

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

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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, (of which number you have not been the least active,) 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.

I feel bound to meet their wishes, as being theirs, and for this other reason, that 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. Were it not my fortune to arrive in your city, I should have felt it my duty to have made the Executive Directory of New York the medium of this statement. But being detained here, and hearing so many anxious inquiries daily made, I have yielded to the general desire to make it public without delay. In doing so I fear I will try your patience much, but 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. Two thousand Catholic Clergymen, quartered in every hamlet and at every cross-road, were his Captains and his magistracy. 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 from “moral force,” and with the examples of Pius the Ninth, and the revolutions last Spring, we succeeded. At any time during the last six months the towns’ people of Ireland, were, in terms, committed to attempts a forcible expulsion of the British power.

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 where money was scarce and military weapons dear. I have known half-employed tradesmen to stint themselves of their daily meals in order to buy a gun. Each Club was divided into sections of ten men, with a Master to each section, who knew, personally, each of his ten men. 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. I assure them of this both from knowledge of the system and from the fact that under the Disarming Act, twenty stands of arms have not yet been captured from the confederates. But the Confederate 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 Peasantry could not retain the heat that Mitchel, Duffy and Meagher would infuse into them. They felt the electricity as - a shock- and it passed through them

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.

In this latter enterprise they were materially assisted by the opposition of Mr. John O’Connell to the formation of the “Irish League.” That League, devised and advocated by the best of clergymen and citizens, was intended to swallow up both the Repeal Association and the Confederation. Its actual result would have been to bring together Young Ireland and the Priesthood- the two vital elements of Irish politics at that period. Mr. John O’Connell opposed it by a succession of small artifices, unworthy of any man, and which were only tolerated because being his father’s son he was necessary to the Union of parties. He asked a delay of a fortnight - of a month- and of six weeks. Finally when the six weeks were expired, and for very shame, he could ask no more, he openly assailed it as illegal, and intended to be un-Catholic. The Catholic Clergy, with the exception of courageous and eloquent Bishop of Derry and his clergymen – abandoned their infant League and so the Confederates were left alone face to face, and foot to foot with the government.

In taking that course, the Irish Clergy did not leave themselves without arguments. The bloody days of June in Paris - the lamentable anarchy in the City of Rome - the comparative unpreparedness of the people - the slaughter that would be made – the partial failure of the harvest – are all reasons for their course. But, assuredly, they made the revolution fail by preaching that it would fail. At Carrick, at

Castlerreagh, in Tipperary, Limerick, and Clare, they preached against an appeal to arms, and made converts.

Now the concentration of the troops in the towns and cities compelled the Confederates to choose a Guerilla war or none. The situation of an Irish town, in August last may be understood from this instance. In Dublin as in most Irish towns, there is an old and a new town. - The Government people live in the new town, and command its open and angular streets from strong public buildings, filling every vista, and dwellinghouse, nearly as strong. In the old town live the hereditary rebels who could be destroyed by a shower of shells which might be so directed as not to injure the other quarter. In Dublin, the garrison was, on the 27th of July, 15,000 men, and it averaged throughout 10,000. The object of making the warfare a guerilla one, was to drag these concentrations to pieces, as the Spanish patriots did Napoleon's armies of occupation, and by bringing them into districts where only infantry could act with ease, to put them more on a level with the raw levies of the people. The remainder of the course that might be taken would be to burn the towns and cities, as the Athens, and the Russian Moscow. This, I believe, would have been the result, on the news of the first royalists blood being drawn in the rural districts, whither these considerations, and the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, had driven our leaders. But the rural districts would not move without their clergy, and the clergy were openly adverse or inactive.

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. Beside, I had rather a future success should publish it than I. I have no objection - quite the contrary - to explain it to any Committee or circle of the friends of Ireland, but printing it would serve no purpose except to arm the enemy.

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. It would be unfair and false to say that they cannot allege strong grounds for their course, 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. And then to compare the two results!

Until the good day of victory comes, all individuals of the Irish nation must only strive the more to make their names respectable by doing noble deeds - by honesty, by courage, by gentleness, by genius, to save the national spirit from barrenness and the national character from disparagement. 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, the scaffold; such offerings have been freely made of late in Ireland by the self immolation of John Mitchell and his faithful friend John Martin; by Mr. Meagher and Mr. O'Gorman, the sons of two of our richest merchants; by Mr. Duffy, our greatest journalist; by John Lillon and Smith O'Brien, men whom much fortune and many friends wooed in vain from "the thorny path of duty." In other revolutionary attempts, leaders are usually less exposed to danger than the people; in this they have openly adventured (sic) fortune, home, friends and life. The country that can bear even a few such men will not readily degenerate into a nursing mother of slaves. 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.)