

## SPEECH - Unveiling of Flight of the Earls Statue

### **Remarks by President McAleese at the unveiling of a statue to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the Flight of the Earls, Rathmullan, Co Donegal, Friday 14th September 2007**

A Mheara, A Shoilsí, A Chairde Uilig.

Is mór dom bheith anseo le bheith páirteach libh ar an lá stáiriúil seo. Ceithre céad bhliain ó shin, i ngar leis an lathair seo, tharla eachtra mór i saol agus stair na hÉireann. Imeacht a chuir deireadh de sort de ré Gaelach na hÉireann.

It is a pleasure to be here on this day, to mark a key and cathartic episode in our island's history. I am grateful to the Rathmullan and District Historical Society for their kind invitation and for the work they have done to ensure a fitting commemoration of that far-off but long-remembered time when Ireland's destiny was so cruelly altered. Even today we struggle to fully comprehend the downstream consequences of the loss, the driving out of our great native leaders. Back then the monumental impact of their leaving was summed up in the simple but telling words of Eoghan Ruadh Mac a' Bhaird, poet to O'Donnell, 'Anocht is Uaigneach Éire', Tonight Ireland is Desolate.

He travelled on that ship that left at 12 noon on the 14th of September 1607 from Portnamurphy, not far from where we stand today, part of that legendary group of ninety-nine of Ulster's Gaelic aristocracy, led by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and Rory O'Donnell, Earl of Tyrconnell. The Flight of the Earls, Teithe na nIarlaí, took them across continental Europe where a virtual Ireland-in-exile was established at Louvain and in Rome. They precipitated the development of a military, religious, economic and intellectual Irish diaspora in continental Europe but their absence from Ireland created the vacuum that became the Plantation of Ulster. And so the scene was set for the Ireland of unfinished business, of unsolved problems we were to inherit all these years later. O'Donnell and O'Neill were to die in exile and we can barely imagine their grief at being unable to return to their native land, not to mention the grief of those who waited in vain for their triumphant return.

This is a year of shared and interlocking anniversaries, for the Irish College in Louvain came into being in the same year as the Flight of the Earls and this is also the 350th anniversary of the death of the great Franciscan, Luke Wadding, remembered among other things as the founder of the Irish College in Rome. Both institutions continue to flourish today but today they showcase in different ways an Ireland that is very comfortable in Europe and increasingly at ease with her complex, turbulent past. Now a proud, peaceful and prosperous nation it is good that we gather on this day to remember what was sacrificed for us and what our struggle for freedom has cost.

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The replica famine ship, the Jeannie Johnson, set sail from Portnamurry earlier this morning re-enacting that fateful departure of long ago. She belongs to an Ireland no longer desolate, an Ireland sorting out at last the twisted mess that history left us - a new ship built by children of native and planter stock, symbolic of the new Ireland we are at last building together.

It has been a long and harsh scattering for most of these four hundred years but now we gather the memories of all those who left our shores whether through military force or economic deprivation and we can see in them an unmatched contribution made by Irish men and women and their descendants to cultures and countries from one end of the globe to the other. They would, I hope, be reassured and vindicated by this Ireland we are privileged to be part of, this place to which migrants come in search of opportunity, this place that for all its success and faith in the future still makes time to look back in gratitude.

The Earls did not return, it is true but their going did not rob us of their spirit, their heart or their hope. Locked into silent, patient hearts those things slowly grew new and fresh shoots. They inspired generations to dream of and to work for an egalitarian Ireland free from oppression, in control of her own destiny and fully engaged with the rest of the world. They did not live to see it. We did. Now we bring their memory home, back to the lonely shore from which they set sail and through John Behan's magnificent sculpture we welcome them warmly to the Ireland that at last vindicates their sacrifice and our loss.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.