

**Transcript of Remarks by Mary McAleese, President of Ireland, at the
Dedication of the Irish Hunger Memorial, Battery Park City, New York,
Tuesday, July 16. Though provided before the event, the speech was
delivered virtually as written.**

/Dia dhíobh a cháirde. Is mór an pléisiúir dom bheith anseo libh inniu ar an ócáid speisialta seo./

Governor Pataki, Mayor Bloomberg, Distinguished Guests, I am both honoured to be here with you this morning and delighted to have been invited to join with you for the dedication of this fascinating famine memorial.

Governor Pataki, it was your commitment to this project that made it a reality. Your pride in your Irish heritage, a heritage shared by millions of Americans, your appreciation of the suffering caused by the famine in Ireland and the importance you attach to highlighting the plight of those who are still afflicted by hunger, these are the things which have brought us together today. I would like to pay tribute to you and to the huge team behind this project in particular, the President of the Battery City Park Authority, Jim Gill, Chief Executive Officer, Tim Carey and the designer Brian Tolle.

Brian Tolle had a formidable task -- to recreate in the heart of the most vibrant city on earth, in a place where the evidence of prosperity is all around - a place of pity where a visitor would be taken back to a time on an impoverished island thousands of miles away when as Brendan Kennelly, wrote:

"winds of hunger howled at every door ..."

Some call it The Great Famine, others The Great Hunger and others The Great Starvation, in the Irish language, we call it /An Gorta Mór/. Whatever its name it is a colossal heart-rending fault line in the story of Ireland: My grandfather told us the stories of the bodies his grandmother had seen piled six deep in the ditch.

Can we imagine the desperation of a father and a mother with nothing to feed their children for days and days on end? Can we know what it is to waken each morning, no matter how beautiful the day or how glorious the landscape and to smell only death all around? Can we feel the aching loneliness of so many pitiful deaths and so many pathetic emigrants setting sail on coffin ships, not to find wealth and glory, but to struggle against prejudice and poverty in strange new lands? There is a saying I heard an Irish bishop quote recently - those who drink the water should remember with gratitude those who dug the well. Here in this place we will be helped to imagine, to feel, and to know our ancestors who dug the well from which we now drink.

That shameful starvation, which ravaged nineteenth century Ireland, changed the future of this country, changed the future of Ireland and left a heavy shadow on our psychological landscape. It has taken many generations to lift that shadow and today we are proud that Ireland is a first world country with a third world memory. Wherever in the world our people have gone they carry that memory with them and wherever people suffer famine in our contemporary world you will find the Irish bringing help and hope. We are rightly proud of the generosity of the Irish

people to the suffering people of the third world and we are grateful too that there were places for our people to go, refuges that took them in and gave them a chance. As I look out at New York harbour I am reminded of the sonnet, written 35 years after the Irish famine, which is inscribed on that great symbol of New York, the Statue of Liberty:

/Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, the tempest-lost to me./

We will not forget the tragedy that brought so many Irish emigrants to these shores, nor the embrace of this great country, which they were given a chance to build alongside the poor, the oppressed and the suffering of so many other countries. Here, they and their children were introduced to their own genius, their own dignity. Here, they flourished, holding Ireland so tightly in their hearts that they made her future their business and they never gave up their vision of an Ireland prosperous, free and at peace. Today's Ireland is well on the way to vindicating their faith and their unwavering support over the generations.

But other parts of our world have other stories to tell, stories that are much too like nineteenth century Ireland for any of us to be complacent. Dark, heavy clouds of poverty, hunger and disease hang over the 1.2 billion people who live on less than a dollar a day. They are real people, with real lives, mums filled with anxiety that never goes away, dads spirit-broken by the sheer weight of their own powerlessness, children without smiles, teenagers without hope, grandparents dead before their time. They are no different to you and to me. They have hearts to be broken by the unfairness of it all and heads to wonder whether things will ever change, will they or their children ever know a full stomach, a day at school, a decent job, a nice home, a sense of fulfilment, a life with dignity. In another generation the people with the broken hearts were our people, our ancestors out of whose lives our today was crafted.

In Southern Africa alone today, thirteen million people are at risk of starvation in one of the worst humanitarian disasters in a decade. Our experience confers on us a profound responsibility to do all that we can to help them to a new and better day. The fullest potential and destiny of our planet will remain an elusive mystery until we have consigned famine and war to history. For as long as there is suffering within the human family on the scale that currently exists, there can be no true peace or contentment for any of us.

U.N. Secretary General Koffi Annan put it well when he compared our planet to a small boat driven by a fierce gale through uncharted waters with more and more people crowded on board, desperately seeking to survive. In his words, "None of us can ignore the condition of our fellow passengers on this little boat. If they are sick, all of us risk infection. And if they are angry, all of us can easily get hurt."

It is simply not possible to hermetically seal ourselves from the effects of events that happen thousands of miles away. We are a global human family - most of that family is living in great pools of poverty and hopelessness, fertile breeding grounds for the bitter frustration

that fuels political or religious fundamentalism and conflict. We are spectators at the mass waste of all those talented men and women whose gifts never have the opportunity to shine, and whose anger sometimes ferments into distilled hatred, the most powerful weapon on the planet.

We each need to be a champion of those who dream of social justice, equal opportunity, of an end to slavery, of a real childhood for children, of regular food on the table, fresh water to drink, a school to attend, affordable medicines, a sustainable livelihood, a permanent home, a life with meaningful choices.

There is nothing abstract about human solidarity. It is just plain hard work and a generous heart. It takes effort to seed-bed and sustain a culture that is spontaneously generous, driven by the values of the human heart and not the tight fist, by a thirst for justice and equality, which cannot be quenched while so many people live lives of manifest and unnecessary grimness.

Starvation has, thank God, long ceased to haunt Irish homes. But its deadly drama is played out every day in other homes on other continents far away from the hum of New York, far away from the chic shops, the beautiful apartments, the lavishness of plenty. Here in this place prophetically located in the empty cavernous absent shadow of the Twin Towers, we remember a day in September last year when we saw the miraculous power of the human heart to soften in the face of suffering. Out of an episode designed to remind us of the awesome power of hatred we got a remarkable lesson in the power of love and courage, self-sacrifice and generosity. If anyone ever doubted what the people of this city were made of, they saw the character of this city carved with pride in a million acts of impulsive goodness. Stranger became a friend to stranger.

This monument calls New York to be the conscience that accompanies its legendary big heart. In a world where the cry of the hungry is weak, in this place, that cry will be heard over the din of the city and in the hearing lies hope.

As the old Gaelic saying goes: '+Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine' [We all live in each other's shadow]. Here the shadow of famine keeps us humble, indignant and determined to work for a world of true peace and prosperity for all.

Thank you.

Transcript courtesy of the Irish Consulate General, New York.