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An Address to the People of Ireland Part 1

1796

An Address to the PEOPLE OF IRELAND on the present important crisis

Tollas licet omne quod usquam est
Auri and argenti, scutum, galeamque relinques,
Et gladium and thoracem; spoliatis arma
supersunt! -- JUVENAL

1796

At length the time is arrived, when a friend to the liberty and independence of Ireland may venture to speak the truth, and examine into the situation and interest of his country, without fear of being stopped short by that most unanswerable of all arguments, an information in the Court of King's Bench, at the suit of his Majesty's General.

It is long since every honest Irishman has mourned in secret over the misery and degradation of his native land, without daring to murmur a syllable in the way of complaint. Not even our groans were free! Six hundred years of oppression and slavery have passed in melancholy succession over our fathers' heads and our own, during which period we have been visited by every evil which tyranny could devise, and cruelty execute; we have been scattered, like chaff, over the land, and our name has been forgotten among the nations; we have been massacred and plundered, insulted and

despised; we have been reduced to that lowest state of human degradation, that we almost ceased to respect ourselves; we have doubted whether the opinion of our oppressors was not just, and whether we were not, in fact, framed for that submission, to which we have been bent by the pressure of so many hard centuries of hard, unremitting, unrelenting tyranny.

But, if the judgements of Providence be slow, they are certain. The villain must not hope to walk in credit to his grave, nor the tyrant to insult forever with impunity the misery he has caused. The pride and arrogance of England have at length called down upon her head the tardy and lingering justice which her manifold crimes have so long provoked; the sufferings of Ireland, prostrate and humbled as she has been, even to the dust, seem to have awakened the attention of Him who rules the destiny of nations; in his goodness and compassion he has at length regarded us, and placed in our hands the means, if we have the courage to be free.

Without being too much of an enthusiastic visionary, I think I may say I see a new order of things commencing in Europe. The stupendous Revolution which has taken place in France; the unparalleled succession of events which have, in defiance of the united efforts of all the despots of Europe, established that mighty Republic on the broad and firm basis of equal rights, liberties, and laws, the abasement,



every one of whom has, in his turn, been forced to yield to her ascendant genius, with the exception thus far, of Austria, and especially of England, whose fall has only been delayed to make her degradation more terrible, and the triumph of her victorious rival the more complete; all this I say, has satisfied my mind, that the ancient system of tyranny must fall. In many nations it is already extinct, in others, it has received its death wound, and though it may for some time train a feeble and lingering existence, its duration is ascertained, and its days already numbered. I do not look upon the French Revolution as a question subject to the ordinary calculation of politics; *it is a thing which is to be*; and, as all human experience has verified that the new doctrine ever finally subverts the old; as the Mosaic law subverted idolatry: as Christianity subverted the Jewish dispensation; as the Reformation subverted Popery; so, I am firmly convinced, the doctrine of Republicanism will finally subvert that of Monarchy, and establish a system of just and rational liberty, on the ruins of the thrones of the depots of Europe.

But whether this opinion be well or ill founded, the question I mean to examine will not be affected by the result. Fortunately, or unfortunately, for Ireland, her cause is independent of the theory. The object for her immediate consideration is not whether she shall be independent under any. She has too many solid, substantial, heavy, existing grievances, to require much ingenuity, or subtle argument to convince her of her interest and her duty, and the question on which we must take an instant determination, will, if I mistake not, be decided as soon as it is stated.

The alternative which is now submitted to your choice, with regard to England, is, in one word, *union or separation!* You must determine, and that instantly, between slavery

and independence; there is no third way. I will not insult you, by doubting what will be your decision. I anticipate your immediate and unanimous declaration, which establishes forever liberty to yourselves, and independence to your country.

To a magnanimous people it is unnecessary to prove, that it is *base*, to exist in dependence on the will of a foreign power, and that power an ambitious rival. To you this is not matter of mere speculation. You feel it in your Government, in your laws, in your manners, in your principles, in your education; with all the great moral and physical advantages of which you are possessed, you are unnoticed and unknown as a nation in Europe; your bodies and your minds are bent down by the incumbent pressure of your tyrant; she, to maintain whose avarice and ambition you are daily forced to spill your best blood, in whose cause you fight without glory and without profit, where victory but rivets your chains the faster, and where defeat adds to slavery, mortification, and disgrace. In vain are you placed in the most advantageous position for unlimited commerce; in vain are you blessed with a fruitful soil, with every requisite for trade and manufactures, with inexhaustible mines, with navigable rivers, and with the noblest harbours in Europe. All these advantages are blasted by the contagious presence of your imperious rival, before whose influence your strength is withered, your resources crushed, and the rising spirit of emulation strangled in the birth. It is England who debauches and degrades your gentry; it is England who starves your manufacturers, to drive them into her fleets and armies; it is England who keeps your wretched peasantry half-fed, half-clothed, miserable and despised, defrauded of their just rights as human beings, and reduced, if the innate spirit of your country did not support them, as it were, by miracle, below the level



of the beasts of the field; it is England who buys your legislators to betray you, and pays you with the money levied on yourselves; it is England who foments and perpetuates, as far as in her lies, the spirit of religious dissension among you, and that labours to keep asunder Irishman from Irishman, because, that, in your cordial union among yourselves, she sees clearly the downfall of her usurpation, and the establishment of your liberties; it is England who supports and nourishes that rotten, aristocratic faction among you, which, though not the tenth part of your population, has arrogated to itself five-sixths of the property, and the whole of the patronage and power of your nation; a faction, which, to maintain itself by the power of England, is ready to sacrifice, and does daily sacrifice your dearest rights to her insatiable lust of gold and power.

Look to the origin of your connection with Britain, that proud and selfish nation, and see what is the foundation of the authority of your oppressors! Six hundred years ago the Pope ⁽¹⁾ *an Englishman*, thought proper to confer the crown of Ireland on Henry II, King of England; and the King of England was pleased, in return, to guarantee to his countryman, the Pope, the payment of a certain tax, *to be levied on the people of Ireland*; but were the people consulted, whose liberties and properties were thus bartered away between these two Englishmen? No such thing. Their independence was sold by one foreigner to the other, without their privity or concurrence, and to consummate the injustice of this most infamous and audacious bargain, they were compelled themselves to raise the purchase money of their disgrace, *and to pay for being enslaved*. Such was the commencement of the British monarchy in Ireland, and what have been its fruits? Six hundred years of continued intestine wars, marked with every

circumstance of horror and barbarity, with the desolation of whole provinces, with massacres and confiscation and plunder, with fire, famine and pestilence, with murder, to that horrible extent, that, at length, it was decreed, even by your own legislature, to be no crime in an Englishman to kill *a mere Irishman*. When, by these multiplied abominations, your strength was exhausted and your spirit broken, when your oppressors made it their boast that you were *brayed, as it were, in a mortar*, this execrable tyranny of the sword was succeeded by the still more execrable tyranny of the laws, framed with a diabolical sagacity to impoverish and degrade and brutalise you; laws, even yet but imperfectly removed, and for whose partial repeal, extorted from your reluctant oppressors, you are indebted to the recent union among yourselves, to your consequent spirit, and to the combination of events produced by the French Revolution.

But, to compensate you for the loss of your independent existence as a nation, for the destruction of your trade and manufactures, the plunder of your property, the interdiction of education to three-fourths of your people, and their absolute exclusion from a state of political existence, you have been gravely told that you participated in what is called, in the cant of your enemies, *the inestimable blessings of the British Constitution!*

I will not here enter into a discussion on the merits or demerits of that constitution. You have, all of you, read the productions which have appeared on that subject, and it is, therefore unnecessary for me to repeat them; on him who is not convinced by the arguments of Paine, of the absurdity of hereditary monarchs, and hereditary legislatures, where no man would admit of hereditary cobblers, who wished to have his shoes well mended, I despair of making any impression. I will,



therefore, for the sake of argument, suppose, though I will by no means admit, that this constitution is really as excellent as it is represented to be by the warmest panegyrists, who, by the by, will ever be found amongst those who exist by its daily destruction, and I will answer, in the first place, that you may, if you choose, adopt that constitution as your own, when your independence is once recognised, and you come to organise your government; but, to quit this, which I look upon as a wild and idle supposition, I say, in the second place, that you do not possess this most excellent and happy constitution as your own, when your independence is once recognised, and you come to organise your government; but, to quit this, which I look upon as a wild and idle supposition, I say, in the second place, that you do not possess this most excellent and happy constitution! That, even in England, it is disfigured and distorted, but that in Ireland it is so smothered beneath a mass of corruption, as to be, in effect, no more the constitution of England, as it exists in theory, than it is the constitution of Constantinople or Japan.

In the first place, what is your King? Your King is a foreigner, an Englishman, a native of a country that holds you in utter contempt; whom you never see, nor expect to see; who never condescends to visit Ireland; who, with all the ignorant prejudices and illiberal passions of his nation, distributes from his closet at St Jame's, by the advice of his British Cabinet, the honours and rewards of your country, either among English sycophants, or more despicable Irish apostates, whose strongest recommendation to his royal favour, is, that they are ready at all times, and without scruple, to sacrifice the interest and independence of their native land, to the avarice or the ambition of England. Is there a man of you, that is not convinced, and that has not felt, that even

the meanest Englishman considers himself as your superior, and despises an Irishman in his heart? And have you not had a thousand occasions, to know that the King of England holds as rank and vulgar prejudices on that score, as the lowest and most ignorant of his vassals? That he regards you, not as a nation of valuable subjects, but as a rabble of mutinous slaves, and that your whole realm is not as of as much importance in his eyes, as any one manufacturing town in England. People of Ireland, this is your absentee Monarch! This is the idol, before whom you are to fall down, and to worship, like another Moloch, with the sacrifice of your blood; to pamper whose pride and folly and ambition, you are daily called upon to devote your treasurers and your lives, your individual liberties, and the glory and independence of your native land; and this is the sentiment which is called loyalty, by those who wish to deceive and to mislead, in order that they may plunder and oppress you.

But, perhaps, you find in the national spirit, in the patriotism and virtue of the other two estates of your legislature, the Lords and the Commons, a protection from the ruinous effects of an executive power, deposited in a foreign country, connected with you by no ties of interest or of glory, actuated solely by selfish motives, and illiberal prejudices, and who is represented by a fugacious personage, bound by no responsibility, and amenable to no tribunal.

See then the redoubtable barrier against oppression, which you have in your House of Lords! In the very first instance, one half of them are Englishmen, who never saw Ireland, who have not a foot of property there; who do not think it worth their while even to visit the country, from which they derive their titles, but who would of themselves be sufficient to stifle all opposition by their numbers, if those



noble Lords, who are in the habit of attending Parliament, were to be found, miraculously, in opposition to the mandate of the British Minister. The means by which a Peerage is obtained in Ireland, and the motives which determine the King of England, *the fountain of honour*, to raise his faithful subjects to that high rank, are of sufficient notoriety. It is well known, and has been asserted even in your Parliament, that the honours of the Peerage are prostituted to the most infamous purposes of corruption; that they are bought and sold, in open market, and at a stated price, or made a subject of a more ruinous, though less disgraceful commerce, in debauching the other branch of the legislature; that sometimes a man is made a Peer, because he can command two votes in the House of Commons, and sometimes, because he can command five thousand pounds in money; sometimes, because he has been obedient as a judge in trials, when the Crown has been concerned, and sometimes, because he has been refractory in Parliament, and it is necessary to appease him. If there were any reason to expect a possibility of patriotism or public virtue, from a body thus constituted; there are six and twenty Bishops, many of them Englishmen, and all of them, expectants of the English Government, for promotion or translation, ready to strangle it in its birth. Such are the hereditary counsellors of the Crown in Ireland, the Judges in the last resort, the impartial and incorruptible guardians of the Constitution, against the encroachments of the people on one side, and the King on the other; the people with whom they have no common interest, and the King who names the Peerage and the Episcopacy, who distributes ribbands and stars, and mitres, and places, and pensions, at his pleasure.

The Crown and the Lords, being thus organised against you, and having confessedly their own

distinct and separate interests to consult, at least, it is to be hoped that the third estate, the Commons, your representatives, emanating from yourselves, deriving their existence from the choice of the people, of which, they make a part, surely, they at least will take care of your rights, your liberties, and your interest, which are their own; proud of the sacred deposit, which you have confided in their hands, they will magnanimously resist any attempt of the other two estates, should any such be made, to invade the inalienable privileges of their constituents; amenable to the tribunal of your opinion, they will dread the disgrace which inevitably attaches upon corruption in a legislator, even more than death; should any courtly pander be found, hardy enough to risqué; the attempt to debauch their stern integrity, they will turn aside from his presence with horror and disgust, if indeed, the first emotion of insulted virtue does not rather prompt them instantly to seize the villain, to drag him from his den to public view, and denounce him to the nation, as the most atrocious of all parricides, the assassin of his country.

I cannot continue this irony! The subject is too sorrowful to excite any other feeling than indignation. Who are those abominable slaves, so impudently miscalled your representatives? How are they chosen? Who are their constituents? Is it not so notorious as no longer to excite surprise, or scarcely resentment, that the most inestimable of your privileges, from which all others depends, the right to choose your legislators, is made a daily subject of a base and villainous traffic? That a station, the most honourable to which man can aspire, that of representing his fellow citizens in the great Council of the nation, is bought and sold, and that seats in Parliament are become a subject of dirty commercial speculation; so that any



fellow, even of the most infamous character, provided he can raise three thousand pounds, may, in defiance of the public indignation and contempt, place himself triumphantly on the benches of your Legislature, and make laws to bind millions of men, any one of whom would scarcely trust himself alone in his company, or suffer him to enter his house, without previously locking up his spoons. The temple of your liberties is filled with buyers and sellers, with money changers and thieves; with placemen and pensioners, those unclean and ominous harpies, gorged with the public spoil, and sucking still, like insatiable vampires, the last drainings of the vital blood of their country; with fraudulent bankrupts, who take shelter in Parliament from the prosecution of their creditors, and purchase, with a part of their plunder, the privilege to retain the rest in security; with speculating lawyers, who, without principle and without practice, and destitute of talents to rise in their own profession, take up the more gainful trade of making in the Legislature those laws, which, in the Courts, they are unable to expound, force on their way, with inveterate perseverance, a servility that knows no scruple, and impudence incapable of a blush, repel their abler and honest brethren, who cannot bend to those vile means of advancement, and make a short cut through Parliament to the judgement seat; with those miserable automatons, the humble dependants of great men, who place them as their puppets in the House of Commons, and whose condition is, I know not whether more to be pitied or despised; with young coxcombs of fortune, who think *a seat in the House*, like their whores, their horses, and their hounds, a necessary appendage to their rank and dignity; even the members for your counties, where, if at all, the public voice might be supposed to have some little influence, even in their elections a system of corruption universally prevails, less

compendious, indeed, than that which exists in your boroughs, but more scandalous and destructive. I do not fear that any one man in Ireland, even on your treasury bench, will be found with a forehead hard enough to deny one syllable of what I have here advanced, or even to assert that the picture is overcharged. Your Parliament has long lost all character, as it has lost all decency; every honest man despises it; the prostitutes who compose it, know this and tremble; in vain do they multiply laws for their protection, and persecute, without remorse, the slightest invasion of what they are pleased to vote to be their privileges; the sanction of character is wanting; the public opinion is pronounced against them, and nothing but the pressure of an incumbent force has prevented the indignant spirit of Ireland from bursting forth long since and levelling with the dust the edifice of her oppression.

From a Legislature constituted as yours is, no good can flow. Those who compose it have no common interest with the people; they feel that they are but a foreign colony, depending entirely for their existence on the connection with England, whose power alone secures them in possession of their usurpation's. If they had the inclination, (of which I am far from suspecting them,) they have not the courage to be honest. The fact and truth is, that the great bulk of the aristocracy of Ireland, conscious that their estates were originally acquired by the most unjustifiable means, either by open robbery, sword in hand, or by the more infamous pillage of the laws, dare not oppose the will of the British Minister, from the apprehension lest he should withdraw his protection from their party, and leave them to the mercy of the majority of their countrymen. It is vain to argue with men under the influence of so extreme a fear. Those of them who are more enlightened, and who, of course, do not dread a resumption of



property which the lapse of time and change of circumstances have rendered impossible, yet affect a terror they do not feel, to confirm the delusion of the rest, and profit of the panic, which, in a great degree, they have themselves caused and diligently cultivated, to govern their party, and to perpetuate their monopoly in every department of the State. By these means they are enabled to make their bargain with the British Minister, and nothing can be imagined less difficult than the negotiation. Their language is simply this: "Maintain us in our places, our pensions, and our power; suffer us to support our mistresses, our dependants, and ourselves at the public expense; surrender to us, in a word, the entire patronage of the crown; in return, we engage to surrender to you the commerce, the manufactures, the liberty, and the independence of Ireland; we will support you in every measure which you may devise to impoverish, to divide, and to weaken our country; we will abet you in every mad and ruinous war in which you may think proper to embark; we will squander the blood of Ireland, without limitation or reserve; *we will stand and fall with England*; suffer us, only, in return, to appropriate to ourselves such portion of the public treasure as the sacrifices we make to you may appear to deserve."