

Launch of "Belgian Square, 100 Years"

Remarks by Minister Heather Humphreys

Cathaoirleach, Councillors, Ambassador, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I'm delighted to be here this evening to launch the Belgian Square Centenary Association's book "Belgian Square, 100 Years" and to remember the impact of World War One on Monaghan and on those Belgian refugees who came here a century ago.

We have many reasons to be proud of our heritage in Monaghan, and there are thousands of families around Cavan and Monaghan who can recall family members who served in the First World War, or the Rising or the War of Independence. Equally important though is how we have used this heritage as a tool for understanding and building relationships with those from different traditions on this Island and around Europe. A century ago a small group of refugees from Belgium were welcomed here, and I know that this has never been forgotten in Belgium. I was in Flanders this week where it was made very clear to me that the sacrifices made by men and their families from Monaghan and Cavan

are honoured by those who live in the areas where those men fought, and where too many lost their lives. I'm glad that the Belgian Ambassador, Philippe Roland, is here today and his support for commemorative events taking place around Ireland is very much appreciated.

This year we mark the centenary of the outbreak of World War One. A lot of groundwork for this important anniversary was laid here in Monaghan by community groups and ex-service organisations who have kept the memory of those who died alive and whose work has built the foundations for some very significant events. In July this year, the President and His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent stood together at Glasnevin Cemetery to unveil the first Cross of Sacrifice erected in Ireland to the memory of those who lost their lives in the World Wars. This monument, as well as centres like the Island of Ireland Peace Park in Messines in Belgium are important spaces where we can explore the different strands of our shared history.

We are also pleased to have received the gift from the British Government of a series of memorial stones in honour of those Irishmen who were awarded Victoria Crosses during the war, of which David Nelson of Stranooden was the first, not

just the first from Ireland, but the first from all of the Allied nations. I will never think of him without being saddened by the knowledge that he survived his wounds that day, only to die almost 4 years later in a war that all involved were certain would long be over by then. It can be hard, one hundred years ago to imagine the devastation in Belgium and in the homes of those who died around the world. David Nelson was a brave soldier, but he was also a son and a brother from a small community in Monaghan. His father was a farmer and he died when David was still a child, so you can imagine the shattering impact that this further loss would have had on his family. There is a tremendous amount of attention given in written history and commemoration to the military campaigns and the soldierly lives of men; but I see the Decade of Centenaries programme as an opportunity to learn more about the impact of the War on communities around Europe – the Nelson farm would have suffered badly and around Europe women were taking up the duties and positions left vacant by men who left for war, many never to return. Many who did return came back wounded or disabled, or bearing invisible scars, poorly understood at the time that caused terrible hardship for them.

It's this broader understanding of the effects of the War that has informed the Government's partnership approach to commemorations, both North-South and East-West. I have been glad to visit Belfast and Glasgow as part of the centenary commemorations, and I'm glad that Minister Andrew Murrison of the Northern Ireland Office has come to Dublin for both the National Day of Commemoration and the World War One Commemoration at Islandbridge.

I am keen to use these opportunities to build understanding, and I know that the Belgian Square Centenary Association is one of the organisations supported by the Monaghan Peace III Partnership as part of their Peace Action Plan for the county. This two phase plan, which has been in place since 2008, aims to make Monaghan an inclusive, outward looking progressive county with a diverse, vibrant economy, a sustainable environment and a high quality of life for all. Over €7.7m in Peace III funding has been made available since 2008 to help make this a reality and the hard work and dedication is to be congratulated.

All of this work has been made possible due to the Peace III EU co-funded Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. It is the third such programme since 1995 and it has made significant investment of €333m in Northern Ireland and the

Border Region in order to promote peace and reconciliation. As a co-funder of the programme, the Irish Government has committed some €120m towards the costs of the various projects, action plans and capital builds that have been funded under the programme.

Peace III is now in its final year with projects either finished or coming to an end. You will also probably be aware that a new round of Peace funding is being negotiated. It is hoped that the new Programme will be in place at the early in 2015. It is likely to focus on four main themes: Shared Education; Children & Young People; Shared Spaces & Services; and Civil Society. Given the success of the Peace III Local Authority Peace Action Plans, it is intended that the Local Authorities will have a similar role under the new programme. I am looking forward to seeing what will be achieved here in Monaghan under the new Programme. Based on the achievements to date, I know that it will be something special.

It's worth taking a moment to consider the impact of War on the Belgium that those refugees who came here left behind: the German advance was the first experience in history of the destructive power of artillery and the all consuming

nature of modern war. Cities and towns, roads, canals and railways were destroyed. As the Western end of the front settled in Flanders and the war consolidated into the trenches, every trace of human development in the region was lost. A century later, you can still see the scars of battle around the countryside. At the time, the unprecedented horrors of the war, reported both as news and propaganda, shocked the world. The most vulnerable in this context were the men, women and children who became refugees from Belgium: Most of the country was occupied and a great deal destroyed. Remaining in the theatre of war was impossible but refuge was not easily found. Many went to London, but some settled in Ireland. The Belgian refugees have left an amazing legacy in Ireland, from Kylemore Abbey to locations like Belgian Square. I was fascinated to discover that the committee of local Monaghan women who made arrangements for refugees was headed by Mrs Leonie Leslie, Winston Churchill's aunt. Our community gained from the influx of diverse skills, including teachers of French, bakers and needleworkers, and I would like to add my welcome to (TBC) Alison Begas and Adrienne Czerwin-Abbot, whose grandmother Sylvie was one of the fifteen Belgium refugees who came to Monaghan on 31st October 1914.

I've read that some people were concerned about the arrival of Belgian refugees at the time, lest they impose a charge on the ratepayers of Ireland. It's a testament to the generosity of Monaghan people that these concerns didn't stop them from welcoming the refugees into their community.

I think it's important to be able to distinguish between politics today, or indeed the politics of a century past, and empathy for the ordinary people living in the extraordinary, and in many ways terrible, Europe of one hundred years ago. One of our greatest literary figures, George Bernard Shaw, was greatly troubled by the war and the destruction. He totally rejected militarism and deplored the war, but he nevertheless sought to assist the Belgian refugees in their plight. He wrote *Augustus Does His Bit* in August 1916, for the Belgian refugee fund.

Monaghan did its bit too, and I hope that this wonderful book and the collection of images helps to show people the richness of our local history, and of the welcome that visitors to Monaghan are sure to receive even today.

Thank you.

