

**Remarks by President McAleese
at the Commemoration of the
Battle of Kinsale - Fort Hill, Summer Cove,
Saturday 22nd September 2001**

A Mhógacht, a Chathaoirligh, a chuireoirí uaisle agus a aíonna.

Tá mé an buíoch díbh as am chuireadh a thug sibh dom teacht anseo inniu ag an ócáid stairiúl, speisialta seo.

There is something very poignant about gathering as we do, in this beautiful and historic place to commemorate one of the most renowned events in Irish history, the Battle of Kinsale in 1601. Many people have worked hard to make this event one of wide embrace, acknowledging that those events of four centuries ago impacted profoundly on the history of Ireland, of Great Britain and Spain. In the many years between those events and today, the forces of history have often skewed the relationship between this island and our neighbouring island. Generations have paid a high price for history's legacy and it is a matter of both pride and reassurance to us that we meet today in an era of healthier, more respectful, more egalitarian relationships, crafted diligently and painstakingly by men and women of goodwill and peace.

Ireland, Spain, and the United Kingdom are today partners in the European Union, an enterprise linking sovereign nations in a partnership which deliberately seeks to turn its back on centuries of conflict and which seeks to put the wisdom of bitter experience to use in building a future of consensus. We meet at a time when Ireland's fortunes have been transformed from weakness to strength, from oppression to self-confidence, from pathos to pride. Just as the Battle of Kinsale was a turning point in our history, so we are privileged to be living through another such turning point. Kinsale and its aftermath cast a huge cloud over Ireland. Today we feel that cloud lifting.

The Battle of Kinsale was the last battle fought by the Irish Chieftains. As battles go it was little more than a rout, but with defeat came decimation of the Gaelic way of life. Government, systems of control, language, customs, religion and ownership of land all changed in Ireland. In Spain the Armada's failure provoked Philip III to seek peace with England, ending more than 20 years of hostilities with the Treaty of London in 1604. But it was the peace of the defeated, a peace which drains the hearts of one side and puffs up the pride of the other. The Flight of the Earls which followed Kinsale might just as well have been the flight of Irish hope. With them went the poets, the intellectuals, the cultural lifeblood and the heart went out of a people. By the end of the century that started with Kinsale the poet Daibhí O'Brúadait was in deep mourning -- a brokenness captured in the poem D'Aithle na Bhfileadh.

*"D'Aithle na Bhfileadh n-ualas
truahsan timheal an tsaoghail
clan na n-ollamn go neagna
folamh gan freagra gaobhair*

*The high poets are gone
And I mourn for the world's waning,
The sons of those learned masters
Emptied of sharp response.*

O'Bruadair's grim snapshot of post-Kinsale Ireland contains no sign of hope or redemption. Yet life did move on. Ireland changed. It faced more and worse suffering, more and worse man-made calamity in the centuries which followed. Each new layer changed the landscape of the future, made the ground we now stand on both metaphorically and in reality. The challenge, and it is an all-consuming challenge that we on this island face 400 years to the day from that Spanish landing here in Kinsale, is how we can drag ourselves out of history's traps to create our own future. Amnesia about the past is not the answer, nor is denial. Each of the protagonists, British, Irish, Spanish has something to learn about the self and about the other, from a searching understanding of the forces which give a distinctive shape to the collective national psyche and which wrote the story of this battle differently in each land. In one a bitter failure, in another a great triumph, in another a grandiose mistake.

Why was Kinsale important to each of us? What did it contribute to our distinctive folk imaginations, carried through the centuries like torches? From today's distance what forces, prejudices, passions and perceptions from those days still impact on the politics of today? What things are we still dealing with or ignoring at our peril?

Is today a day for stirring up or laying to rest? Do those of us who believe in a future based on mutual respect, justice, equality and dialogue, really have a choice? The Good Friday Agreement is about laying fears to rest. It is about accepting that 95% of something humanly decent is better, a million times better than 100% of nothing. Some if its terms are, we know, unpalatable in one way or another to both traditions on this Island and yet for all that and possibly even because of that, the people North and South overwhelmingly embraced the spirit of compromise which made the agreement possible and which is its fuel. The agreement made winners of all sides.

Four hundred years on from Kinsale and many, many battles big and small later, we know that the culture of dispirited losers and triumphalistic winners is the sure seed-bed of more battles, more violence. It has been a long road from Kinsale to this opportunity offered by the politics of dignified compromise. But like all opportunities of a lifetime it must be grasped during the lifetime of the opportunity. I hope there will be a day four hundred years from now commemorating the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and describing it as a turning point in Irish history, in British history and in the history of Europe.

The world is still reeling from the terrible acts of hatred visited upon the United States only last week. Another bitter and unconscionable lesson in the politics of contempt, the politics of loathing. The world stands at another potential turning point in the tide of human history. For how many more centuries will the course of human history be defined by episodes of violence? How many more children will learn how good or bad we are at battling each other?

Today's commemoration should provoke us to turn our backs on all those things which promote hatred, oppression, intolerance, inequality, victimhood, supremacy and all the nasty "isms" they spawn. We have a chance to do something the Battle of Kinsale did not do - to change the tide of Ireland's history for the good, to change the tide of Great Britain's history for the good, to vindicate that fated helping hand that came from Spain, to become good neighbours all, good friends, each different, each comfortable with difference, comfortable with each other, working together for a future where history is made only by the peacemakers. There are those who think we have a choice, but it is the kind of choice which allows us only one answer.

Ireland resounds to the sound of poetry, music, dance, discussion, debate, to the sound of children in schools, to the sound of students in colleges, to the sound of people in jobs, to the sound of politics working, to the sound of outreach in Europe, engagement with the whole world. Daibhi O'Bruadair would I think be the first to admit we are no longer emptied but filling and refilling the "centuries arrears" spoken of so eloquently by the 20th century Ulster poet John Hewitt. We are indeed building to fill the centuries arrears. Here at this commemoration we are reminded just how great those arrears are and how urgent the work of ending battles.

My thanks to all those who so diligently created this special day for us and to those whose presence here allows us to believe and hope in a future of respectful friendship where once there was none.

Thank you.