

Jimmy Deenihan TD
Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

As Chair of the National Famine Commemoration Committee I am frequently humbled by the level of respect and empathy that Irish people - at home and abroad - have for the victims of the greatest tragedy in our history: the Great Irish Famine.

The famine in Ireland casts a shadow to this day. Over one million people died and 1.8 million emigrated. The population of Ireland, close to 8.5 million in 1845, had drastically fallen to 6.6 million by 1851. That decline continued for many decades. Every year, thousands of people attend both the National and International Famine Commemorations which take place, to remember the many who died and emigrated, and to reflect on the appalling events during this period.

However, in times of great adversity we can also find extraordinary acts of generosity or heroism, by people who against all odds tried to help those who were suffering. I think that it is important that we remember these people, many of whom may have been forgotten or overlooked, and for this reason the National Famine Commemoration Committee has launched a new project called *"Heroes of the Great Irish Famine"*.

This project aims to gather information about the people, whether in Ireland or overseas, who tried to help to alleviate the suffering. Members of the public, and all schools in Ireland, are being asked to submit stories from their locality. I hope that this project will capture the imagination, and give us all a deeper perspective on the Great Irish Famine. Over time, I would like this project to grow as a valuable source of information about the famine, which can inspire people to learn more about this most tragic period in our history.

When the National Famine Commemoration Committee embarked on this project we did not realise the extraordinary number of individuals and groups who contributed to the relief effort. Some of their stories are inspirational to this day.

The Quakers - or Religious Society of Friends - were one such group who did much to help. The Quakers not only distributed aid but also sought long-term solutions to the situation which Ireland found itself in. They established soup kitchens, pioneered new farming methods, and highlighted the reality on the ground which encouraged donations nationally and internationally. Joseph Bewley and Jonathan Pim were prominent members of the Society and were instrumental in setting up the Central Relief Committee. It is thanks to these individuals, and all members of the Society, that we have so much information on the famine today.

The native-American Choctaw Nation also gave assistance, even though they faced extraordinary challenges at the time. In 1847 the Indians of the Choctaw Nation collected \$170 for Irish famine relief, an incredible sum at the time. This was despite the fact that in 1831 the Choctaws had been forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in Mississippi, and had been the first of several tribes to be relocated - a 'Trail of Tears' as it became known. Only 16 years later the Choctaws learned of the famine in Ireland. As they had faced hunger and death on the first Trail

of Tears they felt a great empathy with the Irish people, and although they had only meagre resource themselves made a heroic donation to help those suffering in Ireland.

Abdul Mejid Khan, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, donated one thousand pounds and also sent three ships with food supplies to Drogheda. The Jewish community in New York raised hundreds of dollars for famine relief. The 'Committee of Colored Citizens' in Philadelphia did likewise, with the money entrusted to leading anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass to give to Irish relief when he visited the country.

These are some of the examples of the heroic steps that individuals and communities took when they heard of the famine suffering in Ireland. However, from my involvement in famine commemoration, I know that there are many more stories that have never been heard or recorded. In every town and village people remember an individual or a group - from home or abroad - who tried to help relieve the suffering. This work, whether big or small, was heroic. To this day, it reminds us that humanity still exists in greatly troubled times.

This year, the National Famine Commemoration will take place in Strokestown Park, Co. Roscommon. The people of Strokestown have worked tirelessly over the last 20 years to build a rich collection of material which helps us to understand the themes of the famine including blight, eviction and emigration. Strokestown itself had its own local hero. Charles Maguire, clerk of the Strokestown Relief Committee, who - during the months from April to August 1846 - personally oversaw that more than 4,000 people were given relief on a weekly basis.

The "*Heroes of the Great Irish Famine*" project aims to gather the stories of people - from all walks of life, with all backgrounds, and from home and abroad - who tried to help our ancestors at one of the darkest periods in our history. I would urge the public to get involved, to learn more about the famine, and to take part in the National Famine Commemoration. Details are available on www.irishfamine.ie

Ends/

The National Famine Commemoration will take place on 11th May 2014 at 3.00.m in Strokestown Park House. The event is free and open to the public. A ten-day programme of events will begin in Strokestown on Friday May 2nd and will continue until Sunday May 11th culminating in the formal state commemoration ceremony. The events include a series of lectures, musical pieces, walks, bus tours, theatre, music, exhibitions and local commemoration ceremonies, all of which are free of charge. The Irish Famine Museum will remain open throughout the week with a rare display of famine documents.