

# Irish Migration Studies in Latin America

Society for Irish Latin American Studies

## *La vida no es de nadie - todos somos la vida* [1] Address by the President of Ireland Mary McAleese to the Senate in Mexico, 6 April 1999

Edited and introduced by Edmundo Murray



Johann Theodor de Bry, Map of New Spain, 1597 (detail)

### Introduction

Between 31 March and 7 April 1999, the president of Ireland Mary McAleese and her husband Martin visited Honduras and Mexico. In Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, the president viewed the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch (October 1998) and met with the authorities and volunteers. On Sunday, 4 April 1999, McAleese travelled to Mexico for a five-day state visit, the first visit of an Irish president to Mexico. She held a meeting with the then Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo at the National Palace in Mexico City, and made preparations to open the Irish embassy in Mexico later in the year. Two memoranda of understanding, on cultural and educational exchanges, were signed in the presence of the presidents of both countries. During her visit, president McAleese was given the freedom of Mexico City, she laid a wreath at the monument honouring Irishmen who fought for Mexico, and was guest of honour at a state dinner given by president Zedillo. The Irish delegation included Sean O'Huiginn (ambassador to Mexico), Frank Murray (secretary general to the government), Padraic McKernan (secretary general at the Department of Foreign Affairs), Eileen Gleeson (special advisor to the president), Brian Nason (chief of protocol), and Mel Cousins (advisor to the Minister of Social, Community and Family Affairs).

The solemn session at the Mexican Senate commenced at 10.40am on 6 April 1999, when the Senate president Juan Antonio García Villa welcomed Mrs. McAleese and the Irish delegation. Senator García Villa expressed the view that Mexico and Ireland 'share common goals towards the attainment of a new world order, based on unrestricted respect for legal equality among states, and the intrinsic capacity to decide on their type of government and to build their own future'. After the Irish president's discourse, García Villa closed the solemn session at 11.55am, adding that the senators were given the 'pleasant surprise that most of [Mrs. McAleese's address] was in the language of Cervantes and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz' (Senado de la República, *Diario de los Debates: Versión Estenográfica*, 1999, available online at <http://www.senado.gob.mx/>, cited 15 February 2007).

### Text of the Speech by President Mary McAleese (6 April 1999)

Mr. President,

Madam, Gran Comisión President,

Senators, Ambassadors, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for your introduction, Mr. President, and your kind words of welcome. I am deeply honoured to accept your invitation to address the Senate of this great and diverse nation of the United States of Mexico. Although separated by geography, Ireland and Mexico have long had much in common. We each have a rich cultural legacy, a vibrant tradition of literature, music and folk culture. We both bear the scars of a traumatic history, an experience that has deeply wounded the psyche and soul of our nations. We both know the pain of losing generations of our young people to emigration. Yet we each know, too, that from that history and that pain, it is possible to build a better future. It is a long slow path, a path that each of us has travelled and is travelling still. But we in Ireland are living proof, if proof were required, that the difficult experiences of the past can be transformed into strengths, which hold the promise and possibility of a better life for all our people.

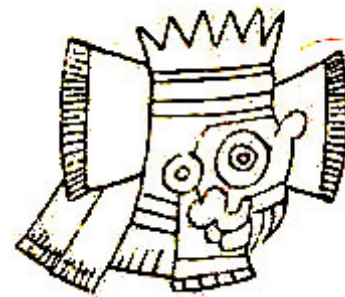
It is that journey that we in Ireland have made, and which I believe will have a resonance and a value here in Mexico, that is the subject of my address to you today. In recent years, Ireland has become a land of hope and a place of infinite possibility. The social, economic and cultural energies of our people - which all too often in the past found full expression only outside Ireland - are now, with remarkable dynamism, transforming our country.

The question, of course, is how that transformation came about. It is all the more remarkable in view of where we had come from as a nation. At the time of our independence in 1922, Ireland's economy was largely agricultural, and almost entirely dependent on one market, that of Britain. From its inception, the young Irish State relied on economic protectionism coupled with wariness towards foreign investment. That dependence on Britain was not confined to the economic sphere. Centuries of domination had left us drained of confidence, full of uncertainty about our own talents. We looked to Britain not only for economic survival but also for social and cultural reassurance. We existed in a damaging love hate relationship, bristling with antagonism for our nearest neighbour, yet valuing its language, outlook, culture and traditions more than our own. The lesson we had learnt over centuries of domination was too deeply ingrained to be dissolved through a mere declaration of independence. That experience had also engraved on our psyche a deep and lasting fear of outside influences. Our history had taught us that the outside world was a threatening place, a place where might was right and to be a small, insecure nation was to risk being overrun and dominated by a larger one. We shored ourselves up on the periphery of Europe and witnessed from the sidelines two World Wars, which seemed to prove the truth of our fears. We convinced ourselves that our only chance of survival was to isolate ourselves, to save what little we had by cocooning ourselves against the outside world. We educated our young only to see them leave to seek in other lands the opportunity for economic survival they could not find at home.

Yet slowly but surely things started to change. The 1960's brought with them a new sense of openness to new opportunities, new influences. We began to see that isolation, far from guaranteeing our economic and cultural survival, would be its death knell. Major initiatives were taken at the time to generate an investment climate which would encourage foreign export companies to locate in Ireland. The first steps away from reliance on protectionism, and towards a more open and trade oriented approach, were taken.

It was, however, our membership of the European Economic Community, as it was then, to which we acceded in 1973, which really spurred on our economic development. Membership increased the attractions of Ireland as a base for manufacturing industry. We targeted key industrial sectors, producing sophisticated and high-value products which would offer the best growth potential.

Membership of the European Union proved to be an important first step on our way to economic success. Yet we would have been unable to avail of the opportunities it offered had it not been for our most important resource: an educated and skilled workforce. The opening up of free second level education to all our people in the 1960's proved to be one of the most far-sighted and important elements in securing our later economic success. It provided opportunities to a far wider range of people, from all social and economic backgrounds, and thereby released a huge reservoir of talent and energy. It is a resource from which we are now reaping the benefits a hundred-fold. It taught us that such an investment is not only worthwhile but indispensable if a country is truly to reach its full potential. I know that many of you here today share that view and have shown huge commitment and energy in applying it here in Mexico. I warmly commend you on your continuing efforts.





Juana Inés de la Cruz de Asbaje y Ramírez  
(c.1651-1695)

Nowhere has this policy had more effect, and more benefits, than in relation to women. For generations, indeed for centuries, the talents of women were confined to the narrow sphere of home and family. Their contribution as wives and mothers helped to seedbed and support the success of their husbands and sons. Yet it was a confined sphere, imposed by cultural norms and traditions, often internalised by the women themselves. The influx of outside influences in the 1960's and particularly our membership of the European Union, challenged those past certainties that there could be only one role for women. It brought new opportunities in education and employment. It changed expectations and for the first time created real choices for women. Many grasped them with enthusiasm and energy. They proved once again that a nation which relies on only half its resources can expect to realise only half of its potential.

Today in Ireland, there is an extraordinary level of confidence among women. They have started to take their rightful place in business and in politics, in all aspects of the private and public spheres of Irish life. Indeed as the second woman in succession to be elected as President of Ireland, a reality that would have been unthinkable a generation ago, I have particular pride in coming here today to this gathering of highly distinguished Senators, women as well as men.

I have great pleasure in seeing that in Mexico, as in Ireland, the talents and giftedness of women are also blossoming. This was brought home to be in particular when I was greeted a few moments ago by Senadora María de los Ángeles Moreno Uriega, the President of the Gran Comisión of the Senate, and by having already had the pleasure of meeting your distinguished Foreign Minister, Mrs. Rosario Green, during her recent visit to Dublin.

Indeed their success should come as no surprise, for Mexico has an honourable tradition as an advocate of women's rights. More than three hundred years ago, Sor Juana, a remarkable poet and nun who was born near Mexico city wrote the poem *Hombres Necios*. [2] It speaks of the imbalance of power between men and women, in a way that seems very modern and relevant to today's world.

Indeed, if we think that the term 'male chauvinist pig' is a modern invention, we need only turn to her work to see that feminism was alive and well in seventeenth-century Mexico!

Three hundred years on, that exclusive ownership by men of the structures of power has started to change. We have now entered a new era of partnership. Indeed I believe that the next millennium will be a time when the potential that women have already demonstrated, will be fully recognised and harnessed. An era when both our societies will utilise the talents and energies of all our people, men and women alike, and be astonished by the dividends that will flow from this for society as a whole.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have spoken of how, in the span of a single generation, Ireland, as a member of the European Union, has been economically and socially transformed - a transformation underpinned by broadening educational and employment opportunities and by opening up to the outside world.

There is another critical factor in our success that I have barely touched on so far, but which has striking parallels to the Mexican experience: that is, the richness and uniqueness of our cultural heritage. Ireland has long being renowned for its literature and poetry. Yet often, they were resources that found more acclaim abroad than at home. Other aspects of our heritage - our language, traditional music, folklore and dance - were in danger of being lost and forgotten, inextricably linked in the minds of our young people with a poor, rural past which seemed to have little relevance for the new, more affluent and more urban world we wished to join.

Our membership of the European Union taught us the value of what we were in danger of carelessly discarding. It provided a showcase in which that heritage was seen and admired by others. They respected its uniqueness in a world that seemed to becoming increasingly homogenised, and their admiration helped us realise for ourselves the extraordinary resource we had at our disposal. We came to see that the old can sit comfortably beside the new, each enriching the other. We went out into the world with a new pride, a new sense of confidence, which has engendered a cultural renaissance. Our musicians, dancers, poets and writers, traditional and modern alike, are now acclaimed both in Ireland and throughout the world. Our language in particular, which almost disappeared through the experience of colonisation, has now been re-found and reinvigorated by a new generation.

Indeed, we have turned the experience on its head, re-colonising the English language as demonstrated by our having given the world four Nobel Prize Winners for Literature. This is a source of great pride for us. It shows once again that what could have been a cultural disaster has become a cultural strength.

We have come at last to realise the truth of what one of our great poets, Patrick Kavanagh, [3] told us many years ago:

around you, don't forget is genius which  
walks with feet rooted in the native soil....  
...this tradition is what the stranger comes to buy or borrow  
what you would leave to chase a worthless mission.

I believe that this renaissance has had an impact beyond the cultural sphere, that there is a close link between cultural confidence and economic success. That confidence has filtered into a much wider understanding that we can compete with the best in any sphere, compete and succeed. We need not fear or eschew outside influences: we can learn from them and adapt them to our own circumstances.

That confidence has translated into the development of a vibrant indigenous business sector. Our young people not only have the necessary knowledge and skills, built up through our education system and through their experience of working in multinational companies. They also now have the confidence to take those skills and apply them in establishing their own high-tech companies. My hope is that Ireland's example can support and encourage Mexico to follow a similar path. Mexico, with its great Aztec, Mayan and other ancient heritage, also possesses an enormous cultural resource. Its writers have greatly enriched the literature of one of the great world languages. It is important to value that resource as a national treasure, to use it a source of energy which can build up national confidence and pride. For Mexico, as for Ireland, that sense of confidence is a vital ingredient in future economic success on the world stage. If it can be correctly channelled, no difficulty, however great, is insurmountable.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the most painful and intractable problems that any country can face is witnessing the loss of its young people to emigration, year after year. It drains a country of its most talented and energetic members, the very ones who have the capacity to create opportunities in their native country.

Milestones in Ireland-Mexico Diplomatic Relations	
1928 (March)	Irish minister in Washington Timothy A. Smiddy accredited in Mexico
1975 (August)	Bilateral relations established
circa 1977	Rómulo O'Farrill Jr. appointed honorary consul of Ireland in Mexico
1987 (October)	Michael O'Kennedy (minister for agriculture) visits Mexico
1990 (April)	Desmond O'Malley (minister for industry and commerce) visits Mexico
1991 (June)	Mexican embassy established in Dublin
1991 (September)	Gerard Collins (minister for foreign affairs) visits Mexico
1992 (February)	Bernardo Sepúlveda Amor opens Mexican embassy in Dublin
1992 (December)	Irish commercial mission to Mexico
1993 (July)	Charlie McCreavy (minister for tourism and trade) visits Mexico
1994 (January)	Albert Reynolds (Taoiseach) visits Mexico
1997 (May)	Vicente Fox (governor of Guanajuato) visits Ireland
1999 (March)	Rosario Green (Mexican secretary of foreign affairs) visits Ireland
1999 (April)	President Mary McAleese visits Mexico
1999 (July)	Mexican parliamentary mission to Ireland Irish embassy opens in Mexico - Art Agnew appointed first ambassador
1999 (October)	
1999 (September)	Sile de Valera (Irish minister for arts and heritage) visits Mexico
2002 (November)	President Vicente Fox visits Ireland
2003 (January)	Bertie Ahern (Taoiseach) visits Mexico
2003 (February)	Reyes Tamez Guerra (secretary of public education) visits Ireland
2004 (December)	Martha Cecilia Jaber Breceda appointed ambassador to Ireland
2005 (July)	Dermot Brangan appointed ambassador to Mexico
<b>Sources:</b>	
- <i>Dail Eireann, Parliamentary Debates</i> , vols. 22 (1 March 1920), 300 (23 June 1988), 310 (24 February 1988), 438 (1 February 1994), 498 (9 December 1998), 514 (16 February 2000), and 516 (23 March 2000).	
- Embassy of Mexico to Ireland, Relaciones Bilaterales (available online <a href="http://portal.sre.gob.mx/irlanda/">http://portal.sre.gob.mx/irlanda/</a> , accessed on 16 February 2007).	

Murray, Edmundo (ed.). 'La vida no es de nadie - todos somos la vida': Address by the President of Ireland Mary McAleese to the Senate in Mexico, 6 April 1999.....

We in Ireland understand that plight which Mexico faces, for until recently we faced it ourselves. Generation after generation, unable to eke out a living on the land which had barely supported their ancestors, were forced to seek opportunity in foreign lands. Yet we have demonstrated that it is possible to escape that vicious circle, to create instead a charmed circle as we enter the new Millennium. We have now experienced a return of many of our most recent emigrants, whose experience abroad has enriched the economic and cultural fabric of our country. We have seen too, that the generations who were forced to emigrate, and who put down roots in other countries, today form a global Irish family which is an immense resource. We have friends in every corner of the world. They are people who look with affection on Ireland, and who have provided very tangible support in our efforts to bring peace to Northern Ireland, both politically and in terms of financial support through initiatives such as the International Fund for Ireland.

Our experience provides hope for other countries, including Mexico, that what is now an immense loss can one day become an extraordinary resource.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen

Our countries are so distant, and yet share so many similarities, that I feel there is much we can learn from each other. A strong sense of independence - combined with a keen appreciation of the necessary interdependence of nations - is at the core of our consciousness as peoples. It is a happy coincidence - or indeed perhaps no coincidence at all - that inside the Column of Independence here in Mexico City, there stands a statue to Guillén de Lamport, born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1615, and recognised as one of the earliest precursors of Mexican independence.

It is important that we continue to build on those historical links. I greatly welcome the launch last October by your Foreign Minister, Mrs. Green, of a branch of the Ireland Fund of Mexico, the first in Latin America. This fund will promote cultural and educational exchanges between our two countries, including, in particular, exchanges between underprivileged students.

In recent years we have also built closer links in academic and cultural relations. Trinity College Dublin has a cooperation agreement with the College of Mexico City. There is a Centre for Mexican Studies in University College, Cork.

Such ties are being reinforced at a more global level by increased co-operation and partnership between the European Union and the countries of Latin America. In June of this year, Mexico will co-host the first ever Summit Meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the European Union and of Latin America and the Caribbean. I welcome this initiative, which will reaffirm the historic and ever closer bonds between the New World and the Old Continent.

The EU Presidency, in inaugurating the first ever EU-Mexico Joint Council last July, set our relations firmly in the context of respect for democratic principles and fundamental human rights, as proclaimed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



Presidents Mary McAleese and Ernesto Zedillo during the state dinner at the National Palace of Mexico  
(*Presidencia de la República de México*)

No less than the European Union, Mexico has declared a clear commitment to these principles. You have the authority of your own history for the conviction that deep respect for human rights is an essential component of peace and security both in the world at large and within nations. We in Ireland share those values, for we know that smaller countries, outside the main power-blocks, have a vital role to play in strengthening those rights internationally. We look forward to future co-operation between our two countries, through the mechanisms of the UN, in playing an active and constructive role on the world stage.

Outside this Senate Chamber is a plaque to President Benito Juárez,

who in the last century recognised with remarkably modern political judgement, that: *Entre los individuos, como entre las Naciones, el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz.* [4] May the wisdom of Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian lawyer from Oaxaca, be our guide as together we enter a new and closer relationship at the dawn of the new millennium.

May his words also guide us in Ireland, as we seek to bring peace and reconciliation to Northern Ireland. The signing of the Good Friday Agreement just over a year ago, has brought that prospect ever-closer. We do not yet have a perfect peace - isolated groups have continued to carry out acts of savagery which, being now so much rarer than they were, seem in some ways all the more shocking.

What is important is that, in working to resolve the difficulties which inevitably have arisen and will arise, we do not lose sight of the immense strides which have been made in so short a period, or of the enormous potential which will unfold over time. The values which inform the peace process are nevertheless universal in their significance. We believe that our experience can be of potential interest and value to those elsewhere who seek to resolve conflict through dialogue.

In our endeavours, we have been encouraged and assisted, in good times and bad, by the unfailing interest and support of the international community, and, on behalf of the Irish Government, I offer my thanks to the Government and people of Mexico.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The relations between Mexico and Ireland have long been characterised by shared feelings of respect and affection. It is my earnest hope that my visit will contribute to the further development of the warm ties that exist between us.

I am deeply conscious of the honour conferred on me by your invitation to address the Senate today. It has been my great pleasure to accept your invitation. I am equally conscious that my visit to your country has afforded me the unique opportunity to witness at first hand the innumerable achievements, over many generations, of the warm, vibrant and immensely diverse people of Mexico. That too has been an honour, eagerly embraced, and one that will endure in my memory.

Let me leave you with one final thought which springs from the poem "Piedra de Sol [Fragmentos]", by Mexico's Nobel Prize Winner, Octavio Paz. In this poem, he asks: *La vida. ¿Cuándo fue de veras nuestra?* [When was life truly ours?]

He tells us: *La vida no es de nadie - todos somos la vida.*

In the end, life is ours if we make it ours. That is what our two countries are striving for: to make life, and the opportunities that life brings, something which belongs to all of us, to all our people. That is what brings peace and prosperity. This is what we must aim for and achieve in the coming Millennium.

Thank you, Mr. President



Octavio Paz (1914-1998)

### **Notes**

[1] Life is no-one's - we are all life. Poem by Octavio Paz, *Piedra de sol* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957). Translated in English as *Sun Stone*, by Muriel Rukeyser (London: New Directions, 1962).

[2] *Stubborn Men*, redondilla (ca. 1680)

[3] Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), major Irish poet

[4] Among individuals, as among nations, respect for the rights of others is peace (this quotation from president Juárez is inscribed on Oaxaca's coat of arms).

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Dr. Stephen Lalor and the Office of the President for kindly providing the text of this speech and the authorisation to publish it.