

# Thousands bid 'failte' to new waterfront park

By Duncan McAllister

The hard work of a decade has finally paid off with the opening of Ireland Park on June 21. Thousands gathered at Toronto's waterfront to mark the official opening of the 300'x70' memorial at the foot of Bathurst St.

Mary McAleese, the president of Ireland, was the guest of honor and performed the cutting of the ribbon, after descending from the Irish navy flagship L.E. Eithne, which was docked at the park for the ceremony.

She was joined by a group of dignitaries including David Miller, Dalton McGuinty, Jim Flaherty and Robert Kearns, the chairman of the Ireland Park Foundation.

Ireland Park commemorates the arrival to Toronto of some 38,000 Irish immigrants escaping the famine of 1847. Many of these immigrants had died soon after arriving at the Toronto wharfs and are buried in a mass grave at Queen and Power streets.

The president visited the St. James cemetery earlier that morning, and was moved by the 281 names of the 1,100 Irish dead that had been

meticulously recorded in a book dating from 1847.

"They wanted us to know who they were, where they were from, how old they were," she said, "and how much they mattered to the people of this city."

Those names have been engraved on a towering famine memorial at the park, made from limestone brought from Kilkenny County in Ireland.

Situated around the park near the water's edge are the haunting statues created by renowned Irish sculptor Rowan Gillespie depicting victims of the starvation. These bronze sculptures complement a set of seven by Gillespie, situated on the Irish coast, facing westward over the sea.

Brothers Robert and Jonathan Kearns originated the concept for the park 10 years ago. Canada pledged a \$500,000 donation towards the cost of the park, and the government of Ireland matched it.

Says McAleese, "This is the first time the Irish government has ever supported an infrastructural project like this outside Ireland or Great Britain."

After the ribbon cutting ceremony, the group of dignitaries joined an audience of several thousand people for the gala event, which included performances by various Irish musicians and singers, including the Celtic Tenors.

The ribbon cutting group included Declan Kelly, the Irish ambassador to Canada, and the Very Reverend Thomas Collins, Roman Catholic archbishop of Toronto. The park is located just west of Reese's Wharf adjacent to the roadway, renamed Eireann Quay last month. Visitors to the park were invited to tour the Irish helicopter patrol vessel P31, the L.E. Eithne and sign their names to a wall-sized visitors' register.

Above, right: The Famine Memorial made from Kilkenny limestone. Below, left to right: Robert Kearns, chairman of the Ireland Park foundation, is joined by Anne Kelly (wife of Irish ambassador to Canada Declan Kelly) and Mary McAleese, president of Ireland, at the park opening on June 21.

