

Republican SÍNN FÉIN Poblachtach

Theobald Wolfe Tone Commemoration
Bodenstown, County Kildare



2000

'Former Republicans have been bought off with palliatives'

Cathleen Knowles McGuirk, Vice President Republican Sinn Féin delivered the oration at the grave of Theobald Wolfe Tone, the founder of Irish Republicanism, on Sunday, June 11 in Bodenstown cemetery, outside Sallins, Co Kildare.

The large crowd, led by a colour party carrying the National Flag and contingents of Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann, as well as the General Tom Maguire Flute Band from Belfast marched the three miles from Sallins Village to the grave of Wolfe Tone at Bodenstown. Contingents from all over Ireland as well as visitors from Britain and the United States took part in the march, which was marshalled by Seán Ó Sé, Dublin.

At the graveside of Wolfe Tone the proceedings were chaired by Seán Mac Oscair, Fermanagh, Ard Chomhairle, Republican Sinn Féin who said he was delighted to see the large number of young people from all over Ireland in attendance this year. The ceremony was also addressed by Peig Galligan on behalf of the National Graves Association, who care for Ireland's patriot graves. Róisín Hayden read a message from Republican Sinn Féin Patron, George Harrison, New York.

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“A chairde, a comrádaithe agus a Phoblactánaigh, tá an-bhród orm agus tá sé d’ónóir orm a bheith anseo inniu ag uaigh Thiobód Wolfe Tone, Athair an Phoblachtachais in Éirinn.

Fellow Republicans, once more we gather here in Bodenstown churchyard at the grave of Theobald Wolfe Tone, the greatest of the Republican leaders of the 18th century, the most visionary Irishman of his day, and regarded as the “Father of Irish Republicanism”.

I feel honoured and very humble to stand here on this hallowed spot where generations of Republican leaders before me have stood, and deliver the oration today. This annual commemoration is considered the most important event in the Republican calendar, not least for its continuity of Irish Republican thinking since Tone first espoused his philosophy of Separatism.



Wolfe Tone, a Protestant, was born in Dublin in 1763 the eldest of five children. His father, Peter, a coachbuilder was a man of property and Tone's early life was one of privilege. Although his ambition was to be a soldier his father had other ideas for him. Returning to his studies he graduated with a Law Degree from Trinity College in 1786. Shortly afterwards he met a young girl named Matilda Witherington. They eloped and married. She was to remain his faithful and supportive wife to the end.

The 18th Century Enlightenment Movement, with its focus in Paris, had begun to affect Irish thinking, and social improvement, freedom of conscience and religious tolerance were advocated. Much of the Irish radicalism of the 1780s and 1790s derived from this influence and from the publication of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*. Both Catholics and Presbyterians or Dissenters, suffered under the Penal Laws, which had created a Protestant ascendancy, but Catholics were also denied a large range of civil rights. This prompted Tone to write a pamphlet in 1791 entitled “An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland” which evoked the sympathy of the Northern Dissenters for the Catholic cause by pointing out the similarities between their respective grievances.

Wolfe Tone's radical nature and his serious questioning of the benefit of Ireland's relationship with Britain drove him into contact with like-minded radicals such as Thomas Russell, a Corkman, and soldier, recently returned from India. Russell was famously known as the 'Man from God Knows Where'. A strong bond of friendship was forged between the two men and when Russell took up a commission with a

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regiment in Belfast, Wolfe Tone visited him there where he met Henry Joy McCracken and Samuel Neilson.

The constant topic of conversation was the French Revolution from which Tone was to draw inspiration. He had become interested in the democratic Republican principles behind both the French and American revolutions.

In 1791, along with Henry Joy McCracken, Samuel Neilson, and Thomas Russell, Tone set up the Society of United Irishmen under the banner of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' with the objective of breaking the connection with England. Tone's potent words at the time echo down the years to us and have inspired Republicans to this day:

"To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, 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 past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in the place of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter – these were my means."

Tone saw the Irish fight for liberty as part of the world-wide upward march of the human race. The Society was declared illegal in 1794 and was driven underground but the Society's oath continued to be administered secretly. Catholics, Presbyterians and Protestants

were to the fore in shaping the Society. Wolfe Tone became the toast of Belfast and was the chief guest at parties in the homes of Henry Joy McCracken and the other leaders. In 1795 at a special event on Cave Hill outside Belfast, the leading figures of the Society of United Irishmen made a solemn compact "never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence."

Tone's egalitarian ideas in an Ireland wracked by distinctions of class and religion and his articulation of Irish nationality were what led to his acknowledgement as one of the greatest political thinkers and the most successful organiser of revolt since Owen Roe O'Neill. To counter the growing strength of the United Irishmen the English government, in the same year, promoted the establishment of the Orange Order, a sectarian and exclusively Protestant secret society with the objective of maintaining the Protestant ascendancy. It was part of their policy of 'divide and conquer' and from then on the Orange card was to be used to great effect. Wolfe Tone now saw



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that the time had come to put an end to talking and that nothing short of a social and political revolution as had been accomplished in France would suffice.

In 1796 Tone sailed first for America and then France and tried to persuade the revolutionary leaders to invade Ireland. Impressed by his courage and his sacrifice they were eventually convinced that there was widespread support for a rising. They responded to Tone's appeals and dispatched 14,500 troops on 43 vessels, commanded by General Hoche, to Ireland. Tone accompanied a French fleet to Bantry Bay but bad weather foiled the expedition.

Again in September 1798 Wolfe Tone set out for Ireland with a fleet consisting of nine ships and 3000 men. The English knew they were coming and that Wolfe Tone would be among them. By this time his brother Matthew had landed with General Humbert but was arrested, taken to Dublin, tried and was hanged. The French fleet was defeated and Tone was taken ashore with the other prisoners at Buncrana, charged with high treason and sentenced to death.

That the 1798 Insurrection failed and that Wolfe Tone was unsuccessful in his objective of breaking the connection with England and had forfeited his life in his attempt to attain it did not in any way diminish him in the eyes of subsequent generations of Irishmen and women.

On the contrary Tone became an icon for freedom-loving people everywhere. He and his comrades were the pioneers of democracy in Ireland and laid the foundation for the separatist cause. He passed on a legacy and a torch of freedom, which was taken up by his successors, Thomas Davis, James Fintan Lalor and John Mitchel. They in turn expanded on his political philosophy, which was to later influence Pearse and Connolly. Wolfe Tone rightly deserves the title of "Father of Irish Republicanism" and true Republicans will continue to strive to complete his unfinished work. It won't be an easy road but with determination we will succeed if everyone plays his part. Pearse's immortal words tell us "It is not sufficient to say 'I believe' unless one can say also 'I serve'." And we know also that history tells us that while one soldier of the British Occupying Forces remains in Ireland there will be resistance.

But what of modern day Ireland? Where have the egalitarian ideas of Tone and the United Irishmen gone? The contrast between the heroism and sacrifice of Wolfe Tone and the self-serving politicians of today — bankrupt of everything except promises — could not be starker. The stench of political corruption assails us as one tribunal after another is held, with more and more revelations being made and in the meantime making millionaires of some of our 'legal eagles'. The Taxing Master of the High court, James Flynn, referred recently to the current tribunals as "the Frankenstein of Modern Irish Society."

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The much-hyped Celtic Tiger has its downside too as we have seen. Not everyone has gained from it nor has the standard of living of those on the margins of society improved. The rich have become richer and a new poor has been created. The proliferation of British-owned outlets in our cities and towns is part of the new 'commercial colonisation' of Ireland while billions of pounds in profit leave the country annually. Rural areas, denuded of people fare no better; deserted villages, closed schools and post offices, disused factories and untilled land tell their own story.

If we look towards our six north-eastern counties we come face to face with the reality of British rule in Ireland, albeit a modernised version. Since the time Lloyd George asserted his determination to break the Republic by force, England's authority in Ireland has been based on military power. Now thanks to the Provisional Movement's switch from revolution to reform, the British government's normalisation policy is in place. Nationalists and former Republicans alike have been pacified, placated, and bought off with palliatives.



Their leadership has, by means of constant drip-feeding, managed to condition the people into acceptance of the unacceptable. Our erstwhile comrades began the betrayal of the Republican cause when they sought to legitimise the Leinster House partitionist assembly by dropping Sinn Féin's abstentionist policy at the 1986 Ard-Fheis. This betrayal culminated with their later jettisoning of Republican principles.

The remarkable ease with which they discarded key elements of the Republican ideology — especially in relation to the principle of consent is as astonishing as it is lamentable.

Those of us who walked out of that Ard-Fheis on November 2, 1986 recall the words of Martin McGuinness as we left: "Don't leave, my friends, stay and I will lead you to the Republic." What he and his friends have brought us instead is a restored Stormont with one-time revolutionaries set to resume office in that hated symbol of discrimination and repression. Gone now are the calls for an end to British rule in Ireland, it is no longer included on their agenda, arms have now been put beyond use and the Provisionals emasculated.

By opening up their dumps they have made it clear that there is no going back. The two international supervisors, Cyril Ramaphosa and Martti Ahtisaari, will then report to General John de Chastelain, whose parents were spies for MI5 during World War II. What a total surrender. The fact is they have now lost their *raison d'être*. Their

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political odyssey has been a long one, longer even than the “Stickies” now swallowed up by the Labour Party. And we can expect more of the same with some of their spokespersons talking about coalition with the Fianna Fáil party. Well may the Unionists applaud the fact that David Trimble was the only Unionist leader to deliver the Provisionals. Shame! Shame! Shame!

When the Belfast Agreement was hailed as a historic agreement Republican Sinn Féin was the only body to point out that “the emperor had no clothes.” The people of Ireland, north and south were engulfed in a conspiracy of mammoth proportions and were duped into voting yes.

Former Republican leaders have subjected the so-called peace process to bitter criticism and have been highly critical of the Provisional leadership's strategy, accusing them of abandoning their goals of a Democratic, Socialist Republic.

When Peter Mandelson, at the stroke of a pen, unilaterally suspended the assembly wherein lay all their hopes, as well as their salaries, the Provisionals were given a short, sharp, knock. They learned the hard way that power in the Six Counties resides ultimately with Westminster. Their ambition to share the reins of power in Dublin will not come without a price.

Do they seriously think that Fianna Fáil, the party that harassed, arrested, imprisoned, and tortured Republicans, allowed them to die on hunger strikes, and who shot and hanged them are seeking the restoration of the Republic of 1916? Or for that matter do they think that London, Washington, and the Catholic Church want the same thing? No, they seek instead to cement Partition, stabilise the 6-county statelet and once and for all neutralise Republicanism

Twenty-five years ago, as a united and strong movement we could have had peace if we had agreed to the principle of consent and given the British Occupying Forces the right to stay in Ireland. So many lives could have been saved and years of imprisonment of Republicans could have been avoided.

If the current leadership of the Provisionals decided in their ‘wisdom’ that it was wrong then why is it right now? But of course in the words of Ernie O’Malley: “It is easy to sleep on another man’s wound.”

At this critical point in Irish history it is worth asking what the past 31 years of struggle was for. What did ten men die on hunger strike for in hellish conditions in a British prison? Their sacrifice and the sacrifices of countless men and women were not for civil rights or ‘jobs for the boys’ but for British disengagement from Ireland and the restoration of democracy.

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Today, in Maghaberry, Hydebank, Portlaoise and Limerick Prisons, Republicans suffer deprivation and loss of liberty for the cause in which they believe and because they reject the latest sell-out. Political status is still being denied to some.

Republican Sinn Féin will continue to reject British rule in Ireland and will strive to undo it and all the injustices that go with it. We are on firm ideological ground and our analysis of the political situation has been proved correct. We look to the future – a future without a British military presence. We will never be reconciled with British rule in Ireland nor will we accept any dilution of the national demand. The sovereignty and unity of the Irish Republic are inalienable and non-judicable, they can't be given away and are not a matter for reconsideration – they are absolute. We are the only political organisation with a stated policy for a New Ireland.

Our document Towards A Peaceful Ireland points to an immediate way out of the impasse while our ÉIRE NUA programme provides for strong provincial and local government in a federation of the four provinces designed to ensure that every citizen can participate in genuinely democratic self-government. The adoption of these policies would ensure that the fears that Unionists may have of being sucked into a society in the 26 Counties, governed by greedy, self-serving and corrupt politicians were put to rest.

Standing here at the grave of Wolfe Tone I am reminded once more of the words he spoke over two hundred years ago: "...never to desist in our efforts until we have subverted the authority of England over our country." We come here each year to renew our faith and pledge ourselves to follow in his footsteps.

The man whom we honour today proved that Catholic and Protestant could work together for their mutual benefit.

Help us to work for the creation of a New Ireland worthy of the memory of Wolfe Tone and then some day we can rejoice when Ireland, a nation, can build him a tomb.