

'The National Orator' is honoured at Suir Bridge



President Higgins unveils the stone marking the renaming of the Suir Bridge as the Thomas Francis Meagher Bridge on Thursday last. | Photo: Mick Wall

President renames new bridge in honour of “the great” TF Meagher

In the teeming rain on Thursday last, President Michael D Higgins renamed the Suir Bridge, which connects Waterford and Kilkenny, Munster and Leinster, as the Thomas Francis Meagher Bridge.

President Higgins spoke of his pride at having “the opportunity to honour this great patriot and son of Waterford, who pursued the cause of Irish freedom with unforgettable eloquence”.

Of the bridge now named in Meagher’s honour, the President told the invited gathering: “Seen from a distance, the white stay cables fanning out from the bridge’s central tower give the whole the appearance of two wide open, aerial sails suspended over the water surface.

“A bridge is certainly an apt symbol to pay tribute to Thomas Meagher’s vision of concord between Ireland’s various traditions and communities – ‘between the Green and the Orange’, as he put it.”

He added: “It is indeed appropriate that a construction of such evident public worth also be used as a vehicle for ethical commemoration – a means to keep alive amongst our citizens the memory of those men and women who gave of their intellects and their lives to shape the values we hold dear as a nation.”

The President listed Meagher’s many feats and attributes: “Eloquent, generous, passionate, courageous and handsome; in turn orator, journalist, lawyer, revolutionary, convict, soldier in the American civil war and Acting Governor of Montana – there

is a picturesque, almost literary, quality to Meagher's personality and life, which continues to capture our imagination...

"Born in Waterford in 1823 the eldest son of somebody who, historians would agree, was the city's very conservative Mayor - in fact Waterford's first Catholic Mayor since the Cromwellian period - Thomas Francis grew to become a rebel and a socialist, joining the Young Ireland movement at the age of 20.

"The desperate poverty then prevalent among the city dwellers of Waterford stoked the revolutionary zeal of young Meagher. In his biography, Paul R. Wylie thus relates how he would lead local children on hikes up Mount Misery and look down on the bay to see the emigrant ships departing for America."

President Higgins continued: "Meagher flew what is now our national flag for the first time at the Wolfe Tone Club in Waterford on 7th March 1848. In April of the same year, he returned from Paris, the epicentre of the 1848 Revolution, with a ceremonial silken tricolour of orange, white and green, which he described in the following words:

"The white in the centre signified a lasting truce between Orange and Green. I trust that beneath its folds the hands of the Irish Catholic and the Irish Protestant may be clasped in generous brotherhood."

"These words still resonate with us, as do indeed Meagher's powerful calls for fraternity between all of the citizens of Ireland, and his rousing emancipatory rhetoric. For Thomas Francis Meagher is remembered above all as 'the National Orator.'"

President Higgins stated: "The last years of Meagher's life, his work as Acting Governor in the untamed lands of Montana, his altercations with the powerful local vigilantes, and his mysterious death in 1867 on a paddle steamer on the Missouri River - these episodes also pertain to the stuff of legend.

With a glint his eye, our First Citizen added, to the amusement of all present: "And of course one must not forget, in the list of Meagher's achievements, this very last one, namely the uniting of Waterford and Kilkenny!"

Dermot Keyes