

Speech by historian Nicholas Furlong, on the occasion of the Unveiling of the Memorial to Robert Brennan in Abbey Street, Wexford on the 25th June 2016

A Chathaóirleach, a Shóillse Maor Mac Cáthruig, a Stiurithoiri ar Chonnde Loch Garman agus mo Phobal Fein. Is ioghantac an lá seo, lá comáradh cómhshúil leis na laétheanta ceilliúradh treasna na blianta 0 1798 go dtí an lá ata indiu ann. Buidheachas mór le Dia! Fe dheire thiar thall tugann Loch Garman go Roibard Breannáin, Úna agus a chlann anseo l gceartlár a chómarsanacht féin, ins na sráideanna in a nimirt se, in a rugagh agus a thógadh e, an dúrais ba cheart dó ar bun.

Translation:

Madam Manager, Your Worship Mayor Carthy, Administrators of County Wexford, and my own people. This is a wonderful day. It is a day of commemoration, just like the days of commemoration across the years, 1798 to this very day. Thanks be to God! At long last Wexford bestows on Robert Brennan, his wife Una and his family, right here in the core centre of his birth neighbourhood, in the streets in which he played, where he was born and raised to manhood, the prize to which he was entitled.

This is a splendid and exclusive day for Wexford, for County Wexford and for Ireland. Robert Brennan, one of our greatest most unselfish, courageous heroes, is at last given the gratitude and the eminence he deserves. After seventy years Wexford does honour to a man of this very vicinity, a man who was born here, walked these very streets, played, developed and grew to manhood, a man who became a colossus in Ireland's history. When called to serve Ireland at the highest national and international level he was unobtrusive. Because from seventeen years of age he was obsessed totally in service only to Ireland, in the rescue of Ireland from appalling humiliation, in the restoration of its own centuries of culture, its rightful pride in itself, its own language and music, its own classical literature and records back to the fringes of pre-history, plus the grasping of its thorough independence. Above all he was determined on Ireland's escape from the shabby dominance from which it suffered and endured for so long.

Thank God that today Wexford launches its own memorial to Bob Brennan in the very precincts of his birth, childhood, schooldays, growth and adolescence. It is the place close to the Bullring where, during the 1798 centenary rallies and unveilings, his horror at the cruelties, the subjugations, the evictions of the Irish from Ireland's own soil appalled him as a lad of seventeen. He created the first steps toward ultimate revolt. He first fundraised for the masterly 1798 Bronze Memorials. He instituted Dr. Douglas Hydes Gaelic League in Wexford and from then to the development, the ideal in antagonistic waters, of We Ourselves, Arthur Griffiths' Sinn Féin. The Fresh Air of Mise Éire, repossessed our people and our land. That fresh-air became a gale as Robert Brennan and his determined Irish Ireland comrades built on toward 1916. He led the Irish Volunteers in 1916 and, when Wexford's Volunteers were ordered by Padraig Pearse to lay down their arms,

he was arrested, jailed, court-martialled and waited for execution in the condemned cell at Kilmainham Jail. On the very morning of his execution, the Prime Minister of England, Asquith, ordered a halt to the serial executions in Ireland at American demands.

We must also today salute the calibre of the two substantial and prodigious women in his life: His lovely wife, Una Bolger of Coolnaboy and his devoted sister, Nan, and we dare not forget his brilliant, still internationally celebrated writer, daughter, Maeve of The New Yorker.

Bob Brennan spent the most of three years in English and Welsh jails. His industrious sophistication – or danger – was identified by London, but also by President De Valera. De Valera appointed Bob Sinn Fein's national director of elections for 1918. Sinn Fein had an overwhelming victory. But just before that triumph he was naturally arrested and lodged in Gloucester Jail in England.

Bob Brennan's later career went by phase after phase through the political and the military strifes. Above all he was masterly in the vital and silent warfare against a powerful, imperial, media enemy. He was made director of foreign affairs by President De Valera and he in fact arranged agents of the New Republic of Ireland in the capitals of mainland Europe, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Madrid. His ultimate and long career expanded rapidly in national and international eminence.

But today we think of him and 1916 especially, him, his sister Nan and Una Bolger. We are heartened by the presence of all his admiring family. His grandchildren, Yvonne and Alan Jerrold and Suzanne Maher, his niece Nancy Walshe, all the Walshes, all the Kearneys, all the Bolgers of Coolnaboy. I had the privilege of meeting "Bob" Brennan on his return to this, his home town. That took place in a summer Sunday of 1947 in Rowe Street Church Yard. He and his wife Una had won over the hearts and respect of the powerful Washington Media; and all its International Diplomats before, during and after the war years.

Ta mo phort beagnac seinnte anois, ac in ndeire na dála ta ceacht mór amháin le cur ós bhúr gcómhar, teagasc Robert Braonain. Sé sin – "go mbeid Éire fós ag Cáit ni Dhuibhir".

At this great moment on a proud accomplishment, I beg to declare before the centuries of County Wexford and Irish History that Robert Brennan has entered the pantheon of Wexford's greatest heroes.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading 'Nicholas Furlong'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large loop at the end of the last name.

Nicholas Furlong