, Kohl, wrote that no mode of life in Europe could seem pitiable after one had seen Ireland.

In 1837, one town in Donegal – with a population of about 9 000 – had only 10 beds, 93 chairs and 243 stools. Most had no real tenure on their small plots of land. A friend of mine describes them as having been more gardeners, or market gardeners, than what we understand as farmers.

The evicted and unemployed put roofs over ditches, burrowed into banks, or lived in bog holes – all this in a country where weather can be severe. They lived on the potato. Exceptions to this extreme poverty were to be found in Ulster, particularly in the north-east near Belfast, and in some other parts of the country. The west suffered more than the east, for instance.

The population of Ireland, as shown at the 1841 census, was about 8 715 000 (it has never been as high since), and that figure may be very conservative – hundreds of thousands may not have been counted. Four million were Gaelic-speaking and those in the western counties knew little English.

Here is a contradiction of which I wrote earlier. Despite their terrible social and political helplessness, the Irish seemed, unbelievably, to strike many as joyful people. Sir Walter Scott, on an Irish visit in 1825, wrote that ‘their natural condition is turned towards gaiety and happiness’. The 1841 census commissioners referred to the ‘proverbial gaiety and lightheartedness of the peasant people’. They often danced the night away to the music of a fiddler and one observer at the end of the eighteenth century wrote of the fine physique of the average Irishman and the good looks of the women. A political economist revisiting Ireland just after the famine was struck by the beauty of the population.

Queen Victoria, monarch during the famine and for long after, visiting her Irish subjects in 1849 when the worst of the famine was over, commented on the beauty of the Irish women. She also commented on the absence of her subjects in the countryside. A visit to a mass grave should have been included in her itinerary. Woodham-Smith writes that good manners and hospitality were universal among the poorest Irish. Every door was open to all at mealtime.

A young woman, Elizabeth Ham, was the daughter of a British army officer stationed in Mayo after the 1798 rebellion. She was astonished to find that she could roam the wild mountains without fear of molestation, while – she wrote – in England no girl could roam the fields and woods alone; even though, at the time of her

roaming in Ireland, Irishmen who had taken part in the rebellion were being hanged by the English on a nearby bridge. Then, on her return to England after five years, she was ‘...greatly struck by the vulgarity of everyone...’.

Alexis de Tocqueville (quoted by Dr Tom Boland in his biography of Melbourne’s Archbishop Thomas Carr) while travelling in Ireland in 1835, noticed the custom of nude bathing in less frequented places. Young women even bathed naked ‘only a short distance from young men’. He attributed this to the extraordinary purity of the Irish. Woodham Smith wrote that illegitimacy was not an issue in pre-famine Ireland.

De Tocqueville also wrote that he was informed Catholic and Protestants exploited the people in the same manner – though I doubt if Catholic landlords were numerous. People trembled before the great power of the landlords and a land agent wrote that he believed they were ‘a desperate people’.

Although the potato was a staple diet in many parts of Europe, no other country was as heavily dependent as Ireland. The potato was nourishing – particularly when mixed with buttermilk; it was easy to grow and also valuable for stock food. It was well fertilised naturally and a manure heap was a prized possession in the little plots of land. If the potato failed in great measure (it had failed before), this fairly heavily populated country – with an uneven economy, poor but still joyful – faced doom.

They did not realise that help from their government at Westminster would be hopelessly inadequate. Some said the 1801 Act of Union with Britain was not a marriage but a brutal rape. The Irish were poorly portrayed in the English newspapers; though Professor Manning Clark has written that, if they did not wish to live on charity, they **had** to break the law.

The blight turned the potato into a pulpy mess.

Here is a snapshot of a famine scene in a letter sent to the Duke of Wellington from a well-known Cork magistrate, Mr Nicholas Cummins, and published in *The Times*, London, on December 14,

1846. He wrote (in part) that, following reports of the appalling misery in Skibbereen, west of Cork, he visited the area. He gave this example of the state of the entire coast district.

Being aware that I should have to witness scenes of frightful hunger, I provided myself with as much bread as five men could carry, and on reaching the spot I was surprised to find the wretched hamlet apparently deserted. I entered some of the hovels to ascertain the cause, and the scenes which presented themselves were such as no tongue or pen can convey the slightest idea of.

In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering seemed a ragged horsecloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees. I approached with horror, and found by a low moaning they were alive – they were in fever, four children, a woman and what had once been a man. It is impossible to go through the detail. Suffice it to say, that in a few minutes I was surrounded by at least 200 such phantoms, such frightful spectres as no words can describe, either from famine or from fever. Their demoniac yells are still ringing in my ears, and their horrible images are fixed upon my brain. My heart sickens at the recital, but I must go on.

In another case decency would forbid what follows, but it must be told. My clothes were nearly torn off in my endeavour to escape from the throng of pestilence around, when my neckcloth was seized from behind by a grip which compelled me to turn, I found myself grasped by a woman with an infant just born in her arms and the remains of a filthy sack across her loins – the sole covering of herself and baby.

The same morning the police opened a house on the adjoining lands, which was observed shut for many days, and two frozen corpses were found, lying on the mud floor, half devoured by rats. A mother, herself in a fever, was seen the same day to drag out the corpse of her child, a girl about twelve, perfectly naked, and leave it half covered with stones.

In another house, within 500 yards of the cavalry station at Skibbereen, the dispensary doctor found seven wretches lying unable

to move, under the same cloak. One had been dead many hours, but the others were unable to move, either themselves or the corpse.

These facts were confirmed by Government witnesses.

People were dying everywhere – with corpses often eaten by cats, dogs and rats. The dogs ate the corpses and the people ate the dogs. I read one report of a deranged woman actually trying to eat the flesh from the leg of one of her dead children.

The British Government, led by Conservative Robert Peel (called by Daniel O’Connell the ‘Orange Peel’), at first dithered and then started various hopelessly inadequate relief measures; but it was in an era when the idea of a government looking after its people was a novelty. It was a case of *laissez faire* economics which, in Woodham-Smith’s view, was exploitation of the worker by the employer and was responsible for much of Britain’s 19th century prosperity. However, other writers tell us of the grinding poverty under which a considerable section of the population lived in Victorian Britain.

At the end of Victoria’s reign (she died in January, 1901), poverty was still deep and widespread in Britain. Historians do not see a British plot to destroy the Irish nation. The government response was in keeping with political and economic liberalism of the time and cannot be judged entirely on attitudes prevalent today. Financial help came from many parts of the world including from the general public in Britain, who were very generous. Many people of goodwill then were bewildered and did not know how to cope with horror on such a gigantic scale.

The Whig, Lord John Russell, was Prime Minister during most of the famine. A very short man, almost a midget, he married a widow and became known as the widow’s mite. Despite the widening of the franchise in Britain with the 1832 reform bill, the type of government was still aristocratic (universal franchise was not introduced in Britain until 1928). This was not a democratic society.

Belfast-born unionist, Patrick Armstrong, writing of the famine in the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* on St Patrick’s Day, 2004, wrote ‘It is

inconceivable, that given the same circumstances, the British establishment would have allowed this suffering and death to take place on the British mainland.’ Britain was then the most powerful country in the world, with a great empire.

The Protestant Irish political agitator, William Smith O’Brien, who was transported to Tasmania and later pardoned said, ‘If there were a rebellion in Ireland tomorrow they (the British Government) would cheerfully vote 10 or 20 million (pounds) to put it down, but what they would do to destroy life they would not do to save it’.

Writers have told of large quantities of food, such as grain, having been exported from Ireland while the people starved. Other historians see that as isolated from the overall picture. Much more food came into Ireland during the famine than went out. The sick and starving had no money to buy food. This is a complex and contentious area, as is the famine itself. Some Irish farmers exported food. There were cases of exploitation of the people by the people (including by Catholic landlords) etc. etc. but nobody made any real money out of the famine, according to famine historian Cormac O’Grada.² But this exploitation is thought to have been one of the reasons why famine memories were suppressed.

Catholic priests, Protestant clergymen, and people of no religious affiliation, worked tirelessly and courageously to help the people – the Quakers reportedly did a good job – but there was criticism of some bishops (not all) for having failed to speak out sufficiently.

Charitable bodies and many government officials also worked enormously hard on relief work. It took great courage even to enter a cabin where there was a risk of contracting a fatal disease. There was also some souperism, which seems to have been on a small scale; if you joined the Protestant church – you got the soup. Apparently many of those who ‘took the soup’ reverted to Catholicism later. Donal A. Kerr³ covers these aspects well. The first Editor of Britain’s *The Economist* wrote in response to cries from Ireland for public help: ‘It is no man’s business to provide for another.’ *The Times* of London said that something like harshness was the greatest humanity to Ireland.

A strong strain of anti-Irish racism permeated these and many other such views, and seemed to dominate the actions of the British Under Secretary to the Treasury, Charles Edward Trevelyan – a key figure in the whole horror story – who directed relief. He was a firm believer in market forces and has been condemned by many writers, but historian Roy Foster says he was carrying out Whig policy⁴. A recent book by Robin Haines⁵ draws a more sympathetic picture of Trevelyan and, in the view of some, a more nuanced picture of the famine. Ireland was fairly tranquil prior to the famine and civil order was never seriously threatened; though the crime rate did rise to equal that of England's.

The Great Irish Famine killed more people (about a million) than most modern famines; and the proportion of those killed (about one eighth) to the entire population, is also greater than in many modern much-publicised famines which are mainly in the Third World. One death is one too many in a world full of food.

In 1995 – the 150th anniversary of the start of the famine – the President of Ireland, Mary Robinson (a former civil rights lawyer and later United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights), came to Australia. She had visited Grosse Ile in Quebec, which had been the disembarkation point for huge numbers of Irish emigrants (thousands also died there after the horrific Atlantic voyage). From Quebec, most went to the United States. Mrs Robinson felt that the Irish were labouring psychologically over the famine. Some were in denial. In Sydney she spoke to an Irish gathering at the *Regent Hotel* (now the *Four Seasons*), at The Rocks. She suggested the famine be remembered in some specific form in Australia. An umbrella association, the Irish Communications Council – on which the various Irish county groups were represented – met monthly. In November 1995, with Martin Coleman in the Chair, it resolved to adopt Mary Robinson's suggestion.

The committee was interested in recognising all, but particularly women who had been victims in one way or another of the famine. In 1991, Belfast-born Dr Trevor McClaughlin (a senior lecturer at Macquarie University and a Cambridge PhD) had published a book, *Barefoot and Pregnant?*, after extensive research on Irish women

famine victims who had come to Australia. [A second volume was published in 2001]. Liddy Connors of Southern Queensland University, with Bernadette Turner of Indooroopilly, contributed a chapter called *Feisty Moreton Bay Women*. The book became a major resource for the project.

In February, 1996, the Sydney-based Famine Appeal Committee of about twelve, was formed:

Tom Power, a Catholic, was Chairman and

Ian Caruth, a Belfast-Protestant, Vice-Chairman

Patrons were:

Richard O'Brien –

then Ambassador to Australia for the Republic of Ireland

Bishop David Cremin –

then Senior Auxiliary Bishop of Sydney and now retired

Tom Keneally –

internationally acclaimed author

Dr Aedeen Cremin –

of the University of Sydney

'Johnno' Johnson –

then a Member of the NSW Legislative Council and

well known politician

The Late Al Grassby –

called the 'Father of Multiculturalism in Australia'.

Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam, in Ireland's west, who lived through the famine, had spoken back then of a famine memorial and suggested it consist of piles of human bones, greater than the pyramids.

Sydney's subdued but sombrely significant and poignant monument – in the 10 ft high sandstone wall of Hyde Park Barracks – was opened by the then Governor-General, Sir William Deane, four years

later. It is the result of the Famine Commemoration Committee's tireless efforts.

The passer-by may notice a circular plaque in the College Street footpath, indicating a bronze bench intersecting a glass panel that breaches the sandstone wall of the barracks perimeter. On it, a bottomless bowl represents hunger. At the other end, inside the wall, a normal bowl and spoon suggest food.

On the glass screen are printed faintly, but elegantly, the names of 400 emigrant Irish girls who did not die in the famine but were orphaned by it. Almost all the names were provided by their descendants in Australia. In one alcove nearby are a bronze footplough and representations of diseased potatoes; in another a sewing basket, a bible and another book. Under a tree, a few paces away, are three bronze stools. Seated on these you can listen to recorded Irish voices from the branches. The soundscape was designed by Paul Carter.

Some find the monument moody, even mysterious. You can easily miss it – or you can discover it and decide to find out more. It cost between \$320 000 and \$350 000.

Opposite Hyde Park Barracks is Queen's Square with its statues of Queen Victoria and her consort, Prince Albert. The square's western side is dominated by St James Anglican church – another Greenway gem – regarded as an outstanding example of Georgian architecture. Nearby, one of Sydney's large circular plaques provides information on the convict architect's legacy.

The famine memorial does not compete with its surrounds. It is retiring and requires an effort for full appreciation; as does the horrendous famine itself. The committee had considered various sites. Then, on St Patrick's Day (17 March 1996) the Yass Heritage Society brought to Sydney a number of girls dressed as orphans – a shipload of Irish famine orphans from the ship Thomas Arbuthnot had gone to Yass by dray. That made Tom Power think of the historic connection with Hyde Park Barracks in Macquarie Street. Checking out the barracks, Tom surveyed Queen's Square in front of

the barracks. He noted the statues of Albert and Queen Victoria forming two corner points of a square; the inset memorial to Francis Greenway forming a third. That left a vacant corner point. Power envisioned a statue of an Irish orphan girl facing the Queen Victoria statue with hand outstretched: 'Give us bread'.

The proposal was put to the Historic Houses Trust, headed by Jack Munday. The Trust, naturally, was reluctant even to consider any suggestion of an addition to what they perceived was a finely balanced historical precinct of national, indeed international, importance. Then word about the suggested girl's statue got around. The Trust's telephone started to ring. Some people objected to the proposal; no doubt not wishing the site dominated by the statues of Victoria and Albert, to be shared by a statue of one of their starving Irish subjects. Sydney's then Lord Mayor, Frank Sartor (now State Member for Redfern), supported the proposal; but a week after it was lodged, The Trust said 'no'. Having empowering legislation, the Trust was the hardest nut to crack.

The Trust also raised the question: why choose the Barracks area as the site for an Irish famine memorial? The Famine Committee had the answer: fifty-four per cent of the immigrant women who passed through the barracks were Irish. That won the day – The Trust agreed to a memorial. Famine Committee member, Professor Joan Kerr of Sydney University, then suggested a site on the barracks south wall as suitable for a memorial. That was accepted and the memorial project was well under way. Power said:

We felt we had lost a prime position in front of the barracks but we were very happy with getting such an important position on the south wall...The suggestions were really ambit claims in the first place but we are deeply grateful to Mr Jack Munday and the other the Historic Houses Trust members for their cooperation...We knew we were poised to provide Australia with a significant piece of public art.

The Director of the Trust, Mr Peter Watts, has written:

The Irish Australian community's desire to place a sculpture at the Hyde Park Barracks to commemorate the passage of 150 years since the Great Irish Famine represented a huge challenge. The barracks in

Sydney is imbued with so much of the nation's history that it has almost sacred status in the minds of many Australians. As the custodians of the place we do not add to it lightly. The monument we have erected to the Great Irish Famine is an exception.

The next step was to decide the type of memorial. A competition was decided and a small advertisement was inserted in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, seeking expressions of Interest. The more than 100 entries were scaled down to 42. The winning entry came from Adelaide couple, Iranian-born Hossein and Anglo-Celtic Angela Valamanesh.

Fund raising started immediately. At first the Howard coalition government was not interested. However the Opposition Leader, Mr Kim Beazley, was an enthusiastic supporter of the project and wrote personally to the Prime Minister. The Federal Coalition changed its mind and gave a splendid grant of \$55 000; a donation that emphasised the national importance of the monument – it would be erected on behalf of all Australians.

The Government of the Republic of Ireland also generously gave \$55 000. The New South Wales Premier, Mr Bob Carr, gave \$30 000 on behalf of his government; as did the Land Titles Office whose building faces the monument, and on whose land the monument is partly built. At first, Sydney City Council was reluctant to donate; but Tom Power encountered the Lord Mayor of Sydney (then Frank Sartor) at a function at NSW Parliament House. After a friendly conversation (or perhaps debate), Mr Sartor went away persuaded. He came back with \$10 000.

The committee raised the remainder.

When excavations started for the base of the monument, a number of archaeological features were discovered. These had to be examined, photographed and recorded – at a cost of an extra \$7 500. They are still in their original place. An inaugural ceremony was conducted by the President of the Republic of Ireland, Mary McAleese, who is a graduate of Queen's University, Belfast, a barrister, and a professor of law.

The monument was unveiled on August 28, 1999 by the then Governor-General, Sir William Deane, who has Irish ancestry and was very supportive; saying he was delighted to perform the ceremony. He and two descendants of the orphan girls laid wreaths. The opening ceremony was hugely successful. Between 700 and 800 descendants of the Irish orphan girls – coming from every state in Australia – attended in a bloc. Three family representatives came from New Zealand and one from America – she was a great granddaughter of an orphan girl who had emigrated there from South Australia.

Prior to the unveiling, an ecumenical service was held in St Mary's cathedral. It was packed and 2 500 leaflets giving the order of service were distributed. All were taken. Bishop Cremin presided, Anglican priest Rev Dennis Wann read a lesson and the Rev Richard McCracken represented the Presbyterian Church. The Cathedral's Dean, Rev Tony Doherty, attended; also such guests as former Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam, and Lady MacArthur Onslow. Girls representing the Irish orphans danced at the main altar. At the same time, people were gathering at the memorial and the attendance there was more than 3 000.

The Famine Committee offers prizes to students at Sydney metropolitan Catholic secondary schools, and a History Honours prize at Macquarie University. Consideration is given to a student who has undergone hardship or whose thesis deals with an Irish or Irish-Australian subject, or whose subject deals with poverty, famine, disease, refugees, or political upheaval in the modern world.

A guest speaker delivers an oration at anniversary ceremonies. Last year, in her address, Susan Ryan said the Irish girls must have been of strong and lively character, and great optimists. How else could they have survived the terrible famine, the loss of their parents, the desperate conditions of the workhouses in which they were incarcerated, the long, dangerous sea voyage to Australia, the cultural shock of colonial Sydney, confinement in the barracks and – no doubt – a fair amount of discrimination and bad behaviour by some of the colony's males.

The Committee is also making progress on a heartfelt plan to sponsor a refugee family to Australia.

It is interesting to note that several religious orders founded in Ireland before the famine, have made a distinct beneficial impact on Australia. They include the Presentation Sisters (1775), the Christian Brothers (1802), the Patrician Brothers (1808), the Irish Sisters of Charity (1815), the Loreto Sisters (1820), and the Sisters of Mercy (1831).

The Monument

- ❖ The Hyde Park Barracks bridges the gap between the academics and popular history.
- ❖ Its powerful symbolism deals directly with the descendants of the Irish famine girls but engages a wider audience.
- ❖ It is a monument to all the famine victims, symbolised in the orphan girls.
- ❖ It is moody and subdued – you can miss it altogether or be inspired to find out more.
- ❖ Perhaps something more is needed to catch the eye of passersby.



*Give me but six-foot-three (one inch to spare)
Of Irish earth, and dig it anywhere ;
And for my poor soul say an Irish prayer
Above the spot.*

*Let it be hill where cloud and mountain meet,
Or vale where grows the tufted meadowsweet,
Or 'boreen' trod by peasants' shoeless feet :
It matters not.*

*I loved them all – the vale, the hill,
The moaning sea, the water-lillied rill,
The yellow gorse, the lake-shore lone and still
The wild birds' song.*

*But more than hill or valley, bird or moor,
More than the green fields of the river Suir,
I loved those hapless ones, the Irish poor,
All my life long.*

*Little I did for them in outward deed,
And yet be unto them of praise the meed,
For the stiff fight I waged 'gainst lust and greed :
I learned it there.*

*So give me Irish grave, 'mid Irish air,
With grass above it – anywhere ;
And let some Irish peasant say a prayer
For my soul's care.*

Sir William Butler

*Rod Manning, a retired journalist,
is a Walkley Award winner
(the highest award in journalism)
and a former editor of
'The Daily Mercury', Mackay, Queensland.*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rev Walter Ebsworth, *Archbishop Mannix* (Armadale, Victoria: H.H.Stephenson and M.R. Brown, 1977).
- 2 Cormac O'Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond – the Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 3 Donal A. Kerr, *A Nation of Beggars? – Priests, People and Politics in Famine Ireland 1846-1852* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1994).
- 4 Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600 – 1972* (The Penguin Press: Allen Lane, 1988).
- 5 Robin Haines, *Charles Trevelyan and the Great Irish Famine* (Four Courts Press: Dublin, 2004).