

UPF Ireland's Peace Road Walk Recalls Ireland's 75-year Legacy

Colm O Cionnaith
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Dublin, Ireland – This year, UPF-Ireland marked the International Day of Peace with its annual Peace Road Walk at the Irish National War Memorial Gardens in Dublin on September 22, 2024. The beautiful sunken gardens were commissioned by the Irish Free State government in the 1930s and built by British and Irish veterans of World War I.

The gardens originally commemorated the 49,400 Irish soldiers who died in World War I. By the time the first official event was held on Armistice Day 1940, World War II was already a tragic reality, and today the gardens also remember the dead of that and other wars.



After interfaith prayers at the Memorial Stone in the Memorial Gardens, which featured **Mr. Sudhansh Verma** representing Hinduism, **Mr. Chabane Belchame** representing Islam, **Mr. Mervyn Claxton** representing Protestantism and **Mr. Beni Vitai** representing Catholicism, the interfaith pilgrims walked to the nearby Kilmainham Gaol.

The historical jail has held many important figures, including the seven signatories of the 1916 Proclamation of the Republic that changed the course of Irish history. Kilmainham Gaol arguably birthed the new state, as public sentiment changed from antipathy and anger towards the insurrectionists to pity, indignation, pride and patriotism as news emerged of their treatment by their captors and demise at the hands of their executioners.



Especially poignant was the story of James Connolly, already condemned by illness to die, tied to his wheelchair and held up by ropes so the firing squad's bullets would not miss his heart. Indeed, public reaction sparked the War of Independence from 1919-1921, which eventually brought freedom for 26 of the 32 southern counties.



The inevitable civil war between those opposed to the treaty with Great Britain, contingent upon partition and separation from Northern Ireland, and those who wished to accept it as an interim solution, resulted in the loss of thousands more from both sides, who had previously fought together, brother killing brother.

The pilgrims heard these stories as they walked among the ghosts of both patriots and "criminals" past, many of whom were victims of poverty. Indeed, we heard that many committed crimes specifically to get into prison, where they would at least survive.



The group was then treated to a delightful buffet lunch at the Unity House Peace Embassy, and entertained by **Mr. Bernard Naughton** on guitar with rousing renditions of favorites such as "The Green Fields of France," "Grace" and a few Bob Dylan and John Lennon tracks thrown in during lunch and at intervals between speakers.

The theme of this year's Peace Road Walk and Forum was "The Republic at 75: Assessing the Founders' Ideals." The MC, UPF-Ireland Secretary General **Mr. Colm O Cionnaith**, gave the opening address. He outlined inspirations behind Republican ideals that might have influenced the founders, including those of the French and American Republics, as well as the influence of Wolfe Tone and Robert Emmett. He speculated on what influence the faith, ideology and values of these figures might have had on their Republican outlook, setting out the role that history plays in today's aspirations as well as values, and the importance of faith, especially freedom of faith.



The next speaker was **Rev. Adza Mould** of River South FFWPU Community in London, a cousin of one of the founders and Proclamation signatory Seán MacDiarmada. Rev. Mould delighted the audience with his stories of growing up in Ghana with an Irish mother and Ghanian father, who met during his studies at Trinity College in the 1960s, and how his mum inspired him to a life of activism.



Mr. Keith Best, chair of UK-UPF and former Conservative MP, gave a masterclass in modern Irish diplomatic history, much to the amazement of the assembled. He praised the commitment of Ireland to the United Nations, and especially its contributions to UN peacekeeping missions since 1958.



The final speaker was **Dr. David Hanna**, chairman of UPF's North Europe subregion. Dr. Hanna expounded on UPF's values and the Peace Road ideal of joining nations together not only physically, but also in heart, understanding and unity despite disparate cultures and traditions.

Mr. Chabane Belkacem was presented with the Ambassador for Peace Award, and in his acceptance remarks read a verse from the Holy Qur'an in Arabic and English. The lawyer thanked UPF-Ireland for his award and for his invitation to the day's commemorations.