

EXTRACTS FROM THE WRITINGS OF REV. JAMES PORTER

Taken from the book Antrim and Down in '98: The Lives of Henry Joy McCracken, James Hope, William Putnam McCabe, Rev. James Porter and Henry Munro by the historian Richard Robert Madden (1798-1886).

Extracts from Porter's third Letter, in the *Northern Star*, addressed to the Marquis of Downshire.

February, 24th, 1797.

That the nation is on the brink of ruin, from which nothing short of a miracle can save it, is a melancholy fact acknowledged in every corner of his majesty's dominions. Were I to point out a public traitor, whose guilt is of a deeper kind than generally falls within the power of mere man to perpetrate – who has exported the precious metals out of these kingdoms – annihilated public credit and commerce – alienated the affections of the people from their sovereign – wickedly confederated with foreign powers to destroy our liberties, to overturn our constitution, and to tear the royal diadem from the head of the house of Hanover; public justice might screen him from popular vengeance, but his life would be a poor compensation for the enormity of his guilt. I shall attempt no picture of the last fourteen years of his life, history will neither be unwilling nor unfaithful. However extravagant these charges may at first sight appear, it does not admit of a doubt; were he tried at the bar of Europe, but that man would be found guilty, whose name your Lordship anticipates, *the Right Honourable William Pitt.*

Gracious Heaven! My Lord, what a state of stupefaction have the men of great landed property fallen into; duped,

confounded, and alarmed, they are blind to the root of the evil; their cause is artfully blended with the cause of a few desperate, proud, hypocritical placemen, who would drive not only the nation, but the universe, to ruin, rather than part with their power, or acknowledge their crimes.

One desperate step succeeds another, and that with so much rapidity, that ere long one step more brings certain death, and that, at a point, where to recede a single yard would produce ruin. What confidence should be placed in a crew, who, while the ship was buffeted with the storm, remained in the hold playing a game of hazard? Never was there a period in which your Lordship's loyalty, wisdom, and patriotism, were more necessary than the present. There are back stairs in St. James's Palace. His majesty will see his real interest when real danger threatens; and, at this time every moment is the *tempora fandi*.

Approach your sovereign, not with the servile flattery of a man who comes to ask a favour, but with the open and dignified carriage of a man who comes to confer one. No service could be done the state, - no favour conferred upon his majesty and family, - no security added to the crown, and no strength given to the constitution equal to what would result from telling the King TRUTH. That such an arduous task would derive importance from its novelty could not be surprising; but that the safety of all I have mentioned would inevitably follow, will admit of little doubt, by those who are sensible of the wisdom and virtues of their sovereign.

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You will talk of *Ireland, of Ireland*, my Lord, not of the blood-thirsty, supercilious, unprincipled ascendancy, who watch over the public that they may destroy every thing great and good in the mind of man; who herd together for the purpose of forging heavier chains for their country; who distrust the people; belie their spirit, scoff at their complaints, and imprudently call

themselves *Ireland*. Your duty and inclination, will concur in leaving off this deceitful veil; your sovereign will know the truth from your own lips; he will hear that a few proud aristocrats hold the representation of the country in their own hands; that free fourths of the people are excluded from participating in the benefits of the constitution; that 800,000 Northerners are insulted and reviled because they talk of Emancipation, Union, and Reform; and, that forced oaths, overflowing bastiles, and foreign troops, are the only means taken for extorting loyalty from his Irish subjects.

Then, my Lord, you will discant on the invasion which is *past*, and the invasion which is (dreadful thought!) *to come*. The weakness, the disunion, the cold and immovable spirit of the mass of the people on the late awful emergency, will be shewn as perfectly commensurate to the duplicity, the arrogances, and the hard-hearted tyranny, under which the people groan. Respecting the armament now preparing, should it be destined for the invasion of this country – your love for your king, and the native sincerity of your heart, will prevent you from insinuating that such an event is impossible, from flattering him with the hopes of any resistance, but a partial one, being made – you will state to him that *the people* are unarmed; that they are mistrusted, and that they are disaffected to their present task masters; that while no ear is bent to their complaints – no confidence placed in their courage and patriotism – no attempt at reform, and no prospect of peace, a French invasion will appear to their distracted and despairing minds, as the messengers of heaven to break their chains, and to set their minds and their bodies free. These melancholy truths are now so notorious, that I presume your Lordship will consider any suggestion of them as unnecessary, as the concealment of them from his majesty would be dastardly and dangerous. Hidden

evils, while they surprise, they may overcome; when they are seen at a distance, though they cannot be prevented, they may be *shunned*. Should description fail, much aid may be drawn from a simple fable: - to save you the trouble of turning over Aesop, state, 'that it was the *turbulent rapacity of the Dung-Hill Cock*, which drove the chickens to seek protection from the eagle who was hovering round.'

.....

That the man who contrived this delusion to cover his diabolical machinations, deserves to lose his head - that the plan was dictated to him by the Directory; and that it eventually places the crown and constitution at the feet of the Republicans of France, are the awful truths which his majesty must hear; the truths which he must believe, - and the evils he must avert. Here is a traitor worthy of your talents and your zeal, you will find millions ready to support you in rescuing the king from his faithless servant. I aver it, my Lord, unless this be immediately done, so entwined will he be round the pillars which support the throne, that his fall will overturn the British Constitution. We recollect the temple which the blind man of old levelled to the ground, when the lords and the idols perished in the ruins.

SYDNEY.

The following extracts (which are pretty free from the defects referred to) from the letters published in the Northern Star, July, August, and September, 1796, styled "Billy Bluff and Squire Firebrand," will give some idea of those productions: -

Billy Bluff, my neighbour, was up yesterday at the squire's, with his duty hens.

"Well, Billy, what news?" says the squire.

"Troth, sir, plenty of news, but none very good," says Billy.

"What is your neighbour R----- (meaning me) about now?"

“Why, please your honour, he’s at the old cur – railing against the war, against the tythes, and against game-laws; and he’s still reading at the newspapers.”

He is a ---- villain, and must be laid fast, by ----; but what more do you know of him, Billy?”

“Why bad enough, and please your honour, him and the Popish priest drank together last market-day, till all was blue again with them; they shaked hands, so they did, drank toasts, and sung songs.”

“Pretty work, by H----ns! Did you overhear them?”

“Ah, that I did so, and listened like a pig.”

“What were the toasts?”

“First, the priest drank – ‘*Prosperity to old Ireland,*’ and-“

“Stop, Billy! The toast is infamous; the word *old* never was, and never ought to be applied to any country but England; and he who would apply it to Ireland is a rebel, and ought to be hanged.’

“He ought, an’ please your honour, as round as a hoop.”

“Well, what toast did the villain R---- drink?”

“He drank, ‘*Union and peace to the people of Ireland.*’

“Worse and worse, Billy; a ---- deal worse; he who wishes union, wishes ruin to the country; I say ruin to the government, and that is ruin to the country. Union, forsooth! That is what never was, and what never must prevail in this country; and as to peace, ‘tis flying in the face of government to speak of it.”

JULY 18, 1796.

Billy Bluff has been at the Squire’s again, Mr. Editor, of which I wish to give you notice, as formerly.

“Well, Billy, where’s the list of what I gave you to spy out for me?”

“Here it is, an’ please your honour, - Let me see; aye, well:”

1st. – To find out all in the parish who have not registered their arms

2nd. – To find out how many United Irishmen there are in Ireland.

3rd. – To find out what those people say, who will not register their freeholds.

4th. – To find out the United Irishmen's word and sign.

5th. – To find out what songs the people sing.

6th. – To watch if R---- and the priest drink together at any time.

7th. – To put notices on the chapel, church, and meeting-house."

OATHS! OATHS! OATHS!

Oaths of all forms, prices and denominations; - great oaths and small oaths, simple oaths and compound oaths, noble oaths and common oaths, purgation oaths and electioneering oaths, bribing oaths and corruption oaths, loyal oaths and disloyal oaths, new oaths and old oaths, oaths for quieting disordered minds, allaying evil spirits, soothing bad consciences, procuring sleep and banishing remorse, oaths for defending the country, for dividing it, for preventing a reform in parliament, for conquering the French, and for stifling public opinion; eating oaths and drinking oaths, singing and laughing oaths; oaths to prevent oaths, and oaths to promote oaths, religious and irreligious oaths, voluntary and involuntary oaths; forced, wheedling, and humbug oaths, all to be had at the above office, from one penny to three shillings each, according to their nature, extent, and efficacy. – *God save the King.*

I do solemnly swear, that the House of Commons, being a branch of the constitution, is a house of wisdom, a house of

purity, a house of virtue, and the real, true, faithful representatives of the people.

And furthermore, I do solemnly swear, that the boroughs, being a part of our constitution, are the great source of our liberties, insomuch as they are never bought or sold; that the men who represent them are freely chosen, and never receive the wages of corruption.

And furthermore, I do solemnly swear, that the House of Lords, being a branch of the constitution, is endowed with all knowledge, and goodness, and patriotism, to the end of the world and for ever.

.....
Fire. Every man must be questioned on his oath. Here are the questions prepared and ready.

“Question 1st. – What is your name?”

Do you know any secret which every body else knows?

3^d. – Did you ever meet a large body of men where nobody saw you?

Did you ever take an oath not to tell any body that you did take it?

5th. – How many United Irishmen are yet to join the Union as they call it?

7th. – How long will it be till the whole nation becomes United?

8th. – Is not the silence that prevails in the country a proof of uproar and rebellion?

Ought not that every man that complains of the king’s ministers, and who asks a reform, be hanged?”

THE GENIUS OF IRELAND

They told me the town I saw to the left was Athlone, and that the spot on which the hill stood was the centre of Ireland. In her right hand she held a branch of olive, which she waved

round and round, at which all the people seemed filled with joy, and began to smile. After hovering a little, she rested on the hill, and sat down on the verdant top, that was covered with nothing but shamrocks. The crowds pressed forward, with their eyes fixed on the genius; as they approached the base of the hill, the throng became greater; they took each other by the hand, and began to ascend. The Genius beckoned with the oldie branch, as if inviting them to come forward. They ascended but a little way, when they linked in each other's arms, and the circle narrowing as they proceeded, they pressed closer together, and grasped each other round the waist. There seemed to be mixed all ranks, ages and professions. The old and infirm were assisted by the young and vigorous. The weak leaned upon the strong, and the rich smiled upon the poor. While this was going forward, I espied, here and there, several stop at the verge of the plain, others in the middle; some halted at the foot of the hill, and several were thrown down who had been a good way up. A vast number of coaches, chariots, phaetons, &c., were driving in promiscuous profusion over the plain; some had lost their drivers, and others their owners, who had flown to join the multitudes that were ascending the hill. But the greater part still retained their ponderous load of the dignitaries of the church, the sages of the law, and the lords of the land; they were flying to the dark clouds that still hung over the east, which had now turned to the colour of clotted blood. Then I immediately saw, issuing from the opening of the sky, from whence the angel came, a beautiful transparent azure cloud, bordered all round with alternate shades of crimson, white and yellow, which spreading round, involved the whole hill, and hid from my sight the vast multitudes which covered it, and left nothing to be seen, but the face, neck, and breast of the beautiful angel. At that instant the Genius spoke, with a voice exquisitely fine, that

ravished my ears: - THESE, said she, ARE ALL MY CHILDREN.
This is the HILL of UNION.