

U.S. Ambassador to Ireland Kevin F. O'Malley
Remarks at the Launch of *The Famine Folios*
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Thank you to Professor O'Sullivan and the Royal Irish Academy for inviting me here today to the launch of *The Famine Folios*. Ireland's Great Famine or the Great Hunger, as it is more often referred to today, ranks among the worst tragedies in modern history. We all know the facts: between 1845 and 1850, approximately 1.5 million Irish men, women and children died of starvation or related diseases. The famine was a watershed in Irish history. Its effects permanently changed the island's demographic, political and cultural landscape—and left deep scars that still cause pain as we reflect on the famine today.

We cannot forget such a tragic event. As commentator Fintan O'Toole wrote in his recent Irish Times essay about the folios, "No event in Irish history is more emotive than the Great Famine. And nowhere is it more emotive than in the United States." That's why these publications, and the excellent work of the Great Hunger Museum in Quinnipiac University in the United States, are so important. By both preserving and archiving many of the articles and illustrations related to the famine, as well as collecting famine paintings, sculpture and other artwork, the museum enables the next generation to better understand this devastating time. I was especially taken by the museum's focus on famine artwork, which is a good reminder that artists should be as central to commemoration as historians. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet Dr. O'Sullivan and receive an introduction to some of the museum's exhibitions detailed in the folios. The artwork depicting the famine led me to reflect from a new viewpoint on the legacy of the tragedy.

One example that particularly moved me is a stained glass window created by one of Ireland's most distinguished artists, Robert Ballagh, that illustrates the "before and after" of the famine. In the piece "An Gorta Mor," a beautiful Irish landscape is shown in contrast to a family being evicted from their home. The reflection cast by this window serves as a reminder that those who visit the museum are entering sacred ground. Another example is Margaret Lyster Chamberlain's sculpture "The Leave Taking," of a starved family boarding a ship. The piece eloquently captures the range of emotions that took place at such a departure: the sorrow and the despair. It calls to mind James Joyce's description of the the Atlantic as a bowl of bitter tears. But the piece also speaks to the possibility of hope and rebirth.

The art-centered approach of the Great Hunger Museum creates a new space for remembrance, and it also provides an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which the Irish people eventually triumphed in the face of this tragedy. Those who immigrated to America endured a dangerous crossing. And those who survived, arrived hungry, ill, and often penniless. But they did not arrive empty-handed. They brought with them a strong work ethic and an even stronger spirit that would help to build America. They found work digging canals, building railroads and raising skyscrapers. They brought with them a love of words that enriched American journalism and literature and produced writers such as Eugene O'Neill. They brought a great reverence for education and created renowned schools, colleges, and universities across the country.

The United States has forever been enriched by the rich culture and vitality the Irish brought with them. While Ireland has never regained the population it lost during the famine, out of this tragedy emerged a blessing. Ireland gained a deep connection to America and a powerful diaspora that wants to see Ireland

to succeed. And we can see those results today in the enduring familial, cultural and economic ties that exist between our countries. Annual U.S. investment in Ireland now tops more than 200 billion. Each year more than 8,000 American students choose to study here, instilling an interest in and love of Ireland in the next generation. And, I am continually amazed by the rich and deep cultural exchange between our two countries. Ireland offers beautiful locations for Hollywood filmmakers, countless performance opportunities for American musicians who tour here, and a staggering number of conferences and festivals at which U.S. and Irish artists forge new creative collaborations.

Today, with the launch of the Famine Folios, we celebrate not only the good work of this important museum but also the generations—on both side of the Atlantic—who overcame the heartbreaking losses of the famine to find a brighter future. Congrats to Niamh and all those at the Great Hunger Museum who are working to preserve this defining moment in our shared history.