

**8 January 2009**

**2009 NATIONAL FAMINE MEMORIAL DAY TO BE HELD IN SKIBBEREEN**

Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, today outlined the National Famine Commemoration Committee's plans for the National Famine Memorial Day 2009. The Committee has agreed four main points for this year's commemoration:

- It is proposed that the national event will take place in Skibbereen, Co. Cork;
- The parallel international event will be held in Canada;
- That communities around the country should be encouraged to hold their own local events to commemorate the Great Famine; and
- That all public and sporting events should observe a minute's silence on the National Famine Memorial Day.

There is nothing else in the history of the Irish people that can be likened to the Great Famine, either for its immediate impact, or its legacy of emigration, cultural loss and decline of the Irish language. The population of Ireland, which exceeded 8 million in the Census of 1841, was reduced by approximately 1.5 million through death and emigration. In recognition of the importance of the Great Famine, the Government established a National Famine Commemoration Committee, which is chaired by Minister Ó Cuív, and the inaugural Famine Memorial Day was held on 25 May 2008 in Dublin.

The National Famine Commemoration Committee has now agreed that the annual Famine Memorial Day should revolve between the four provinces of Ireland. It is proposed that Skibbereen, Co Cork, will be the venue for the 2009 event, to be held on 17 May 2009. It is envisaged that the 2010 commemoration will take place in Co Mayo.

"The Skibbereen area was one of the worst affected by the Great Famine. The mass graves of between 8,000 and 10,000 famine victims at Abbeystrewery near Skibbereen are testament to the tragic consequences of the catastrophic failure of the potato crop in the area during the 1840s. I look forward to discussions taking place between my Department and relevant stakeholders over the coming weeks to make the necessary arrangements to hold the 2009 National Memorial Day in Skibbereen."

- Éamon Ó Cuív, T.D., Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

The Great Famine also resulted in a disproportionately strong representation of the Irish among the nations formed through emigration in the later 19th and early 20th centuries. These diaspora communities - the Irish abroad – still demonstrate a significant affinity with their migrant predecessors of the Famine. Against this background, it was decided that an overseas commemoration should be held in parallel with the National Memorial Day in Ireland. The 2009 event will be held on 10 May next in Canada, which became the new home of thousands of dispirited people who were ravaged by hunger and disease arising from the Famine.

Although the majority of the Canadian Irish arrived well before the Famine, some 250,000 arrived between 1845 and 1855. 1847 was the high watermark as close to 110,000 immigrants, most of whom were Irish famine refugees, made their way to Canada. Some 4 million Canadians (12.5% of the population) claim Irish heritage today and Irish communities can be found across the country. 2009 sees the 100th anniversary of the erection of a massive Celtic Cross, over forty feet high, which commemorates the 7,000 Irish men, women, and children who are buried on Grosse Ile near Quebec City. The island of Grosse Ile was a quarantine station, and became known by locals as 'L'Ile des Irlandais' – the Island of the Irish.

Minister Ó Cuív expressed his gratitude to the members of the National Famine Commemoration Committee for their commitment in ensuring that the catastrophic events of the Great Famine are appropriately remembered and that the extraordinary contributions of those who emigrated, and of their many descendents abroad, are justly celebrated.

**Ends**