

Republican SINN FÉIN Poblachtach

Theobald Wolfe Tone Commemoration
Bodenstown, County Kildare



1999

“We want recruits because we are sure of the rightness
of our cause.”

The main oration at the Annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration in Bodenstown, Co Kildare, on Sunday, June 13 was delivered by the former Republican prisoner and hunger striker from west Belfast Marian Price. Organised by Republican Sinn Féin, the parade left Sallins Village at 2.30pm. A speaker from the United States assured the crowd at the graveside of Wolfe Tone of continued support from the “exiled children in America”.

Marian and her sister Dolours Price spent 167 days on hunger strike and forced feeding by the British in Brixton and Durham prisons in England before winning their campaign to be transferred to Armagh jail in March 1975. The text of her oration follows:

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"A chairde

Fáilte romhaibh go léir. Fellow Republicans and friends I feel honoured and privileged to have been invited here today, to the grave of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 'the Father of Irish Republicanism', to deliver the oration at the annual Bodenstown Commemoration. As Republicans we gather, not merely to foster and cherish the memory of our fallen predecessors and comrades, important and necessary though that function must always be, but also to draw strength and inspiration from their lives and deaths and once again to swear allegiance to the legacy which they bequeathed to us. From their sacrifice we receive lessons of history to learn, ideals to espouse and principles of patriotism to uphold.

This particular event is one of potent symbolic and historical significance in the psyche and the traditions of Irish Republicanism. As we stand here today we are mindful of those previous generations of Republicans who made the annual pilgrimage to this hallowed spot and I feel humble as I reflect on the litany of our illustrious patriot dead who eulogised the ideals and the sacrifice of Wolfe 'Tone by his graveside. In this churchyard on June 22, 1913 Patrick Pearse in his tribute to the leader of the United Irishmen, said:

"Though many before him and some since have died in testimony of the truth of Ireland's claim to nationhood, Wolfe Tone was the greatest of all who have made that testimony, the greatest of all that have died for Ireland whether in old time or in now. He was the greatest of Irish Nationalists; I believe he was the greatest of Irishmen. And if I am right in this I am right in saying that we stand in the holiest place in Ireland, for it must be that the holiest sod of a nation's soil is the sod where the greatest of her dead lie buried. To his teaching we owe it that there is such a thing as Irish Nationalism and to the memory of the deed he nerved his generation to do, to the memory of '98, we owe it that there is any manhood left in Ireland. Think of Tone."

High praise indeed from a man who was himself to become a Republican icon. What greater honour could be bestowed upon any Irish Republican than to be the recipient of such adulation and eloquent exaltation from such a colossus in Irish history as Patrick Pearse.

Wolfe Tone's political ideology and objectives were forged by the era known as the Enlightenment. It was a period when the 'Philosophes' argued that there was something common to all men which was more important than any differences. They claimed that all had a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and that the best social arrangements were those which maximised pleasure and minimised pain. The 'Philosophes' asserted that the State was a collection of individuals who lived together in order to improve and secure their own welfare and it was the duty of rulers to rule so as to bring about, by means which would be ascertained by reason,

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the greatest welfare for the inhabitants of their countries. This, in their view, was the social pact which united people together, and defined the rights and duties of rulers and subjects.

Inspired by the 'Philosophes', the American Declaration of Independence and war against Britain, Tom Paine's Rights of Man and the French Revolution, Theobald Wolfe Tone and his comrades under the banner of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' established the Society of United Irishmen in 1791 in their attempts to build a more humane, just and democratic society in Ireland. The enemies of an egalitarian political system whom they identified were the British Crown and Royal family, the Anglican landed, privileged, aristocratic Ascendancy, the Established Church of Ireland, which imposed its will on people of other religions and none through the imposition of the tithe, the undemocratic, unrepresentative, Dublin Parliament on College Green which was the sole preserve of the Ascendancy, and the intimidating physical symbol of British rule in Ireland: the Dublin Castle administration. The custodians of this corrupt, tyrannical society were the huge naval and military forces at the disposal of the British Crown supplemented by an array of auxiliary units in the Yeomanry and the Militia.

Initially, the United Irishmen sought reform of the system and placed their trust in more enlightened members of the English Whigs to aid their cause. However, just as the Civil Rights Movement of my generation was bludgeoned off the streets of Derry on October 5, 1968 and massacred on those self-same streets on Bloody Sunday, January 30, 1972, the United Irishmen found painful disillusionment on the path of reform. The present-day advocates of the 'equality agenda' should note well that the British state in Ireland regards any proposal for reform as repugnant and reacts violently against its proponents. It is clear however that Irish history does not appear to be one of their strongest subjects.

Faced with the stubborn refusal of the British Government to remove the Penal Laws from the Statute Book, the Society of United Irishmen faced a dilemma. Should they abandon their struggle for democracy or resort to force of arms to attain it? To their eternal credit, given the political and military power of the foe they faced, Tone and many of his closest comrades opted for revolution, Sadly though, some of their old friends and associates chose a different path and would oppose them in battle during the '98 Rebellion. At the core of the United Irish philosophy following the failure of the attempts at reform was the concept of separatism ie, the complete severance of the political link between Ireland and Britain. On this issue Tone was firm and explicit when he stated:

"To break the connection with England, the never failing source of all our political evils, and to assert the independence, of my country — these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and

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to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter – these were my means."

This is the immortal political will and testament of the man whose memory and legacy we commemorate today, Theobald Wolfe Tone, the democrat, secularist, humanitarian, separatist, revolutionary Republican soldier. What would this man, who inspired generations of our noblest and bravest to sacrifice their lives in pursuit of his goal of a sovereign, independent Irish Republic, think of our present-day Irish society? Does the Ireland of today reflect the realisation of his hopes and aspirations?

In the South the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' is being held up by economists and the European Union as the model for successful economic development to other countries. Yet despite the undoubted rise in prosperity and living standards over the past fifteen years in particular, poverty and inequality remain widespread. Over 190,000 remain unemployed. There is a chronic shortage of housing in the public sector and the gap between rich and poor is growing. Our native culture is swamped by a media bombardment of Anglo-American popular and soap-opera attitudes and values. Huge sections of our population, including Bertie Ahern and the TDs in Leinster House, are fixated with the activities of an English soccer club. Twenty-Six-County sovereignty is daily eroded by the growing power of the European Union, whose entire Commission were recently forced to resign because of widespread nepotism and corruption.

The latest spate of tribunals in the South investigating similar serious malpractices in the highest levels of civil and public life are a far cry from the noble idealism which motivated the United Irishmen in 1798. Neutrality is being bartered to facilitate NATO's designs. Working class areas of Dublin, Cork and Limerick are devastated by the scourge of drug addiction and dealing. A vicious criminal gang leader is glamourised on the silver screen while crime flourishes as the old and the lonely in vulnerable rural areas are preyed upon, terrorised, beaten and robbed. The Dublin 4 Seóinín society sit and wait in eager anticipation for the possible first official State visit of a British monarch to their midst and assess the possibilities of a return to the Commonwealth via the mechanisms of the forthcoming British-Irish Council.

North of the British-imposed border the murders of solicitor Rosemary Nelson and Elizabeth O'Neill in Portadown highlight the fact that there has been no radical change brought about by the Stormont Agreement. The northern nationalist nightmare, which Garret Fitzgerald promised us in 1985 would be ended by the Anglo-Irish Agreement, remains part of our daily lives. The siege endured by the people of the Garvaghy Road is a stark reminder that the North Armagh region remains a cauldron of sectarian hatred, as intense as it was in Tone's day when it witnessed the murderous activities of the Peep-o-Day Boys and the birth of the racist Orange Order.

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The latest British-Free State initiative, ie the Stormont Agreement, is a three-stranded package firmly rooted in the joint British-Leinster House strategy which was drawn up in 1973. Politically, it offers us less than the Sunningdale Agreement. Recently, a Provisional spokesman was on record as saying that "David Trimble, by insisting on decommissioning, was threatening to bring down what it took 30 years to build".

To suggest that those Republicans and indeed nationalists, who suffered, fought and died over the past three decades did so in order to walk through the doors of a revamped Stormont, abandon Articles 2 and 3 of the Southern Constitution, and establish a British-Irish Council which would extend British influence in the 26 Counties, is a blasphemy and fraudulent assertion. To add insult to injury we, had to endure the nauseating statement of [the Provisionals'] Mr Francie Molloy in the Sunday Times (March 28, 1999) which I quote:

"We are prepared to work an Executive. We are really prepared to administer British rule in Ireland for the foreseeable future. The very principle of partition is accepted and if the Unionists had had that in the 1920s they would have been laughing."

In response to that heresy I quote from Patrick Pearse's oration at the grave of O'Donovan Rossa on August 1, 1915:

"We know only one definition of freedom; it is Tone's definition, it is Mitchel's definition, it is Rossa's definition. Let no man blaspheme the cause that the dead generations of Ireland served by giving it any other name and definition than their name and their definition . . ."

Our critics will decry us by claiming that we ignore the wishes of the people expressed in the 1998 referendums. Our response is to assert that, just as in 1922, the people, heavily influenced by establishment agencies voted, not necessarily for the political structures presented to them, but for "peace" and "an end to violence". Theirs was a natural and understandable reaction in the face of great suffering. Republicans also yearn for peace, especially for the sake of our children. We know all about death, suffering, hardship and imprisonment. However, we will not accept as the price for peace the destruction of our principles, integrity, and indeed our very ideology.

Fellow Republicans, I call upon you to educate our youth and instil in them a sense of pride in and understanding of the sacrifices of countless generations of men and women in pursuit of the cause of Irish freedom. Outline for them the errors of the past and cultivate an attachment and commitment to fundamental Republican principles. In a further reminder to Mr Francie Molloy of the error of his ways I will once again quote from Patrick Pearse's writings. On Christmas Day 1915 he wrote:

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"If I do not hold the faith of Tone and if Tone was not a heretic then I am. If Tone said 'break the connection with England', and if I am saying 'maintain the connection with England', I may be preaching a saner, as I am certainly preaching a safer gospel than his, but I am obviously not preaching the same gospel."

The prophetic words of Patrick Pearse.

As I said earlier Bodenstown Sunday has always been an important date in the Republican calendar. It invokes memories of the annual trip in bygone days. Memories will come rushing back to many of you of parents and grandparents, childhood friends, comrades-in-arms, the memories and camaraderie of the internment camps and the prisons. We meet each year to renew our faith in and pledge our loyalty to the legacy bequeathed by our patriot dead.

Personally, it conveys to me memories of my mother and father and my aunts ridie and Maureen Dolan. Participation in events such as the annual Wolfe Tone Commemoration was very important to Bridie given the nature of her injuries in the Cause of Ireland. It was a source of great psychological reassurance to her to know that the cause for which she sacrificed so much was being nurtured and maintained and the flame of freedom rekindled by succeeding generations. How bitterly disappointed she would be today. Sadly and tragically we also reflect on the great number of former comrades who marched from Sallins to this churchyard in earlier days but have since taken an alternative political path.

The history of Ireland since Partition provides evidence in abundance of the political fate of those former Republicans who sought to 'use the system to overthrow the system'. Cumann na nGaedheal, Fianna Fáil, Clann na Poblachta and the Workers Party in due course became part and parcel of the establishment and deeply rooted in a partitionist mindset. As we daily watch the Provisionals eagerly prancing past the statues of Carson and Craigavon at Stormont and sit comfortably under the gaze of Britannia are we witnessing the latest addition to the club for political opportunists?

It is painful for us all as we look back over the past three decades; the young lives sacrificed in pursuit of a noble cause; the mental and physical scars of British army and RUC interrogation centres; the innocent victims young and old of vicious sectarian murder gangs; the children cut down by the rubber and plastic bullets of British Crown Forces; the long years spent in prison cells and internment camps separated from family and friends; the Bloody Sunday Massacre; the courage and integrity of the ten H-Block martyrs who captured the attention of the world and earned the respect of even their most implacable foes.

Yes, it is painful indeed to come to terms with the fact that after so much struggle and sacrifice former comrades could enter the British political system, adjust so readily to the environs of an institution which always has been and will continue to

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be a symbol of tyranny and oppression, openly boast about administering British rule for the foreseeable future and in return gleefully accept cheques from the British Treasury. 'For what died the sons of Róisín?'

Cast your minds back to the 1969–70 split in our Movement. The tactics and the strategies advocated by the Gardiner Place politburo in relation to the abandonment of abstentionism, participation in the two partitionist parliaments and the establishment of the broad front (NLF) concept, which we vehemently opposed, have now been realised under the stolen banner of Sinn Féin. Yet even our former associates in Gardiner Place had the intelligence to change the name of their party and abandon all pretence to being Republicans.

Fellow Republicans, it is imperative that we restate our programme and in the words which Patrick Pearse uttered as he observed our national ideal being diluted and abandoned by John Redmond and his Party:

"Let us make no mistake as to what Tone sought to do, what it remains for us to do. Tone has stated it for us . . . To that definition and to that programme we declare our adhesion anew; pledging ourselves as Tone pledged himself — and in this sacred place by this graveside, let us not pledge ourselves unless we mean to keep our pledge — we pledge ourselves to follow in the steps of Tone, never to rest either by day or by night until his work be accomplished . . . never lowering our ideal, never bartering one jot or tittle of our birthright, holding faith to the memory and the inspiration of Tone, and accounting ourselves base as long as we endure the evil thing against which he testified with his blood."

In conclusion I will once again highlight how relevant the political perception of Patrick Pearse remains particularly given the present situation with which we are faced. In May 1915 he wrote:

"We want recruits because we are sure of the rightness of our cause. We have no misgivings, no self-questionings. While others have been doubting, timorous, ill at ease, we have been serenely at peace with our consciences. The recent time of soul-searching had no terrors for us. We saw our path with absolute clearness; we took it with absolute, deliberateness. 'We could no other.' Whatever soul-searchings there may be among Irish political parties now or hereafter, we go on in the calm certitude of having done the clear, clean, sheer thing. We have the strength and the peace of mind of those who never compromise."

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir. ENDS

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