

Republican SÍNN FÉIN Poblachtach

Theobald Wolfe Tone Commemoration
Bodenstown, County Kildare



2005

“Let us, each one for himself or herself pledge ‘never to desist in our efforts...’”

ON June 12 the annual Republican Sinn Féin commemoration to Theobald Wolfe Tone, the Father of Irish Republicanism, took place.

A large crowd assembled in Sallins Village, Co Kildare and led by a National Colour Party carrying the Tricolour, the Starry Plough and the flags of the Four Provinces as well as uniformed contingents from Cumann na mBan and Na Fianna Éireann, carrying their own flags, marched to Bodenstown Churchyard.

At the Monument to Wolfe Tone in the cemetery, erected by the National Graves Association, proceedings were chaired by Des Long, Limerick. A laurel wreath was laid by Veteran Republican Niall Fagan, from Co Meath, and flags were dipped in salute. Peig Galligan spoke on behalf of the National Graves Association.

The main oration was delivered by Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, President of Republican Sinn Féin in the centenary year of the organisation. It is is carried below in full:

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“Ó éirigí suas a thogha na bhfear . . .
Come! Rise in your might, O best of men,
And muster your pikes in yonder glen;
Your enemies smite, with sword and lance,
And no laws you will own, but those of France.
Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité — Saoirse, Ionannas
agus Bráithreachas — Liberty, Equality and
Fraternity.

Scríobh an Piarsach; ‘Dob uafar í doimhneacht intleachta Wolfe Tone agus dob íontach í géire a intinne. Do thug sé dála Gael agus cúrsaí Gall go h-ionnlán. Dob ‘é an chéad duine do thug ina gceart iad. Is é a thug léargas agus solas ar an gcúis sin do a dtáinig ina dhiaidh;’ agus arís: ‘Tiobóid Wolfe Tone an fear do b’fhearr de Ghaeil nó de Ghall – Ghaeil dár geineadh riamh in Éirinn.’

(An Bárr Bua — Bealtaine 18, 1912)

Sea, a cháirde, tá Wolfe Tone mar réalt eolais ag Clanna Gael, ag muintir na h-Éireann le breis agus dhá chéad bliain anuas. Sin é an fáth go dtagann muid ar an láthair seo bliain i ndiaidh bliana — chun omós a thúirt dá chuimhne, chun inspioráid a fháil ó scéal a bheatha agus chun athnuachaint a dhéanamh ár ngealltanais leanúint ar bhóthar na saoirse go deireadh.

We are gathered at what Pádraig Pearse described as ‘the holiest place in Ireland’. This was so because Theobald Wolfe Tone known as the Father of Irish Republicanism — was the greatest of Irish men and ‘the greatest of all that have died for Ireland in old time or in new’. It followed, he said, that the “‘holiest sod of a nation’s soil is the sod where the greatest of her dead lies buried’.

Personally it is at once an honour and a privilege to speak at this sacred spot where the undiluted gospel of Irish Republicanism has been articulated down the decades by Pearse himself, by Liam Mellows, Brian O’Higgins, Mary MacSwiney, Tom Maguire, Tomás Óg Mac Curtáin, Tony Magan, Dáithí Ó Conaill and Pat Ward. Go raibh síocháin de shíor aca ar fad.

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It was 'our own immortal Tone' who although born into the ranks of the Ascendancy over 200 years ago, relinquished privilege to espouse the cause of the poor and downtrodden ordinary Irish people. He organised them to strive for the removal of the shackles of the Penal Laws with some degree of success. As Secretary of the Catholic Committee he was the driving force of the campaign.

Realising that civil rights under English rule would not secure "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" he went on to found the Society of United Irishmen as a revolutionary body — first in Belfast, then in Dublin and later in all 32 Counties of Ireland. As internationalists, they were in contact with similar bodies abroad such as the United Scotsmen and the United Englishmen.

Later again, he would journey to America, which had just thrown off the English yoke, and from there to revolutionary France dedicated to the ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. 'That Ireland was not able of herself to throw off the yoke, I knew. I therefore sought for aid wherever it was to be found,' he wrote.

But first he formulated in worthy terms his programme. '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 all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishman in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter — these were my means.'

We, who stand in clear succession to Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen, come here not merely to do honour to the noble spirit of Tone. We have come to renew our adherence to his teaching. We do not venerate him as a saint but rather do we look up to and respect him for his essential humanity, his passionate love for his wife and children, his espousal of the cause of the common people and his spirit and bravery as a soldier.

Fortunately, we have his diaries. According to the writer, Seán Ó Faoláin, these reveal 'pleasantly human qualities and frailties [that] make us feel that humanity is safe in his hands, and would have been safe in his hands had he lived to be the first President of an Irish Republic'.

Tone was logical and pitilessly clear in his thinking: 'No consideration,' he wrote, 'must be permitted to stand a moment against the establishment of our independence.' And again: 'our independence must be had at all hazards! If the men of property will not support us, they must fall; we can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community — the men of no property.'

Tone sought military assistance from revolutionary France. The Duke of Wellington has gone on record: 'Wolfe Tone was an extraordinary man . . . With a hundred guineas

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in his pocket, unknown and unrecommended, he went to Paris in order to overturn the British Government in Ireland. He asked for a large force; Lord Edward Fitzgerald for a small one. They listened to Tone . . . '

Wolfe Tone made the case that a large force of seasoned, revolutionary French soldiers in Ireland — with the support of the United Irishmen and the Defenders — would quickly overthrow British rule. A small force, while useful, would prolong the war of liberation. Tone wanted minimum bloodshed. But he was prepared to face any eventuality.

Five different expeditions were fitted out for the liberation of Ireland. Tone sailed with the first and largest — to Bantry Bay. Storms prevented the 15,000 soldiers from landing. 'The French were in the Bay', but could not come ashore. As one commentator reported: 'England has not had such an escape since the (Spanish) Armada.'

Tone also sailed with the last expedition but it was confronted off Donegal by a greatly superior British fleet. Offered an escape to France on a fast, light craft, he refused saying, 'Shall it be said that I fled whilst the French were fighting the battles of my country?' Tone fought for six hours until his vessel was a wreck. The fast, light craft reached France safely.

Captured and taken to Dublin Tone was court-martialled summarily. Standing in the uniform of a French 'chef-de-brigade' (colonel) he told the British military court: 'In a cause like this, success is everything. Success in the eyes of the vulgar fixes its merits. Washington (in America) succeeded, and Kosciusko (in Poland) failed.' He proudly admitted the facts: 'words, writings, actions' and repeated that the purpose of his struggle was to break the connection with England.

Tone thanked the Catholics in his speech from the Dock. He had sought to raise, 'three millions of my Countrymen to the rank of citizens. When the public cry was raised against me, when the friends of my youth swarmed off and left me alone, the Catholics did not desert me — they had the virtue even to sacrifice their own interests to a rigid principle of honour.'

But he sought also to remove the great disabilities imposed on the Presbyterians or Dissenters at that time. Sentenced to death he died in the hands of his enemies and we have their word only as to the manner of his passing. Suffice to say that he died for Ireland.

His enemies decreed that two men only should accompany his coffin to this very spot, but the word got out and a large crowd gathered to pay respect. Ever since they come each year near to the date of his birthday, June 20, to do homage to his memory and renew their faith in his principles.

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There are, however, those who pretend to support his programme, who pay lip service here to his ideals while in fact they work against them day and night in collaboration with British power in Ireland. The road to Irish freedom does not lie through Stormont or Leinster House, partitionist institutions which were imposed here by England as their alternative to Irish national independence.

One stands either for the essential unity and freedom of Ireland or for the English connection. A person cannot work with and administer British rule here and at the same time be a follower of Wolfe Tone. Neither can one, at the behest of the British government, destroy the weapons given to achieve the freedom of Ireland while one fights for Tone's ideals.

Above all, a person cannot don the uniform of the British police here or carry a gun in the service of English rule in this country while claiming to be an adherent of Irish Republicanism. One cannot adopt such conflicting attitudes without being a total contradiction. And Tone was certainly no contradiction; his labours, his struggles and his death attest to that.

I submit that three simple requirements are necessary for any person to see this point clearly. The first is simply to have average intelligence; the second is a basic knowledge of Irish history, especially the history of the last 200 years — since the time of Wolfe Tone; and the third is an attribute which appears to be in short supply these days — the ability to be honest with oneself. As the Bard said so many years ago: 'First, to thine own self be true ...' Not so many are prepared to be true to themselves in recent times.

What is more, since Ireland has been invaded, occupied and colonised — for many hundreds of years — one cannot deny the right of the Irish people, as a last resort, to avail of the option of the use of controlled and disciplined force to expel the armed forces and the administration of the invader.

Also, there are those who collaborate with the enemy within our gates and extradite political prisoners to him and condemn the small wars of national liberation. These very people, while pretending to uphold Irish neutrality, give material aid and comfort to the powers engaged in imperialist wars of conquest and the seizure of natural resources in the Third World.

This reference is clearly to the brazen use of Shannon airport as a military base and the availability of Irish airspace and re-fuelling facilities to a participant in such a war. The Irish people are even required to pay through taxation for the use of some of these facilities.

We know full well what would be the attitude of Wolfe Tone — and also of James Connolly — to such blatant collaboration with imperialism. Yet those who authorise

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these activities — while at the same time denying their obvious nature — parade here to Wolfe Tone's grave to abuse his memory.

Meanwhile these same collaborators with imperialism intend to sell out the Irish airline, Aer Lingus, after almost 70 years service to the Irish people. This essential service to an island nation is set to be lost to the Irish people, just as another essential service, Eircom, is now gone beyond their control.

Through the mismanagement of yet another set of collaborators Irish Shipping Ltd was lost in 1984. This was the agency that brought vital food-stuffs and raw materials to Ireland during WWII and lost over 150 seamen and nineteen ships during its loyal service to the Irish people. Without its own Merchant Fleet and its own Airline, this island people is more vulnerable to outside pressures and more dependant on external forces, a far cry from the nation visualised by Wolfe Tone.

A new English Supremo has taken over in the Six Occupied Counties as the British government continues its effort to gain as much nationalist support as possible for its rule here in addition to its underpinning by the unionists and the Dublin establishment. This newcomer was formerly with the 'Troops Out' movement in England and at one time took a definite left-wing political stance.

They come and they go — as did the Lord-Lieutenants at Dublin Castle in the past. Since 1972 we have had Willie Whitelaw, Francis Pym, Merlyn Rees, Roy Mason, Humphrey Atkins, Jim Prior, Douglas Hurd, Tom King, Patrick Mayhew, Mo Mowlam, John Reid, Peter Mandelson, Paul Murphy and now Peter Hain. The list goes on and on.

But they achieve nothing other than attempting to contain the situation in Ireland. They cannot solve the dreaded Irish Question within their restricted terms of reference. Only a definite policy decision by the English government to quit Ireland once and for all can do that.

Republican Sinn Féin and the true Republican Movement generally have a positive policy to meet such a new situation. To a constituent assembly, elected by adult suffrage in ALL of Ireland we will bring our ÉIRE NUA programme for a four-province federal Ireland, with optimum devolution of powers down to community level.

Even now, Unionists could still have a working majority in a nine-county Ulster, subject to the checks and balances of the new structures — and the nationalists would be within reach of power at that provincial level. We do not regard incorporation of the Six Counties into the 26-County State as desirable and nothing resembling a takeover, open or covert, should be attempted.

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True Republicans have consistently sought the creation of a completely New Ireland fashioned by the representatives of all the Irish people who would draft a new 32-County Constitution.

This is the centenary year of the foundation of Sinn Féin in 1905 with the object of "the re-establishment of the independence of Ireland". By a remarkable coincidence this is also the centenary year of the first meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council.

Unionists should realise that England has little or nothing to offer to any of us at this stage. The time has come for her to bow out and for this generation of Irish men and women of all persuasions to seize the moment in unity and fraternity. We must plan our future together — Wolfe Tone would have it no other way.

Tone demonstrated amply in his own life that he would not be content as some are with mere civil rights under English rule. Rather did he seek "To break the connection with England and to assert the independence of my country, these were my objects" — ideas never heard in Establishment circles to-day.

A Cháirde, before leaving for America and in this month of June in 1795 — two hundred and ten years ago exactly — Tone, Thomas Russell, Henry Joy McCracken and three or four others climbed to the summit of MacArt's Fort on the top of the Cave Hill overlooking Belfast. There, as is recorded in Tone's diary, they took a solemn obligation "never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country, and asserted our independence".

Could anything be clearer? Tone, Russell, McCracken, and many, many thousands more in the 210 years since that day on the Cave Hill, gave their lives rather than break that solemn obligation.

Here to-day at Bodenstown, in this centenary year of Sinn Féin and in close communion with the spirit of Theobald Wolfe Tone, let us, each one for himself or herself pledge 'never to desist in our efforts' for freedom, justice and peace."