
Theobald Wolfe Tone

Memorial on the Present State of Ireland

1796

Two Memorials on the Present State of Ireland, Delivered to the French Government, February 1796

by Theobald Wolfe Tone [1796]

The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone

FIRST MEMORIAL

The genius of the English nation, their manners, their prejudices, and their government, are so diametrically opposite to those of the French Republic, in all respects, that it is unnecessary to dwell upon this subject. I assume it is an axiom, that there is an irreconcilable opposition of interests between the two nations. Since the French Revolution, there is one still more irreconcilable between the Governments, so that neither can be said to be in security while the other is in existence.

The war, hitherto, however glorious to France, has not been unprofitable to England; her fleets were never more formidable, and, in the true spirit of trade, she will console herself for the disgrace of her armies by land, in the acquisition of wealth, and commerce, and power, by sea; but these very acquisitions render it, if possible, incumbent, not merely on France, but on all Europe, to endeavour to reduce her within due limits, and to prevent that enormous accumulation of wealth, which the undisturbed possession of the commerce of the whole world would give her; and this reduction of her power, can be alone, as I presume, accomplished, with certainty and effect, by separating Ireland from Great Britain.

The French Government cannot but be well informed of the immense resources, especially in a military point of view, which England draws from Ireland. It is with the beef and the pork, the butter, the tallow, the hides, and various other articles of the first necessity, which Ireland supplies, that she victuals and equips her navy, and, in a great degree, supports her people and garrisons in the West Indies. It is with the poor and hardy natives

of Ireland that she mans her fleets and fills the ranks of her army. From the commencement of the present war to the month of June, 1795, not less than 200,000 men were raised in Ireland, of whom 80,000 were for the navy alone. It is a fact undeniable, though carefully concealed in England, that TWO THIRDS of the British navy are manned by Irishmen; a circumstance, which, if stood alone, should be sufficient to determine the French Government to wrest, if possible, so powerful a weapon from the hands of her implacable enemy. I shall not dwell longer on the necessity of the measure which I shall propose, but will endeavour to show how it may best be executed, and on what grounds it is that I rest my confidence of success, if the attempt be but once made.

For the better elucidation of the plan, it is necessary to take a review of the actual state of Ireland. I shall condense the facts as much as possible, as I trust the French Government is already in possession of those which are most material.

The people of Ireland consist of about four million five hundred thousand persons, distributed under three different religious sects, of whom the Protestants, whose religion is the dominant one, and established by law, constitute four hundred and fifty thousand, or one tenth of the whole; the Dissenters, or Presbyterians, about nine hundred thousand, or one fifth; the Catholics form the remaining three million one hundred and fifty thousand. They may also be considered with regard to property, which is necessary, in some degree, to explain the political situation of the country.

The Protestants, who are almost entirely the descendants of Englishmen, forming so very small a minority as they do of the whole people, have yet almost the whole landed property of the country in their hands; this property has been acquired by the most unjust means, by plunder and confiscation during repeated wars, and by the operation of laws framed to degrade and destroy the Catholics,



the natives of the country. In 1650, the people of three entire provinces were driven by Cromwell into the fourth, and their property divided amongst his officers and soldiers, whose descendants enjoy it at this day. In 1688, when James II was finally defeated in Ireland, the spirit of the Irish people was completely broken, and the last remnant of their property torn from them and divided amongst the conquerors. By these means, the proprietors of estates in Ireland, feeling the weakness of their titles to property thus acquired, and seeing themselves, as it were, a colony of strangers, forming not above one tenth part of the population, have always looked to England for protection and support; they have, therefore, been ever ready to sacrifice the interests of their own country to her ambition and avarice, and to their own security. England, in return, has rewarded them for this sacrifice, by distributing among them all the offices and appointments in the church, the army, the law, the revenue, and every department of the State, to the utter exclusion of the two other sects, and more especially of the Catholics. By these means, the Protestants, who constitute the aristocracy of Ireland, have in their hands all the force of the Government; they have at least five sixths of the landed property; they are devoted implicitly to the connection with England, which they consider as essential to the secure possession of their estates; they dread and abhor the principles of the French Revolution, and, in case of any attempt to emancipate Ireland, I should calculate on all the opposition which it might be in their power to give.

But it is very different with regard to the Dissenters, who occupy the province of Ulster, of which they form, at present, the majority. They have among them but few great landed proprietors; they are mostly engaged in trade and manufactures, especially the linen, which is the staple commodity of Ireland, and is almost exclusively in their hands. From their first establishment, in 1620, until very lately, there existed a continual animosity between them and the Catholic natives of the country, grounded on the natural dislike between the old inhabitants and strangers, and fortified still more by the irreconcilable difference between the genius of the religions of Calvinism and Popery, and diligently cultivated and fomented by the Protestant aristocracy, the partisans of England, who saw in the feuds and dissensions of the other two sects, their own protection and security.

Among the innumerable blessings procured to mankind by the French Revolution, arose the circumstance which I am about to mention, and to which I do most earnestly entreat the particular attention of the French Government,

as it is, in fact, the point on which the emancipation of Ireland may eventually turn.

The Dissenters are, from the genius of their religion, and the spirit of inquiry which it produces, sincere and enlightened Republicans; they have ever, in a degree, opposed the usurpations of England, whose protection, as well from their numbers and spirit, as the nature of their property, they did not, like the Protestant aristocracy, feel necessary for their existence. Still, however, in all the civil wars of Ireland, they ranged themselves under the standard of England, and were the most formidable enemies to the Catholic natives, whom they detested as Papists, and despised as slaves. These bad feelings were, for obvious reasons, diligently fomented by the Protestant and English party. At length, in the year 1790, the French Revolution produced a powerful revulsion in the minds of the most enlightened men amongst them. They saw that, whilst they thought they were the masters of the Catholics, they were, in fact, but their jailers, and that, instead of enjoying liberty in their own country, they served but as a garrison to keep it in subjection to England; the establishment of unbounded liberty of conscience in France had mitigated their horror of Popery; one hundred and ten years of peace had worn away very much of the old animosity which former wars had raised and fomented. Eager to emulate the glorious example of France, they saw at once that the only guide to liberty was justice, and that they neither deserved nor could obtain independence, whilst their Catholic brethren, as they then, for the first time, called them, remained in slavery and oppression. Impressed with these sentiments of liberality and wisdom, they sought out the leaders of the Catholics, whose cause and whose suffering were, in a manner, forgotten; the Catholics caught with eagerness at the slightest appearance of alliance and support from a quarter, whose opposition they had ever experienced to be so formidable, and once more, after lying prostrate for above 100 years, appeared on the political theatre of their country. Nothing could exceed the alarm, the terror, and confusion, which this most unexpected coalition produced in the breasts of the English Government, and their partisans, the Protestant aristocracy of Ireland. Every art, every stratagem, was used to break the new alliance, and revive the ancient animosities and feuds between the Dissenters and Catholics. Happily such abominable attempts proved fruitless. The leaders on both sides, saw that as they had but one common country, they had but one common interest; that while they were mutually contending and ready to sacrifice each other, England profited of their folly, to enslave both; and that it was only by a cordial union, and affectionate



co-operation, that they could assert their common liberty, and establish the independence of Ireland. They, therefore, resisted and overcame every effort to disunite them, and, in this manner, has a spirit of union and regard succeeded to 250 years of civil discord; a revolution in the political morality of the nation of the most extreme importance, and from which, under the powerful auspices of the French Republic, I hope and trust her independence and liberty will arise.

I beg leave again to call the attention of the French Government, to this fact of the national union; which, from my knowledge of the situation of Ireland, I affirm to be of importance, equal to all the rest. Catholics and Dissenters, the two great sects, whose mutual animosities have been the radical weakness of their country, are at length reconciled, and the arms which have so often imbrued in the blood of each other, are ready, for the first time, to be turned in concert against the common enemy.

I come now to the third party in Ireland, the Catholics, who are the Irish, properly so called, and who form almost the entire body of the peasantry of the country. The various confiscations, produced by the wars of five centuries, and the silent operation of the laws for 150 years, have stripped the Catholics of almost all property in land; the great bulk of them are in the lowest degree of misery and want, hewers of wood and drawers of water; bread they seldom taste, meat never, save once in the year; they live in wretched hovels, they labour incessantly, and their landlords, the Protestant aristocracy, have so calculated, that the utmost they can gain, by this continual toil, will barely suffice to pay the rent, at which these petty despots assess their wretched habitations; their food, the whole year round, is potatoes, their drink, sometimes milk, more frequently water; those of them who attempt to cultivate a spot of ground as farmers, are forced, in addition to a heavy rent, to pay tithes to the Priests of the Protestant religion, which they neither profess, nor believe; their own Priests fleece them. Such is the condition of the peasantry of Ireland, above 3,000,000 of people. But though there be little property in land, there is a considerable share of the commerce of Ireland in the hands of the Catholic body; their merchants are highly respectable, and well informed; they are perfectly sensible, as well of their own situation, as that of their country. It is of these men, with a few of the Catholic gentry, whose property escaped the fangs of the English invaders, that their General Committee, of which I shall have occasion to speak by-and-by, is composed, and it is with their leaders that

the union with the Dissenters, so infinitely important to Ireland, and, if rightly understood, to France also, has been formed.

I have now stated the respective situation, strength and views, of the parties of Ireland; that is to say: *First*. The Protestants, 450,000; comprising the great body of the aristocracy, which supports and is supported by England. Their strength is entirely artificial, composed of the power and influence which the patronage of Government gives them. They have in their hands all appointments in every Department, in the church, the army, the revenue, the navy, the law, and a great proportion of the landed property of the country, acquired and maintained as has been stated; but it cannot escape the penetration of the French Government that all their apparent power is purely fictitious; the strength they derive from Government results solely from opinion; the instant that prop is withdrawn, the edifice tumbles into ruins; the strength of property acquired like theirs by the sword, continues no longer than the sword can defend it, and, numerically, the Protestants are but one tenth of the people.

Second. The Dissenters, 900,000, who form a large and respectable portion of the middle ranks of the community. These are the class of men best informed in Ireland; they constituted the bulk of what we called the volunteer army in 1782, during the last war, which extorted large concessions from England, and would have completely established their liberty, had they been then, as they are now, united with their Catholic brethren. They are all, to a man, sincere Republicans, and devoted with enthusiasm to the cause of liberty and France; they would make perhaps the best soldiers in Ireland, and are already in a considerable degree trained to arms.

Third. The Catholics, 3,150,000. These are the Irish, properly so called, trained from their infancy in an hereditary hatred and abhorrence of the English name, which conveys to them no ideas but those of blood and pillage and persecution. This class is strong in numbers, and in misery, which makes men bold; they are used to every species of hardship; they can live on little; they are easily clothed; they are bold and active; they are prepared for any change, for they feel that no change can make their situation worse. For these five year, they have fixed their eyes most earnestly on France, whom they look upon, with great justice, as fighting their battles, as well as those of all mankind who are oppressed. Of this class, I will stake my head, there are five hundred thousand men, who would fly to the standard of the



Republic, if they saw it once displayed in the cause of liberty and their country.

From what I have said, it appears that all the artificial strength of Ireland is implicitly devoted to England, and decidedly adverse to France; that all the natural strength is equally devoted to France, and adverse to England; for this plain reason, that in the one, they look for a deliverer, in the other, they see a tyrant. It is now necessary to state the organisation of the people of Ireland; and here I must be allowed to observe, that even if there were no previous organisation, the measures which I shall submit would not be the less advisable and practicable. Organisation, like machinery, may be necessary to enable a small force to raise a great weight; but a whole people can act by their natural strength. The Republic may rely with confidence to meet support from the Dissenters, actuated by reason and reflection, from the Catholics, impelled by misery and inflamed by detestation of the English name. These are the actual force of Ireland, and, in addition to their strength, they are organised also.

In the year 1791, the Dissenters of Belfast, which is the principal city in Ulster, and, as it were, the metropolis of the great body, formed the first club of United Irishmen, so called, because in that club, for the first time in Ireland, Dissenters and Catholics were seen together in harmony and union. A similar club was immediately formed in Dublin, which became speedily famous for its publications and the sufferings of its members, many of whom were thrown into prison by the Government, whose terror at this rising spirit of union amongst the people may be estimated from the severity with which they persecuted those who were most active in promoting it. This persecution however, far from quelling the spirit, only served to make the people more cautious and guarded in their measures. Means have been adopted to spread similar clubs throughout Ulster, the seat of the Dissenting power, the object of which is to subvert the tyranny of England, to establish the independence of Ireland, and to frame a free Republic on the broad basis of liberty and equality. These clubs were rapidly filled, and extended, in June last, over about two-thirds of that province. I am satisfied that, by this time, they embrace the whole of it, and comprise the activity and energy of the Dissenters of Ireland, including, also, numbers of the most spirited and intelligent of the Catholic body. The members are all bound by an oath of secrecy, and could, on a proper occasion, I have not the smallest doubt, raise the entire force of the province of Ulster, the most populous, the most warlike, and the most informed quarter of the

nation.

For the Catholics, from what has been said of their situation, it will appear that little previous arrangement would be necessary to ensure their unanimous support of any measure which held out to them a chance of bettering their condition; yet they also have an organisation, commencing about the same time with the clubs last mentioned, but composing Catholics only. Until within these few months, this organisation baffled most active vigilance of the Irish Government, unsuccessfully employed to discover its principles, and, to this hour, they are, I believe, unapprized of its extent. The fact is, that in June last it embraced the whole peasantry of the provinces of Ulster, Leinster and Connaught, three-fourths of the nation; and I have little doubt but it has since extended into Munster, the remaining province. These men, who are called Defenders, are completely organised on a military plan, divided according to their respective districts, and officered by men chosen by themselves; the principle of their union is implicit obedience to the orders of those whom they have elected for their Generals, and whose object is the emancipation of their country, the subversion of English usurpation, and the bettering the condition of the wretched peasantry of Ireland. The eyes of this whole body, which may be said, almost without a figure, to be the people of Ireland, are turned, with the most anxious expectation, to France, for assistance and support. The oath of their union recites, "That they will be faithful to the united nations of France and Ireland," and several of them have already sealed it with their blood. I suppose these is no instance of a conspiracy, if a whole people can be said to conspire, which has continued for so many years, as this has done, where the secret has been so religiously kept, and where, in so vast a number, so few traitors have been found.

This organisation of the Defenders embraces the whole peasantry of Ireland, being Catholics. There is also a further organisation of the Catholics, which is called the General Committee, and to which I have already alluded. This was a representative body, chosen by the Catholics at large, and consisting of the principal merchants and traders, the members of professions, and a few of the remaining Catholic gentry of Ireland. This body, which has sate repeatedly in the capital, at the same time with the Parliament, and has twice within four years, sent ambassadors to the King of England, possesses a very great influence on the minds of the Catholics throughout the nation, and especially decides the movements of the city of Dublin, a circumstance, whose importance, when well directed, it is unnecessary to suggest to men



so enlightened as those who compose the Government of France. It is true, that, by a late act of the Irish Legislature, this body is prevented from meeting in a representative capacity, but the individuals who compose it still exist, and this act, without diminishing their power or influence, has still more alienated their minds from the British Government in Ireland, against which they were already sufficiently, and with great reason, exasperated. It is but justice to the General Committee, in whose service I had the honour to be, during the whole of their activity, and whose confidence I had the good fortune to acquire and retain, to say, that there is nowhere to be found men of purer patriotism, more sincerely attached to the principles of liberty, or who would be more likely in an arduous crisis to conduct themselves with abilities and firmness. I can add, from my personal knowledge, the great majority of those able and honest men who compose it are sincere Republicans, warmly attached to the cause of France, and, as Irishmen and as Catholics, doubly bound to detest the tyranny and domination of England, which has so often deluged their country with their best blood.

I have now stated the modes of organisation which exist in Ireland.

1. The Dissenters, with some of the most spirited and enlightened of the Catholics, under the name of United Irishmen, whose central point is Belfast, the capital of Ulster.
2. The Defenders, forming the great body of the Catholic peasantry, amounting to 3,000,000 of people, and who cover the entire face of the country.
3. The General Committee of the Catholics, representing the talents and property of that body, possessing a very great influence everywhere in Ireland, and especially deciding the movements of the capital.

I hazard nothing in asserting, that these three bodies are alike animated with an ardent desire for the independence of Ireland, an abhorrence of British tyranny, and a sincere attachment to the cause of the French Republic; and, what is of very great consequence, they have a perfect good understanding and communication with each other, (that is to say, their leaders,) so that, on any great emergency, there would be no possible doubt of their mutual co-operation. Many

of the most active members of the General Committee, for example, are also either members of those clubs, or in unreserved confidence and communication with those who regulate and guide them. The central point of all this is undoubtedly Belfast, which influences, and which deserves to influence, the measures of all the others, and what I consider as extremely singular, the leaders of the Defenders in Ulster, who are all Catholics, are in more regular habits of communication, and are more determined by the Dissenters of Belfast, than by their Catholic brethren of Dublin, with whom they hold much less intercourse.

I shall add a few words on the military force of Ireland, and on the navy, and then I shall conclude this memorial, which, in spite of all my efforts to condense it, I feel growing under my hands.

In the month of June, 1795, when I left Ireland, the army, as I believe, amounted to about 30,000 men, of which 12,000 were troops of the line, or fencibles, and 18,000 were militia; a great proportion of the former, viz the cavalry and artillery, and all the latter, being Irish. I believe a considerable number have been since detached to the West Indies and elsewhere; if so, the relative proportion of Irish must be increased, as the militia cannot be ordered on foreign service. For the cavalry and artillery, I cannot speak with certainty; but my belief is, that if they saw any prospect of permanent support they would not act against their country. For the remaining 9,000 men of the troops of the line and fencibles, they are a wretched assemblage of old men and boys, incapable of the duties of active service; any resistance they could make, if they were inclined to resist, could be but trifling, and I have reason to believe they would not be so inclined, several of the fencible regiments being Scotch, and already more than half disaffected to the Government. For the militia, they consisted, at the time I mention, of about 18,000 men, as fine troops as any in Europe. Of these at least 16,000 were Catholics, and of those a very great portion were actually sworn Defenders, who were compelled to enter the service to avoid prosecution. I learn, that since my departure from Ireland, Defenderism has spread rapidly among them, and that numbers have been imprisoned on that account. I have not a shadow of doubt on my mind, but that the militia would, in case of emergency, to a man, join their countrymen in throwing off the yoke of England, provided proper measures were taken, and that they saw a reasonable prospect of success.

For the navy, I have already said that Ireland has



furnished no less than 80,000 seamen, and that two-thirds of the English fleet are manned by Irishmen. I will here state the grounds of my assertion. First, I have myself heard several British officers, and among them, some of very distinguished reputation, say so. Secondly, I know that when the Catholic delegates, whom I had the honour to attend, were at St James, in January, 1793, in the course of the discussion with Henry Dundas, principal Secretary of State, they asserted the fact to be as I have mentioned, and Mr Dundas admitted it, which he would most certainly not have done if he could have denied it. And, lastly, on my voyage to America, our vessel was boarded by a British frigate, whose crew consisted of 220 men, of whom no less than 210 were Irish, as I found by inquiry. I submit the importance of this fact to the particular notice of the French Government.

From all which has been said, I trust it will appear that it is the interest of France to separate Ireland from England; and that it is morally certain that the attempt, if made, would succeed, for the following reasons:

1. That all the Dissenters are disaffected to England, attached to France, and sufficiently organised.
2. That the whole Catholic peasantry of Ireland, above 3,000,000 of people, are, to a man eager to throw off the English yoke; that they also are organised, and that part of the fundamental oath, by which they are bound as Defenders, is to be true as well to France as to Ireland.
3. That there is a certainty of a perfect harmony and co-operation between these two great bodies, which constitute nine-tenths of the population of Ireland.
4. That the British Government cannot reckon on any firm support from the army, above two-thirds of which are Irishmen, and, of that number, nearly 10,000 being, as I am informed and believe, actually sworn Defenders.
5. That it is at least possible that, by proper measures to be adopted relative to the Irishmen now serving in the navy of England, her power at sea might receive such a shock as it has never yet experienced; and
6. lastly, that if these facts be as I have here stated

them, it would be impossible for the Protestant aristocracy in Ireland to make any stand whatsoever, even for an hour, in defence of the connection with England.

Having now submitted the actual situation of Ireland to the notice of the French Government, I shall offer, in a second memorial, the plan which I conceive most likely to effectuate the separation of that country from Great Britain.