

Republican SINN FÉIN Poblachtach

Theobald Wolfe Tone Commemoration
Bodenstown, County Kildare



Oration delivered by 1916 leader Pádraig MacPiarais in 1913

We have come to the holiest place in Ireland; holier to us even than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down. Patrick brought us life, but this man died for us. And 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 that have made that testimony, the greatest of all that have died for Ireland whether in old time or in new. He was the greatest of Irish Nationalists;

I believe he was the greatest of Irish men. 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 the nation's soil is the sod where the greatest of her dead lies buried.

I feel it difficult to speak to you to-day; difficult to speak in this place. It is as if one had to speak by the graveside of some dear friend, a brother in blood or a well-tried comrade in arms, and to say aloud the things one would rather keep to oneself. But I am helped by the knowledge that you who listen to me partake in my emotion: we are none of us strangers, being all in a sense own brothers to Tone, sharing in his faith, sharing in his hope, still unrealised, sharing in his great love. I have, then, only to find expression for the thoughts and emotions common to us all, and you will understand even if the expression be a halting one.

We have come here not merely to salute this noble dust and to pay our homage to the noble spirit of Tone. We have come to renew our adhesion to the faith of Tone; to express once more our full acceptance of the gospel of Irish Nationalism which he was the first to formulate in worthy terms, giving clear definition and plenary meaning to all that had been thought and taught before him by Irish-speaking and English-speaking men; uttered half articulately by a Shane O'Neill in some defiance

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flung at the Englishry, expressed under some passionate metaphor by a Geoffrey Keating, hinted at by a Swift in some biting gibe, but clearly and greatly stated by Wolfe Tone, and not needing now ever to be stated anew for any new generation. He has spoken for all time, and his voice resounds throughout Ireland, calling to us from this grave when we wander astray following other voices that ring less true.

This, then, is the first part of Wolfe Tone's achievement—he made articulate the dumb voices of the centuries, he gave Ireland a clear and precise and worthy concept of Nationality. But he did more than this: not only did he define Irish Nationalism, but he armed his generation in defence of it. Thinker and doer, dreamer of the immortal dream and doer of the immortal deed—we owe to this dead man more than we can ever repay him by making pilgrimages to his grave or by rearing to him the stateliest monument in the streets of his city. 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.

I have called him the greatest of our dead. In mind he was great above all the men of his time or of the after time; and he was greater still in spirit. It was to that nobly-dowered mind of his that Kickham, himself the most nobly-dowered of a later generation, paid reverence when he said:

Oh, knowledge is a wondrous power;

'Tis stronger than the wind

And would to the kind heavens

That Wolfe Tone were here to-day.

But greater than that full-orbed intelligence, that wide, gracious, richly stored mind, was the mighty spirit of Tone. This man's soul was a burning flame, a flame so ardent, so generous, so pure, that to come into communion with it is to come unto a new baptism, unto a new regeneration and cleansing. If we who stand by this graveside could make ourselves at one with the heroic spirit that once inbreathed this clay, could in some way come into loving contact with it, possessing ourselves of something of its ardour, its valour, its purity, its tenderness, its gaiety, how good a thing it would be for us, how good a thing for Ireland; with what joyousness and strength should we set our faces towards the path that lies before us, bringing with us fresh life from this place of death, a new resurrection of patriotic grace in our souls!

Try to get near the spirit of Tone, the gallant soldier spirit, the spirit that dared and soared, the spirit that loved and served, the spirit that laughed and sang with the

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gladness of a boy. I do not ask you to venerate him as a saint; I ask you to love him as a man. For myself, I would rather have known this man than any man of whom I have ever heard or ever read. I have not read or heard of any who had more of heroic stuff in him than he, any that went so gaily and so gallantly about a great deed, any who loved so well, any who was so beloved. To have been this man's friend, what a privilege that would have been! To have known him as Thomas Russell knew him! I have always loved the very name of Thomas Russell because Tone loved him.

I do not think there has ever been a more true and loyal man than Tone. He had for his friends an immense tenderness and charity; and now and then there breaks into what he is writing or saying a gust of passionate love for his wife, for his children. 'O my babies, my babies!' he exclaims. . . Yes, this man could love well; and it was from such love as this he exiled himself; with such love as this crushed in his faithful heart that he became a weary but indomitable ambassador to courts and camps; with the memory of such love as this, with the little hands of his children plucking at his heartstrings, that he lay down to die in that cell on Arbour Hill.

Such is the high and sorrowful destiny of the heroes: to turn their backs to the pleasant paths and their faces to the hard paths, to blind their eyes to the fair things of life, to stifle all sweet music in the heart, the low voices of women and the laughter of little children, and to follow only the far, faint call that leads them into the battle or to the harder death at the foot of a gibbet.

Think of Tone. Think of his boyhood and young manhood in Dublin and Kildare, his adventurous spirit and plans, his early love and marriage, his glorious failure at the bar, his healthy contempt for what he called 'a foolish wig and gown', and then—the call of Ireland. Think of how he put virility into the Catholic movement, how this heretic toiled to make free men of Catholic helots, how, as he worked among them, he grew to know and to love the real, the historic Irish people, and the great, clear, sane conception came to him that in Ireland there must be, not two nations or three nations, but one nation, that Protestant and Dissenter must be brought into amity with Catholic, and that Catholic, Protestant, and Dissenter must unite to achieve freedom for all.

Then came the United Irishmen, and those journeys through Ireland—to Ulster and to Connacht—which, as described by him, read like epics infused with a kindly human humour. Soon the Government realises that this is the most dangerous man in Ireland—this man who preaches peace among brother Irishmen. It does not suit the Government that peace and goodwill between Catholic and Protestant should be

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preached in Ireland. So Tone goes into exile, having first pledged himself to the cause of Irish freedom on the Cave Hill above Belfast. From America to France: one of the great implacable exiles of Irish history, a second and a greater Fitzmaurice, one might say to him as the poet said to Sarsfield:

*Ag déanamh do ghearáin leis na ríghthibh
Is gur fhág tú Éire 's Gaedhil bhocht' claoidhte,
Och, ochón!*

But it was no 'complaint' that Tone made to foreign rulers and foreign senates, but wise and bold counsel that he gave them; wise because bold. A French fleet ploughs the waves and enters Bantry Bay—Tone on board. We know the sequel: how the fleet tossed about for days on the broad bosom of the Bay, how the craven in command refused to make a landing because his commander in-chief had not come up, how Tone's heart was torn with impatience and yearning—he saw his beloved Ireland, could see the houses and the people on shore—how the fleet set sail, that deed undone that would have freed Ireland.

It is the supreme tribute to the greatness of this man that after that cruel disappointment he set to work again, indomitable. Two more expeditions, a French and a Dutch, were fitted out for Ireland, but never reached Ireland. Then at last came Tone himself; he had said he would come, if need be, with only a corporals guard: he came with very little more.

Three small ships enter Lough Swilly. The English follow them. Tone's vessel fights: Tone commands one of the guns. For six hours she stood alone against the whole English fleet. What a glorious six hours for Tone! A battered hulk, the vessel struck; Tone, betrayed by a friend, was dragged to Dublin and condemned to a traitor's death. Then the last scene in the Provost Prison, and Tone lies dead, the greatest of the men of '98. To this spot they bore him, and here he awaits the judgment; and we stand at his graveside and remember that his work is still unaccomplished after more than a hundred years.

When men come to a graveside they pray and each of us prays here in his heart. But we do not pray for Tone —men who die that their people may be free 'have no need of prayer'. We pray for Ireland that she may be free, and for ourselves that we may free her. My brothers, were it not an unspeakable privilege if to our generation it should be granted to accomplish that which Tone's generation, so much worthier than ours, failed to accomplish! To complete the work of Tone! . . .

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And let us make no mistake as to what Tone sought to do, what it remains for us to do. We need not re-state our programme; Tone has stated it for us: '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 Irishmen in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter these were my means.'

I find here implicit all the philosophy of Irish Nationalism, all the teaching of the Gaelic League and the later prophets. Ireland one and Ireland free —is not this the definition of Ireland a Nation? 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, deeming it the proudest of all privileges to fight for freedom, to fight, not in despondency, but in great joy, hoping for the victory in our day, but fighting on whether victory seem near or far, never lowering our ideal, never bartering one jot or title 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.