

## Remarks by President McAleese

At the Irish World Heritage Centre Manchester

Thursday, 22nd February, 2001

Tá glidondar orm bheith anseo inniu I measc cairde nah Eireann. Go raibh mile maith agaibh as an bhfáilte chaoin.

Thank you for that most warm welcome. It is a great pleasure to be here again in the Irish World Heritage Centre. As some of you will recall, the last time I was here was the week before I was elected President of Ireland. And while it's doubtful that there is a direct correlation between visiting Manchester and becoming Head of State, just think of the marketing potential! Today, on my return visit, I want to thank you for being a source of inspiration to me during the first three and a half years of my Presidency.

So, I am this afternoon renewing my ties with the Irish World Heritage Centre, with the Irish community here and with the city of Manchester. And we are also here to strengthen our bonds of friendship and kinship and to look forward together to the completion of a new Irish World Heritage Centre, which is heralded in the web site I have just launched.

In the coming years it is my hope that we will see this place becoming a welcoming hearth, around which the Irish family abroad can gather to recount their stories and to share and celebrate their cultural, ancestral and personal links to Ireland. It will also be a place in which the best of Irish culture, Irish business acumen and style, and an Irish welcome will be show cased to all who visit.



This gathering and the anticipation of the new centre bring home to me what we mean by the word "heritage". And one thing I know for certain is that it does not evoke some dry, academic definition from a dictionary. Our heritage is a living, breathing, metamorphic source of energy that is rooted deep within each of us. It is the well from which we draw the sparkling, thirst-quenching spring water of the past, the life source for Heritage is the pathway that connects us meaningfully, richly, to place and people and importantly, it connects us to our very selves.

Irish heritage might start in a town land, a parish, a province, it might run from where the Lagan rises, or where the Shannon meets the sea, it might be an ancient cross, or a bog with centuries of secrets, but it is also people, people who treasure and care for heritage, who take it with them wherever they go, who guard it and guide it, too, to new manifestations, new stories.

Irish heritage was probably the lightest and most intriguing part of the baggage which our emigrating people took with them to every part of the world. Today this huge reservoir that is Irish heritage, Irish culture, draws as naturally from wells dug in Manchester and Melbourne as it does from those nearer home. There has always been an invisible yet powerful network of links between the global Irish Family; today that ancient web of friendship is mirrored and strengthened further by the Internet, and by web sites such as this which put Irish people in every part of the globe in instant touch with their heritage and with each other.

The extraordinary vivacity and energy which characterises today's Irish culture owes a huge debt to the work which is done here and in places like this in the name of Irish Heritage. But at the heart of that heritage is a story of simple human decency and kindness characterised by the way in which each wave of Irish emigrants reached out with a helping hand and a welcome to the next.

That tradition of welcome and care has been at the heart of this place and will be captured in a new and imaginative way when the new Centre comes alive. The Centre has the potential to become a unique resource and meeting point, both as a public place and yet a "home place" for our community.

However, while the Centre will always have one eye in the past, telling where we have come from through the story of Irish emigration over the past century and a half, it will most certainly have the other eye on the remarkable new heritage being forged by a new, successful generation in an Ireland that is today, dynamic and prosperous and by its high-achieving global Irish family rooted in cultures the world over.

As many of you are aware, the pace of change in Ireland over the past decade and more has been astounding. Ireland, like Manchester, has seen change of fortune in recent years as our economy has surged to almost full employment and to net immigration for the first time in many years.

As a result of the peace process in Northern Ireland and devolution in Britain, the current fluidity of political and cultural identities and landmarks have altered relations between these two islands forever.

The story of the Irish in Britain is both one of great success as well as struggle. Irish men and women are leaders in business and the professions, in the voluntary sector, in sport and in the arts. Collectively our community lives out a daily ambassadorship for Ireland and for Ireland's heritage.



There are those in our community who are in need, in particular some among the elderly Irish and the travelling community.

We have a duty to care for the more marginalised members of our Community, as I know Sr. Elizabeth (Cahill) and all in Irish Community Care do. We also have a duty to reach out to the other communities in Manchester and strengthen our bonds of friendship as well as our professional ties with them.

With as many as one in five Mancunians having Irish connections, our community here is a major contributor to this city, and a stakeholder in its present and future. And I know that the Irish community has played its part in the recent regeneration of Manchester. They did this not only because they are proud of being Irish but also because of their great pride in this city.

The Irish word that most closely corresponds to the English word "heritage" is "dúchas". And in Irish we say 'is treise and dúchas ná an oiliúnt', or 'everything takes after its kind'. For me the folk wisdom of this saying does not imply that we are destined to some slavish repetition of what has gone before.

On the contrary, we are empowered and driven by a spirit or essence which matures within each one of us - the essence of our Irish heritage - that potent blend of stories, songs and folklore that is distilled from the network of family, friends and community within which we are embedded.

And it is my hope that on completion, the Irish World Heritage Centre will give to all who visit a taste of the heritage - a heritage that has matured in a unique way among our vibrant community here in Manchester. In the meantime, the website I have launched here today gives us a tantalising glimpse of that future.

Thank you once again for inviting me here. Is iontach an obair ar siul agaibh agus guim gach rath oraibh sa todchai.