

You are all very welcome to the Embassy of Ireland for the London launch of the Cambridge History of Ireland.

We are honoured that Sir John Major has accepted an invitation to join us for the evening. Your presence Sir John is deeply appreciated.

We are also delighted that my political boss the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Simon Coveney TD is also present.

We will hear from the Tánaiste and Sir John in a little while.

The publication of the Cambridge History of Ireland comprising 4 volumes and covering 1500 years of Irish history is by any standards a landmark event in historical scholarship – as reflected in the fact that its Dublin launch last week took place in the presence of President Higgins.

The Cambridge History of Ireland would grace any library. And I have now added it to my list titled “things to do when Brexit is all sorted in the autumn”. I have not specified which autumn.

When one considers that the 9 volume Oxford History of Ireland was published over a thirty year period between 1976 and 2006, the fact that the Cambridge History was completed in five years and its four volumes is now being published concurrently is an extraordinary achievement – of which its editors, contributors and publishers can be very proud.

I am delighted that we are joined this evening by three of the History’s four editors – Thomas Bartlett (who is the overall general editor), James Kelly and Brendan Smith – and we will hear from Tom in a few minutes.

The absent editor is Jane Ohlmeyer who – to her and my great disappointment – cannot be here on account of a long-standing prior commitment.

Jane has been a key partner in making this event happen and I am pleased that her son Jamie is with us.

A warm welcome also to the various contributors who wrote individual chapters for the History and are with us this evening – as well as to all of the distinguished historians of Ireland and Britain who have joined us this evening.

Your collective work in the shared British-Irish historical space has made an immense contribution to increased mutual understanding between our countries.

I am also pleased to welcome senior representatives of Cambridge University Press – Peter Philips and Mandy Hill.

All together there are over 100 contributors to the Cambridge History of Ireland with approximately one third of them based in UK universities. In addition two of the editors are based in the UK.

This is a further manifestation of the intertwined nature of the historic and contemporary realities of the Ireland and UK relationship.

And while the Cambridge History seeks to comprehensively address the complex and multi-faceted nature of Irish history, nonetheless a core element of that narrative is the story of the relationship between two neighbouring islands.

For good or ill, and as result of geography, Ireland and Britain live in the shadow or the shelter of one another. Whether it is a shadow or shelter has waxed or waned over the centuries depending on changing contexts and choices made.

An article written about the Cambridge History contained a sentence that pithily captured the entwined nature of our shared history.

“Brexit itself illustrates how the Irish Question never dies; it just gets reformulated”.

In recent decades we have all been fortunate enough to witness a period in Ireland-UK relations which has been one of hope and positivity.

However, the sweep of 1500 years of Irish history tells us that the continuation of such a positive trajectory is not pre-destined.

Sustaining and developing the current neighbourly and friendly relations between Ireland and the UK will require ongoing vigilance, care and wise management.

Those entrusted with that task will be assisted by having a sophisticated understanding of Irish history. In that respect, the Cambridge History of Ireland will certainly be a good point of departure.

I now invite its General Editor, Tom Bartlett and Mandy Hill of Cambridge University Press to say a few words about this great project.