

Howth Éire sign – Remarks by Dr. Michael Kennedy

9 April 2022

President Higgins, Mayor of Fingal, Lieutenant General Clancy, friends, it is an honour to be here. I want to thank Dermot Quinn and the Howth Éire 6 Restoration Group for inviting me to speak. Their recovery and restoration of the Howth Éire Sign has saved an outstanding national artefact; a monument which will continue to inform us of our island's experience during the second world war.

The Éire Signs, of which there were originally over 80 located the length our coast, and of which few today remain in such pristine and accessible condition, were constructed in summer 1943 by the men of the Defence Forces Coastwatching Service to indicate the territory of Ireland to Allied and Axis forces. These signs are now historical documents. They speak to us of how Ireland responded geopolitically to the great test of the Second World War and how Ireland, though geographically close to the epicentre of conflict, sought to remain neutral.

The Éire signs are not only a visible lasting expression of our independence. At a time when thousands of Allied aircraft were crossing the Atlantic in the run up to D-Day the addition of the numbers to each sign made them waypoints to guide lost airmen away from Ireland and towards their bases. These signs ultimately saved young lives. You might argue they helped the Allied war effort – but the 'trackless desert' of neutrality, as one Irish diplomat put it in 1939, is a complex environment to navigate.

Using historical evidence, such as this sign, to understand why Ireland remained neutral in the Second World War, and to understand the agile manner in which neutrality was implemented by our politicians, diplomats, and soldiers eighty years ago, as an instrument of state policy in a very different national and international geopolitical context to today, will contribute significantly to the 'informed and respectful' debate President Higgins has recently called for on the future of Ireland's military neutrality.

An aid to navigation from a bygone age of aviation, the Howth Éire Sign is a marker on the border between neutral Ireland and the second world war. With a commanding view of the theatre of war it played its part in, it is a reminder of how close to Ireland, and to Dublin, the Second World War was.

From the east mountain here on Howth Head, the coastwatchers at Look Out Post No. 6, the local men who built this sign, reported the war at sea and in the air off Ireland's east coast:

Luftwaffe bombers heading for Belfast and in May 1941 bombing Dublin, RAF fighters training from bases in Northern Ireland, Coastal Command aircraft on patrol. They saw allied convoys, Kriegsmarine U-boats hunting them and the Royal Navy destroyers chasing those U-boats down.

Amidst this chaos of war Howth LOP also recorded Ireland's aerial life-line to the world: a daily Aer Lingus flight, a solitary civilian aircraft in camouflage drab, crossing the war zone of the Irish Sea to Liverpool; it saw Air Corps patrols, their Gladiators, Ansons and Hurricanes defending our skies, and the Irish Shipping vessels which braved U-boat attack in the Bay of Biscay making their approach to Dublin Port to bring supplies to the people of Ireland.

Howth's Éire Sign links the local with the national and the international. A visible statement Ireland's sovereignty, it is as iconic to Second World War Ireland as the Spitfire to Britain or Rosie the Riveter to the United States. It is a monument to that almost vanished generation of Irish men and women who realised that they had to improvise during a global crisis to preserve an independence that was not yet two decades old. Once a part of the national defence infrastructure, today the Howth Éire Sign is part of our national cultural heritage.