

HRH The Prince of Wales's speech at The Model, Sligo. Weds 20th May 2015

Mr. Flanagan, a daoine uaiseala [Ladies and gentlemen],

I must just say, before going any further, what a treat it was to hear real Irish music - one cannot stop one's foot tapping - thank you to the composer, we will treasure this experience for the rest of our lives.

I cannot tell you what a joy it is for my wife and myself that we are able to be in Ireland once again. This is a country we both so love visiting, not least because of the wonderful warmth of the Irish welcome, failte.

As we have been reminded throughout this visit – and do forgive my attempt at coining a new Seanfhocal – Ní bhíonn strainseirí anseo ach carda nar aithíonn leat [There are no strangers here, only friends that you haven't yet met]. For the ancient land of Ireland does have a remarkable tradition of cultural and spiritual creativity and it can be a powerful magic for some...

It is no surprise that it has inspired so many great writers, musicians and artists over the years.

Ladies and gentlemen, in the 150th anniversary of the birth of W. B. Yeats, there can be no more apt county to visit in Ireland than Sligo. This is where Yeats felt most at home; his "land of heart's desire." And it was places in Sligo – like the Dooney Rock, Knocknarea Mountain and the islands of Lough Gill – that prompted many of his most memorable poems.

Yeats' poetry is widely studied in schools and universities throughout the United Kingdom. It is not a stretch to say that it is through Yeats' work that many British people are first introduced to Ireland.

After all could you have a better guide than someone who, to quote from his citation for the Nobel Prize for literature, wrote "inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation"?

Ladies and gentlemen, relations between Britain and Ireland have changed hugely since my visits in 1995 and 2002. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 and its successors have transformed for the better the political and security landscape across these islands.

Only last month, my son, Harry, and I were with the President and Mrs Higgins, and Mr Flanagan, in Turkey as we paid our respects to the soldiers who fought and died in the Gallipoli campaign.

Even by the dreadful standards of the First World War, the death toll and suffering were horrific. However, the bravery of the troops on all sides was extraordinary. Amongst them were over ten thousand Irishmen – Connaught Rangers, Royal Dublin Fusiliers and Royal Munster Fusiliers and innumerable others fighting side by side. Tragically, over three and a half thousand Irish soldiers were killed and many more wounded at Gallipoli.

At the time, many Irish nationalists hoped that their participation in the First World War would bring together people of different traditions across these islands. Sadly, of course, it didn't turn out that way. But a hundred years later, in remembering the scale of the suffering and sacrifice of that generation, we are at last finding common ground.

Working to end the conflict in Northern Ireland brought the two administrations in Dublin and London closely together.

My mother, The Queen's, State Visit to Ireland four years ago and the President's return state visit last

year were further demonstrations of the historical change in our relationship.

The success of those visits is clear evidence of the maturity of our relations, which are now better than ever, based on mutual respect and friendly cooperation between two sovereign neighbours who share a huge amount in common.

We have shed our inhibitions about acknowledging the value that we bring to each other – as trading partners, as places to find work, as sporting rivals and as contributors to a lively exchange of ideas and culture that enriches everyone. After all, the Irish have made a unique and important contribution to Britain – a wonderful warmth of laughter, spontaneity and imagination.

Neither Ireland nor Britain enjoys such a deep and broad engagement with any other country. Our current, blessed era of friendship and cooperation is not, however, founded on pretending that the past did not happen. We all have regrets. As my mother said at Dublin Castle, “with the benefit of historical hindsight, we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently or not at all.”

I am only too deeply aware of the long history of suffering which Ireland has endured, not just in recent decades but over the course of its history. It is a history which, I know, has caused much pain and much resentment in a world of imperfect human beings where it is always too easy to over-generalize and to attribute blame.

At the end of the day, however, we should never forget that our acquaintance has been long; and we can turn that knowing into something new and creative. We need no longer be victims of our difficult history with each other. Without glossing over the pain of the past, we can, I believe, integrate our history and memory in order to reap their subtle harvest of possibility. Imagination, after all, is the mother of possibility. Let us, then, endeavour to become the subjects of our history and not its prisoners.

Ireland has had more than its fair share of turbulence and troubles. Those directly affected do not easily forget the pain. Recent years have shown us, though, that healing is possible even when the heartache continues.

In August 1979, my much-loved great uncle, Lord Mountbatten, was killed alongside his young grandson and my godson, Nicholas, and his friend, Paul Maxwell, and Nicholas’s grandmother, the Dowager Lady Brabourne.

At the time I could not imagine how we would come to terms with the anguish of such a deep loss since, for me, Lord Mountbatten represented the grandfather I never had. So it seemed as if the foundations of all that we held dear in life had been torn apart irreparably.

Through this dreadful experience, though, I now understand in a profound way the agonies borne by so many others in these islands, of whatever faith, denomination or political tradition.

Despite the tragedy of August 1979, the memories that Lord Mountbatten’s family have of Classiebawn Castle and Mullaghmore, going right back to 1946, are of great happiness. I look forward to seeing, at last, the place that he and they so loved and to meeting its inhabitants.

Many of them showed the most extraordinary outpouring of compassion and support to both Lord Mountbatten’s and Paul Maxwell’s families in the aftermath of the bombing. Their loving kindness has done much to aid the healing process.

A number of us will also gather in St. Columba’s Church at Drumcliffe, “under bare Benbulbin’s head,” for an ecumenical service of peace and reconciliation. The poet Yeats, who is of course buried at Drumcliffe, once wrote:

“And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow.”

As a grandfather now myself, I pray that his words can apply to all those who have been so hurt and scarred by the troubles of the past, so that all of us who inhabit these Atlantic islands may leave our grandchildren a legacy of lasting peace, forgiveness and friendship.