

St Patrick's Day Address  
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Chapel at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture

“How the Irish heritage has shaped the Australian character”

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Ladies and gentlemen, hello and thank you for that warm welcome. I'm not sure I can describe the honour I feel in being here to speak today - it certainly would have seemed remarkable to my ancestors Hugh and Sarah Byrne whose story I'll touch on a little later, and who came to Australia in 1806, not as convicts but nevertheless without much choice. I am, as some of you know, Irish in every bit of me. Even the small part of the family we thought originally was English turns out to have only been pretending.

I am descended from Byrnes and Ryans, McNamaras and O'Rourkes, we came from Wicklow and Cork, from Clare and Tipperary and yes, the vast majority of us are Catholics. I am part of the great Irish diaspora of southern NSW - in my immediate family on the south west slopes, and I'm also connected to people who went very far west indeed to south western Queensland and also far, into the high country, to the Suggan Buggan valley where the O'Rourkes first came with hundreds of head of cattle, their women and children in the 1820s. A McNamara is supposed to be a candidate for Clancy of the Overflow

The story I have most detail about belongs to Hugh Vesty Byrne my many times great grandfather, who was part of the failed 1798 rising. The proclamation of 1800 made while he was on the run describes him as 5'8" high, fair freckled face, light or sandy hair, well made...shot through the thigh"! They were wild years. The 98 rising shook Ireland to the core, perhaps only the bad luck and poor management that prevented the French from landing in support of the United Irishmen rebel forces prevented overthrow of the long hated English yoke.

The rebellion in fact had its genesis with liberal urban Protestants inspired by the aged of revolution in both France and America. Hugh and his cousin

—and brother-in-law—Michael Dwyer were not, its fair to say, liberal urban Protestants, but they were leaders among men—Dwyer became known as the Wicklow chieftain, Byrne was his lieutenant and they raised and led men at the battles of Arklow, Vinegar Hill and Hacketstown.

When the rising failed, Dwyer and a band of loyal followers including Byrne held out against the British forces in the wilderness of the Wicklow mountains. One bitterly cold night of falling snow in 1799 at Dernamuck, Dwyer and about a dozen men were sheltering in three cottages when an informer led a large force of soldiers to the area. The cottages were quickly surrounded, the first two surrendering, but Dwyer and his men decided to fight on in the third one after negotiating the safe passage of women and children.

In the hopeless gunfight which followed, the cottage caught fire and only Dwyer remained unwounded. At this stage, Dwyer's comrade, Antrim man Sam McAllister, stood in the doorway to draw the soldiers' fire on him, which allowed Dwyer to slip out and make an incredible escape, over the freezing mountain in his night-shirt.

Now note that name: McAllister? Five or six years ago, I stood at the doorway of a tiny out of the way house museum in the Glen of Imaal with one of the Hoxey family whose ancestors were there that night. There we were in the exact spot, two centuries on and he theorised to me that the notion of Irish freedom fighting being an exclusively sectarian conflict, Catholic vs Protestant is a 20th century one, perhaps even an invention of the modern Irish state because a clear division helped to draw political battle lines for modern causes. But as our friend distinguished historian Richard Reid says, in Ireland it is always complicated.

In 1799, Sam McAllister from Antrim who drew the fire from the Wicklow chieftain and so laid down his life—he was a Presbyterian who also fervently believed in his nation's right to govern itself.

By 1803 the pressure on Dwyer had increased to a point where he surrendered. Hugh Byrne had been imprisoned at the Wicklow Gaol at the same time although he was one of the few men who ever escaped from the Gaol. There were three more companions and relations: John Mernagh,

Arthur Devlin and Martin Burke.

The highly combustible nature of the situation on the ground, the fear of the French perhaps—the fear of how admired and beloved these men were among a mutinous people and a mountainous landscape that was impossible to control—meant that an extraordinary deal was struck. They were offered the chance to banish themselves and to take their families with them.

The 5 ‘Wicklow Martyrs’, would go to Botany Bay as exiles, with their wives and child, the promise of land grants, convict labourers and equal rights with free settlers. They left Cobh Harbour aboard the ship "Tellicherry." Landing in New South Wales in early 1806, the men were given 100 acres of land and the promise of a new life. It would have been like agreeing to colonise Mars, so far from home it was.

I pause to reflect on the immense courage of all these people—to respond to the idea that they could be miraculously free, but at the price of never, ever seeing their homes again. Australia had not at that time been permanently settled by Europeans for even 20 years. And this in a time when a letter home—presuming you were literate and I think Hugh would have been, but I don’t know—presuming you even knew one of the handful of people here a letter would take six months to get home, as long to go back.

That extraordinary promise was shattered when they got here by Governor William Bligh, the infamous commander of H.M.S. Bounty. I’ve seen these letters from Bligh—he is appalled when the Tellicherry lands. He is utterly furious that these dreadful men, the worst of the worst—and their wives, and their children have been landed on him. These, mind, are the days when it is illegal to speak Gaelic in the colony. These are the days when it is illegal to celebrate the Mass. In fact during Sydney’s first 32 years, Catholic group religious observance was prohibited for all but 10 months.

Bligh had Dwyer, Byrne and the others arrested on charges of seditious activities. They were in fact cleared by the first court they faced—because there was genuinely no evidence they had done anything even in this quasi prison camp, only to be re-arrested and sent to Norfolk Island and Van

Diemen's Land.

Bligh was eventually removed from office during the Rum Rebellion and Byrne, Dwyer and the others released and pardoned. Their land grants of 100 acres at Cabramatta were restored by Lieutenant Governor Paterson and then confirmed in 1810 by that enlightened Highland Scot, Lachlan Macquarie who was not a product of the English class system and who saw a future for the place and value in the merciful but just rule of law rather than rule by fiat.

When Campbelltown was established by Macquarie, Hugh and Sarah purchased further land and by all evidence lived in increasing comfort and prosperity—some of the finest Georgian colonial houses in the state were built by their children. Hugh died in 1842. Sarah [and] the young women who had once joined her husband in jail then boarded the *Tellicherry* and by the looks of things may have even given birth aboard. She remarkably lived to the age of 94. And they have tens of thousands of descendants.

I've thought a great deal about what Hugh and Sarah's story means and how it relates to Australia, the Australian character, the particular thread that we represent, in places, like here, like south western Victoria, where they settled in great numbers. In fact if any of you hail from South Australia, I've heard it said the problem with the place is that there aren't enough Irish in the state.

It is this: presented with an impossible situation they took an immense gamble on their freedom. They were not cowed by injustice but again and again fought back both in Ireland and in Australia. On reaching this country, they did not accept that the old hierarchies should continue. They believed, and acted upon the belief, that they were as good as any man or woman in the colony. They sought property and they believed in education. They were devout Catholics who held to their faith and their identity despite suspicion and hostility from the powers that be. They brought the values of the old world with them, but they blossomed in the new.

In their lives they exemplified courage, tenacity, determination and ultimately hope. They changed their lives and all of our lives by taking those risks. They were not content that this should be a carbon copy of the

old world they had come from with all its entrenched injustice. They were making a new world as they went and from them, I believe, come our steadfast convictions around equality in particular.

Their hunger for land and thirst for independence also brought them to the furthest reaches of the new country and in doing so many of them lived alongside indigenous Australians. I don't want to romanticise this and I am aware that the Irish were as brutal as any other white settlers—but I also believe there is a fundamental sympathy between the Gaelic and indigenous cultures where passion for land, spirituality and storytelling mesh together.

I am a seventh generation Australian, my children eighth and this country is in our bones and our deepest memories, but it makes me believe too that none of us has a better claim to Australia than anyone else because we are all migrants here other than indigenous Australians. I also believe that people fleeing conflict and oppression now do so in the same spirit as Hugh and Sarah 200 years ago—taking their lives in their hands, knowing they may never see home again.

And this finally is the lesson of knowing our own history well. Of understanding that it's taken courage for everyone to come here. That our nation is shaped generation after generation by people who take a remarkable step because they so urgently want the best for their children, a bright promise of hope in the land where every man and woman is as good as another.

For those who come across the sea, we've boundless plains to share.