

Theobald Wolfe Tone

An Address to the People Of Ireland Part 2

1796

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

To a proposition so just and reasonable in itself, it is not to be supposed the English Minister can be so captious as to raise the least objection. He purchases, in fact, for England every advantage she can possibly derive from the connection between the countries, without putting her to the expense of six pence; for Ireland, who is sold, is also forced to raise the purchase money; and herein lies the essential difference between the political situation of England and Ireland. In the former, undoubtedly the constitution is depraved and degraded, and corruption carried on to an enormous extent; the liberty of the people is, beyond contradiction, sacrificed to the arbitrary will and pleasure of the King; but, at the same time, their essential interests are, in all other respects, carefully consulted by the Government. The Minister there, studies to advance their trade and manufactures by all possible means, justifiable and unjustifiable, upon the same principle that the farmer manures the soil he means to cultivate, and feeds the beasts he destines for labour. Under this point of view, I have no hesitation to admit that England is essentially well and wisely governed, and a mere merchant or manufacturer who looks no further than his warehouse or his shop,

has no reason to wish for a change. But do you, my countrymen, lay your hands on your hearts, and ask yourselves, *is all this so with us?* I do not fear contradiction when I answer for you, that the direct contrary is the fact, and that your legislators are *hired and paid* by the English Minister, (paid with your own money, I beseech you to ever keep in memory) to destroy and smother your arts, manufactures, and commerce, in the cradle, lest they might, by possibility, interfere with the interest of England, who will be ever undoubtedly better pleased to see you a colony of idlers to consume her manufactures, and to recruit her fleets and armies, than to meet you in the markets of the world, an active, enterprising, and industrious rival. No English Minister would have the folly or the impudence to propose to the most corrupt and profligate of his dependants a measure subversive of the interest of the nation, or if he were so utterly infatuated, which is indeed impossible, he would not be Minister for four and twenty hours after. When a member of Parliament in England sells himself, it is always with a saving clause; there are things he will not do, and which he never will be asked to do; but a member of Parliament in Ireland who sells himself, (as they all do, or wish to do) is, politically speaking, damned without reserve; the condition of his bargain is to surrender his country for ever to the mercy of England. I do not here speak of your liberties, for, in that respect, the people of England are nearly as



badly off as yourselves; but in the name of God, consider how this connection affects your interests, and see how absolutely and utterly different your condition is from theirs in that respect. The commerce of England is protected and cherished and fostered by the Government. On a question of trade, all consideration of party vanish; every man, whatever be his political delinquency, is alike eager to forward any measure which promises to be beneficial, and even the most abject slaves in the English House of Commons are honest upon that score. But how is it with the prostitutes of the Irish House of Commons? The indispensable requisite, the fundamental principle of their bargain, I repeat it, is the sacrifice of their country to the avarice and ambition of England. I appeal with confidence to your own unvarying experience to determine whether, in Ireland, there be any road to preferment other than an implicit deference to the will of the English Minister. Is any man promoted, or will any man ever be promoted to power or station, at least while the connection holds, because he was, or is even suspected to be a friend of his country? Would not such a suspicion operate infallibly to his exclusion? And hence it is, that it is impossible, under the present system, that you ever can have an honest Government, because the English Minister, who names your rulers, will be sure to exact from them such conditions and engagements as no honest Irishman can by possibility submit to, and consequently none but knaves and sycophants, who are ready without scruple, to take this abominable covenant, can fill place or office; it is not so in England, because there, as I have already said, the essential interests of the nation are equally the object of all parties, and a man may accept a situation in the Government without sacrificing his integrity or his reputation; but I defy any man to take a share in the measures of the Irish Government, without a total surrender

of all principle and character as an Irishman. Number, I beseech you, your tyrants; consider the most virulent of your oppressors, man by man; review the whole of their political career, and see what are the means whereby they have become your rulers. Have they any other merit than that of blind submission to the will of England, and a profligate eagerness to sacrifice the very existence of Ireland to her arbitrary will and pleasure? Turn then to those who call themselves your patriots, and see whether they are not essentially as much your enemies, and as ready to prostrate themselves at the feet of your tyrant, as the most impudent and abandoned of her acknowledged hirelings. Do you not go to your legislature, as to a comedy, to be amused by the talents of the actors, well knowing the part which each is to play, and what is to be the catastrophe of the piece? Can you not, on every question of importance, determine beforehand with precision how every individual will vote, and upon what motives? Do you believe, on your honour and conscience, that you could find ten men in your entire Legislature who act upon conviction or principle? Is not making your laws, as much a trade as making your shoes, and not the thousandth part so honest or respectable? And if this be so, what kind of administration is that under which you groan, for a brave, a sagacious, and an enlightened people with warm hearts, with quick feelings, and with strong resentments?

But I waste time in dwelling on grievances and abuses which you all know and feel. The difficulty in enumerating the sufferings of Ireland, is not what to choose, but what to reject; so many abominations crowd at once upon my mind, and everyone more atrocious than the other. Let me turn from a subject so disgusting in all points of view, as your actual Government, and contemplate the brilliant prospect which lies before us, the promised



land of liberty and happiness, to secure the possession of which, we have but to act with the spirit of men, and to profit of the great occasion which Providence has at length afforded us. We have now the means, in the first place, to break that execrable slavery, by which, under the more plausible name of connection, we have been chained for six hundred years at the feet of England; we have in our hands independence for our country, the first blessing of nations, and liberty for ourselves, without which life is not worth preserving; we shall no longer be dragged perpetually from the line of our obvious interests by the overbearing attraction of our tyrant, nor forced to run and prostrate ourselves at the feet of an English Minister, to obtain his permission to regulate the concerns of our country. The aristocracy of Ireland, which exists only by our slavery, and is maintained in its pomp and splendour by the sale of our lives, liberties, and properties, will tumble in the dust; the people will be no longer mocked with a vain appearance of a Parliament, over which they have neither influence nor control. Instead of a King representing himself, a House of Lords representing themselves, and a House of Commons representing themselves, we shall have a wise and honest Legislature, chosen by the people, whom they will indeed represent, and whose interest, even for their own sakes, they will most strenuously support. Our commerce will be free, our arts encouraged, our manufactures protected; for our enemies will be no longer our law-makers. The benches of our Legislature will no longer groan under the load of placemen and pensioners, the hirelings of foreign power, and the betrayers of our country; we shall have upright judges to administer the laws, for the road to the judgement seat will no longer be through the mire of Parliament corruption; we shall have honest juries to determine on our liberties, properties, and

lives, for the Crown will no longer nominate our sheriffs on the recommendation of this or that grandee; the host of useless offices, multiplied without end, for the purposes of corruption, will be annihilated, and men will be made hereafter for places, and not places for men; the burdens of the people will be lightened, for it will be no longer the custom to buy majorities in Parliament; the taxes which will be hereafter levied, will be honestly applied to the exigencies of the State, the regulation of commerce, the support of a constitutional army, the formation of a navy, the making of roads, the cutting canals, the opening mines, the deepening our harbours, and calling into activity the native energy of the land. Instead of the state of daily suicide wherein Ireland now exists, her resources will at length be actively employed for her interest and her glory. Admission to the legislature will be no longer to be purchased by money, and the execrable system of jobbing, so long our disgrace and ruin, will be forever destroyed. The trade of Parliament will fail, and your boroughmongers becomes bankrupts. Your peasantry will be no longer seen in rags and misery; their complaints will be examined, and their sufferings removed; instead of the barbarous policy which has so long kept them in want and ignorance, it will be the interest, as well as the duty of a national Government, to redress their grievances, and to enlighten their minds. The unnatural union between Church and State, which has degraded religion into an engine of policy, will be dissolved. Tithes, the pest of agriculture, will be abolished; the memory of religious dissensions will be lost, when no sect shall have an exclusive right to govern their fellow citizens. each sect will maintain its own clergy, and no citizen will be disfranchised for worshipping God according to his conscience. To say all in one word, *Ireland shall be independent*. We shall be a nation, not a province; citizens, not slaves. Every man shall



rank in the State according to his merit and his talents. Our commerce shall extend into the four quarters of the globe; our flag shall be seen on the ocean; our name shall be known among the nations; and we shall at length assume that station, for which God and nature have designed us.

I feel that I am proving an axiom. Can any honest man for a moment doubt that an independent nation will better regulate her own concerns, than if she were subjugated to another country whose interest it is to oppress her? I will, therefore, assume as a fact, that independence is an object of the highest possible advantage to Ireland, and I will briefly consider what are the weighty motives, for weighty, indeed, they must be, which have thus long induced her to forego so great a blessing and to remain in humble subjection to England. The first and most striking, and, in fact, the true reason, is the dread of risking a contest with a power which we are habituated to look upon as our superior. Every man agrees that independence is a good thing, if it could be had, but dreads to hazard the little he enjoys in surety for the speculation of a greater benefit, the acquisition of which is remote, and attended with uncertainty and danger.

Not to dwell upon the pusillanimity of this mode of reasoning, the first answer I have to give, is conclusive. It is no longer a matter of choice; we must take our party on the instant and decidedly; we have now all we wanted: allies, arms, and ammunition; stores, artillery, disciplined troops, the best and bravest in Europe, besides the countless thousands of our own brave and hardy peasantry who will flock to the standard of their country. The sword is drawn, the Rubicon is passed, and we have no retreat; there remains now no alternative; if we were even inclined, we could not return to the state in which we were three months ago.

We must conquer England and her adherents, if any yet she has among ourselves, or they will conquer us, and then *vae victis!* To the brave and honest majority of my countrymen, who are ready to sacrifice their lives for the independence of Ireland, I do not now address myself; but to those timid and cautious speculators who may hang back, and wait upon contingencies, and fluctuate and balance, before they choose their party. To such men, and I hope at this glorious period few such will be found, I appeal; and I desire them, even for their own sakes, to consider, that, in a war like that wherein we are now engaged, there is no neutrality; we fight for our liberties, dearer far than life, and, in such a contest, he that is not with the people, is against them; him we do not find in the ranks we must hold as an enemy, and an enemy in the highest degree, a deserter and a traitor to his country. If any man dreads the issue of the contest, it is, notwithstanding, the interest, as it is the duty, of even that man to come forward in the defence of the common cause; for it is only in the possibility of disunion among ourselves, that England can form the slightest hope of success in the contest.

If she sees all ranks and description of Irishmen united and determined, she will balance, after the experience of America and France, before she will engage in a third crusade against the liberties of an entire nation. The sure way to avert the calamities of war from our country, is, to show we are to a man resolved to face them with courage; or, if war must be, the infallible means to ensure its speedy and glorious termination, is to bring to bear on our enemy the consolidated force of the entire nation. In the present crisis it is, therefore, the interest, even of the most cautious man, to step forward in the cause of his country, unless he prefers to sacrifice his property, his honour, perhaps his existence, to his fears; for, I again repeat



it, in a war for our liberties, we can admit of no neutrality.

A generous mind is not deterred from a glorious pursuit because it is attended with danger. It is our duty to hazard everything when the object is the independence of our native land, were our enemy even more powerful than she has been described, or we have been used to conceive her. But let us approach this gigantic figure by which we have been so long kept in awe, and see whether our own apprehensions, as well as the artifice of our oppressors, have not magnified the object of our fears. The English fleet is very formidable, but we have little commerce, and, during the short continuance of the war, we can dispense with it; a shot from a ship will not kill a man a quarter of a mile from the shore, and we have no occasion to go upon the seas to meet them. But either I am much deceived or it will be found that, so far from England being formidable by her fleet, it is there she will be found most vulnerable. Who are they that man their vessels? Two-thirds of them are Irishmen; and will those brave and gallant fellows, thousands of whom have been pressed, and the rest driven by famine into her service, will they, I say, be ready to turn their arms against their native land, against their fathers? It is not to be supposed; besides that, we have in our hands the means to secure their co-operation in the glorious contest wherein we are engaged, and in due season, it will be seen that we want neither the skill nor the spirit to employ them.

What I have said of the navy, applies, in a great degree, to the army of England; if she is determined to make war upon us she will not venture to do it with native troops, for there are too many Irish in the ranks; she must, therefore, do it with foreign mercenaries, if she can find the means to land them; but those mercenaries are not to be had without

money, and I entreat you to consider what will be the effect of a war with Ireland upon her finances. Four hundred millions of debt is no slight burden, and the Minister may not always find lenders. It is no secret that he is, at this moment, in considerable difficulty, and I take it for granted we shall not be so mad as to part with a shilling of English property until our liberty is established; but supposing he can even find money, money will not do everything; the gold of Carthage did not save her from the iron of Rome, and I doubt whether, in the present contest, the bank paper of England will be found more efficacious.

But granting she is formidable; so are we; if she is near us, we are near her; our people are brave, and hardy, and poor; we are not debauched by luxury and sloth; we are used to toil and fatigue, and scanty living; our miseries, for which we have to thank England, have well prepared us to throw off her yoke. We can dispense with feather beds, with roast beef, and strong beer; war, if it makes any change in the diet of our peasants, must change it for the better; they may, in that case, taste meat and bread, delicacies to them, and which a great majority of them seldom see; our soil and our climate we can well support; we can sleep in our bogs, where our enemies will rot, and subsist on our mountains, where they will starve. We fight upon principle and for our liberties; they fight because they are ordered to do so; we are at home; they are in an enemy's country. Under these circumstances, and especially with a just and righteous cause, he must be timid indeed who could doubt of success.

England, with Ireland at her back, is undoubtedly formidable; England, with Ireland neuter, is still respectable; but England, with Ireland in arms against her, I do not despair of seeing humbled with the dust. Add to what



I have said, the discontents which exist even in her own bosom, and which every year's continuance of the war will increase; remember the state of Scotland two years since, and judge whether she may not seize the present great occasion, and, like ourselves, assert her ancient independence; see the mighty French Republic, Spain, and Holland, united against her, and friendly to Ireland, and then decide which of us has most to dread from the other.

I leave this point, the discussion of which is only necessary for timid souls, and I come to another, addressed to those of a more generous stamp. It may be said that we are indebted to England for protection from our enemies, and that we are, of course, bound, in gratitude and honour, not to desert her in the hour of difficulty. If this argument were founded in fact, I should be ashamed to offer a syllable against it, for, with nations, as with individuals, I esteem honour the first of all objects, and no consideration of convenience or interest should be suffered, for an instant, to stand against it. But, in God's name, who are the enemies against whom we are protected by England? With what one nation on earth have we a shadow of difference? Of what people existing have we reason to complain, except England herself? It is true, indeed, that, by this baneful connection, which, in a thousand shapes, presents itself for the destruction of our interests, we are dragged, as reluctant parties, into every war wherein her ambition or her avarice induces her to embark; we are forced to forego, for the time, the modicum of commerce we possess; we are loaded with taxes; our people are pressed for seamen, or listed for soldiers, to fight the battles of England, in the event of which we have no possible interest, unless, indeed, it be our interest to be defeated, for the prosperity of England has ever been the depression of Ireland. In this very war,

which she has, in her pride and folly, waged against the French Republic, we have supplied not less than two hundred thousand of our gallant countrymen to combat against our most essential interests; and this is the protection for which we are to be grateful! If a man sets my house on fire first, even though he should afterwards succeed in extinguishing it, am I to be grateful to such a man? If a man drags me into a quarrel for his interests, wherein I have nothing to do, am I to thank him, even though, by our joint exertions, I escape with my life, after receiving a sound beating, and losing a great part of my property? See, then, whether the protection of England differs, in any respect, from the cases I have just mentioned. The truth and fact is, it is we that protect England; it is our provisions that victual her navy; it is our seamen who man her fleets, and our soldiers who fill her armies; this is solid, substantial protection, and now that we are at last about to separate from her forever, she will soon experimentally feel, to her irrecoverable loss, which of the two nations it is that has thus long protected the other. Independent of the consideration that this argument is a cowardly one, (for, what Irishman, what Irishwoman would, in the hour of danger, seek shelter under the arm of an Englishman?) it involves a gross fallacy, inasmuch as it presumes that, without the protection of England, we could not exist. It is true that, at this hour, we have not a navy; neither should we ever have one to the end of time, if the connection with England were so long to continue; but the moment that our independence is established, and the resources of our country applied, not to debauch and corrupt our rulers to sacrifice our dearest interests, but to cherish and bring out the inborn energy of the land, we shall soon see an Irish navy on the ocean; we shall look for protection only to God, and our own courage. We have means far beyond those



of half the independent States of Europe, of Denmark, of Sweden, of Portugal, of Naples, of Sardinia. Who at this hour protects America? Who protects Switzerland? The common interest of Europe protects the one, the valour of her people the other. We unite, in our cases, both circumstances. When we have once broken the yoke of England, do not believe that the maritime powers will ever see us return to our bondage; if even our means were insufficient for our protection, (which I will never admit,) we should speedily find allies; and, I presume, there is hardly an Irishman who so little respects his country, or himself, as to doubt that, with her own resources, and the assistance of France, Spain, and Holland, Ireland is abundantly competent of her own protection.

There is only one argument more which suggests itself to my mind, in support of our dependence upon England, and that is, that the condition of Ireland is, latterly, much improved, and, therefore, we should not desire a change.

I admit our condition is improved by her frantic crusade against America, we extorted from her necessities the extension of our trade; this was a great improvement, but is it the connection with England we are to thank for that? So far from it, that the first improvement in our condition was the step we then made towards independence. In 1782, we broke another, and a weighty link of the chain which bound us to England, by establishing our exclusive right to legislate for ourselves; this was also a great improvement in our condition, inasmuch as it placed us a step farther from England, we had then the means to be honest, if our legislators had had the inclination, to its full extent, it is because we yet remained too near our enemy, and one end of our chain was still in the hands of the despot of England. In 1793, when she was on the point of embarking in her

second crusade against France, the union of the Dissenters and Catholics took place, and three millions of Irishmen were restored, in a great degree, to their just rights; this was the last great improvement in our condition, and of the very highest importance, for, by making us at length one people, it has enabled us, if it be not our own fault, to throw off the yoke forever. Thus it appears, that every step that we have made towards independence, has, in the same degree, bettered our condition; that we have become prosperous, as we have become free; that while we were bound close to England, we were poor and oppressed; that, in proportion as we have receded from her baneful influence, we have risen nearer to our proper level. I am ready, therefore, to allow this argument of the increasing prosperity of Ireland its full force, but I draw therefrom a conclusion very different from those who advance it as a reason for our remaining in subjection to England. For, I say, that, if the imperfect shadow of independence we have enjoyed for the last 17 years has produced, as all parties will acknowledge it has, such beneficial effects, what may we not expect from a full and complete enjoyment of actual, national independence, when the pressure of our ancient tyrant is once removed, and we are left at liberty to regulate our own concerns, to study our own interests, to cultivate our means, to augment our resources, to profit of our natural advantages, in a word, to bring into play all the latent energy of our country, *“that noble and neglected island, for which God has done so much, and man so little?”*

Look, I beseech you, to America! See the improvement in her condition, since she has so nobly asserted her independence, on a provocation which, when set beside your grievances, is not even worthy to be named. Before the struggle, she too was flourishing in a degree far beyond what you have ever



experienced; England, too, was then infinitely more formidable, in every point of view, than at this hour; but neither the fear of risking the enjoyments she actually possessed, nor the terror of the power of her oppressors, prevented America from putting all to the hazard, and despising every consideration of convenience or of danger where her liberty was at stake. She humbled her tyrant at her feet, and see how she has been rewarded! Contemplate the situation of America before and since her independence, and see whether every motive which actuated her in the contest, does not apply to you with tenfold force; compare her laws, compare her Government with yours, if I must call that a Government which is, indeed, a subversion of all just principle, and a total destruction of the ends for which men submit to be controlled, and see whether it is not worth the struggle to place yourselves, and your friends, and ten times more formidable for your enemies.

I have now done, my countrymen, and I do most earnestly beseech you, as Irishmen, as citizens, as husbands, as fathers, by everything most dear to you, to consider the sacred obligation that you are called upon to discharge, to emancipate your country from a foreign yoke, and to restore to liberty yourselves and your children; look to your own resources, look to those of your friends, look to those of your enemies; remember that you must instantly decide; remember that you have no alternative between liberty and independence, or slavery and submission; remember the wrongs you have sustained from England for six hundred years, and the implacable hatred, or still more insufferable contempt, which, even at this moment, she feels for you; look to the nations of the earth emancipating themselves around you. If all this does not rouse you, then are you, indeed, what your enemies have long called you, A BESOTTED PEOPLE! You have now

arms in your hands, turn them instantly on your tyrants; remember, if this great crisis escapes you, you are lost forever, and Ireland will go down to posterity branded with that infamy of which the history of the world has, hitherto, for the honour of human nature, furnished but *one instance*. The Cappadocians had once the offer of liberty; they rejected it, and returned to their chains. Irishmen, shall it be said that you furnish the second, and more disgraceful instance? No, my countrymen, you will embrace your liberty with transport, and, for your chains, you will *“break them on the heads of your oppressors”*; you will shew, for the honour of Ireland, that you have both sensibility to feel, and courage to resent, and means to revenge your wrongs; one short, one glorious effort, and your liberty is established. NOW, OR NEVER! NOW, AND FOREVER!