

**THOMAS FRANCIS MEAGHER
UNVEILING OF A COMEMMORATIVE SEAT
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
ST JOHN THE EVANGELIST CHURCH, RICHMOND
SUNDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2018**

Good afternoon.

I am delighted to be able to acknowledge today the attendance at this ceremony of His Excellency the Ambassador of Ireland Mr Breandán Ó Caollaí and Ms Carmel Callan.

Warm greetings also to the Mayor of Clarence, Alderman Doug Chipman and Mrs Jo Chipman.

May I also acknowledge the very fine craftsmanship of Peter Naughton, who created the beautiful commemorative seat from Huon pine sourced from the Queenstown area. I know that Peter has worked professionally in forestry for many years and his knowledge of our indigenous timbers was well expressed through his editorship of the publication *Forest Trees of Tasmania*.

And my fulsome congratulations are offered to Dr Christina Henri for initiating the Thomas Francis Meagher project; and to Tasmanian historian Reg Watson, her colleague in the project.

The story of Thomas Francis Meagher is well documented: he began to train for the law in Dublin but became distracted by politics and joined the Young Irelander's wing of the Repeal Association; was one of the committee of five who led the abortive 1848 Irish insurrection; was tried for sedition and transported to Van Diemen's Land; then escaped to the United States, where he resumed legal studies and was admitted to the Bar; joined the army and became a brigadier general and after the Civil War, acting Governor of Montana Territory.

But let me now step outside of that mere summary. Here is what Meagher was told when found guilty in 1848, and I quote:

"The sentence of the court is that you Thomas Francis Meagher be taken thence to the gaol from where you came and be thence drawn on a hurdle to a place of execution; that you be hanged by the neck until you are dead; and that afterwards

your head shall be severed from your body and your body be divided into four quarters, to be disposed of as Her Majesty may think fit. And may the Almighty God have mercy on your soul.”ⁱ

You would think that, given that grotesque and gruesome original sentence, exile to an island on the other side of the world would be a blessed relief. And for many this proved to be the case.

However, let me take a moment to remind you of the perceived reality of our island, back then. The historian John West, whose *History of Tasmania* was first published in Launceston in 1852, recounts the following, and now I quote from West’s book:

“In our native land we are looked upon with feelings of horror. An old and respected colonist ... took his family to an hotel [in England]. He had not been there long before the landlord learnt that he had come from this place: [the landlord] came to him with a face full of concern, and said, ‘You did not tell me, sir, that you came from Van Diemen’s Land; do not let it be known, or I shall be ruined.’”ⁱⁱ

So it is very pleasing to be able to record – 169 years later – that when Meagher and his fellow exiles reached Tasmania on 27 October, 1849, he wrote this in his work *Meagher of the Sword*:

“Nothing I have seen in other countries – not even in my own – equals the beauty, the glory of the scenery through which we glided up from Tasman Head to Hobart Town. To the left were bold cliffs, compact and straight – built as the finest masonry, springing up full 200ft and more, above the surface of the water, and bearing on their broad and level summits the forests of the gum-tree ...

Mount Wellington, a majestic mountain, towering to the height of 4,000 feet behind the town, and wearing a thin circlet of snow upon its head, disclosed itself in all its greatness, grandeur, and solemnity ... Gazing at them, we lost sight of our misfortunes, and the dull, cold destiny which at that moment, like the deepening twilight, fell upon our path. Gazing at them, we forgot for the while we were prisoners ...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Thomas Francis Meagher, and those he left behind in Van Diemen’s Land and then Tasmania, could not have known that those words of his would be repeated here today. But it is good, if poignant, to be able to do so, near the grave of the infant son of Thomas Meagher and his wife Catherine Bennett. Their son Henry Emmett Fitzgerald O’Meagher was born after Meagher’s escape and died of influenza aged

just four months, one month after his father's arrival in New York. After his death and burial at Richmond and before sailing for Ireland, Catherine returned to live at her parents' home at my home town Norfolk, where her father had entertained another of the Young Irelanders, Terrence MacManus.

The stories of the Young Irelanders and their connection with Tasmania is a fascinating one. And it is good to see that this story is acknowledged by memorials such as this, so that we encourage people to explore and be inspired by this story and follow the Young Irelander's trail in Tasmania from places such as Maria Island and Port Arthur (where Smith O'Brien was detained), Campbell Town, Ross and Lake Sorell (where Thomas Meagher lived), Richmond (where Catherine and Thomas Meagher's son is buried), Bothwell (where John Mitchell lived) and New Norfolk, home of Catherine Bennett and briefly of Smith O'Brien and where Terence McManus made a home at the Grange.

Thank you.

ⁱ Watson p. 23 para 3.

ⁱⁱ West p. 282 footnote.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Meagher of the Sword. Speeches of T. F. Meagher in Ireland, 1846-1848; his narrative of events in Ireland in July, 1848; personal reminiscences of Waterford, Galway and his Schooldays*, edited by A. Griffith, Dublin, M. H. Gill & Son, 1916, digitised version no page reference.