

Taoiseach, Ladies and Gentlemen

Today is about celebrating a milestone – the tenth anniversary of the opening of the Museum of Country Life. It is about reflecting on achievements: the achievement of a national folk museum for Ireland after decades of campaigning; the achievement of a gamble paying off in locating that museum here in county Mayo; the achievement of quality displays about the lives of our recent ancestors in the permanent exhibition.

Turlough Park is a deceptive place, for beyond the calm tranquillity of the beautiful grounds is a place of restless energy and creativity. The cliché about a museum being like an iceberg is grounded in truth. What visitors see is only a small proportion of what goes on. The objects on display are but a small percentage of the total number of objects in the Collection – some 1,500 out of around 35,000. The objects have to be documented and cared for, studied and catalogued, interpreted and published, their stories told. Much of that work goes on behind the scenes, undertaken by curators, documentation and conservation staff. But some of it also takes place in the public domain, through temporary exhibitions, projects and activities that also involve other staff, especially in the education department, but also attendant, administrative and marketing and retail staff – in short, everyone. While not everyone is involved in every activity, all play their part in ensuring knowledge of the Collection, and the life of the people that the Collection represents, is communicated to the public. You can see the range and breadth of what has been done here in the last decade in the exhibition of posters and photographs in the Museum Café. Many objects from the Collection are on loan to other museums around Ireland and can be seen in their exhibitions. Publications on elements of the collection are in train, and in the next year we should see the publication of catalogues of the Straw, Hay and Rushes collection and the Currachs collection, as well as publications on the hair hurling balls and on our architectural drawings.

Part of our Collection is still stored in quite poor conditions in Daingean in Co. Offaly. This includes our transport collection and larger agricultural implements. We do not have the storage space for these objects here. We have begun the process of

transferring these larger objects to the National Museum's new Collections Resource Centre in Swords. This is an essential piece of work and it will continue over the next few years. We are gradually improving the displays in the main exhibition on an incremental basis. We have commenced planning the refurbishment of the hall, drawing room and library in Turlough Park House with furniture from the Art & Industry collection in Collins Barracks and we will be putting on display, through the good graces of the National Gallery of Ireland, the portrait of George Fitzgerald and his sons by Johan Zoffany, former owners of Turlough Park. This will happen next year.

So much for the present and the past. We are now into the second week of our second decade. Where to from here? The completion of a decade is a good milestone and good point at which to take stock. Where do we see this Museum being in 2021? What will the role of this museum be within the National Museum of Ireland a decade hence? The easy answer is, of course, that we don't know and cannot know the answers to these questions. But we can have a vision for the future and we can work towards the achievement of that vision.

The National Museum of Ireland does not currently seek to collect, in a sustained and systematic way, objects that reflect contemporary society: through its collaboration with the Crafts Council of Ireland it does collect examples of excellence in contemporary craftsmanship, but the closest it has come to the systematic and organised collecting of the lives of **ordinary people** from recent times (other than in military history) is in Folklife. If the National Museum is to reflect Irish society in the later twentieth and even the twenty first centuries, it is, perhaps, in a re-conceptualisation of the Folklife Division and of the Museum of Country Life that develops and enlarges the scope of their activities that this might be done. This does not mean that the Folklife Division abrogates or walks away from its origins, or abandons the important work that it has been doing for nearly a century. On the contrary, it should deepen its engagement with Irish society in a manner that allows it to interrogate, explore, portray and display more recent and contemporary society through its material culture such that these activities hold up a mirror to society; allow us as Irish people to understand ourselves better and

also to allow others, tourists and visitors to Ireland, the opportunity to discover more. And, indeed, there must be continuity between the original Folklife collecting and the collecting and interrogating of the more recent past and present: life is not discontinuous, even though in superficial terms there may, at first glance, appear to be major paradigm shifts, and it is usually only in retrospect that continuities can be seen for what they are. As the German ethnologist Ulrich Kockel has put it, 'Continuity is, of course, not synonymous with perennial sameness, and change is a condition of continuity.'

A first step in this process was made a few years ago when the collecting policy of the National Museum was being finalised. Here, we reviewed where the Folklife Collection stood, and noted that there were still gaps that needed to be filled. The main thrust of the Folklife collecting policy, however, remains that enunciated over eighty years ago, although in a number of areas – clothing and personal adornment, and household furniture in particular, our policy is to collect representative samples up to the present. We also said at the time,

Conscious that life in Ireland is evolving very rapidly and that social and economic developments are having a transforming effect on how people live and do things, and on the objects they use, the Folklife Division will begin a process of review of its collecting ethos and practice with a view to more adequately reflecting a changing Ireland.

It is now time for us to undertake this work pro-actively. This, of course, will have implications for what is displayed, how it is displayed and the space available for display and storage. Which neatly takes us on to the issue of infrastructure.

With regard to the physical museum and Turlough Park, we also need to ensure that the **place** that is this Museum continues to be suitable for its role. This will include, among other things, consideration of opening more of Turlough Park House to the public than the two rooms already available; there is a public demand for this, but it cannot happen unless there is proper access to the upper floors, and other accommodation is found for staff now working there. Additional car-parking space is already a pressing need

because of the Museum's current success in attracting visitors. Additional display space is needed for the larger agricultural and especially transport objects that are currently in off-site storage because there is a lack of sufficient space for these here in Mayo. And additional education workspace will also be needed.

We are realistic enough to know that money is not available for this at present, nor will it be for quite some time to come. So I will refrain from saying, "Brother Taoiseach, can you spare a dime." But we must aspire. The time will come when money will be available again and we must have our plans ready for when that time comes.

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Being part of the National Museum of Ireland is central to us here in Turlough Park. Much of what we do here is possible only because of the support of the wider Museum family, for which I want to thank the Director, Dr Pat Wallace, and our colleagues in Dublin.

But the successful operation of the Museum of Country Life involves more than just staff of the NMI. It is also something to which each and every one working here in Turlough Park contributes – and this includes Security, Cleaning, Grounds Maintenance and Catering staff. We may have different employers, but we are all part of the one team committed to the same goal – the delivery of high-quality service to the public, to bringing knowledge of how our recent ancestors lived to them in an informative and enjoyable way. Thanks to staff of G4S, Moore's Cleaners, Mayo Co. Council and Brambles Catering. Our thanks also to the Office of Public Works for their maintenance of the buildings.

Mayo County Council is the owner of Turlough Park. It has leased Turlough Park House, the ground for the Museum and their immediate curtilage to the Office of Public Works for a period of ten years. That lease expires now and I understand a new lease, that includes the entire property, is about to come into force. This is something that I welcome as it is a condition of gaining accreditation under the Museum Standards

Programme for Ireland that the Museum regularise its tenancy relationship with its landlord.

I want to say a special thank you to Mayo County Council for their generosity today in providing the Irish Oak which the Taoiseach planted this afternoon to mark our anniversary, along with the plaque that goes with it. I also want to say a special thanks to Brambles Catering who have very kindly sponsored our birthday cake and this afternoon's scrummy nibbles.

Turlough is a small village. The people of Turlough have taken us into their community and into their hearts. This is something we are very grateful for. I would like to recognise three people in particular. Two are Patrick and Deirdre Butler, whose family home Turlough Park was until twenty years ago. The other is Christy Lawless, who helped persuade Des Mahon to buy Turlough Park on behalf of Mayo County Council and who was involved in looking after it before the work of making the Museum began.

Taoiseach, thank you for honouring us with your presence here this afternoon and thank you for helping to make this happen all those years ago.

There are people here today who were part of the original team that opened the Museum ten years ago, but who have now moved on to other things, both inside and outside the National Museum, and I would like to recognise their contribution. Lastly, but most of all, I want to thank my own staff, both here in Turlough Park and in Daingean – you are the people who have made it all happen so successfully, and you are the people who will continue to make it happen. It is my privilege, and an honour, to lead you. Congratulations, well done and thank you all.