

FOOTSTEPS TOWARDS FREEDOM SCULPTURES
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
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Good afternoon.

I begin by paying my respects to the Mouheneener people, the traditional and original owners of this land –those who have passed before us; and in acknowledgement of today’s Tasmanian Aboriginal community, being the custodians of this land.

Your Excellency Michael D. Higgins, President of Ireland and Mrs Sabina Higgins, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be with you today as we officiate at this ceremony commemorating an enduring historical linkage between the peoples of Ireland and of Tasmania.

May I acknowledge among you:

- His Excellency the Ambassador of Australia to Ireland Mr Richard Andrews;
- Sculptor Rowan Gillespie;
- the Footsteps Towards Freedom principals, who created and drove the entire project: John Kelly, State Cinema owner; Carole Edwards, urban designer; Lucy Frost, Emeritus Professor of English; and Jo Lyngcoln, cultural heritage consultant;
- and the many organisations and individuals who have contributed financially and in other ways to ensure the completion of this lengthy project, including: the Vos Family Foundation; Ros Escott and John Coates; the Sisters of Charity of Australia; the Tasmanian and Commonwealth Governments.

The bland facts of female transportation from Ireland and elsewhere to Van Diemen’s Land – some 12,500 women and 2,500 children between 1803 and 1853 – do not and cannot tell their story with any kind of empathy.

But on this site of disembarkation, Irish sculptor Rowan Gillespie has gone a long way towards rectifying that. His sculptures dramatically and poignantly mark the exact site of their arrival and now also stand as a powerful marker to where the story is told, the World Heritage Cascades Female Factory Historic Site.

It is a remarkable fact that these bronze sculptures are modelled from living descendants of convict women who stepped ashore here. This, I think, reinforces for us all the reality that, while the lives of those women were often wretched, they were also in many respects the founding mothers of today's Tasmania.

Where did these 12,500 women and their 2,500 children go when they stepped ashore here on Hunter Island? At first, they were assigned directly to settlers. In Governor Sorell's time (1817-24), he boarded the ship with a list of people who wanted servants. The surgeon-superintendent matched women to the list and they were disembarked and delivered by constables. Those unassigned because they were described as of 'bad character' by the surgeon, went straight to the first female factory in Murray Street.

The first female factory was cramped and the conditions were awful. In 1828 Governor Arthur opened a new Female Factory at Cascades and until 1843 this was where the newly disembarked female convicts went, walking up Macquarie Street, to await assignment. This was also where convict women on assignment returned if they committed offences or became pregnant. The conditions at Cascades were little better than at the first female factory. It was damp, dank, cold and unhealthy. Many of the children in the nursery died.

Following the introduction of the Probation system, new arrivals went directly to the *Anson*, a hulk moored in New Town Bay. Women convicts were rowed to the *Anson* and climbed a rope ladder up the side. There they stayed for six months where they were taught a range of skills before being assigned to settlers to work for wages. It was during this period that many Irish women convicts were transported to Van Diemen's Land.

Their collective resilience showed levels of extraordinary courage, in the face of what was a rough, militaristic society of overwhelming indifference to their appalling lives in the Female Factory.

These four sculptures in the forecourt of MACq01 add a new cultural dimension to Hobart's waterfront. They are testament as well to the close historical ties between the two islands – Ireland and Tasmania – at opposite ends of the world. They strengthen the bonds of affinity between the two countries created by the transportation of these women so many years ago.

Your Excellency, your being here today is the best possible reminder that those ties are not merely historic but enduring. Thank you for officiating with me today.