

Transcribed Excerpt from "Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland," November 15, 1848

Cause of the Non-Commencement of the Rebellion in Ireland.

To the Editors of the Spirit of the Times:

Congress-Hall,
Thursday, Oct. 12, 1848,

DEAR SIR: Several gentlemen of this city, who have long felt a deep interest in the affairs of Ireland ... desire that I should give some public explanation of the causes which led to the unexpected failure of the late revolutionary movement in the country ... no honest statement of the matter can be made at present in Ireland, where the right of meeting and the liberty of the press have been both annihilated by the British authorities ... I am certain none of your readers will consider the final fate of seven millions of a generous and gifted race a subject of indifference to them, as man or as Americans.

In what I say I shall speak from my own knowledge, for, though I went on a mission into a neighboring country toward the end of July, I was back in Ireland the first week in August, and was engaged there till September.

There are three dates to be borne in mind in reference to this movement; the month of February, when the continental revolutions began – the 24th of July, when the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, and the Harvest time, which, in Ireland, does not come till September.

In February last, the Irish parties who sought a change of Government, were two – “the moral force Repealers,” and “Young Ireland.” These parties originated in July, 1846, when young Ireland seceded from the Repeal Association, on the subject of the lawfulness of shedding blood to achieve political rights. Before that event, Daniel O’Connell was as absolutely the ruler of Ireland, as Nicholas Romanoff is of Russia. The old honored him for his cautious tactics, the young, because England feared and hated him; many Protestants sincerely co-operated (sic) with him for his liberality; the Catholics revered him as the man who rebuilt their altars, and loosed the tongues and arms of their Priesthood ... His word was the only law in the land, and children were baptized with his name, as with the name of a Saint.

This man, so powerful and so well beloved, taught in his last days the doctrine that “no amount of liberty was worth the spilling of one drop of human blood,” and the great majority of the clergymen and the people adopted it implicitly. But there was an undergrowth of a new generation in Ireland, who desired self-government, and who thought it a cause worth fighting for – who, indeed, wished to fight for it, provided it could not otherwise be had. O’Connell introduced, in July ‘46, his test of membership in the Repeal Association, known as “the Peace Resolution,” – and Young Ireland, believing that such a course would be fatal to success against such an enemy, seceded. In January,

1847, they formed “the Irish Confederation,” out of which the heat of the Continental events produced this late attempt at insurrection.

In 1847, Young Ireland was busy gaining over the inhabitants of the towns ...

This township organization consisted of 500 clubs, in the total of about 30,000 men of the fighting age. Of these, less than half were more or less armed in July, and the other half were acquiring arms as fast as they could ... And let me assure our generous American friends that although the clubs, as clubs, do not meet not together in Ireland, these sections nearly all exist, and form a nucleus of future movement which cannot be reached or crushed.

But the Confederate [revolutionary] principles did not pervade the rural populations up to the last hour. For this there are many causes. The famine of '46 and '47, had left a lassitude after it like that which follows forever ...

The Government saw – it was a patent fact- that we had converted and organized the towns, but had not reached the heart of the country. They knew that the club system, formidable where population was grouped, was unsuited to the rural districts. They, therefore, opposed the Insurrection with two weapons; they concentrated their forces on the towns, and used every act to prevent the junction of the Catholic clergy with the Revolutionary leaders ...

The Catholic Clergy ... abandoned their infant League and so the Confederates [revolutionaries] were left alone face to face, and foot to foot with the government ...

Now the concentration of the troops in the towns and cities compelled the Confederates to choose a Guerilla war or none ...

It is not fair to assume that there was no system of operation agreed on among the confederates. There was a feasible and well understood plan. What is was, it is not advisable for me publicly to explain ... printing it would serve no purpose except to arm the enemy ...

[The Catholic Clergy] made the revolution fail by preaching that it would fail ...

The conclusion I draw, from all I know of this attempt, is this- that the clergy of the people made a grave political mistake, and that the mistake, was fatal to the insurrection in its incipient (sic) stages ... but I am, for one, fully convinced, that if they had headed the peasantry we would have renewed the miracle of St. Patrick. I know there would be slaughter, but Fever and Famine, now under the protection of the British flag in Ireland, will destroy more lives, and with worse weapons, than the sixty thousand armed men could have killed ...

If this late movement has produced nothing else it has produced martyrs. It has wedded the Irish cause once more to disinterestedness and self-sacrifice, and next to such sages as Washington, the life most valuable to freedom is a life like Emmet's offered up upon her holy altar ... For

*Freedom's battle once begun,
Bequeathed from bleeding sire to son,
Though baffled oft, is ever won.*

That it will be won in Ireland, and sooner than many, even among her friends, dare hope I believe. The vice of loyalty is gone at the root, and it but needs a little of Time's teaching to make a Democratic

Revolution, which will wait for no leadership to strike, to make Ireland as free as the freest— even as free as this parent land of liberty itself.

Requesting your indulgence for this too long letter, I remain, dear sir, yours, very truly,

THOMAS D'ARCY McGEE
(A Traitor to the British Government.)