

PRESIDENT MARY ROBINSON

IMAGINATIVE POSSESSIONS

This lecture was established in memory of a remarkable advocate and parliamentarian with a life-long commitment to the international protection of human rights. I recall hearing the story of Sir John Foster's life about 20 years ago, when I saw his portrait hanging in the chambers at Hare Court and asked about him. Perhaps it was Anthony Lester's instinctive way of engaging my interest, but part of the vivid word picture given to me was of his mother, Rose Galway, born - as I was myself - in the West of Ireland, so that John Foster thought of himself a half-Irish.

That Irish connection came back to me when I was invited by the trustees of the John Galway Foster Trust to deliver this lecture on any subject I might choose. It encouraged me to honour the memory of a man loved for his independence of mind, his lateral thinking and his commitment to human rights by reflecting in an open-minded way on our sense of "Irishness" and Irish identity as this millennium draws to a close. I do not speak to you this evening as a politician or policy maker. The office I was elected to as President of Ireland is a modest, non-executive one. It allows me - indeed encourages me - to stand back from the pressing issues of the day and try to identify deeper trends and influences which are relevant to our self-knowledge and our sense of ourselves in relation to others.

And in thinking of the factors that are shaping the modern Ireland, and influencing or conditioning the modern Irish psyche, I have found it natural to look to our writers for inspiration. A particular phrase came to mind when I began to think about how I would convey all this to you. It was a phrase used by one of our greatest poets, William Butler Yeats, in an essay he wrote on Irish theatre. He described us as "...a community bound together by imaginative possessions".

Of course, every country - every people - has its imaginative possessions. And, indeed, if focused on in a particularly narrow and racist way, they could promote a strident nationalism or even lead to ethnic conflict. On the other hand, and this is my sense of the phrase, it can invite us to look at the inspirational and artistic influences that are part of the shaping of a people, and so have a liberating effect which can also promote deeper understanding between peoples.

Let me bear witness to this. In preparing to talk to you about the Irish as a community bound together in this way it was natural - and only fair - to reflect on the imaginative possessions you have here in this country. That also prompted an awareness of the rich diversity involved. It is immediately necessary to acknowledge English imaginative possessions, and Scottish, and Welsh, and also British. The concept is such a broad and, inevitably, subjective one that I feel that I should give you some idea of what comes to my mind in thinking, for example, of English imaginative possessions. I would include in that the development of the common-law, the great rhetorical eloquence of language, and the central place of the land of England in your literature. And that would only be the beginning!

Obviously, I have had more time and occasion to reflect on Irish imaginative possessions, and to do so in the context of the shaping of a modern Irish identity. Having borrowed that phrase from Yeats, I now want to borrow another poetic image.

There is a wonderful moment in Yeats's *Autobiographies* when he speaks of his political apprenticeship in Ireland. It was the time of Charles Stuart Parnell and the Home Rule Movement, of the start of the Gaelic League, of the beginnings of the Irish Literary Movement. A conviction came over Yeats - so he tells us - that Ireland was, at that moment, 'soft wax'. That it was going to remain 'soft wax' for some years to come. It is a marvellous image, and I put it before you today because it suggests the excitement of an historic moment. A moment when it seems that we can change things, when situations no longer seem fixed, when the unyielding, the durable, the intractable suddenly yields, when we put our hand to the door and it opens.

Yeats, of course, was affected by events at the beginning of this century. But might not his words be prophetic as well for its last half decade? This could well be another moment of 'soft wax' on the island of Ireland. I think we all feel it. The cessation of paramilitary violence, the acceleration of economic co-operation, the coming down of physical and metaphysical barriers - both of which find a powerful symbol in the daily human contacts North to South and South to North - and the increased awareness of a need for parity of esteem and emphasis on building up local communities: these all mark the moment. But we need to mark it in other ways. We need to mark it in our hearts and our imaginations. We need to remember that wax does not stay soft for long: that shapes which are now in the making will harden. That we need all our rigour, our questioning and our vigilance to be equal to this moment.

As a contribution to what I believe is a vital and necessary debate about what this Ireland as soft wax is and what it means, I would like to pose the question of how we go forward while learning the lessons of the past. Paradoxically, I am helped in this process of questioning by the constitutional constraints on the office I hold, which - as I have emphasised - is not one of political power. Instead of addressing political considerations, I look to our past for factors which can help shape our present.

This year we began the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the darkest moment in Irish history, the great potato famine. Between 1845 and 1849 a million people died of starvation or related diseases such as typhus and dysentery. Over a million others emigrated in those few years alone, and the whole pattern of agricultural holding and land use altered.

It was a defining moment. At this remove it is, in a very real sense, one of our imaginative possessions. How we engage in the process of commemoration, and what we draw from that process will affect the collective psyche of this generation and future generations who live on the island of Ireland or have a consciousness of their Irish heritage. For that reason it is encouraging to see the broad approach being adopted to the famine commemoration, including a Government programme, academic conferences, local community initiatives to restore a workhouse or publish a local history of the famine period.

This famine research must be thorough, meticulous and honest. It will also be important that it does not simply open old wounds. Instead, if it were to foster a sense of historical reconciliation, a willingness to shoulder appropriate responsibility on both sides of the Irish Sea, and a capacity to express genuine regret for what was done or left undone,

then the commemoration of the Great Famine would be a significant moral act of deep relevance to our bilateral relations.

There is another sense, of course, in which the Famine commemoration can be a moral act. It can bring Irish people closer to the suffering of countries going through a similar experience now. It is not that we lack the relevant information, far from it! And yet there is a growing gap - not simply between rich and poor - but between the idea of hunger and the fact of it. In 1993, we are informed, more than 12 million children under the age of five died in the developing world. This in itself is a terrible fact. What is almost as terrible is that that figure could - according to the World Health Report - have been cut to 350,000 if those children had had the same access to health care and nutrition as the modern Irish child does. Now how did the idea of hunger so fail the fact of it, where a vast waste of human life occurred in the midst of our knowledge, our understanding and our resources and yet was not prevented? The truth is, we need more than knowledge. We need real empathy.

Revisiting the suffering of Irish people during those famine years can help to engage us more actively with human suffering in parts of Africa and elsewhere in the world today. I believe that this explains the particular interest in Ireland in third world development: the fact that - against international trends - successive Irish Governments have been increasing the level of overseas development assistance, the generosity of Irish people in supporting third-world agencies and the involvement of Irish people in aid agencies and development work throughout the world. The level of commitment has deepened because of this imaginative connection with the suffering in our own past. My recent visit to Rwanda and the camps in Zaire reflects that level of public commitment.

And, understandably, the Great Famine is being commemorated in other parts of the world where Irish people had fled for survival: here in Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. That wider commemoration in Manchester and Melbourne, New York and Nova Scotia, brings to mind another imaginative possession: the Irish Diaspora. I have been very conscious of the significance of this wider Irish family. At my inauguration I expressed a wish to represent in a symbolic way the 70 million people world-wide who can claim Irish descent. Earlier this year I addressed the two Houses of the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament, on the importance of cherishing this Irish Diaspora. And I have come to recognise that the reality of emigration, which began long before the Famine and continues to this day, has become a resource which is now part of our self-definition.

Despite the fact that the individual experience of emigration may be lonely and painful, it seems to me an added richness of our heritage now that "Irishness" has this wider dimension. We have only to look at the diversity and range of the array of people outside Ireland for whom the island is a place of origin. After all, emigration is not just a chronicle of sorrow and regret. It is also a powerful story of contribution, of adaptation. The reality is that this great narrative of dispossession and belonging, which so often had its origins in sorrow and leave taking, has become - with a certain amount of historic irony - one of the treasures of modern Irish society. In essence our relation with the Diaspora beyond our shores is one which can instruct our society in the values of diversity, tolerance and "fair-mindedness". It is like a mirror reflecting back to us on the island. It encourages us to see that Irishness is not simply territorial. Therefore it can reach out to everyone on the island and show itself capable of honouring and listening to those whose sense of identity, and whose cultural values may be more British than Irish.

Seamus Heaney, the Nobel Laureate, in one of his Oxford Lectures published recently as "The Redress of Poetry" speaks with great eloquence of his own personal experience of what he calls two-mindedness:

"There is nothing extraordinary about the challenge to be in two minds. If, for example, there was something exacerbating, there was still nothing deleterious to my sense of Irishness in the fact that I grew up in the minority in Northern Ireland and was educated within the dominant British culture. My identity was emphasised rather than eroded by being maintained in such circumstances. The British dimension, in other words, while it is something that will be resisted by the minority if it is felt to be coercive, has nevertheless been a given of our history and even of our geography, one of the places where we all live, willy-nilly. It's in the language. And it's where the mind of many in the Republic lives also. So I would suggest that the majority in Northern Ireland should make a corresponding effort at two-mindedness, and start to conceive of themselves within - rather than beyond - the Irish element. Obviously, it will be extremely difficult for them to surmount their revulsion against all the violence that has been perpetrated in the name of Ireland, but everything and everybody would be helped were they to make their imagination press back against the pressure of reality and re-enter the whole country of Ireland imaginatively, if not constitutionally, through the northern point of the quincunx."

And there is another kind of "two-mindedness" to which I would like to refer briefly. It is the effortless sense in which the Irish today, particularly the young Irish, are both Irish and European. It is as though it were a seamless web - the European dimension simply being an extension of modern Irishness. There is no doubt that Ireland has benefited substantially from membership of the European Community, now the European Union, and that European cities are a likely destination for many young Irish looking for work. So is this "two-mindedness", this sense of being both Irish and European, simply the predictable outcome of perceived economic advantage to-date, or is there a deeper context underpinning the relationship?

I believe that there is a deeper connection or more accurately a series of imaginative connections. They go back as far as the golden age from the 6th to the 10th centuries, when Irish monks and scholars took Christianity and scholarship back to a war-ravaged Europe. They include the Irish chieftains who fled from defeat in battle, and joined the armies and courts of Europe in the 17th and the 18th centuries. They also include the priests who had to study for the priesthood in colleges and seminaries throughout Europe. All of these are in some way in the subconscious of the young Irish, who find their way back, so to speak, to a Europe to which they belong. And this feeling of belonging is reinforced by the attitude of other Europeans towards Ireland. There is an interest in Irish history and culture, in the Irish language and music, and in writers such as Yeats, and James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett who are part of a European mainstream. And so, this sense of belonging, of being included in the European family, is also part of our imaginative possessions.

And, finally, it should come as no surprise, given the closeness of our two islands and the intermingling of our peoples that we undoubtedly share some imaginative possessions in common. I can think of one example, which leads me back to John Galway Foster, in whose memory this lecture is given. We both value in a particular way a kind of individuality, even at times eccentricity. We both deeply honour the triumph of the human spirit in that individuality.

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