



### **Honouring Canada's Irish Heritage.**

Now that Ireland Park is a reality, the new board of directors of Ireland Park Foundation has set its sights on further improving the infrastructure around the park and expanding the Irish cultural presence on Toronto's waterfront.

In 1995, Robert Kearns, founder and chairman of the foundation, was moved and inspired by Rowan Gillespie's bronze sculptures of Irish famine figures in Dublin. Kearns had read extensively about Canada's role in the Irish famine migration and sought to acquire the figures for a memorial in Toronto. Before he could do so, however, Ireland's Smurfit Foundation purchased the sculptures and donated them to the city of Dublin and the people of Ireland. They now stand on the Dublin waterfront, depicting the departure of emigrants from Ireland.

Undaunted, Kearns asked Gillespie to create another series of figures representing the arrival of famine refugees in Toronto in 1847. Gillespie agreed, provided that a suitable waterfront location could be secured.

In July 2000, with the help of then-Councillor Olivia Chow, Toronto City Council ratified a proposal to make the southeast corner of Bathurst Quay available.

“There was a window of opportunity to acquire this space that would not be there today,” says Kearns.

The derelict scrap of land was chosen for its unobstructed lake views and the long-term potential of its waterfront location. Being on a quay also established a symbolic water link with the docklands setting of the companion sculptures in Dublin.

The site had great significance to the famine as well—just west of Dr. Reese’s Wharf, where the immigrants landed, and just south of the intersection of Bathurst and Front Streets, where the convalescent hospital housed those who had survived the fever sheds at King and John Streets.

Ireland Park Foundation was incorporated in May 2000 and received charitable status in September 2004. Its formal fundraising campaign to raise \$3.5 million was launched in June 2004.

By 2007, the site had become Ireland Park, thanks to the efforts of the foundation’s board of directors and the generosity of the Ireland Fund of Canada, the Irish community, and the governments of Ireland, Canada and Ontario.

The funds were used to:

- Construct the park’s landscape according to a design contributed by Jonathan Kearns and Kearns Mancini Architects, including a sculptural limestone wall displaying the newly documented names of 675 of the 1,100 famine immigrants who died soon after arrival, a glass tower that is a symbolic beacon of the “New World” and the immigrants’ hopefulness for the future, and several computer displays;
- Commission five new bronze figures by Gillespie;

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Written by Patricia Collins - Last Updated Tuesday, 10 January 2012 08:36

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- Sponsor original research on the history of famine migration from Ireland to Canada by Professor Mark G. McGowan of the University of Toronto, and use that research to produce a two-hour documentary and a book, both titled *Death or Canada*.

“Now we have this great historic and geographic location on Eireann Quay, renamed in honour of Ireland Park,” Kearns says. “The park sits beside the main west entrance to the harbour, has a spectacular view of the city skyline, and will be very close to the island airport tunnel entrance.”

Being situated in an area undergoing massive revitalization means inconvenience, however. The city is rebuilding and enlarging the quay wall on the east side of the park, so the area is closed as a safety precaution until the spring or summer of 2012.

The new \$5-million quay wall will extend more than seven metres into the lake, creating a tree-lined promenade. Soil vaults under the surface will allow trees along both sides of the walkway to grow to their full height, eventually forming a canopy of green. Benches along the land edge and barriers along the water’s edge will provide seating.

The quay wall on the south side of the park is wider but in worse condition than the old east wall now being replaced, so Kearns wants to see the new structure continued around the south side to offer inviting access from either direction.

“It will likely mean more closures, but we have to take the long view,” he says. “The airport tunnel construction will further disrupt the area over the next two years, and there is also the unresolved problem of the old silos next door.”

The concrete silos, once owned by Canada Malting Company, were abandoned in 1987 and slated for demolition. Then in 2010, the city designated them as a heritage site, so now they can’t simply be torn down.

“I like the way they look next to the park—a bit like an old crumbling castle in Ireland,” says Kearns. “But something will have to be done about them, either demolition or repair, and that

will probably involve more inconvenience in the park.”

However, his principal focus is on another relic from the Canada Malting days. The firm’s former executive offices, just to the west of Ireland Park, would make an ideal visitor and interpretation centre, according to Kearns.

“The original three-storey building is a lovely example of Art Deco architecture, which Councillor Adam Vaughan agrees should be preserved and rehabilitated,” he says.

Currently, Toronto’s Urban Forestry Services department uses the area as a marshalling yard for workers. Once construction on the island airport tunnel begins, the Toronto Port Authority will use the site as a construction headquarters, but after that, Kearns plans to acquire the location from the city.

“As with the land for the park, another window of opportunity exists for us to procure this building, so that we can fully tell the story of the Irish immigration experience in Toronto and Canada,” Kearns says.

The renovated building and a new addition would provide a permanent home for the Ireland Park Foundation, with offices, board rooms, meeting rooms, a library, exhibition space for artwork and Irish archaeological material recovered from sites in Canada, and a small theatre to show educational videos for tour groups.

Never one to shy away from a challenge, Kearns is prepared to lobby government bureaucracies and spearhead another multimillion-dollar fundraising campaign to make this vision a reality.

“We have just begun a process to create a whole new and proud awareness of Ireland’s place in the story of Canada,” he says.

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