

**REMARKS BY PRESIDENT OF IRELAND,
MARY MCALEESE**



AT THE CENTRE CULTUREL IRLANDAIS



Paris, 23rd November 2005

*Monsieur le President de la Fondation,
Your Grace,
Ambassador,
Distinguished guests,*

Je suis vraiment heureuse de me trouver ici de nouveau au Centre Culturel Irlandais de Paris. Il y a cinq ans j'étais ici avec mon mari, Martin, pour voir les plans de rénovation du Collège des Irlandais et aujourd'hui nous avons l'occasion d'admirer le résultat. Nous désirons remercier tous ceux qui ont contribué à cette réussite.

It is said that Saint Columbanus loved nature and that wild animals figured among his friends. According to legend, squirrels hung on to his robes; wolves came to him for a caress and bears brought their young for benediction. So it is very fitting that we remember Ireland's

great saint in an open courtyard where, in time to come, the odd squirrel is likely to wander by, though hopefully not too many wolves or bears.

It is quite a triumph for a 6th century monk that his name can draw us together in such special homage some fourteen centuries later. His lengthy and legendary travels connected so many parts of Europe through the one hundred or more abbeys he and his disciples founded, that Robert Schuman called him a patron saint for all involved in the construction of a unified Europe. Some have indeed referred to him as Ireland's first European.

At the end of the 6th century, Ireland was already the famous island of saints and scholars and Columban was merely one of many Irish monks whose life became a pilgrimage of exile and evangelism. It is ironic that the man credited with bringing much of the church in Western Europe back into communion with Rome never made it to that great city but died on this day in Bobbio in Italy in 615. For the waves of Irish who followed him in every generation, whether in voluntary or involuntary exile, the path they walked or rode or drove had been made straight by Columban's hand and heart.

This College was a refuge for Irish clerics who lived through very different times many centuries after Columban, times of appalling repression when exile was about refuge more than pilgrimage. Here in this College and in this city a huge investment was made in the education of Irish clerics and through them in the steeling of the Irish people to withstand the oppressive circumstances which so pauperised and terrorised them. In fact the College has almost as colourful a history as Columban himself, as makeshift war hospital and even as shelter to a young Polish priest who was destined to become Pope. But the College survived its many crises, changing vocation rather than location but always keeping alive the link between Paris and Ireland, a link once made by Columban himself when he healed a man with evil spirits at the gates of this city.

Today the College remains, in the tradition of Columban, a centre for pastoral outreach but it has a new role as the first government-supported Irish cultural centre established abroad. To celebrate this coming together of the sacred and the secular, the Centre Culturel Irlandais, the Irish Bishop's Conference and the Columban Fathers have commissioned this monumental and inspiring sculpture by Imogen Stuart. Columban is said to have believed there is no boundary between the visible world and the invisible world and in this sculpture Imogen Stuart - often described as a woman of two worlds - uses two entwined wings to capture Columban's spirit. It's a spirit of nurture, of embrace, of the surging power that comes from using two wings, harnessing all the talent, courage and vision that can be wrapped up in each individual but only reveals its full potential when used in partnership.

Imogen's beautiful statue is made of stone, enduring, strong, resilient. We hope it is a metaphor for the values Columban bequeathed to us and for the Europe we are building for ourselves and our children. Who are the children of Columban, Columcille, Columbanus, Columba? In Ireland they are all those who seek reconciliation, who invest in peace, who instil respect for the otherness of others, who forswear sectarianism, who look to the future, determined that it will be characterised by the friendships, the partnerships, the mutual respect that history rendered still-born. Columban has become their father figure whether they are Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist. Just as he struck out in hope and faith into strange and uncharted territories all those centuries ago, so do those who share the island of Ireland strike out into a future of their careful and considered making. The story of Columban

inspires us precisely because, fourteen hundred years after his death, we are struck by the immense potential for good of one passionate life lived well.

I am reminded of the prophetic words of the late Tomas Cardinal O'Fiaich - no stranger himself to the College - who expressed the hope that Irish Europeans might "find inspiration and courage in the words of this sixth-century pioneer, Southern-born, Northern-trained, Irish-speaking, European-minded, who set his country on a new path to which it is now returning centuries later".

As we embark together on a new journey, or pilgrimage, I am honoured and delighted to inaugurate this marvellous and inspiring sculpture by Imogen Stuart, to acknowledge the invaluable help give by Philip O'Neil and to wish the Centre Culturel Irlandais and the College des Irlandais many happy, successful years on their shared pilgrimage.

Je voudrais vous remercier tous pour votre accueil si chaleureux et adresser mes voeux les meilleures á l'occasion de la fite de Saint Colomban. J'espere que ceux parmi vous qui participent au colloque sur la vie et le message de Saint Colomban pourront s'inspirer de cette statue et voir leurs recherches couronnées de succès.