
Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Leo Varadkar, T.D. at the Famine Commemoration in the Warehouse, Ballingarry

“A million a decade!”—of human wrecks,

Corpses lying in fever sheds

Corpses huddled on foundering decks,

And shroudless dead on their rocky beds;

Nerve and muscle, and heart and brain,

Lost to Ireland—lost in vain.

The powerful words of Speranza – Lady Jane Wilde – who tried to capture 170 years ago the horrors and tragedy of *an Gorta Mór*.

More than any other event in our history, the Irish famine shaped our destiny. It resonates in our culture, in our society, in our politics, and in how we approach the problems of the world.

As Desmond Egan reminded us more recently when he said, ‘Listen, there is famine in our music, famine behind our faces, it is only a field away’.

Minister, Distinguished guests,

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour to join with you all on this special occasion at Ballingarry as we commemorate and pay homage to our ancestors who suffered so much during the Great Hunger and commemorate those who rose up here in rebellion in 1848.

Witness accounts of the era are almost too raw, too graphic for us to appreciate what our forebears endured. The ignominy, the cruelty of starvation, as they fell victim to fever and disease.

The Great Famine was a cataclysm on a scale never witnessed on this island before. And yet people endured, survived, emigrated and above all remembered. It has been part of our national consciousness and national subconscious.

Here at Ballingarry we are at the intersection of two important points in Irish history – the Great Famine of the 1840s and the Rebellion of 1848. Both interconnected, and both shaped our future as a country.

1848 Rebellion

Last year we celebrated the centenary of the 1916 Rising and were once again inspired by the words of the Irish declaration of independence, the 1916 Proclamation.

It refers to how six times over the past three hundred years the Irish had attempted to assert their rights to national sovereignty and freedom. The fifth of those six attempts happened right here in Ballingarry.

Inspired by a desire to establish an independent Irish Republic, in the middle of a national catastrophe, they took up arms.

Although mocked years later for being nothing more than a skirmish at Widow McCormack’s cottage, there was a lot going on at Ballingarry.

We also remember the courage of Widow McCormack who refused to leave her home with her six children. The heroism of William Smith O’Brien who put himself in the firing line to try and help her.

There is a direct line between the events here, the formation of the IRB, the agitation of the Land League, the 1916 Rising, and the winning of Irish independence.

The Young Ireland revolt of 1848 while an abject failure in a military sense was a rallying point for generations of nationalists in the decades that followed.

One of the men who fought at Ballingarry that day was John Blake Dillon, one of the leading figures in the Young Ireland movement. He opposed the idea of armed rebellion, believing it had no chance of succeeding, but once it went ahead he decided to stand by his friends. His son, John Dillon, was the last leader of the Irish Parliamentary party, and his grandson was James Dillon. In 1948, for the centenary, James Dillon, then the Minister for Agriculture, came here to commemorate the rebellion. And he suggested that in the wake of the incredible destruction of the second world war this country had a role to play in the world and a destiny to fulfil. That remains true today, and it reflects and honours the spirit of 1848.

Today we are an island at the centre of the world - at the heart of the common European home we helped to build - confident about our place in the world at a time when so many other countries are not.

Táimid bailithe le chéile inniu chun cuimhneamh ar ár muintir a chaillíodh le linn an Ghóirta Mhóir agus dóibh siúd a ghlac páirt i Reibiliún míle ocht déag daichead a hocht mar fhreagra ar an dtubaiste. Tubaiste nadúrtha ba ea ceann acu - agus an ceann eile – tubaiste mhíleata a bhí i gceist. Iad araon... áfach... a mhúnláigh meon ár muintire. Suíomh cuí is ea Baile an Gharraí chun cuimhneamh orthu agus iad a aithint – na mílte a d'fhulaing agus a fuair bás agus an oidhreacht a thug siad dúinn. Mar Taoiseach, tá mé ana bhródúil as a bheith i bhur láthair inniu chun ómós a thabhairt dóibh.

Famine

The Great Hunger left many emotional and social wounds, and waves of emigration that lasted well into the 20th century. It was responsible for major agricultural change, and a profound decline in our native language. Even today when we hear of blight warnings, it reminds us of the worst images of our country's past.

For so many of our Diaspora, the famine was the foundation stone of their family's emigration story. The stories of how their family came to America, Canada, Australia or England is for many the key turning point in their family history.

One of the most positive legacies of the famine is the contribution of our emigrants and their descendants to their adopted homelands.

This in turn has created the strong and lasting ties that bind our relationship with the United States, Canada, Australia and all those other nations that gave a home to our people.

The Government is firmly committed to the global Irish through the implementation of Ireland's Diaspora policy. At the heart of this commitment is our Emigrant Support Programme, through which we support Irish community organisations across the world.

Another is the solidarity and compassion we have shown as people for other peoples and nations undergoing humanitarian crises whether famine, natural disasters or war. Just as our people found assistance and opportunity when they needed it, we too work to support those who now need our assistance to escape from hunger.

Regrettably we are all too aware that food shortages and famine are not consigned to history. In February this year, UN Secretary General Guterres highlighted the 'four famines' where 20 million people across Yemen, Nigeria, South Sudan and Somalia are facing starvation. Every day thousands are forced to leave their homes, and hundreds are boarding vessels to cross the Mediterranean. These people are no different to our ancestors.

So, we are determined to help. We are providing humanitarian support for those starving, those persecuted, and those displaced. In 2016 Ireland provided more than €190m in humanitarian assistance to those most in need throughout the world. Through Ireland's engagement in the EU and the UN, we are working to try to solve the root causes of famine and migration. We are supporting efforts to end conflict in places like South Sudan, Yemen and Nigeria, and are working to alleviate the impact of drought in the Horn of Africa.

Our investment in the provision of nutrition to mothers and their children is but one element in building the foundations of a more famine resistant world.

And, perhaps the best way we can remember those who perished in the Great Famine is to show empathy with their modern day equivalents and to reach out, to share, and to welcome those suffering, whether through natural disaster or oppression.

Conclusion

In her poetry Speranza captured the horrors of the famine, describing the tears that were strange on the faces of babies and 'the hollow eyes that cannot weep'.

Her pen-name suggested 'Hope', and Speranza looked across Europe to the springtime of revolutions and hoped that a similar revolution in Ireland would save the starving people.

Afterwards, she admitted 'that Ballingarry killed us all'. However hope returned as it always does.

Today we are gathered here to remember those who perished in the Great Famine and those who sought to respond to that disaster by creating a new future through the Rebellion of 1848. One was a natural catastrophe, the other a military one – both however shaped us as a people - and Ballingarry is a fitting location to acknowledge and remember all those who suffered and died and honour their legacy.

And so we do.

Thank You.