January 25th, 2016

**MEP Launches Student Project in Ballinrobe**

No county in Ireland had suffered more from the effects of emigration than County Mayo and it was therefore most appropriate that the students of Ballinrobe Community School were to engage in a project ‘Colours of Europe – History of Migration and Emigration in our Community’.

This was stated by Independent MEP Marian Harkin on Friday, January 22nd when she launched the project in Ballinrobe in the context of the EU Erasmus programme which funds exchanges between students of the EU countries.

“The Erasmus programme will mean that since its commencement, over three million EU students will have studied through exchange arrangements and developed a wider perspective of the people and events which have shaped the European Union”, she said.

Referring to the emigration experience of the people of county Mayo, and of Ballinrobe, she pointed out that the population of the county had, because of adverse events, had more than halved from 388,887 in 1841 to 172,690 in 1926 shortly after the State was formed and to 130,638 in 2011. This was not just because of the catastrophic effects of the famine but the repeated privations which occurred subsequently”, Marian Harkin said.

A project on migration and emigration was particularly appropriate at a time when every day the hardships of people from Africa, Asia and the Middle East in trying to migrate to Europe were a daily focus in the media, she said.

‘More than most in the western world we, the Irish, must have an understanding for the plight of those forced by war and economic conditions to flee their countries and seek refuge in a safe place for themselves and their families. County Mayo, and its people, have known times as bad as those being experienced by the current wave of migrants as this report on St. Patrick’s Day 1847 from the local Ballinrobe Vicar James Anderson to the Under Secretary in Dublin indicates:-

*‘The master and clerk of the workhouse lie dead. The lives of the doctor and matron are in the balance. For God’s sake, dispatch from Dublin proper persons to take charge, by tomorrow’s night mail. Things are in an awful state and we are all overwhelmed. For myself, I am quite prostrated as to strength.*

and the following day:

*‘The doctor of the workhouse died. There are upwards of 700 inmates, all more or less ill with dysentery, themselves under no control and 5 ctw of meal in the house. For God’s sake, send proper persons to take charge, medical men etc and give us means for the support of the house’.*

Despite the harrowing experience of Co. Mayo and Ballinrobe, and the need for Ireland to accept its fair share of refugees. Marian Harkin warned that steps were necessary to ensure that open borders did not threaten the future of the entire European Union project.

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