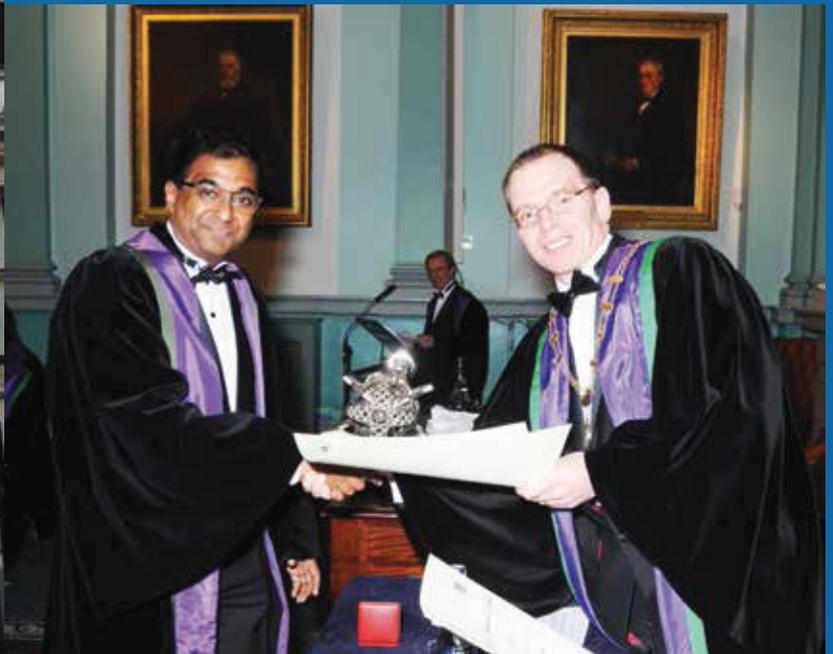




RCPI Building

# An Irish Rendezvous



Conferment Ceremony



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Travelling at a cruising speed of 850 km per hour at an altitude of approximately 35,000 feet in an Airbus A380 from Kuala Lumpur to London, I was suddenly jolted by the voice of a MAS stewardess in a seemingly put on British-like accent asking my fellow British passenger next to me "Sir, Do you like to have tea?". Her accent decreased when she posed the same question to his British wife (minus the madam!) and to me in her usual Malaysian accent (rather pleasant though!); of course minus the Sir as well! I wonder why do we Malaysians still awe the accent and imitate them when we meet Westerners. Perhaps, we need to move on another 50 years to get away from the invisible clutches of our colonial masters. My fellow passenger who sat beside me happened to be a Colorectal Surgeon based at London. Our conversation from medicine veered on later towards historical spots in Malaysia especially in Malacca. He was amazed how many serene historical spots in Malaysia were dwarfed with high rise commercial buildings. Fortunately, he was not aware of the recent destruction of ruins that may date back more than 2000 years in Bujang Valley as well as recent media reports of artefacts and relics from Johor, Malacca and Perak found to be sold openly on eBay. We seem to be obsessed with new buildings at the expense of the old or historic and with superlatives; highest, tallest or the longest!

I made a stopover in London for a week en route to Dublin where I had stayed for almost another week. When I arrived at Dublin, where many people associate this city to Guinness Stout, I was met by my taxi

driver. I have a habit to be chatty with taxi drivers especially in foreign countries as I believe their perceptions; rightly or wrongly, is a crude indicator of the perception or voice of the middle or lower income population. During my trip to my hotel, the exuberant driver gave me a brief insight of the latest news in Dublin. It so happened that Dublin few days earlier had taken back control of its economic affairs in a 'historic' move as international lenders concluded their final review of the country under the terms of a three-year bailout programme. The Irish Finance Minister aptly said "the big change is not that we are free of all difficulties but that the responsibility has been passed back to the Irish Government". My driver remarked it is customary in Ireland to toast wine to the President of Ireland at formal functions. However, in a jest, he said since Ireland was forced to accept a €67.5bn EU and International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout in November 2010 following a massive property crash and banking crisis, the wine toast at formal functions has instead been to the President of IMF! The skyline of Dublin was devoid of construction cranes; another surrogate indicator of the economic situation of a country that is just wriggling out of recession.

The hotel where I stayed was pleasant albeit devoid of a lift. It looked old but well maintained. When I chatted with the hotel staff, I was told that old buildings are not allowed to make major renovations including fitting lifts as local city council laws prohibit renovations that may distort any historical relevance. The next day, as our Hop-on, Hop-off bus weaved through the city, I understood the reason people perceive Dublin to be historical and a contemporary cultural centre for the country. I may not be a culture or history buff. However, that does not hinder me from being moved by how history can so succinctly and poignantly reflect humane in all its glory and profanity.

Dublin has many landmarks and monuments. Kilkenny Castle located at Kilkenny, one of Ireland's most beautiful, medieval cities and Dublin Castle, built in the twelfth and thirteenth century respectively stands majestically in a typical Norman courtyard design. The likes of Mansion House, the Anna Livia monument, the Molly Malone statue all give Dublin a refreshing elegance of historical richness. Trinity College founded in 1592 is one of the seven ancient universities of Britain and Ireland. The college retains a tranquil collegiate atmosphere despite its location in the centre of the city. It draws immense interest from tourist.

The main purpose of my trip to Dublin was to attend my conferment ceremony for the Fellowship from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (FOM, RCPI). The ceremony was held at the RCPI building at Kildare Street. The black tie ceremony was conducted in a classic and distinguished manner, laced with tradition at the venue abound with historic details from the college's 360 years history, lending each of its graceful rooms a distinctive character and ambience. 2014 marks the twentieth year anniversary since the FOM, RCPI has been conducting their membership examination (Member of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine-MFOM) in Malaysia. In conjunction with this, an International Conference on Occupational Medicine (ICOM 2014) will be held at Kuala Lumpur organised by FOM, RCPI and



*With Dr Tom O'Connell, Dean, FOM, RCPI.*

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Irish demography remains an enigma. The population of this island is 4.5 million. The global Irish diaspora population is approximately 100 million. This translates to about 5% of Irish descendants actually staying on in Ireland whilst the rest are in countries such as Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Dublin has many park areas. This is testament to the fact that Dublin has more green spaces per square kilometre than any other European capital city, with 97% of city residents living within 300 metres of a park area. However, interestingly Ireland is devoid of snakes!

My Irish jaunt and previous trips to other European countries makes me appreciate not only the skills and craftsmanship of people who create things of beauty during the historical era but how these countries preserve tradition, historical artefacts and structures to the core. They take pride of their old buildings and heritage. One will often feel the past touch the future with every step. I am inclined to believe many tourists are more charmed with heritage buildings rather than mega structures. Cities like Kuala Lumpur, Singapore or New York have high rise buildings and shopping malls to be proud. What makes a major difference among them is the heritage behind each city that really dazzle the tourists! Being born and raised in historic Malacca, I could not resist feeling despair how some of us in Malaysia are careless with national and world treasures. I may not be an expert in history but I am not a philistine either. It is a shame, we have let some of our historical fabric to be torn up, tied into knots and now has become entangled into a ball of mess. I think we are so far from seeing the woods from the trees.

I end with the few Irish words I picked up during my recent trip to Dublin; *Le gach dea ghuí* (with every good wish) to our policy makers and historians in trying to preserve what is left of history in our country. Michael Crichton, the late eminent novelist once aptly remarked "if you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree!".