

James Connolly

Labour In Irish History

Chapter VI

Capitalist betrayal of the Irish Volunteers

*“Remember still, through good and ill,
How vain were prayers and tears.
How vain were words till flashed the swords
Of the Irish Volunteers.”*

– **Thomas Davis**

The theory that the fleeting ‘prosperity’ of Ireland in the time we refer to was caused by the Parliament of Grattan is only useful to its propagators as a prop to their argument that the Legislative Union between Great Britain and Ireland destroyed the trade of the latter country, and that, therefore, the repeal of that Union placed all manufactures on a paying basis. The fact that the Union placed all Irish manufactures upon an absolutely equal basis legally with the manufactures of England is usually ignored, or, worse, still, is so perverted in its statement as to leave the impression that the reverse is the case. In fact many thousands of our countrymen still believe that English laws prohibit mining in Ireland after certain minerals, and the manufacture of certain articles.

A moment’s reflection should remove such an idea. An English capitalist will cheerfully invest his money in Timbuctoo or China, or Russia, or anywhere that he thinks he can secure a profit, even though it may be in the territory of his mortal enemy. He does not invest his money in order to give employment to his workers, but to make a profit, and hence it would be foolish to expect that he would allow his Parliament to make laws prohibiting him from opening mines or factories in Ireland to make a profit out of the Irish workers. And there are not, and have not been since the Union, any such laws.

If a student desires to continue the study of this remarkable controversy in Irish history, and to compare this Parliamentary theory of Irish industrial decline with that we have just advanced – the Socialist theory outlined in our previous chapter –

he has an easy and effective course to pursue in order to bring this matter to the test. Let him single out the most prominent exponents of Parliamentaryism and propound the following question:

Please explain the process by which the removal of Parliament from Dublin to London – a removal absolutely unaccompanied by any legislative interference with Irish industry – prevented the Irish capitalistic class from continuing to produce goods for the Irish market?

He will get no logical answer to his question – no answer that any reputable thinker on economic questions would accept for one moment. He will instead undoubtedly be treated to a long enumeration of the number of tradesmen and labourers employed at manufacturers in Ireland before the Union, and the number employed at some specific period, 20 or 30 years afterwards. This was the method adopted by Daniel O’Connell, the Liberator, in his first great speech in which he began his Repeal agitation, and has been slavishly copied and popularised by all his imitators since. *But neither O’Connell nor any of his imitators have ever yet attempted to analyse and explain the process by which those industries were destroyed.* The nearest approach to such an explanation ever essayed is the statement that the Union led to absentee landlordism and the withdrawal of the custom of these absentees from Irish manufacturers. Such an explanation is simply no explanation at all. It is worse than childish. Who would seriously contend that the loss of a few thousand aristocratic clients killed, for instance, the leather industry, once so flourishing in Ireland and now scarcely existent. The district in the city of Dublin which lies between Thomas Street and the South Circular Road was once a busy hive of men engaging in the tanning of leather and all its allied trades. Now that trade has almost entirely disappeared from this district. Were the members of Irish Parliament and the Irish landlords the only wearers of shoes in Ireland? – the only persons for whose use leather was tanned and manufactured? If not, how did their emigration to England make it impossible for the Irish manufacturer to produce shoes or harness for the millions of people still left in the country after the Union? The same remark applies to the weavers, once so flourishing a body in the same district, to the woollen trade, to the fishing trade, and so down along the line. The people of Ireland still wanted all these necessaries of life after the Union just as much as before, yet the superficial historian tells us that the Irish manufacturer was unable to cater to their demand, and went out of business accordingly. Well, we Irish are credited with being gifted with a strong sense of humour, but one is almost inclined to doubt it in the face of

gravity with which the Parliamentary theory has been accepted by the masses of the Irish people.

It surely is an amusing theory when we consider that it implies that the Irish manufacturers were so heartbroken, grieving over losing the trade of a few thousand rack-renting landlords, that they could not continue to make a profit by supplying the wants of the millions of Irish people at their doors. The English and the Scotch, the French and the Belgian manufacturers, miners, merchants, and fishermen could and did wax fat prosperous by supplying the wants of the Irish commonalty, but the Irish manufacturer could not. He had to shut up shop and go to the poorhouse because my Lord Rackrent of Castle Rackrent, and his immediate personal following, had moved to London.

If our Parliamentary historians had not been the most superficial of all recorders of history; if their shallowness had not been so phenomenal that there is no equal to it to be found except in the bigotry and stupidity of their loyalist rivals, they might easily have formulated from the same set of facts another theory equally useful to their cause, and more in consonance with the truth. That other theory may be stated thus:

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That the Act of Union was made possible because Irish manufacture was weak, and, consequently, Ireland had not an energetic capitalist class with sufficient public spirit and influence to prevent the Union.

Industrial decline having set in, the Irish capitalist class was not able to combat the influence of the corruption fund of the English Government, or to create and lead a party strong enough to arrest the demoralisation of Irish public life. This we are certain is the proper statement of the case. Not that the loss of the Parliament destroyed Irish manufacture, but that the decline of Irish manufacture, due to causes already outlined, made possible the destruction of the Irish Parliament. Had a strong enterprising and successful Irish capitalist class been in existence in Ireland, a Parliamentary reform investing the Irish masses with the suffrage would have been won under the guns of the Volunteers without a drop of blood being shed; and with a Parliament elected under such conditions the Act of Union would have been impossible. But the Irish capitalist class used the Volunteers to force commercial reforms from the English Government and then, headed by Henry Grattan, forsook and denounced the Volunteers when that body sought, by reforming the representative system, to make it more responsive to the will of the people, and thus to secure in peace what they had won by the threat of violence. An Ireland controlled by popular suffrage would undoubtedly have sought to save Irish industry, while it

was yet time, by a stringent system of protection which would have imposed upon imported goods a tax heavy enough to neutralise the advantages accruing to the foreigner from his coal supply, and such a system might have averted that decline of Irish industry which, as we have already stated, was otherwise inevitable. But the only hope of realising that Ireland lay then in the armed force of the Volunteers; and as the capitalist class did not feel themselves strong enough as a class to hold the ship of state against the aristocracy on the one hand and the people on the other, they felt impelled to choose the only alternative – viz., to elect to throw in their lot with one or other of the contending parties. They chose to put their trust in the aristocracy, abandoned the populace, and as a result were deserted by the class whom they had trusted, and went down into bankruptcy and slavery with the class they had betrayed. A brief glance at the record of the Volunteer movement will illustrate the far-reaching treachery with which the capitalist class of Ireland emulated their aristocratic compatriots who

sold for place or gold,

Their country and their God.

but, unlike them, contrived to avoid the odium their acts deserved.

At the inception of this movement Ireland was under the Penal Laws. Against the Roman Catholic, statutes unequalled in ferocity were still upon the statute books. Those laws, although ostensibly designed to convert Catholics to the Protestant Faith, were in reality chiefly aimed at the conversion of Catholic-owned property into Protestant-owned property. The son of a Catholic property-holder could dispossess his own father and take possession of his property simply by making affidavit that he, the son, had accepted the Protestant religion. Thenceforth the father would be by law a pensioner upon the son's bounty. The wife of a Catholic could deprive her husband of all control over his property by simply becoming a Protestant. A Catholic could not own a horse worth more than £5. If he did, any Protestant could take his horse from him in the light of day and give him £5 in full payment of all rights in the horse. On the head of a Catholic schoolmaster or a Catholic priest the same price was put as on the head of a wolf. Catholics were eligible to no public office, and were debarred from most of the professions.

In fact the Catholic religion was an illegal institution. Yet it grew and flourished, and incidentally it may be observed it secured a hold upon the affections and in the hearts of the Irish people as rapidly as it lost the same hold in France and Italy, where the Catholic religion was a dominant state institution – a fact worth noting by those Catholics who are clamouring for the endowment of Catholic institutions out of public funds.

It must be remembered by the student, however, that the Penal Laws, although still upon the statute book, had been largely inoperative before the closing quarter of the eighteenth century. This was not due to any clemency on the part of the English Government, but was the result of the dislike of those laws felt by the majority of intelligent Irish Protestants. The latter simply refused to take advantage of them even to their personal aggrandisement, and there are very few cases on actual record where the property of Catholics was wrested from them by their Protestant neighbours as a result of the Penal Laws in the generations following the close of the Williamite war. These laws were in fact too horrible to be enforced, and in this matter public opinion was far ahead of legislative enactment. All historians agree upon this point.

Class lines, on the other hand, were far more strictly drawn than religious lines, as they always were in Ireland since the break up of the clan system, and as they are to this day. We have the words of such an eminent authority as Archbishop Whatley in this connection, which coming, as they do, from the pen of a supporter of the British Government and of the Protestant Establishment, are doubly valuable as witness to the fact that Irish politics and divisions turn primarily around questions of property and only nominally around questions of religion. He says:

“Many instances have come to my knowledge of the most furious Orangemen stripping their estates of a Protestant tenantry who had been there for generations and letting their land to Roman Catholics ... at an advance of a shilling an acre.”

These Protestants so evicted, be it remembered, were the men and women whose fathers had saved Ireland for King William and Protestantism, as against King James and Catholicity, and the evictions here recorded were the rewards of their father's victory and their own fidelity. In addition to this class line on the economic field the political representation of the country was the exclusive property of the upper class.

A majority of the members of the Irish Parliament sat as the nominees of certain members of the aristocracy who owned the estates on which they 'represented' were situated. Such boroughs were called 'Pocket Boroughs' from the fact that they were as much under the control of the landed aristocrat as if he carried them in his pocket. In addition to this, throughout the entire island the power of electing members of Parliament was the exclusive possession of a privileged few. The great mass of the Catholic and Protestant population were voteless.

This was the situation when the Volunteer movement arose. There were thus three great political grievances before the Irish public. The English Parliament had prohibited Irish trade with Europe and America except through an English port, thus

crippling the development of Irish capitalism; representation in the House of Commons in Dublin was denied alike to Protestant and Catholic workers, and to all save a limited few Protestant capitalists, and the nominees of the aristocracy; and finally all Catholics were suffering under religious disabilities. As soon as the Volunteers (all of whom were Protestants) had arms in their hands they began to agitate for the removal of all these grievances.

On the first all were unanimous, and accordingly when they paraded the streets of Dublin on the day of the assembling of Parliament, they hung upon the mouths of their cannon placards bearing the significant words:

FREE TRADE OR ELSE

– and the implied threat from a united people in arms won their case. Free Trade was granted. And at that moment an Irish Republic could have been won as surely as Free Trade. But when the rank and file of the Volunteers proceeded to outline their demands for the removal of their remaining political grievances – to demand popular representation in Parliament – all their leaders deserted. They had elected aristocrats, glib-tongued lawyers and professional patriots to be their officers, and all higher ranks betrayed them in their in hour of need. After the granting of Free Trade a Volunteer convention was summoned to meet in Dublin to consider the question of popular representation in Parliament. Lord Charlemont, the commander-in-chief of the body, repudiated the convention; his example was followed by all the lesser fry of the aristocratic officers, and finally when it did meet, Henry Grattan, whose political and personal fortunes the Volunteers had made, denounced them in Parliament as “an armed rabble”.

The convention, after some fruitless debate, adjourned in confusion, and on a subsequent attempt to convene another Convention the meeting was prohibited by Government proclamation and the signers of the call for the assembly were arrested and heavily fined. The Government, having made peace in America, with the granting of American independence, had been able to mass troops in Ireland and prepare to try conclusions with the Volunteers. Its refusal to consider the demand for popular representation was its gage of battle, and the proclamation of the last attempt at a Convention was the sign of its victory. The Volunteers had, in fact, surrendered without a blow. The responsibility for this shameful surrender rests entirely upon the Irish capitalist class. Had they stood by the reformers, the defection of the aristocracy would have mattered little, indeed it is certain that the radical element must have foreseen and had been prepared for that defection. But the act of the merchants in throwing in their lot with the aristocracy could not have been foreseen; it was too

shameful an act to be anticipated by any but its perpetrators. It must not be imagined, moreover, that these reactionary elements made no attempt to hide their treason to the cause of freedom.

On the contrary, they were most painstaking in keeping up the appearance of popular sympathies and in endeavouring to divert public attention along other lines than those on which the real issues were staked. There is a delicious passage in the **Life of Henry Grattan**, edited by his son, describing the manner in which the Government obtained possession of the arms of the various corps of Dublin Volunteers, which presents in itself a picture in microcosm of very many epochs of Irish history and illustrates the salient characteristics of the classes and the part they play in Irish public life.

Dublin is Ireland in miniature; nay, Dublin is Ireland in concentrated essence. All that makes Ireland great or miserable, magnificent or squalid, ideally revolutionary or hopelessly reactionary, grandly unselfish or vilely treacherous, is stronger and more pronounced in Dublin than elsewhere in Ireland. Thus the part played by Dublin in any National crisis is sure to be simply a metropolitan setting for the role played by the same passions throughout the Irish provinces. Hence the value of the following unconscious contribution to the study of Irish history from the pen of the son of Henry Grattan.

In Dublin there were three divisions of Volunteers – corresponding to the three popular divisions of the ‘patriotic’ forces. There was the Liberty Corps, recruited exclusively from the working class; the Merchants Corps, composed of the capitalist class, and the Lawyers Corps, the members of the legal fraternity. Henry Grattan, Jr., telling of the action of the Government after the passage of the *Arms and Gunpowder Bill* requiring the Volunteers to give up their arms to the authorities for safe keeping, says the Government “seized the artillery of the Liberty Corps, made a private arrangement by which it got possession of that belonging to the Merchant Corps; they induced the lawyers to give up theirs, first making a public procession before they were surrendered”.

In other words and plainer language, the Government had to use force to seize the arms of the working men, but the capitalists gave up theirs secretly as the result of a private bargain, the terms of which we are not made acquainted with; and the lawyers took theirs through the streets of Dublin in a public parade to maintain the prestige of the legal fraternity in the eyes of the credulous Dublin workers, and then, whilst their throats were still husky from publicly cheering the ‘guns of the Volunteers’, privately handed those guns over to the enemies of the people.

The working men fought, the capitalists sold out, and the lawyers bluffed.

Then, as ever in Ireland, the fate of the country depended upon the issue of the struggle between the forces of aristocracy and the forces of democracy. The working class in town and the peasantry in the country were enthusiastic over the success of the revolutionary forces in America and France, and were burning with a desire to emulate their deeds in Ireland. But the Irish capitalist class dreaded the people more than they feared the British Government; and in the crisis of their country's fate their influence and counsels were withdrawn from the popular side. Whilst this battle was being fought out with such fatal results to the cause of freedom, there was going on elsewhere in Ireland a more spectacular battle over a mock issue. And as is the wont of things in Ireland this sham battle engrosses the greatest amount of attention in Irish history. We have already alluded to the Henry Flood who made himself conspicuous in the Irish Parliament by out-Heroding Herod in his denunciation of the Government for failing to hang enough peasants to satisfy him. Mr. Henry Grattan we have also introduced to our readers. These two men were the Parliamentary leaders of the 'patriot party' in the House of Commons – the "rival Harries", as the Dublin crowd sarcastically described them. When the threat of the Volunteers compelled the English authorities to formally renounce all its rights to make laws binding the Irish parliament, these two patriots quarrelled, and, we are seriously informed by the grave historians and learned historians, the subject of their quarrel divided all Ireland. In telling of what that subject was we hope our readers will not accuse us of fooling; we are not, although the temptation is almost irresistible. We are soberly stating the historical facts. The grave and learned historians tell us that Grattan and Flood quarrelled because Flood insisted that England should be required to promise that it would never again interfere to make laws governing the Irish Parliament, and Grattan insisted that it would be an insult to the honour of England to require any such promise.

As we have said, the grave and learned historians declare that all Ireland took sides in this quarrel, even such a hater of England as John Mitchell in his **History of Ireland** seemingly believes this to be the case. Yet we absolutely refuse to give any credence to the story. We are firmly convinced that while Grattan and Flood were splitting the air with declamations upon this subject, if an enquirer had gone down into any Irish harvest field and asked the first reaper he met his opinion of the matter, the said reaper would have touched the heart of the question without losing a single swing of his hook. He would have said truly: –

“An’ sure, what does it matter what England promises? Won’t she break her promise, anyway as soon as it suits her, and she is able to?”

It is difficult to believe that either Grattan or Flood could have seriously thought that any promise would bind England, a country which even then was notorious all over the world for broken faith and dishonoured treaties. Today the recital of facts of this famous controversy looks like a poor attempt at humour, but in view of the tragic setting of the controversy we must say that it bears the same relation to humour that a joke would in a torture chamber. Grattan and Flood in this case were but two skilful actors indulging in oratorical horse-play at the death-bed of the murdered hopes of a people. Were any other argument, outside of the absurdity of the legal hairsplitting on both sides, needed to prove how little such a sham battle really interested the great mass of the people the record of the two leaders would suffice. Mr. Flood was not only known to be an enemy of the oppressed peasantry and a hater of the Catholics – that is to say, of the great mass of the inhabitants of Ireland – but he had also spoken and voted in the Irish Parliament in favour of a motion to pay the expenses of an army of 10,000 British soldiers to be sent to put down the Revolution in America, and Mr. Grattan on his part had accepted a donation of £50,000 from the Government for his ‘patriotic’ services, and afterwards, in excess of gratitude for this timely aid, repaid the Government by betraying and denouncing the Volunteers.

On the other great questions of the day they were each occupying an equivocal position, playing fast and loose. For instance: –

Mr. Flood believed in Democracy – amongst Protestants, but opposed religious freedom.

Mr. Grattan believed in religious freedom – amongst property owners, but opposed all extension of the suffrage to the working class.

Mr. Flood would have given the suffrage to all Protestants, rich or poor, and denied it to all Catholics, rich or poor.

Mr. Grattan would have given the vote to every man who owned property, irrespective of religion, and he opposed its extension to any propertyless man. In the Irish House of Commons he bitterly denounced the United Irishmen, of whom we will treat later, for proposing universal suffrage, which he declared would ruin the country and destroy all order.

It will be seen that Mr. Grattan was the ideal capitalist statesman; his spirit was the spirit of the bourgeoisie incarnate. He cared more for the interests of property than for human rights or for the supremacy of any religion.

His early bent in that direction is seen in a letter he sent to his friend, a Mr. Broome, dated November 3, 1767, and reproduced by his son in his edition of the life and speeches of his father. The letter shows the eminently respectable, anti-revolutionary, religious Mr. Henry Grattan to have been at heart, a free thinker, free-lover, and epicurean philosopher, who had early understood the wisdom of not allowing these opinions to be known to the common multitude whom he aspired to govern. We extract: –

“You and I, in this as in most other things, perfectly agree; we think marriage is an artificial, not a natural, institution, and imagine women too frail a bark for so long and tempestuous a voyage as that of life ... I have become an epicurean philosopher; consider this world as our *ne plus ultra*, and happiness as our great object in it ... Such a subject is too extensive and too dangerous for a letter; in our privacy we shall dwell upon it more copiously.”

This, be it noted, is perhaps not the Grattan of the poet Moore’s rhapsody, but it is the real Grattan.

Small wonder that the Dublin mob stoned this Grattan on his return from England, on one occasion, after attending parliament in London. His rhetoric and heroics did not deceive them, even if they did bewitch the historians. His dramatic rising from a sick bed to appear before the purchased traitors who sold their votes to carry the Union, in order to appeal to them not to fulfil their bargain, makes indeed a fine tableau for romantic historians to dwell upon, but it was a poor compensation to the common people for the Volunteers insulted and betrayed, and the cause of popular suffrage opposed and misrepresented.

A further and, to our mind, conclusive proof of the manner in which the ‘Parliament of ’82’ was regarded by the real Nationalists and progressive thinkers of Ireland is to be found in the extract below from the famous pamphlet written by Theobald Wolfe Tone and published September, 1791, entitled **An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland**. It is interesting to recall that this biting characterisation of the ‘glorious revolution of 1782’ from the pen of the most far-seeing Irishman of his day, has been so little to the liking of our historians and journalists that it was rigidly boycotted by them all until the present writer reprinted it in 1897, in Dublin, in a series of **’98 Readings** containing also many other forgotten and inconvenient documents of the same period. Since then it has several times been republished exactly as we rereprinted the extract, but to judge by the manner in which some of

our friends still declare they “stand upon the constitution of ’82” it has been published in vain for some people.

WOLFE TONE ON GRATTAN’S PARLIAMENT

(Extract from the famous pamphlet, **An Argument on behalf of the Catholics of Ireland**, published September, 1791)

I have said that we have no National Government. Before the year 1782 it was not pretended that we had, and it is at least a curious, if not a useful, speculation to examine how we stand in that regard now. And I have little dread of being confuted, when I assert that all we got by what we are pleased to dignify with the name of Revolution was simply the means of doing good according to law, without recurring to the great rule of nature, which is above all positive Statutes; whether we have done good or not, why we have omitted to do good is a serious question. The pride of the nation, the vanity of individuals concerned, the moderation of some honest men, the corruption of knaves, I know may be alarmed when I assert that the revolution of 1782 was the most bungling, imperfect business that ever threw ridicule on a lofty epithet, by assuming it unworthily. It is not pleasant to any Irishman to make such a concession, but it cannot be helped if truth will have it so. It is much better to delude ourselves or be gulled by our enemies with praises which we do not deserve, or imaginary blessings which we do not enjoy.

I leave to the admirers of that era to vent flowing declamations on its theoretical advantages, and its visionary glories; it is a fine subject, and peculiarly flattering to my countrymen, many of whom were actors, and almost all spectators of it. Be mine the unpleasing task to strip it of its plumage and its tinsel, and show the naked figure. The operation will be severe, but if properly attended to may give us a strong and striking lesson of caution and of wisdom.

The Revolution of 1782 was a Revolution which enabled Irishmen to sell at a much higher price their honour, their integrity, and the interests of their country; it was a Revolution which, while at one stroke it doubled the value of every borough-monger in the kingdom, left three-fourths of our countrymen slaves as it found them, and the government of Ireland in the base and wicked and contemptible hands who had spent their lives in degrading and plundering her; nay, some of whom had given their last vote decidedly, though hopelessly, against this, our famous Revolution. Who of the veteran enemies of the country lost his place or his pension? Who was called forth to station or office from the ranks of opposition? Not one. The power remained in the

hands of our enemies, again to be exerted for our ruin, with this difference, that formerly we had our distress, our injuries, and our insults gratis at the hands of England; but now we pay very dearly to receive the same with aggravation, through the hands of Irishmen – yet this we boast of and call a Revolution!

And so we close this chapter on the Volunteers – a chapter of great opportunities lost, of popular confidence betrayed. A few extracts from some verses written at the time in Dublin serve as an epitome of the times, even if they do seem a little bitter.

Who aroused the people?
The rival Harries rose
And pulled each other's nose.
And said they aroused the people.

What did the Volunteers?
They mustered and paraded
Until their laurels faded.
This did the Volunteers.

How died the Volunteers?
The death that's fit for slaves.
They slunk into their graves.

Chapter VII The United Irishmen

“Our freedom must be had at all hazards. If the men of property will not help us they must fall; we will free ourselves by the aid of that large and respectable class of the community – the men of no property.”
– **Theobald Wolfe Tone**

Contemporaneously with the betrayal and fall of the Volunteers, Ireland witnessed the rise and progress of the Society of United Irishmen. This organisation was at first an open, peaceful association, seeking to utilise the ordinary means of political agitation in order to spread its propaganda among the masses and so prepare them for the accomplishment of its greater end – viz., the realisation in Ireland of a

republic on the lines of that established in France at the Revolution. Afterwards, unable to maintain its public character in face of the severe persecution by the British Government of anything savouring in the least of a democratic nature, the organisation assumed the veil and methods of secrecy, and in that form attained to such proportions as enabled it to enter into negotiations with the Revolutionary Directory of France on the basis of an equal treaty making national power. As the result of this secret treaty between Revolutionary France and Revolutionary Ireland against the common enemy, aristocratic England, various fleets and armies were dispatched from the Continent to assist the Irish Republicans, but all of those expeditions were disastrous in their outcome. The first, under the command of Grouchy and Hoche, was dispersed by a storm, some of the ships being compelled to return to France for repairs, and when the remainder, including the greater part of the army, reached Bantry Bay, on the Irish coast, the French commander exhibited to the full all that hesitation, indecision and lack of initiative which he afterwards was to show with equally fatal results to Napoleon on the eve of the battle of Waterloo. Finally, despite the desperate protests of the Irish Revolutionists on board, he weighed anchor and returned to France without striking a blow or landing a corporal's guard. Had he been a man equal to the occasion and landed his expedition, Ireland would almost undoubtedly have been separated from England and become mistress of her own national destinies.

Another expedition, fitted out by the Dutch Republic in alliance with France, was detained by contrary winds in the harbour until the British fleet had time to come upon the scene, and then the Dutch commander chivalrously but foolishly accepted the British challenge to fight, and, contending under unequal and adverse conditions, was defeated.

An unauthorised but gallant attempt was made under another French officer, General Humbert, and this actually landed in Ireland, proclaimed the Irish Republic at Killala, in Connacht, armed large numbers of the United Irishmen amongst the inhabitants, and in conjunction with these latter fought and utterly routed a much superior British force at Castlebar, and penetrated far into the country before it was surrounded and compelled to surrender to a force more than ten times its own in number. The numbers of the French expedition in this case were insufficient for the purposes of making a stand long enough to permit of the people reaching it and being armed and organised efficiently, and hence its failure. But had Humbert, possessed the number commanded by Grouchy, or Grouchy possessed the dash and daring of Humbert, the Irish Republic would have been born, for weal or woe, in 1798. It is a

somewhat hackneyed observation, but so true that it compels repetition, that the elements did more for England than her armies. Indeed, whether in conflict with the French expeditionary force of Humbert, with the Presbyterians and Catholics of the United Irish Army under General Munro in the North, or with the insurgent forces of Wicklow, Wexford, Kildare and Dublin, the British army can scarcely be said to have any time justified its reputation, let alone covered itself with glory. All the glory was, indeed, on the other side, as was also most of the humanity, and all of the zeal for human freedom. The people were wretchedly armed, totally undrilled, and compelled to act without any systematic plan of campaign, because of the sudden arrest and imprisonment of their leaders. Yet they fought and defeated the British troops on a score of battlefields, despite the fact that the latter were thoroughly disciplined, splendidly armed, and directed like a huge machine, from one common centre. To suppress the insurrection in the counties of Wicklow and Wexford alone required all the efforts of 30,000 soldiers; had the plans of the United Irishmen for a concerted uprising all over the island on a given date not failed, the task of coping with the Republican forces would have been too great for the Government to achieve. As it was, the lack of means of communication prevalent in those days made it possible for the insurrection in any one district to be almost fought and lost before news of its course had penetrated into other parts of the country.

While the forces of republicanism and of despotism were thus contending for supremacy upon the land, the victory was being in reality decided for the latter by its superiority upon the sea. The successes of the British fleet alone made it possible to keep the shores of England free of invading enemies, and to enable Pitt, the English Prime Minister, to subsidise and maintain the armies of the allied despots of Europe in their conflict with the forces of freedom and progress throughout the Continent. In the face of this undoubted fact, it is somewhat humiliating to be compelled to record that the overwhelming majority of those serving upon that fleet were Irishmen. But, unlike those serving in the British army, the sailors and marines of the navy were there against their own will. During the coercive proceedings of the British Government in Ireland, in their attempt to compel the revolutionary movement to explode prematurely, the authorities suspended the Habeas Corpus Act (the guarantee of ordinary legal procedure) and instituted Martial Law and Free Quarters for the Military. Under the latter system the soldiery were forced as boarders upon the civilian population, each family being compelled to provide food and lodging for a certain number. For all attempts at resistance, or all protests arising out of the licentious conduct of the brutal soldiery, or all incautious expressions overheard by

them during their unwelcome residence in the houses of the people, the authorities had one great sovereign remedy – viz., the transportation on board the British fleet. Thousands of young men were seized all over the island and marched in chains to the various harbours, from thence taken on board the English men of war ships, and there compelled to fight for the Government that had broken up their homes, ruined their lives and desolated their country. Whenever any district was suspected of treasonable sympathies it was first put under Martial Law, then every promising young man was seized and thrown into prison on suspicion and without trial, and then those who were not executed or flogged to the point of death were marched on board the fleet. All over Ireland, but especially in Ulster and Leinster during the closing years of the 18th and the opening of the 19th century, the newspapers and private letters of the time are full of records of such proceedings, telling of the vast numbers everywhere sent on board the fleet as a result of the wholesale dragooning of the people. Great numbers of these were United Irishmen, sworn to an effort to overthrow the despotism under which the people of Ireland suffered, and as a result of their presence on board, every British ship soon became a nest of conspirators. The ‘Jack Tars of Old England’ were conspiring to destroy the British Empire, and any one at all acquainted with the facts relative to their treatment by their superiors and the authorities cannot wonder at their acts. The subject is not loved by the jingo historians of the English governing classes, and is consequently usually complacently lied about, but, as a cold matter of fact ‘the wooden walls of England’, so beloved of the poets of that country, were in reality veritable floating hells to the poor sailors and marines.

Flogging for the most trivial offences was inflicted, upon the unsupported word of the most petty officer; the quarters in which the men were compelled to sleep and eat below decks were of the vilest and most unsanitary conditions; the food was of the filthiest, and every man had to pay tribute to a greedy quarter master in order to escape actual starvation, and the whole official life of the ship, from the captain down to the youngest midshipman, was based upon the wealth and rank and breathed hatred and contempt for anything belonging to the lower classes. Mutinies and attempts at mutiny were consequently of constant occurrence, and, therefore, the forcibly impressed United Irishmen found a fertile field for their operations. In the Government records of naval court-martials at that time, the charge of “administering the secret oath of the United Irishmen” is one of the commonest against the accused, and the number of men shot and transported beyond seas for this offence is simply enormous. English and Scottish sailors were freely sworn into

the ranks of the conspirators, and the numbers of those disaffected grew to such an extent that on one occasion – the mutiny of the Nore – the sailors were able to revolt, depose their officers, and take command of the fleet. The wisest heads amongst them, the original United Irishmen, proposed to sail the ships into a French port and turn them over to the French Government, and for a time they had great hopes of accomplishing this purpose, but finally they were compelled to accede to a proposal to attempt to win over the sailors on some other ships in the port of London before sailing to France. This they did, and even threatened to bombard the city; but the delay had enabled the Government to rally its loyal ships, and also enabled the ‘loyal’ slaves still on board the revolting ships to play upon the ‘patriotic’ feelings of the waverers among the British mutineers by representing to them the probability of their being confined in French prisons instead of welcomed as allies. In the end the admiral and officers, by promising a “redress of their just grievances” succeeded in winning over a sufficient number on each ship to paralyse any chance of resistance, and the mutiny was quenched. The usual tale of shootings, floggings, and transportations followed, but the conditions of life on board ship were long in being altered for the better. It may be wondered that the men forcibly impressed, and the conspirators against a tyrannical Government could fight for that Government as did those unfortunates under Nelson, but it must be borne in mind that once on board a war vessel and that vessel brought into action with an enemy in the open sea, there was no possibility of escape or even of co-operation with the enemy; the necessity of self-preservation compelled the rebellious United Irishmen or the discontented mutineers to fight as loyally for the ship as did the soulless slaves amongst whom they found themselves. And being better men, with more manhood they undoubtedly fought better.

In concluding this brief summary of this aspect of that great democratic upheaval we desire to quote from the **Press**, the organ of the United Irishmen, published in Dublin, the following short news item of the period, which we trust will be found highly illustrative of the times in question, as well as a confirmation of the points we have set forth above: –

ROASTING

“Near Castle Ward, a northern hamlet, a father and son had their heads roasted on their own fire to extort a confession of concealed arms. The cause was that the lock of a gun was found in an old box belonging to the wife of the elder man. It is a fact that

the above old couple had two sons serving on board the British fleet, one under Lord Bridgport, the other under Lord St. Vincent”

Chapter VIII

United Irishmen as democrats and internationalists

*“Och, Paddies, my hearties, have done wid your parties,
Let min of all creeds and professions agree,
If Orange and Green, min, no longer were seen, min,
Och, naboclis, how aisy ould Ireland we’d free.”;*

– **Jamie Hope**, 1798

As we have pointed out elsewhere (**Erin’s Hope, the End and the Means**) native Irish civilisation disappeared, for all practical purposes, with the defeat of the Insurrection of 1641 and the break-up of the Kilkenny Confederation. This great Insurrection marked the last appearance of the Irish clan system, founded upon common property and a democratic social organisation, as a rival to the politico-social order of capitalist feudalism founded upon the political despotism of the proprietors, and the political and the social slavery of the actual producers. In the course of this Insurrection the Anglo-Irish noblemen, who held Irish tribelands as their private property under the English feudal system, did indeed throw in their lot with the native Irish tribesmen, but the union was never a cordial one, and their presence in the councils of the insurgents was at all times a fruitful source of dissension, treachery and incapacity. Professing to fight for Catholicity, they, in reality, sought only to preserve their right to the lands they held as the result of previous confiscations, from the very men, or the immediate ancestors of the men, by whose side they were fighting. They feared confiscation from the new generation of Englishmen if the insurrection was defeated, and they feared confiscation at the hands of the insurgent clansmen if the insurrection was successful.

In the vacillation and treachery arising out of this state of mind can be found the only explanation for the defeat of this magnificent movement of the Irish clans, a movement which had attained to such proportions that it held sway over and made laws for the greater part of Ireland, issued its own coinage, had its own fleet, and

issued letters of marque to foreign privateers, made treaties with foreign nations, and levied taxes for the support of its several armies fighting under its flag. The fact that it had enrolled under its banner the representatives of two different social systems contained the germs of its undoing. Had it been all feudal it would have succeeded in creating an independent Ireland, albeit with a serf population like that of England at the time; had it been all composed of the ancient septs it would have crushed the English power and erected a really free Ireland, but as it was but a hybrid, composed of both, it had all the faults of both and the strength of neither, and hence went down in disaster. With its destruction, and the following massacres, expropriations and dispersion of the native Irish, the Irish clans disappear finally from history.

Out of these circumstances certain conditions arose, well worthy of the study of every student who would understand modern Irish history.

One condition which thus arose was, that the disappearance of the clan as a rallying point for rebellions and possible base of freedom made it impossible thereafter to localise an insurrectionary effort, or to give it a smaller or more circumscribed aim than that of the Irish Nation. When, before the iron hand of Cromwell, the Irish clans went down into the tomb of a common subjection, the only possible reappearance of the Irish idea henceforth lay through the gateway of a National resurrection. And from that day forward, the idea of common property was destined to recede into the background as an avowed principle of action, whilst the energies of the nation were engaged in a slow and painful process of assimilating the social system of the conqueror; of absorbing the principles of that political society based upon ownership, which had replaced the the Irish clan society based upon a common kingship.

Another condition ensuing upon the total disappearance of the Irish Social Order was the growth and accentuation of class distinctions amongst the conquerors. The indubitable fact that from that day forward the ownership of what industries remained in Ireland was left in the hands of the Protestant element, is not to be explained as sophistical anti-Irish historians have striven to explain it, by asserting that it arose from the greater enterprise of Protestants as against Catholics; in reality it was due to the state of social and political outlawry in which the Catholics were henceforth placed by the law of the land. According to the English Constitution as interpreted for the benefit of Ireland, the Irish Catholics were not presumed to exist, and hence the practical impossibility of industrial enterprise being in their hands, or initiated by them. Thus, as the landed property of the Catholic passed into the ownership of the Protestant adventurers, so also the manufacturing business of the nation fell out of the stricken grasp of the hunted and proscribed "Papists" into the

clutches of their successful and remorseless enemies. Amongst these latter there were two elements – the fanatical Protestant, and the mere adventurer trading on the religious enthusiasm of the former. The latter used the fanaticism of the former in order to disarm, subjugate and rob the common Catholic enemy, and having done so, established themselves as a ruling landed and commercial class, leaving the Protestant soldier to his fate as tenant or artisan. Already by the outbreak of the Williamite war in the generation succeeding Cromwell, the industries of the North of Ireland had so far developed that the ‘Prentice Boys’ of Derry were the dominating factor in determining the attitude of that city towards the contending English Kings, and, with the close of that war, industries developed so quickly in the country as to become a menace to the capitalists of England, who accordingly petitioned the King of England to restrict and fetter their growth, which he accordingly did. With the passing of this restrictive legislation against Irish industries, Irish capitalism became discontented and disloyal without, as a whole, the power or courage to be revolutionary. It was a re-staging of the ever-recurring drama of English invasion and Anglo-Irish disaffection, with the usual economic background. We have pointed out in a previous chapter how each generation of English adventurers, settling upon the soil as owners, resented the coming of the next generation, and that their so-called Irish patriotism was simply inspired by the fear that they should be dispossessed in their turn as they had dispossessed others. What applies to the land-owning ‘patriots’ applies also to the manufacturers. The Protestant capitalists, with the help of the English, Dutch, and other adventurers, dispossessed the native Catholics and became prosperous; as their commerce grew it became a serious rival to that of England, and accordingly the English capitalists compelled legislation against it, and immediately the erstwhile ‘English Garrison in Ireland’ became an Irish ‘patriot’ party.

From time to time many weird and fanciful theories have been evolved to account for the transformation of English settlers of one generation into Irish patriots in the next. We have been told it was the air, or the language, or the religion, or the hospitality, or the loveliness of Ireland; and all the time the naked economic fact, the material reason, was plain as the alleged reason was mythical or spurious. But there are none so blind as those who will not see, yet the fact remains that, since English confiscations of Irish land ceased, no Irish landlord body has become patriotic or rebellious, and since English repressive legislation against Irish manufacturers ceased, Irish capitalists have remained valuable assets in the scheme of English rule in Ireland. So it would appear that since the economic reason ceased to operate, the air, and the language, and the religion, and the hospitality, and the loveliness of

Ireland have lost all their seductive capacity, all their power to make an Irish patriot out of an English settler of the propertied classes.

With the development of this 'patriotic' policy amongst the Irish manufacturing class, there had also developed a more intense and aggressive policy amongst the humbler class of Protestants in town and country. In fact, in Ireland at that time, there were not only two nations divided into Catholics and non-Catholics, but each of those two nations in turn was divided into other two rich and the poor. The development of industry had drawn large numbers of the Protestant poor from agricultural pursuits into industrial occupations, and the suppression of those latter in the interest of English manufacturers left them both landless and workless. This condition reduced the labourers in town and country to the position of serfs. Fierce competition for farms and for jobs enabled the master class to bend both Protestant and Catholic to its will, and the result was seen in the revolts we have noticed earlier in our history. The Protestant workman and tenant was learning that the Pope of Rome was a very unreal and shadowy danger compared with the social power of his employer or landlord, and the Catholic tenant was awakening to a perception of the fact that under the new the new social order the Catholic landlord represented the Mass less than the rent-roll. The times were propitious for a union of the two democracies of Ireland. They had travelled from widely different points through the valleys of disillusion and disappointment to meet at last by the unifying waters of a common suffering.

To accomplish this union, and make it a living force in the life of the nation, there was required the activity of a revolutionist with statesmanship enough to find a common point upon which the two elements could unite, and some great event, dramatic enough in its character, to arrest the attention of all and fire them with a common feeling. The first, the Man, revolutionist and statesman, was found in the person of Theobald Wolfe Tone, and the second, the Event, in the French Revolution. Wolfe Tone had, although a Protestant, been secretary for the Catholic Committee for some time, and in that capacity had written the pamphlet quoted in a previous chapter, but eventually had become convinced that the time had come for more comprehensive and drastic measures than the Committee could possibly initiate, even were it willing to do so. The French Revolution operated alike upon the minds of the Catholic and Protestant democracies to demonstrate this fact, and prepare them for the reception of it. The Protestant workers saw in it a revolution of a great Catholic nation, and hence wavered in the belief so insidiously instilled into them that Catholics were willing slaves of despotism; and the Catholics saw in it a great manifestation of

popular power – a revolution of the people against the aristocracy, and, therefore, ceased to believe that aristocratic leadership was necessary for their salvation.

Seizing this propitious moment, Tone and his associates proposed the formation of a society of men of every creed for the purpose of securing an equal representation of all the people in Parliament.

This was, as Tone's later words and works amply prove, intended solely as a means of unity. Knowing well the nature of the times and political oligarchy in power, he realised that such a demand would be resisted with all the power of government; but he wisely calculated that such resistance to a popular demand would tend to make closer and more enduring the union of the democracy, irrespective of religion. And that Tone had no illusions about the value of the aristocracy is proven in scores of passages in his autobiography. We quote one, proving alike this point, and also the determining effect of the French Revolution upon the popular mind in Ireland: –

“As the Revolution advanced, and as events expanded themselves, the public spirit of Ireland rose with a rapid acceleration. *The fears and animosities of the aristocracy rose in the same or a still higher proportion.* In a little time the French Revolution became the test of every man's political creed, and the nation was fairly divided into great parties – the aristocrats and democrats borrowed from France, who have ever since been measuring each other's strength and carrying on a kind of smothered war, which the course of events, it is highly probable, may soon call into energy and action.”

It will be thus seen that Tone built up his hopes upon a successful prosecution of a Class War, although those who pretend to imitate him to-day raise up their hands in holy horror at the mere mention of the phrase.

The political wisdom of using a demand for equal representation as a rallying cry for the democracy of Ireland is evidenced by a study of the state of the suffrage at the time. In an **Address from the United Irishmen of Dublin to the English Society of the Friends of the People**, dated Dublin, October 26, 1792, we find the following description of the state of representation: –

“The state of Protestant representation is as follows: – seventeen boroughs have no resident elector; sixteen have but one; ninety out of thirteen electors each; ninety persons return for 106 rural boroughs – that is 212 members out of 300 – the whole number; fifty-four members are returned by five noblemen and four bishops; and borough influence has given landlords such power in the counties as to make them

boroughs also ... yet the Majesty of the People is still quoted with affected veneration; and if the crown be ostensibly placed in a part of the Protestant portion it is placed there in mockery, for it is encircled with thorns.

“With regard to the Catholics, the following is the simple and sorrowful fact: – Three millions, every one of whom has an interest in the State, and collectively give it its value, are taxed without being represented, and bound by laws to which they have not given consent.”

The above Address, which is signed by Thomas Wright as secretary, contains one sentence which certain Socialists and others in Ireland and England might well study to advantage, and is also useful as illustrating the thought of the time. It is as follows:

–

“As to any union between the two islands, believe us when we assert that *our union rests upon our mutual independence. We shall love each other if we be left to ourselves.* It is the union of mind which ought to bind these nations together.”

This, then, was the situation in which the Society of United Irishmen was born. That society was initiated and conducted by men who realised the importance of all those principles of action upon which latter-day Irish revolutionists have turned their backs. Consequently it was as effective in uniting the democracy of Ireland as the ‘patriots’ of our day have been in keeping it separated into warring religious factions. It understood that the aristocracy was necessarily hostile to the principle and practice of Freedom; it understood that the Irish fight for liberty was but a part of the world-wide upward march of the human race, and hence it allied itself with the revolutionists of Great Britain as well as with those of France, and it said little about ancient glories, and much about modern misery. The **Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords** reprinted in full the **Secret Manifesto to the Friends of Freedom in Ireland**, circulated throughout the country by Wolfe Tone and his associates, in the month of June, 1791. As this contains the draft of the designs of the revolutionary association known to history as the Society of United Irishmen, we quote a few passages in support of our contentions, and to show the democratic views of its founders. The manifesto is supposed to have been written by Wolfe Tone in collaboration with Samuel Neilson and others:

“It is by wandering from the few plain and simple principles of Political Faith that our politics, like our religion, has become preaching, not practice; words not works. A

society such as this will disclaim those party appellations which seem to pale the human hearts into petty compartments, and parcel out into sects and sections common sense, common honesty, and common weal.

“It will not be an aristocracy, affecting the language of patriotism, the rival of despotism for its own sake, nor its irreconcilable enemy for the sake of us all. It will not, by views merely retrospective, stop the march of mankind or force them back into the lanes and alleys of their ancestors.

“This society is likely to be a means the most powerful for the promotion of a great end. What end? *The Rights of Man in Ireland*. The greatest happiness of the greatest number in this island, the inherent and indefeasible claim of every free nation to rest in this nation – the will and the power to be happy to pursue the common weal as an individual pursues his private welfare, and to stand in insulated independence, an imperatorial people.

“The greatest happiness of the Greatest Number. – On the rock of this principle let this society rest; by this let it judge and determine every political question, and whatever is necessary for this end let it not be accounted hazardous, but rather our interest, our duty, our glory and our common religion. The Rights of Man are the Rights of God, and to vindicate the one is to maintain the other. We must be free in order to serve Him whose service is perfect freedom.

“The external business of this society will be – first, publication, in order to propagate their second principles and effectuate their ends. Second, communications with the different towns to be assiduously kept up and every exertion used to accomplish a National Convention of the People of Ireland, who may profit by past errors and by many unexpected circumstances which have happened since this last meeting. Third, communications with similar societies abroad – as the Jacobin Club of Paris, the Revolutionary Society in England, the Committee for Reform in Scotland. *Let the nations go abreast*. Let the interchange of sentiments among mankind concerning the Rights of Man be as immediate as possible.

“When the aristocracy come forward, the people fall backward; when the people come forward, the aristocracy, fearful of being left behind, insinuate themselves into our ranks and rise into timid leaders or treacherous auxiliaries. They mean to make us their instruments; let us rather make them our instruments. One of the two must happen. The people must serve the party, or the party must emerge in the mightiness

of the people, and Hercules will then lean upon his club. On the 14th of July, the day which shall ever commemorate the French Revolution, let this society pour out their first libation to European liberty, eventually the liberty of the world, and, their eyes raised to Heaven in His presence who breathed into them an ever-living soul, let them swear to maintain the rights and prerogatives of their nature as men, and the right and prerogative of Ireland as an independent people.

“Dieu et mon Droit (God and my right) is the motto of kings. Dieu et la liberté (God and liberty), exclaimed Voltaire when he beheld Franklin, his fellow citizen of the world. Dieu et nos Droits, (God and our rights), let every Irishman cry aloud to each other, the cry of mercy, of justice, and of victory.”

It would be hard to find in modern Socialist literature anything more broadly International in its scope and aims, more definitely of a class character in its methods, or more avowedly democratic in its nature than this manifesto, yet, although it reveals the inspiration and methods of a revolutionist acknowledged to be the most successful organiser of revolt in Ireland since the days of Rory O’More, all his present-day professed followers constantly trample upon and repudiate every one of these principles, and reject them as a possible guide to their political activity. The Irish Socialist alone is in line with the thought of this revolutionary apostle of the United Irishmen.

The above quoted manifesto was circulated in June, 1791, and in July of the same year the townspeople and volunteer societies of Belfast met to celebrate the anniversary of the Fall of the Bastille, a celebration recommended by the framer of the manifesto as a means of educating and uniting the real people of Ireland – the producers. From the **Dublin Chronicle** of the time we quote the following passages from the *Declaration of the Volunteers and Inhabitants at Large of the town and neighbourhood of Belfast on the subject of the French Revolution*. As Belfast was then the hot-bed of revolutionary ideas in Ireland, and became the seat of the first society of United Irishmen, and as all other branches of the society were founded upon this original, it will repay us to study the sentiments here expressed.

COLONEL SHERMAN, President

Neither on marble, nor brass, can the rights and duties of men be so durably registered as on their memories and on their hearts. We therefore meet this day to commemorate the French Revolution, that the remembrance of this great event mat

sink deeply into our hearts, warmed not merely with the fellow-feeling of townsmen, but with a sympathy which binds us to the human race in a brotherhood of interest, of duty and affection.

Here then we take our stand, and if we be asked what the French Revolution is to us, we answer, much. Much as men. It is good for human nature that the grass grows where the Bastille stood. We do rejoice at an event that means the breaking up of civil and religious bondage, when we behold this misshapen pile of abuses, cemented merely by customs, and raised upon the ignorance of a prostrate people, tottering to its base to the very level of equal liberty and commonwealth. We do really rejoice in this resurrection of human nature, and we congratulate our brother-man coming forth from the vaults of ingenious torture and from the cave of death. We do congratulate the Christian World that there is in it one great nation which has renounced all ideas of conquest, and has published the first glorious manifesto of humanity, of union, and of peace. In return we pray to God that peace may rest in their land, and that it may never be in power of royalty, nobility, or a priesthood to disturb the harmony of a good people, consulting about those laws which must ensure their own happiness and that of unborn millions.

Go on, then – great and gallant people; to practise the sublime philosophy of your legislation, to force applause from nations least disposed to do you justice, and by conquest but by the omnipotence of reason, to convert and liberate the world – a world whose eyes are fixed on you, whose heart is with you, who talks of you with all her tongues; you are in very truth the hope of this world, of all except a few men in a few cabinets who thought the human race belonged to them, not them to the human race; but now are taught by awful example, and tremble, and not dare confide in armies arrayed against you and your cause.

Thus spoke Belfast. It will be seen that the ideas of the publishers of the secret manifesto were striking a responsive chord in the hearts of the people. A series of meetings of the Dublin Volunteer Corps were held in October of the same year, ostensibly to denounce a government proclamation offering a reward for the apprehension of Catholics under arms, but in reality to discuss the political situation. The nature of the conclusions arrived at may be judged by a final paragraph in the resolution, passed 23rd October, 1791, and signed amongst others by James Napper Tandy, on behalf of the Liberty Corps of Artillery. It reads:

“While we admire the philanthropy of that great and enlightened nation, who have set an example to mankind, both of political and religious wisdom, we cannot but lament that distinctions, injurious to both, have too long disgraced the name of Irishmen; and we most fervently wish that our animosities were entombed with the bones of our ancestors; and that we and our Roman Catholic brethren would unite like citizens, *and claim the Rights of Man.*”

This was in October. In the same month Wolfe Tone went to Belfast on the invitation of one of the advanced Volunteer Clubs, and formed the first club of United Irishmen. Returning to Dublin he organised another. From the minutes of the Inauguration Meeting of this First Dublin Society of United Irishmen, held at the Eagle Inn, Eustace Street, 9th November, 1791, we make the following extracts, which speak for the principles of the original members of those two parent clubs of a society destined in a short time to cover all Ireland, and to set in motion the fleets of two foreign auxiliaries.

For the attainment then of this great and important object – the removal of absurd and ruinous distinctions – and for promoting a complete coalition of the people, a club has been formed composed of all religious persuasions who have adopted for their name The Society of United Irishmen of Dublin, and have taken as their declaration that of a similar society in Belfast, which is as follows: –

In the present great era of reform, when unjust governments are falling in every quarter of Europe, when religious persecution is compelled to abjure her tyranny over conscience; *when the Rights of Man are ascertained in Theory, and that Theory substantiated by Practice*; when antiquity can no longer defend absurd and oppressive forms against the common sense and common interests of mankind; when all government is acknowledged to originate from the people, and to be so far only obligatory as it protects their rights and promotes their welfare; we think it our duty as Irishmen to come forward and state what we feel to be our heavy grievance, and what we know to be its effectual remedy.

We have no National Government; we are ruled by Englishmen and the servants of Englishmen, whose object is the interest of another country; whose instrument is corruption; whose strength is the weakness of Ireland; and these men have the whole of the power and patronage of the country as means to seduce and subdue the honesty and the spirit of her representatives in the legislature. Such an extrinsic power, acting with uniform force in a direction too frequently opposite to the true line

of our obvious interests, can be resisted with effect solely by unanimity, decision, and spirit in the people, qualities which may be exerted most legally, constitutionally, and efficaciously by that great measure essential to the prosperity and freedom of Ireland – an equal Representation of all the People in Parliament ...

We have gone to what we conceive to be the root of the evil; we have stated what we conceive to be the remedy – with a Parliament thus reformed everything is easy; without it nothing can be done.

Here we have a plan of campaign indicated on the lines of those afterwards followed so successfully by the Socialists of Europe – a revolutionary party openly declaring their revolutionary sympathies, but limiting their first demand to a popular measure such as would enfranchise the masses, upon whose support their ultimate success must rest. No one can read the manifesto we have just quoted without realising that these men aimed at nothing less than a social and political revolution such as had been accomplished in France, or even greater, because the French Revolution did not enfranchise all the people, but made a distinction between active and passive citizens, taxpayers and non-taxpayers. Nor yet can an impartial student fail to realise that it was just this daring aim that was the secret of their success as organisers, as it is the secret of the political effectiveness of the Socialists of our day. Nothing less would have succeeded in causing Protestant and Catholic masses to shake hands over the bloody chasm of religious hatreds, nothing less will accomplish the same result in our day among the Irish workers. It must be related to the credit of the leaders of the United Irishmen that they remained true to their principles, even when moderation might have secured a mitigation of their lot. When examined before the Secret Committee of the House of Lords at the prison of Fort George, Scotland, Thomas Addis Emmet did not hesitate to tell his inquisitors that if successful they would have inaugurated a very different social system to that which then prevailed.

Few movements in history have been more consistently misrepresented, by open enemies and professed admirers, than that of the United Irishmen. The *suggestio falsi*, and the *suppressio veri* have been remorselessly used. The middle class ‘patriotic’ historians, orators, and journalists of Ireland have ever vied with one another in enthusiastic descriptions of their military exploits on land and sea, their hair-breadth escapes and heroic martyrdom, but have resolutely suppressed or distorted their writings, songs and manifestoes. We have striven to reverse the process, to give publicity to their literature, believing that this literature reveals the men better than any partisan biographer can do. Dr. Madden, a most painstaking and

conscientious biographer, declares in his volume of **The Literary Remains of the United Irishmen**, that he has suppressed many of their productions because of their 'trashy' republican and irreligious tendencies.

This is to be regretted, as it places upon other biographers and historians the trouble (a thousand times more difficult now) of searching for anew, and re-collecting the literary material from which to build a proper appreciation of the work of those pioneers of democracy in Ireland. And as Irish men and women progress to a truer appreciation of correct social and political principles, perhaps it will be found possible to say, without being in the least degree blasphemous or irreverent, that the stones rejected by the builders of the past have become the corner-stones of the edifice.