

**Address by
Mr. Éamon Ó Cuív, TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs
Grosse Ile on Sunday 10th May 2009**

Mesdames, Messieurs, distingués invités, Je suis heureux et fier d'être ici aujourd'hui, sur cette île belle et tranquille - Grosse Ile-Oileán na nGael en gaélic, l'Ile des irlandais

As Minister with responsibility for offshore islands, it is always a pleasure for me to visit islands and this particular island is one I have been looking forward to visiting for many years.

This is truly a most special and poignant place – sacred in many ways. Indeed, I am delighted that Grosse Ile is the location that was selected as the first overseas location for the commemoration of the Great Irish Famine, by the National Famine Commemoration Committee, which was established by the Irish Government last year and which I chair.

The terrible events of the summer of 1847 are a very important part of Irish history. They are also, of course, an integral part of the history of Quebec and Canada. In this context, I am delighted to be here today in the presence of the Federal Minister for the Environment, Jim Prentice; the representative of the Provincial government, and mayor, MPs James Rajotte and

The Great Famine, which lasted from 1845 to 1849, reached a climax in 1847. Here in Québec and Grosse Île, the situation soon became tragic, with over 100, 000 immigrants arriving in a single season. In previous years, the average number of newcomers had been 25,000 to 30,000. Most of the immigrants who landed here at the height of the famine were Irish. Already weakened by malnutrition and starvation, they had been crowded aboard unsanitary sailboats, unfit for transporting human beings. They reached their destination in a deplorable state, many already infected with typhus, a disease which soon reached epidemic proportions.

It is hard to believe that there were over 5,400 burials on Grosse Ile alone in 1847, most of them Irish, making it the largest resting place for Irish people outside Ireland. It is for this reason that Grosse Ile is such a hallowed and important place to the Irish people with some 30,000 visitors coming to the island each year to pay their respects and to honour those who suffered tragically because of the Great Hunger.

The enormity and scale of the tragedy experienced at the time clearly cannot be underestimated, nor can the hopelessness and despair which those fleeing hunger in Ireland experienced. Robert Whyte (a middle-class emigrant) kept a diary of his voyage on a coffin ship crossing to Quebec in 1847 and outlined the desolate situation at the time as follows:

“The prospect before us was indeed an awful one, and there was no hope for us but in the mercy of God”.

We are here today to honour and remember those many thousands of Irish people who arrived here to these shores on the coffin ships referred to by Robert Whyte in search of a better of life during the Famine. We especially remember and honour those who suffered so much loss at that time - that is loss of life, loss of family, loss of home and loss of country.

The Irish cemetery which I have just left, which holds over 6,000 of Grosse Île's 7,553 burial plots and the poignant Celtic Cross, which honours those who perished serves to remind us of the special links between Canada and Ireland. It also serves to remind us of the harrowing experience and suffering of those subjected to famine all those years ago and is a lesson to us all in today in the twentieth first century, where no human being should hunger and where it should be the right of all the worlds citizens to be nourished.

I would at this point like to express the gratitude and appreciation of the Irish Government and people of Ireland for the generosity and the humanity shown by your nation, and in particular the people of Quebec, to the Irish people during the summer of 1847.

J'aimerais maintenant, exprimer la gratitude et l'appréciation du peuple irlandais et de son Gouvernement pour la générosité et l'humanité démontrées par votre nation, et surtout par le peuple du Québec vis-à-vis du peuple irlandais lors de l'été de 1847.

At that time, the people of Canada put their own lives and safety in danger, and indeed many paid the ultimate price, in order to assist the famished and desolate that arrived from foreign shores. The impact of those arriving on Canada was enormous and life changing and this can be seen in many of the accounts provided at the time, including the account by G.M. Douglas, the Medical Superintendent in Quebec who wrote on 27 December 1847:

“There were still 35 vessels in quarantine, having on board 12,175 souls, and great numbers of these falling ill and dying daily. It is with much difficulty that people could be found to make coffins, dig graves and bury the dead. As already observed, all our regular hospital servants were either ill or exhausted by fatigue. Dr. Benson, the gentlemen engaged to assist, took fever and died after a short illness”.

It is particularly fitting that we are here today at the Lazaretto, which was the last shelter constructed on Grosse Île in 1847 to house healthy immigrants. As we know, however, just like the eleven other surrounding buildings of similar size, it was turned into a hospital. This, the oldest building on the island, bears witness to the tragedy of 1847 and is the only remaining evidence of Grosse Île's role as a hospital unit-a major role of the quarantine station.

I am truly honoured to be unveiling a plaque and planting a tree on this very spot in honour of all those Irish and Canadian who dwelt, worked, perished and survived during this terrible time in our history and I would like to thank all at the Department of Heritage and Parks Canada for facilitating this.

As you know, in 2008, the Irish government provided a grant for the refurbishment of the interior of the wooden building, known to all as the Lazaretto, so it will resemble how it appeared in 1847. I am delighted that a permanent exhibit of Irish artefacts from that period is also currently being mounted in the Lazaretto and that it is envisaged that the refurbished building will be open in late summer 2009 in time for the celebrations marking the centenary of the Celtic Cross by the Ancient Order of Hibernians

2009 sees the 100th anniversary of the erection of the Island's Celtic Cross, which I have just come from and I understand that the Ancient Order of Hibernians in Montreal are planning a series of major events in 2009 to commemorate the erection of the cross culminating in a memorial service on 15 August. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well in your endeavours in this regard.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Jo-Anick Proulx here in Parks Canada for all the work he has undertaken on this special site. I know he has been working closely with Ms. Terri Kearney, Skibbereen Heritage Officer, in relation to establishing a partnership arrangement between both sites in this special year, when Skibbereen, Co. Cork was selected by the Irish Government as the commemorative location for the National Famine Memorial Day, next Sunday 17th May.

I can assure you we will be thinking of you next Sunday at our ceremony in Skibbereen, Co. Cork and I will be telling the people of Ireland of the great welcome I received here today at Grosse Ile.

Finally, let us never forget An Gorta Mór, which was clearly the greatest social calamity – in terms of mortality and suffering – that Ireland has ever experienced.

The Irish people will truly never forget this horrific time in our history, nor will we forget the generous welcome given by the people of Canada, and particularly the hand of friendship and assistance offered by the people of Québec to those distraught and desolate masses that came to these beautiful shores. I thank you again for the kindness and compassion you showed at the time.

Les irlandais n'oublieront jamais cette période effroyable de leur histoire. Ils n'oublieront jamais non plus l'accueil généreux des canadiens, et tout particulièrement l'aide et le soutien bienveillants offerts par le peuple québécois aux masses égarées et désolées qui débarquèrent sur ces beaux rivages. Je vous remercie encore pour la bonté et la compassion témoignées à nos ancêtres.

Let us now remember and honour all those who perished at this time and also those who survived and went on to make new lives.

Let both our countries continue to enjoy the close relations we currently have and let the special bond between both countries continue and flourish in the years ahead.

Merci Beaucoup
Go raibh maith agat.
Thank You