

Eire Society of Boston Dinner  
2 April 2016  
Gold Medal Awardee former President Mary McAleese  
Professor McAleese's remarks

President Carty, Dr Shannon, Monsignor Bergin, members and guests of the Eire society.

I left the revolutionary city of Dublin this week to come to the revolutionary city of Boston thanks to your kindness and the formidable links of solidarity which unite us across the Atlantic.

This city understands the cost of freedom more than most. It was here two hundred and forty years ago that British Colonial rule was challenged by a people who believed in liberty, equality and their right to self-determination.

Ireland is still coming to terms with the cost of British Imperial rule and the high price extracted for the sovereign independence enjoyed today by the Republic of Ireland. In Dublin and all over Ireland last weekend families gathered in gratitude and pride to commemorate those who one hundred years ago stood up for the right of the Irish people to their own sovereignty and freedom. When Padraig Pearse read the Proclamation from the front of the General Post Office in Dublin's main thoroughfare, now known as O'Connell Street then called Sackville Street, he set a radical and egalitarian agenda for the future- the creation of a Republic which would guarantee religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and which would pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and cherishing all of the children of the nation. He was not describing the country he then inhabited, whose rulers would summarily execute him and his comrades within weeks. He was describing a country he knew he would not live to see but which he wanted future generations to build and enjoy. Historian Ronan Fanning argues compellingly in Fatal Path that without the Rising and Britain's fateful response to it, Ireland would not have achieved the independence it enjoys today. One of the saddest things written about the Rising and subsequent

War of Independence, was a letter from Eamon de Valera to the British officer who took his surrender. In it Dev says simply that the Irish did not like to fight. Those words tell of a people faced with impossible choices in a world where the default position was always war, where twenty million people (among them tens of thousands of Irishmen) had just died in the carnage caused by the insane vanity of Empires in the so-called Great War. Those tragic words plumb the true charism of the Irish race- once described by Douglas Hyde, as *one of the most original, artistic, literary and charming peoples of Europe*.

The 1916 Proclamation is short, terse even but early on it acknowledges the importance of the support of Ireland's exiled children in America. Over the generations that faithful support has taken many, many forms. In the year 1937 when Ireland's new Constitution was proclaimed, this Eire Society of Boston came into being to be a bastion and advocate of that Irish charism, of Ireland's culture, heritage, arts, history science and language. For a struggling newly independent nation your organisation was a source of much needed confidence and self-belief. You showed that wherever in the world Ireland's children and their children are gathered her culture, her charism, her care and her influence flourish thanks to their efforts. One hundred years ago the streets of Dublin were festooned with British army recruiting posters challenging Irish men to be heroes, to fight for Ireland against the Hun, to find glory in killing the Hun. 200,000 Irish men bravely answered that call and are entitled to respectful remembrance for their sacrifice. There was then an imperial presumption that every Irish man and woman owed allegiance and loyalty to the British Empire. They were in the words of King George V "*our Irish people*". In 1911 George V had visited Ireland on his accession tour as King of the United Kingdom, the British Dominions and Emperor of India. As he left, he expressed the hope of: "*coming amongst our Irish people again and at no distant date*." His first cousin Wilhelm II was at the time King of Prussia and German Kaiser. He would be the last German Kaiser. His other first cousin Nicholas was Emperor of Russia, Grand Duke of Finland and King of Poland. He would be the last Russian Tsar. I mention these names because without much help they conjure up an important part of the geopolitical maelstrom which was the backdrop to Anglo-Irish

relations in the early twentieth century. The day of Empires was coming to a chaotic close. Ireland was then part of the biggest of the Empires, the British Empire then at its zenith and with an unshakeable belief that unlike the Roman, the Ottoman, the AustroHungarian, the Russian, the German, the Portuguese, the French, the Spanish, the Belgian and the German, the sun would never go down on the vast dominions of the British Empire! Her citizens were the King's subjects like it or not and their loyalty was not simply taken for granted but obliged by law.

But there was another tide in Ireland with a long pedigree both of political advocacy and violent rebellion, which asserted the right of the Irish people to self-determination. O'Connell and Parnell had been the powerful custodians of the non-violent tradition and it is no accident that today pride of place in our capital city belongs to O'Connell the man whose ambition was to end the physical force tradition and to carry Ireland's ambitions through constitutional politics alone. But last Sunday it also belonged to those who planned and carried out the Rising. They lived in appallingly violent and chaotic times. They wanted a peaceful, prosperous and above all a democratic Ireland. They took the road of the Rising. Two and three generations later we gathered in our millions last weekend to commemorate their actions, to celebrate our hard-earned freedom, to remember with sadness all the dead and to commit ourselves anew to the vision of a Republic which cherishes all its citizens equally.

Over the years since the partitioning of Ireland in the years after the rising, and the war of independence, as the Republic gathered momentum and became a significant player among the nations of the world, the problems of political and sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland continued to cast dark shadows. The campaign for civil rights for Catholics and the descent into the Troubles showed up the skewed relationships within Northern Ireland, between North and South and between Ireland and Great Britain.

Once again it was Ireland's exiled children in America whose efforts helped nourish and nurture the peace process in Northern Ireland,

garnering the active support of the US government (especially the seminal work of George Mitchell), funding the academic and charitable initiatives, keeping up scholarly and journalistic interest in telling Ireland's story- the right way up.... The Eire Society was involved in all those efforts as a result of which there emerged a shared future based on partnership and parity of esteem where the Northern Ireland would be free in the future to choose to remain in the United Kingdom or to opt for a fully reconciled and united Ireland.

One hundred years on and all has changed, changed utterly yet what has been born is no terrible beauty- quite the opposite. Between 1911 and 2011 no British Monarch had set foot in Dublin. In May of 2011 Queen Elizabeth paid a four day State Visit. She arrived into Casement Aerodrome named after Sir Roger Casement one of the great heroes of the Rising, the whistleblower who had uncovered the barbarity of little Belgium's not so little Empire. For his dedication to human rights he became a British hero and was knighted. For his dedication to the liberty of his own country he became a reviled British traitor. He was tried and hanged for treason by the British in the summer of 1916. The Queen's first official engagement was to visit the Garden of Remembrance, a place of homage dedicated to the memory of all those who fought and died for Irish freedom. The Queen laid a wreath in their honour and in a beautiful unscripted gesture nodded her head in respect. To quote Notre Dame's Briona NicDhiarmada director of the acclaimed documentary on the rising *"Here, on the same spot where the defeated rebels were held before being marched off, some to prison, some to their deaths before British firing squads, Queen Elizabeth bowed her head and laid a wreath in memory of her erstwhile enemies. It was a remarkable moment in the long and turbulent history of these two neighbouring islands."*

Next day she walked out onto the pitch at Croke Park and stood looking up at the Hogan stand- named after the footballer who died in November 1920 on a day of infamy known ever after as Bloody Sunday, when British troops invaded the pitch in the middle of a game and opened fire killing fourteen and wounding over sixty innocent people.

In Dublin Castle at the official Dinner that evening in her honour, her Majesty began her remarks in the Irish language another extraordinary gesture which highlighted the profound mission of reconciliation on which she had embarked in coming to Ireland. That night with visible sadness she remarked that:

*« Of course, the relationship has not always been straightforward; nor has the record over the centuries been entirely benign. It is a sad and regrettable reality that through history our islands have experienced more than their fair share of heartache, turbulence and loss. [...] With the benefit of historical hindsight we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all. »*

Reflecting on those difficult centuries I had remarked at the same event that:

*« Inevitably where there are the colonisers and the colonised the past is a repository of bitter division. The harsh facts cannot be altered [...] but with time and generosity [...] perspectives can soften and open up space for new accommodations. »*

In the run up to her visit there were those who did not want the visit, others who thought it too soon, or too dangerous. Her Majesty's State visit lasted four days, considerably longer than any State Visit during my fourteen years as President. That, in itself, was a statement of intent both ways and an act of faith in one another. Two days later I got a letter that summed it all up - it was from a ninety year old Irish Republican woman who was strongly anti-monarchy and in particular as she put it: "*had no time for the monarch next door and definitely did not want her visiting Ireland.*" She said that having watched the four days on television she was sure it "*had been choreographed by the angels.*"

Whatever about angels one thing was certain after those four days, Ireland and Britain were now good neighbours, friends, partners, and as the Queen put it; "*We are able to bow to the past and not be bound by it.*"

These hundred years have seen massive changes in the relationship between Ireland and Britain and further afield. Things that were deemed strong and invincible a century ago have disappeared into the footnotes of history. Things that seemed weak and set for failure have grown strong and enduring. A conflict that seemed intractable has been quelled by the politics of peace based on justice, equality, parity of esteem and a willingness to compromise.

Ireland and Britain are today egalitarian democracies held accountable nationally and internationally by our commitment to the same human rights. We meet now on the international stage as equals, as good neighbours and as co-custodians of the Good Friday agreement.

Her Majesty the Queen summarised the state of today's relations well: "*We, the Irish and British, are becoming good and dependable neighbours and better friends; finally shedding our inhibitions about seeing the best in each other. [...] indeed, there is today no closer working relationship for my Government than that with Ireland.*"

There is no better epitaph for the past - no better signpost to the future - to finally see the best in each other.....

You have always seen the best in us; you have always known how much Ireland and her people have to offer. Your positivity and optimism helped us believe anew when we faced down with such courage, the recent recession and the years of austerity it provoked. Now the strengths of Ireland are revealing themselves again in an economic recovery which we are determined will help us to fully honour the words of the Proclamation and make them real for all our citizens, especially for those who want to come home from abroad, for those at home and abroad whose lives and hopes were blighted by the economic crash. With your faith and support we hope this generation will vindicate your faith in us by laying the foundation for what the proclamation called the august destiny to which Ireland is called- to be a place where equality is real, where equal opportunities are real, where the children of the nation of all creeds and ethnicities whether old or young feel cherished as equals in a country that cares, among a people whose charism is care.

It is your care that gave us this night. May God Bless this society, this great country of the United States of America and infuse it with that charism of care and community solidarity which is such a miraculous and wonderful part of the Irish character.