

Official State Opening of Famine Warehouse 1848, Ballingarry, Co. Tipperary, 21 July 2004¹

Thomas McGrath

A very large attendance turned out for the official state opening by the Office of Public Works of the Famine Warehouse 1848 on 21 July 2004. In a memorable and historic day for Ballingarry and the Slieveardagh region of County Tipperary, the official opening of the new national heritage site was performed by Mr Tom Parlon, T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Finance with special responsibility for the Office of Public Works. Clare McGrath, OPW Commissioner chaired the event and the speakers were the present writer (author of the exhibition text), Senator Martin Mansergh, The O'Brien of Thomond (Lord Inchiquin) and Minister Parlon. Also on the platform were Morrogh and Suzanne O'Brien and Brian O'Brien, descendants of William Smith O'Brien, and Councillor Mattie McGrath, chairman of South Tipperary County Council. Several other public representatives were in attendance. A plaque to



Left to right: Billy Keogh, Liam Dunne, Paddy O'Loughlin, Jimmy Doheny, Seamus Lawlor pictured at the opening ceremony.

mark the event was unveiled by the Minister on the side of the house. The Commons Comhaltas Ceoltóirí and the Moycarkey Pipe Band provided appropriate music including the national anthem. Light refreshments were served in a large marquee erected for the occasion in the field in front of the house.

The state has decreed that the official name of the house is 'Famine Warehouse 1848'. The house has always been known in Ballingarry and The Commons as 'the Warehouse' but the state has chosen to bookend the name with 'Famine' and '1848'. This wording places the Rising in the contemporary context which led to it: the Great Famine and the 1848 revolutions across Europe were occurring simultaneously. The house was owned in 1848 by Mrs Margaret McCormack, known in some history books with more than a hint of condescension as 'the Widow McCormack'. The British press ridiculed O'Brien's Rising (for which nonetheless there was a state trials and convictions for high treason) as 'the battle of the Widow McCormack's cabbage patch or garden'. O'Brien regarded this dismissive and pejorative description, which was not untypical of some British reportage of Ireland during the Famine, as not just an insult to himself but to the Irish nation and to the million people who died during the Famine. It is not surprising that the independent Irish state should take the same view and should seek to interpret the Rising from an Irish perspective.

In his speech Senator Martin Mansergh stated: 'The opening of this Famine Warehouse is an act of historical justice to the people of The Commons and Ballingarry, to their ancestors, and the Young Ireland movement, and commemorates a very important moment in Irish history.

1848 was the year of revolutions, when the Irish tricolour was brought for the first time from France. It symbolised liberty, equality, democracy, and, on that basis, peace between traditions.



Brian O'Brien, The O'Brien of Thomond (Lord Inchiquin), Martin Maher (Chairperson, 1848 Commemoration Committee), Dr. Thomas McGrath (TCD), Tom Parlon (Minister of State at the Office of Public Works), Clare McGrath (OPW Commissioner), Senator Martin Mansergh, Councillor Mattie McGrath (Chairperson, South Tipperary County Council) and John McMahan (OPW Special Projects).

The 1848 rebellion which came to a head round this house did not alone fail in Ireland. It failed sooner or later throughout Europe. But it left an enduring and inspiring legacy for latter generations. As John O'Leary put it, 'if Young Ireland had failed and failed definitely in her revolutionary policy, she had certainly not failed in her educating and propagandist policy. The soul she had brought into Éire still stirred in many of us'. The condition of Ireland at the end of the 1840s was desperate. It deserved a revolution, but the people were debilitated.'

The O'Brien (Lord Inchiquin) in his speech said: 'As head of the O'Brien Clan, it is my distinct honour to be here today to witness this historic event. As you may, know Dromoland Castle was the birthplace of my great great uncle, William Smith O'Brien. A place that meant so much to him particularly in his younger days, despite the fact that his father Sir Edward O'Brien and his brother Sir Lucius O'Brien, both MPs, and very much Tory supporters, were in many ways opposed to him. There were many difficult political discussion between them at Dromoland and at times he avoided going to Dromoland to avoid confrontation. In 1998 on the 150th anniversary of the Rising we unveiled a plaque at Dromoland Castle to commemorate all of the Young Irelanders. William Smith O'Brien's dearest wish was, and I quote 'To see Irishmen united without regard to the distinctions of creed or party' and Ireland raised to the 'place in the scale of nations to which she is entitled but hitherto withheld'.

The Minister of State at the Office of Public Works, Mr Tom Parlon, stated that: 'Many threads of history bring us together here today to pay homage to the spark that burned in July 1848,



Interior view.

however briefly, in the utter darkness of our nation's deepest despair. The Great Famine in so many ways marks the pivotal point of our history; may we never reach that nadir again. Few nations have lost up to a quarter of their populations in the space of only five years... It is salutary to think that only recently have we finally stemmed the hemorrhage of our national diaspora... We remember those departed millions as well today.

It is in the history of the Young Irelanders that the great themes of nineteenth century Ireland are fused: national and cultural re-awakening, famine and emigration in its wake, attempted revolution, transportation and Irish possibilities in the New Worlds of Australia and America... Without the Famine, O'Brien might not have entered into rebellion. O'Brien was an idealist who wished to unite landlord and tenant and to lead a bloodless revolution against the state... In acknowledging O'Brien's rebellion in the context of the Famine which inspired it, we give it its proper dignity. O'Brien's was a moral gesture, an almost bloodless protest against the unequal treatment of Ireland under the Union.... As one of OPW's newer centres it is notable that this is not only a new interpretive centre but the actual historic building and location of rebellion during the Famine. It is also the first centre in OPW's portfolio of national heritage visitor centres that formally remembers the period of the Great Famine.

On this spot in 1998, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, T.D., said: 'the rebellion that broke out here was a protest against the appalling degradation of the Famine, which was decimating a population of eight million in 1845 through starvation and emigration against a background of much official neglect and indifference, and where the goodwill that existed was simply not enough'.

The Taoiseach requested the Office of Public Works to purchase the site in 1998 and to place



Scene at opening ceremony.

here a permanent state exhibition commemorating the events of the period. The works under architect, Michele O'Dea, comprised the restoration of the two-storey nineteenth-century stone farmhouse for use as an exhibition centre. Works also included the provision of car parking facilities and the creation of constructed wetlands. Some of the outbuildings were adapted to house toilets, a switch room and stone. A new stone wall, piers and timber gate have been built enclosing the area immediately to the front of the main house. This stone wall replicates the wall in contemporary drawings of the Rising and later photographs... This site is a long term investment by the state and one anticipates that in coming years it will be possible to do more here.'

The following is the speech delivered by the present writer: 'A dhaoine uaisle. The rebellion of 1848 occurred here during the greatest social catastrophe in Irish history. It took place during the darkest days in our history, in the middle of the Great Famine of 1845-1850, when a million people died in Ireland and a million fled into exile. Fr Fitzgerald, a priest of Ballingarry, wrote during the Famine, that if he experienced another week of the same kind, there would be heaps of unburied dead in this parish and that this district would be one vast graveyard. Agus le gorta forleathan ar fud na hAifrice, meabhráíonn an teach seo dúinn géarfhulaingt ar muintire féin ceád go leith bliain ó shin, and spiorad agus dóchas ár muintire in ainneoin gach donais.

William Smith O'Brien was an M.P. for County Limerick and leader of the Young Irelanders. He did not have to be here in 1848. O'Brien was one of the O'Briens of Thomond, several of whom are here today. He was a Protestant aristocrat born into a privileged background in Dromoland Castle with a lineage which went back almost a thousand years to Brian Boru. O'Brien considered that the Famine justified his rebellion. O'Brien had been the most trenchant critic of the government's famine policy in the House of Commons. O'Brien was a patriot who



Michael Hall, Paddy Fitzgerald and Paddy O'Connell

felt that some protest had to be made against the state.

The Young Ireland movement was inspired by Thomas Davis who edited *The Nation* newspaper with Charles Gavan Duffy and John Blake Dillon. Young Ireland made a brilliant contribution to Ireland's literary history. The movement stood for Irish identity, Irish self-government and an interdenominational and ecumenical Ireland. The Young Irelanders gave Ireland the tricolour which is now the national flag. Thomas Francis Meagher brought the flag from Paris in 1848 and he explained its symbolism in the words which are inscribed on the monument in The Commons: "The white in the centre stands for a lasting truce between the Orange and the Green and I trust that beneath its folds the hands of the Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic may be clasped in generous and heroic brotherhood".

Across Europe in the revolutions of 1848, reactionary monarchies were forced to give way (at least temporarily) to constitutional governments. O'Brien hoped to unite landlord and tenant in Ireland in protest against British rule and to use moral force to achieve his objective. But once he was met here by the physical force of the state the limits of moral force were reached. He did not want blood. In Mullinahone, Killenaule and Ballingarry and throughout his rebellion, he avoided taking offensive action. Although he had a price of £500 on his head, here he was just after shaking hands with some of the forty seven police in this house through the parlour window (on your left as you look at the house) — he told the police that all he wanted was their arms and that they would be free to go — when the police commander, Trant, ordered his men to open fire on O'Brien's supporters. Thomas Walsh was shot dead at the gate. Patrick McBride at the right hand gable end of the house. Many others were wounded.

The police had taken five children of the McCormack family within the house as hostages. O'Brien was unwilling to take strong measures against the house which would endanger the lives of the children. Once the well-armed police had possession of the house they were in a very strong fortification, akin to being in a police barracks. The rebels were hardly in a position to take it. One head constable (named McDonogh) had charge of the top left window and he could, on looking out, see women gathering stones in their aprons to bring to the men who were under the wall here. Fr Fitzgerald who arrived to make peace had a very lively exchange of views with the police commander, Trant, who spoke to him from the middle window upstairs. After three hours, the arrival of police from Cashel and an exchange of fire on the public roadway scattered the rebels whose ammunition was low. Among the locals arrested after the Rising were people from Ballingarry and The Commons, Lismalin, Kyle, Boulea, Kilbraugh, Kilcooley, Gortnahue, Killenaule, Drangan and Callan.

O'Brien, Meagher, MacManus and O'Donohue were charged with high treason in state trials at Clonmel. They were sentenced to death. They refused to appeal their convictions. The sentences were commuted to penal exile in Van Diemen's Land, now Tasmania, then at the end of the earth and a journey by ship of several months. There they were joined by other transported 1848 men: John Mitchel, John Martin and Kevin Izod O'Doherty. O'Brien was deprived of his parliamentary seat, being a convicted traitor.

The exhibition covers the serious attempts by John O'Mahony to re-start the Rising in September 1848 at Glenbower and Ahenny and at Portlaw in Co Waterford as well as James Fintan Lalor and the 1849 movement which centred on South Tipperary and Waterford. These actions led to further penal transportations.

Several of those exiled to Van Diemen's Land escaped to the United States where they became leaders of the Famine Irish in exile. Thomas Francis Meagher became the most notable of them. John Kavanagh — who commanded the pikemen under this wall — was killed as a captain

fighting under Meagher's Irish Brigade at the battle of Antietam. Meagher himself died as acting governor of Montana. Denied the opportunity to advance at home, a number of these men achieved eminence abroad. Charles Gavan Duffy who was under arrest in July 1848 later became prime minister of the state of Victoria in Australia. Thomas D'Arcy McGee became one of the founders of the modern Canada and a Canadian cabinet minister though he was later shot dead by a Fenian for turning his back on his former colleagues. Richard O'Gorman became a judge of the New York superior court. After the Rising, John Blake Dillon escaped dressed as a priest through the Aran Islands to the United States and practised law in New York. He subsequently returned to Ireland, became an M.P. for County Tipperary, and founded the Dillon dynasty. His son John Dillon was sometime M.P. for County Tipperary and last leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party. His grandson James Dillon as Minister for Agriculture was here for the centenary celebrations in 1948.

The Kilkenny-man, James Stephens, escaped after the Rising. He and Terence Bellew MacManus had pulled O'Brien out of the line of fire here. In 1858, Stephens founded the I.R.B or Fenian movement with his colleagues from 1848, John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny. Charles Kickham of Mullinahone and John O'Leary of Tipperary town, both of whom were active Young Irelanders in 1848, became prominent Fenians. Kickham is celebrated annually at the Kickham Country Weekend in Mullinahone. The IRB organised the rebellions of 1867 and that of 1916 which led to Irish independence.

The McCormack family, Mrs Margaret McCormack nee Duggan and her seven children, like millions of Irish families, emigrated (about 1853) to the United States of America. We know of one son, John McCormack, who died in Trenton, New Jersey in 1903. His recollections of the Rising are in the exhibition. Undoubtedly there are family members alive in the United States. The house was subsequently owned for decades by the Walsh family and later the Morris family. It was un-lived-in for twenty years when the last owner sold it and five and a half acres to the state. This house has always been known in this area as the Warehouse. I am glad that with the official name, Famine Warehouse 1848, the state has chosen to place the rebellion in its appropriate context, that of the Great Famine, and has not accepted the terminology with which the British papers of the time sought to denigrate O'Brien's moral protest and that of his local supporters. I think that O'Brien and the local people of that time would be happy that the rebellion is at last being understood in its proper context.

The original impetus for today's event dates back to 1987 and concern at the dilapidated state of the house. It has been a long struggle, every step of the way. The local committee under the chairmanship of Martin Maher dates from 1988 and it included a good representative spread of people from Ballingarry and The Commons and further afield such as Dick Vaughan, Joe O'Shea of The Commons, John Walsh of Ballintaggart, Tom Croke of Grawn, Dr Willie Nolan, Susan Meagher, Maisie Dunne, Paddy O'Connell, Mrs Annie Heaphy, James O'Shea, John Dalton, Margaret Webster, Tommy Kavanagh, the late Michael Fitzgerald, and Eileen Heaphy as a very efficient secretary. I have named several but obviously I cannot name everybody. The erection of the Young Ireland 1848 and National Flag monument in The Commons and its unveiling by the late Cardinal and historian Tomás Ó Fiaich was one of the achievements of that time. Here I would like to salute the dedication of Mr Tony Ivors who has kept the national flag flying daily since that time in The Commons according to the protocol and thus performed an important one-man tourist service in this region. In 1998, on the 150th anniversary, Slieveardagh Rural Development, under the chairmanship of Seamus Troy and with Peg McGarry as Secretary and Declan Rice as coordinator, hosted a major nine-day festival commemorating 1848 under the

local direction of Martin Maher as Chairman and Caroline Kealy as Secretary. The Taoiseach's visit here and his decision to purchase the house for the state occurred during the 1998 celebrations. I would like to thank especially Pat O'Meara of The Commons, Minister Michael Smith and Dr Martin Mansergh then of the Taoiseach's office, now a senator, for their important work at that time. I would particularly like to pay tribute to Senator Mansergh who secured the funding from the Department of Finance for the restoration. P.J. Ryan and his team did the building work. The architect Michele O'Dea (who trained with Daniel Libeskind in Berlin) has worked assiduously on the project and brought it to fruition. I would like to thank the parish priest of Ballingarry, Fr Thomas Breen for his support for this event and for ensuring a large attendance. I would like to thank you all for coming today. If you can't do so today, do come back and view and read the exhibition at your leisure and bring your friends and visitors.

The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, T.D., said here in 1998 that this house "is an important historical monument, and part of our national heritage" and that the house "will be an important cultural amenity, attracting visitors to this part of Co. Tipperary, and also having a significant educational role". I think the Famine Warehouse 1848 will be of considerable interest to school tour groups.

For years we lamented the state of this house. Now we can celebrate developments so far. One might say that much has been done but there is more to do. As you can see for yourselves today, the immediate public roads have to be improved so that this site can be easily accessed by buses especially. We call on the County Council to upgrade the public roads as a matter of urgency. The out-buildings around the courtyard at the back of the house which were seized by Stephens and MacManus in 1848 survive unchanged since that time and are part of the historic fabric of this site. They are, as yet, undeveloped and they offer scope for extending the exhibition significantly and for including a guides' room, an audio-visual room and a tea-room. In John Webster we have an active manager here but we need OPW to give us normal opening hours during the summer season as one sees as standard at other state national heritage locations. This new national heritage site is situated mid-way on the direct route between two of OPW's most visited heritage attractions, namely the Rock of Cashel and Kilkenny castle. We need strong linkages to be made between both of those sites and here.

I thank all those who have contributed material artefacts to the exhibition especially Paddy O'Connell who has been great, Tommy Croke of Garrynoe, Richie Murray, Michael Fitzgerald of Foyle, Dr Brendan Ó Cathaoir of the *Irish Times*, Jim Herlihy on the Constabulary, Liam Ó Duibhir and Sheila Foley of Mullinahone for Kickham-related materials. We welcome offers of more materials. More furniture and artefacts will be going into the exhibition. Finally we thank all at the OPW for their commitment to this site and Minister Tom Parlon for his attendance today.

This is a great day for this parish, for Mullinahone and Killenaule and all the surrounding parishes on the Tipperary-Kilkenny border, and indeed for the whole Slieveardagh region which was part of the events of 1848. Today, by coming here we honour O'Brien and his Young Ireland colleagues and the local population who participated here in 1848. We honour the patriots of 1848. As a last word, I would like to call now for a minute's silence in memory of those who died here at the Warehouse in the middle of the Great Famine for the sake of Irish self-government and a better Ireland. Go raibh maith agaibh.'

Notes

- 1 For further information on Famine Warehouse 1848 see www.ballingarry.net.