

## John Kelly's Think and Thank Garden in West Cork



*An edited version of this article appeared in the Times Ireland on Christmas Eve - 175 years after N.M. Cummins' letter was published in the Times of London.*

On this day in 1846, at the height of the Great Famine, a letter addressed to the Duke of Wellington was published in the Times of London alerting an indifferent British public to the scale of the disaster, especially in the West Cork region. Earlier in the year, the Duke had written a singularly unsympathetic letter to a clergyman in Armagh (the Rev. H.P. Disney) claiming that as Commander-in-Chief of the Army he had no control over measures to be adopted for the relief of the distress. Go ask the Lord Lieutenant was his conclusion. As the Duke and the British ruling classes tucked into their kedgerees on Christmas Eve, they were presented with a graphic vision from within the Empire of what starvation and its attendant fever entailed. The author of this chastening missive was N. M. Cummins, a Justice of the Peace for West Cork. He gave witness to the horrors he witnessed when he visited homes in South Reen on the eastern side of Castlehaven Bay, near Skibbereen: "In the first, six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner on some filthy straw, their sole covering what seemed a ragged horse cloth, their wretched legs hanging about, naked above the knees."

John Kelly, an internationally successful Australian artist with familial links to Ireland, moved here in 2003. On an earlier exploratory visit, Kelly and his wife Christina Todesco-Kelly, also an artist, fell in love with a large property on the remote Reen Peninsula, near Union Hall. Having settled into his new home, Kelly began to explore the dark history of a region that had been the epicenter of the Great Hunger. He came upon Cummins' letter through a neighbour, Ann Shaw, who had attended school with a descendant of the concerned Justice. While landscaping his property and seeding it with his sculpture

(including his iconic Cow Up a Tree), Kelly determined to create a permanent monument to its tragic past using Cummins' historic missive.

Two notions informed Kelly's concept and they both centered on Sir Henry Tate – founder of the original Tate Museum. Tate had been a grocer in Liverpool during the Famine period, owning a string of shops. While there is no direct evidence that he was one of the many British businesses importing foodstuffs from Ireland during the Famine, it is an established historical fact that such activity continued as people starved. Tate sold his grocery business and invested his money in buying the patent for sugar cubes and subsequently built his fortune (via slavery) by importing sugar from the West Indies. This fortune, coming from questionable sources, led to the philanthropy that built and stocked the Tate Gallery. (It's not hard to see some parallels with the Sackler imbroglio today – although sugar is, of course, less addictive and less lethal than Oxycontin.) Another aspect of Kelly's interest in the Tate was the absence of paintings in the museum that recorded the greatest cataclysm in Irish history. Irish artists painted to please their paymasters and there was a perception that, as art historian Catherine Marshall opined, "such work would not be acceptable to the establishment." Kelly's rationale for his creation is simple: "Cummins's words painted the picture that the artists could or would not."

Kelly built a scale model of the Tate Modern from a forty-foot container that he had previously used to ship art to the 2011 Gothenburg Biennale. His Gothenburg exhibit contained a copy of Cummins letter but he determined to locate a more lasting exhibit on his Reen property. He had the text etched on a limestone tablet and placed on the floor of his Tate model. This was accompanied by another stone tablet bearing an eye-witness account of the Famine's horrors from a local doctor. The building also contains a large cast-iron pot from the Famine period that he discovered on his property. It bears the distinctive Phoenix symbol indicating that it was donated by the Quakers. Its presence acknowledges the exemplary role of this group during the Famine. The title of Kelly's land sculpture is the *Think and Thank Garden*. This is an ironic take on the Tate family motto: *Thincke and Thancke*. As we settle down tomorrow to our Christmas dinners, let us think back to our less fortunate ancestors and give thanks, even in these blighted times, for our good fortune.

*The Think and Thank Garden will be open to the public in 2022 through various West Cork festivals. These include the Arts Festival (Uillinn), the West Cork History Festival and the West Cork Garden Trail.*

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