

THE SPANISH WAR

AN INQUIRY HOW FAR IRELAND IS BOUND,
OF RIGHT TO EMBARK ON THE IMPENDING
CONTEST ON THE SIDE OF GREAT BRITAIN



Addressed to the Members of Both Houses of Parliament, 1790

By Theobald Wolfe Tone



PREFACE

Many of the ideas on the following pages may doubtless appear extraordinary, and some of them, to cautious men, too hardy. To the first, it maybe answered that, until the present, no occasion has happened where such a question could arise, as I venture to investigate. Since the lately acknowledged independence of Ireland, this is the first time when our assistance to Britain has become necessary, and the question of right had better be settled in the outset. To the last, I shall only submit that it is not whether the ideas are hardy, but whether they are true, that is of importance to this kingdom. If the reason of my countrymen be convinced, I have no doubt of their spirit.

CONSIDERATION ON THE APPROACHING WAR WITH SPAIN

My Lords and Gentlemen: The Minister of England has formally announced the probability of a rupture with Spain; and the British nation is arming with all possible energy and despatch; and, from Land's End to the Orkneys, nothing is to be heard but dreadful note of preparation; ships are equipped, press warrants are granted, beating orders issued, and a million raised; all parties unite in one great principle – the support of the national honour, and pulling down Spanish pride; and hope and glowing expectation kindle the native valour of England; the British lion has lashed himself into a fury, and woe the unlucky Spaniard whom he may seize in his gripe.

But this is not all; the Minister of England, in the overflowing of his benevolence to this happy isle, has been graciously pleased to allow us an opportunity of following the noble beast in the course of glory and profit; so that we may, from hi leavings, glean up sufficient of honour and wealth to emblazon and enrich us till time shall be no more. Press warrants are granted, and beating orders issued here, too, and the youth of Hibernia have no more to do but to take the King's money first, as earnest, and the riches of Spain follow of course.

I know the ardent valour of my countrymen, ever impatient of peace and prompt for battle, heightened and inflamed as it now is by the eloquence of the sergeant and the music of his drum, will strongly impel them, more majorum, to brandish the cudgel first, and discuss the merits after; a very common process among them. But you, my lords and gentlemen, will, I trust, look a little deeper into things; with all the spirit of our rustics, you will show that you are just and prudent, as well as valiant.

Now is the instant for consideration, before the Rubicon be passed; and the example which Caesar showed, the bravest of you need not blush to follow. It is universally expected that, at your meeting, the Secretary will come forward to acquaint you that his majesty is preparing for war with Spain, and hopes for your concurrence to carry it on, so as to procure the blessings of an honourable peace. This message he will endeavour to have answered by an address, offering, very frankly, our lives and fortunes to the disposal of the British Minister in the approaching contest; and, that will be followed by up by a vote of credit for three hundred thousand pounds as our quota of the expense; a sum of a magnitude very alarming to the finances of this country.

But it is not the magnitude of the grant which is the great object; it is the consequence of it, involving a question between the two countries of no less importance than this: ***'WHETHER IRELAND BE, OF RIGHT, BOUND TO SUPPORT A WAR, DECLARED BY THE KING OF GREAT BRITAIN, ON MOTIVES AND INTERESTS ENTIRELY BRITISH?'***

If it appear that she is, it is our duty to submit to the necessity, however inconvenient; if it appear that she is not so bound, but may grant or withhold her assistance to England, then it will be for your wisdoms to consider whether war be for her interest or not. If it be, you will doubtless take the necessary steps to carry it on with spirit and effect; if it be not, you will make arrangements to obtain and secure a safe and honourable neutrality.

The present is a question of too much importance to both countries to be left unsettled; but though it be of great weight and moment indeed, I do not apprehend it to be of great difficulty. The matter of right lies in a nut-shell, turning on two principles which no man will, I hope, pretend to deny: First, that the Crown of Ireland is an imperial crown, and her legislature separate and independent; and, secondly, that the prerogative of

the Crown, and the constitution and powers of parliament, are the same here as in Great Britain.

It is, undoubtedly, the King's royal prerogative to declare war against any power it may please him to quarrel with; and when proclamation is made here to that effect, I admit, we are then engaged, just as the people of England are, in similar circumstances. But as we have here a free and independent parliament, it is as undoubtedly their privilege to grant, or withhold, the supplies; and if they peremptorily refuse them, and the Mutiny Act, I know not how an army is to be paid, or governed, without proceeding to means not to be thought on.

It follows, therefore, that the parliament of Ireland have a kind of negative voice, in the question of war and peace, exactly similar to that of the English parliament. If, then, they have this deliberative power, they are no further bound to support a war than the English parliament is, which may, undoubtedly, compel peace at any time by postponing the money and mutiny bills. They are, therefore, not bound to support any war until they have previously approved and adopted it.

The king of Ireland may declare the war, but it is the parliament only that can carry it on. If this be so, it follows, very clearly, that we are not, more than England, ipso facto, committed, merely by the declaration of war of our own king; and, a fortiori, much less are we committed by his declaration, as king of Great Britain, when our interest is endamaged, and the quarrel and the profit are merely and purely English. If the parliament of England address his majesty for war and, in consequence, war be proclaimed; if we are at once, without our consent, perhaps against our will and our interest, engaged, and our parliament bound to support that war, in pursuance of that address; then, I saw, the independence of Ireland is sacrificed, we are bound by the act of the British parliament, and the charter of our liberties is waste paper.

To talk of the independence of a country, and yet deny her a negative voice in a question of less import to her well-being than that of peace and war, is imprudent nonsense.

But, I hope and trust, no man at this day will be so hardy as to advance such an assertion, or to deny that our parliament is co-ordinate with that of England, and equally competent to the regulation of all our domestic concerns and foreign interests, with similar powers of assent and refusal, and if so, with equal right to receive or reject a war. From the question of right, which will not be denied you, suffer me to call your attention to the question of expediency. You may, at your will, draw the sword, or hold out the olive.

It remains, therefore, to examine which line of conduct is likely to be most beneficial to your country. Before you commit ourselves, decidedly, to war or peace, it behoves you well to consider the consequences of both to Ireland; see what she can gain, see what she must lose, try how far her interest or her honour is concerned: reflect that on your first vote depend the properties, the liberties, the lives of thousands of your countrymen; and, above all, remember you are about to make a precedent for future ages, in the great question of the obligation on Ireland to follow Great Britain to war; as a necessary appendage.

What, in the first place, are the grounds of the quarrel as to Ireland? And what are the profits she has to look to from the contest between Spain and England? It will not be pretended that we have immediately, from our own concerns, any ground for interfering in the approaching war; on the contrary, peace with all the world, but peace with Spain particularly, is our object and our interest. The quarrel is merely and purely English. A few individuals in China, members of a company which is possessed of a monopoly of the commerce to the East, to the utter exclusion of this country, fitted out certain ships to trade to the North Western coast of America, for furs, which they expected would prove a lucrative article of traffic.

The Spaniards, actuated by pride or jealousy, or both, have, it seems, seized these vessels, to the disgrace of (not the Irish, but) the British flag, and to enforce satisfaction, an armament is preparing. In this transaction the probability is that Spain is in the wrong, and England is acting with no more than a becoming spirit; but the question with us is, not who is wrong, or who is right? Ours are discussions of a different nature; to foster and cherish a growing trade, to cultivate and civilize a yet unpolished people, to obliterate the impression of ancient religious feuds, to watch, with incessant and anxious care, the cradle of an infant constitution; these are our duties, and these are indispensable.

Removed a hemisphere from the scene of action, unconnected with the interest in question, debarred from the gains of the commerce, what has Ireland to demand her interference, more than if the debate arose between the Emperor of Japan and the King of Korea? Will she profit if England secure the trade? No. Will she lose if England cannot obtain one otter skin? No. Shall we eat, drink or sleep one jot the worse whether the Mandarins of Pekin line their doublets with furs purchased from a Spanish or an English merchant? No.

Decidedly, then, the quarrel is English, the profit will be to England, and Ireland will be left to console herself for her treasure spent, and her gallant sons fallen, by the reflection that valour, like virtue, is its own reward, and that she has given Great Britain one more opportunity to be ungrateful. So much for the ground of quarrel, and the profit we are to expect from the war!

Let me now humbly submit to your consideration the actual certainty we are required to sacrifice to these brilliant expectations, and I will do it from your own authentic documents. Subjoined, in an Appendix, is a view of the whole of our commerce with Spain or the year 1789, from which I shall extract the most important articles here. In doing this, it is my

wish to be as correct as possible, but the value of most of the articles I am obliged to appreciate by conjecture and inquiry.

There is a book in the possession of administration, called the National Stock Book, wherein the value of all the exports and imports is inserted; but this is industriously kept back from you, so that, in the documents submitted to you, containing, in most articles, only the quantum, you must content yourselves with doing what I have done, and make the best inquiries you can. It appears that the following are the principal articles of your exports:

Linen	£26,779
Wheat	£17,056
Pork	£17,190
Butter	£37,539
Bacon	£4,260
Beef	£3,207
Flour	£3,718
Barley	£3,794
TOTAL	£113,543

Which, with other articles mentioned in the Appendix, makes the gross amount of your exports £117,428 3s 2d.

On this trade, I shall only remark that your staple manufacture, your agriculture and tillage, are most materially concerned. The following, from the same authority, is the account of your imports from Spain in the same year, but I confess myself less competent to ascertain their value. I shall, therefore, unless in one or two of the most material articles, set down only the quantum imported:

Drugs: £2,000 value.

Argal: 6 cwt.

Cochineal: 1,223 lb.

Indigo: 5,995 lb.

Logwood: 790 cwt.

Madder: 50 cwt.
Sumach: 382 cwt.
Salt: 23,226 bushes.
Brandy: 17,847 gals.
Wine: 977 tons.
Canes: 55,600
Beaver: 150 lb.
Cotton: 123 cwt. 21lb.
Spanish: 13 cwt.
Pot ashes, 52,378 cwt. At 25s. per cwt. £65,972

Of these, it is to be observed that the dye stuffs, salt, canes, wool and pot ash constitute the materials and implements of future manufactures, the most beneficial species of importation.¹² For the loss of this trade, the only compensation ward holds out to you is the provision trade for the army and navy; of all others the least advantageous, as is universally known, to the interests of this kingdom.

Such is the present state of your commerce with Spain, the whole of which is, at one blow, cut up; your commerce with other nationals loaded with a heavy insurance; your manufactures nipped in the bud, and, in a word, every branch of trade suspended, except the slaughtering of bullocks and men. And for what is all this? We have no quarrel with Spain, no infraction of good faith, no national insult to complain of. No, but we have the resentments of a rapacious English East Indian monopolist to gratify who, at the distance of half the globe, kindles the torch of war amidst the eternal snows of Nootka Sound, and hurls it into the bosom of our commerce.

The rising prosperity of Ireland is immolated on the altar of British pride and avarice; we are forced to combat without resentment in the quarrel of an alien, where victory is

¹ Worth about £2,600

² The price of the pot ash I have taken from Anderson, vol. 6. p. 707.

unprofitable and defeat is infamous. Having examined the question on the ground of profit and loss to Ireland, I presume it appears clearly that we shall make an immense sacrifice of blood, treasure, and trade, to establish a right in which, when it is obtained, we are never to participate. If, therefore, we embark in this war, it is not in support of our immediate particular interest; on the contrary, it is evident we shall be very considerable losers by the most prosperous issue.

The principle of expediency, therefore, must be given up, and it follows that we engage, if at all, on the principle of moral obligation: the arguments on this ground are reduceable to three – the good of the empire, the honour of the British flag, and the protection which England affords us. I confess I am, in the outset, much staggered by a phrase so very specious, and of such general acceptation as this of ‘the good of the empire’. Yet, after all, what does it mean? Or: What is the empire?

I believe it is understood to mean the kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland with independent legislatures, united under one head. But this union of the executive does by no means, to my apprehension, imply so complete a union of power or of interest, that an injury or a benefit to one, is an injury or a benefit to the other; on the contrary, the present emergency shows that occasions may arise wherein the direct opposite is the fact. It is not two kingdoms being united under one head that involves, as a necessary consequence, a unity of resentment. His majesty’s electoral dominions (i.e. Hanover) are not concerned in this Spanish quarrel, and I would ask how are we more concerned, unless it be that we speak the English language?

The king of Hungary is also Grand Duke of Tuscany, yet no man thinks that the Tuscans are bound to sacrifice their trade or their men in his German quarrels, and, in the midst of a bloody and destructive war.

It is convenient, doubtless, for England, for her instruments in this country, to cry up the ‘good of the empire’ because it lays the power of Ireland at her disposal; But if the empire consists of

two parts, one of which is to reap the whole profit of a contest, and the other to share only the difficulties and the danger, I know not why we should be so misled by sounds as to sacrifice solid advantages to the whistling of the name of 'empire'. The good of the whole empire consists of the good of all the parts; but in our case the good of one part is renounced to establish the good of the other. Let us, for God's sake, call things by their proper names; let us analyse this unmeaning and fallacious mixed mode 'empire' into its components, England and Ireland, and then see how the matter stands.

England has a quarrel with Spain, in a matter concerning her own interest exclusively, and wherein she is to reap the whole profit. Ireland has no quarrel, but, on the contrary, a very beneficial intercourse with Spain, which she is required to renounce to her infinite present detriment; she is called on, likewise, to squander her wealth and shed her blood in this English East Indian quarrel, and then she is told, to console her, that she has been advancing 'the good of the empire'! Let us substitute 'England' for 'the empire' and see if it be not nearer the fact and truth.

Certainly, if there be such a thing as this 'empire', and if the general good of this 'empire' be forwarded by the particular loss and suffering of Ireland, I maybe allowed to say, it would be better for her there were none. Suppose, in this great era of revolution, the French were to acknowledge the title of his majesty, set forth on his guineas, to the throne of their kingdom; that he were, in gratitude, to move his royal residence to Paris, and govern England by a French viceroy, and on French views and principles: suppose the merchants of Marseilles were to quarrel with the Turks in the Levant, and find it expedient to go to war; suppose the merchants of London to have a very gainful trade to the Levant, and to find those same Turks fair and honest dealers - what answer would the intelligent and virtuous parliament of England give to the viceroy, who should come forward and demand them to renounce this trade and its profits,

to sink the value of their lands, and fetter and cramp their commerce with a load of additional taxes, to send forth the bravest of their youth to battle and slaughter; and then tell them it was all for the good of the common empire of France and England?

The viceroy would act like a good Frenchman in making the requisition, but he would find the English nation too determined and too wise to listen to such idle babble, as that of forwarding the common good of two independent nations by the certain loss and detriment and damage of one of them. Now, setting aside our prejudice against the idea of a French viceroy at St James's, will any man deny that the actual case of Ireland at this day is exactly parallel with that of England which I have supposed? With this difference, however, that when the war was over, France and England might renew their trade with Turkey, but the trade which is at present in dispute between England and Spain, Ireland can, by no possible contingency, ever attain a share in.

The argument than stands thus: The quantum of consolidated power in the 'empire' maybe increased by a successful war, but it is distributed entirely to one of the components, while the other is at a certain loss. Suppose the joint strength before the war to be as twelve, England being as eight, and Ireland as four, and after the war to be as fourteen, England being as eleven, with one third gained, and Ireland as three, with one fourth lost; it is very obvious that there would be an increase of power in one of the parts.

And this is no exaggerated supposition, when we consider the mode in which each country must necessarily carry on the war. During the contest, to Ireland nothing is certain but a heavy loss of trade, men, and money. Our privateers, from the discouragement to Irish navigation, are few, and navy we have none; whereas England may not only support the contest, but be absolutely enriched by a Spanish war, even during its

continuance. Her powerful navy, her infinite number of corsairs, bring in wealthy prizes from every point of the compass.

Where then, is the equality of empire? Or what are our temptations to war? I have shown, as I presume, that in the use of the word 'empire' we are the dupes of a sound; if, as I contend, the good of the empire turns out, when examined, to signify no more than the good of England, purchased, and dearly purchased, at a heavy loss to Ireland, I know not what quixotic spirit of national generosity misguided, or gratitude misplaced, shall pretend to exact such a sacrifice from us.

I hasten, therefore, to the next grand argument for our interference, the honour of the British flag; an argument on the face of it, degrading to your country and dishonourable to our spirit; an argument, the mention of which should make every Irishman bang his head in sorrow and abasement.

WHERE IS THE NATIONAL FLAG OF IRELAND?

I know there are those who, covering their apathy or their corruption with the specious garb of wise and prudent caution, may raise their hands in astonishment at this, as an idle exclamation; but I say that such a badge of inferiority between the two kingdoms is a serious grievance. Is the bold pride of patriotism nothing? If the flag of England be, as it is, dearer to every brave Englishman than his life, is the wish for a similar badge of honour to Ireland to be scouted as a chimera? Can the same sentiment be great and glorious on one side the channel, and wild and absurd on the other?

It is a mortifying truth, but not the less true for its severity, that the honour of the British is the degradation of the Irish flag. We are compelled to skulk under the protection of England, by a necessity of our own creation; or, if we have not created, we have submitted to it. We are contented to be the subaltern instrument in the hands of our artful and ambitious and politic

sister, without one ray of generous national pride beaming forth to light us on to our honour and our interest. We raise the lofty temple of her glory but we cannot, or we dare not, inscribe our name on the entablature.

Do we not, in the system of her naval arrangements, see the narrow jealousy and interested caution of England betray itself in every feature? Where are the docks, the arsenals of Ireland? How many of the British navy have been built in our harbours? Where are the encouragements held out to Irish navigation? What is the fair and liberal and equitable construction laid by Englishmen on the navigation act? We are not to be trusted! We are to be kept in pupillage, without a navy, or the rudiments of a navy, that we may be retained in subjection and dependence on England, and so be compelled to purchase her protection, whenever her interest or her pride may think proper to plunge us into war.

And this leads me to the last argument for our supporting Great Britain, gratitude for the protection which she affords us. As this is an argument addressed to a very warm and honourable sentiment and, therefore, likely to have some weight with Irishmen who feel much better than they reason, I shall take the liberty to examine it with some attention. I lay it down, then, as a principle, that no man has a right to lay another, perforce, under an obligation; I mean, to put him in that state that the obligation becomes unavoidable. No man has a right to run me into difficulties, that he may extricate me from them.

The original necessity, superinduced by him, leaves him little if any claim to gratitude for the subsequent service; but his claim will be infinitely weakened if, in superinducing this necessity, he does me an actual, violent injury. If a man hire a banditti to attack the house of another, and then volunteer the defence of it, I believe it will not be said that the owner is much indebted to him, though his defence should prove successful; but if, in the attack, the house should be burned and the owner robbed of his goods, and sorely wounded into the bargain, I

humbly conceive that the subsequent defence, however sincere, makes but a poor atonement for the original attack, and that if any feeling be excited, it should be a very strong and natural resentment.

Now, let us see what is the boasted protection of England. When has she ever held it forth that she did not first make it necessary? For her own interest and honour she embarks in war, and drags in this unoffending and unoffended country as a necessary sequel, exposes us to a thousand dangers and difficulties in a cause where we have no hope of profit, or advantage, for who has heard of the glory of Ireland, merged as it is in that of Great Britain?

And then she defends us, or perhaps does not defend us, from the resentment of her, not our enemy, and so the mighty debt of gratitude accrues; and we are bound to ruin our commerce and lavish our treasure, and spill our best blood in her quarrel, and still remain her debtor for protection in a war which she has wantonly and unnecessarily, as to this country, plunged us into. If this be the protection of England, I, for one, could be well content that we were left to our own wisdom to avoid, or our own spirit to support a contest.

But what becomes of this famous argument of protection, if it appears, by the infallible testimony of facts, that no such thing exists? What have been the wars that England has embarked on in for Irish interests? Her most determined supporters cannot allege one. But perhaps, they may draw on futurity for the deficiency of experience, and tell us that if we wanted her aid, she would be prompt and willing to afford it. Have we, then, forgot the memorable protection of the last war, when one or two paltry American privateers harassed and plundered our trade with impunity, even in our very ports, and the people of Belfast were told, 'You have a troop of horse and a company of invalids, and, if that will not do, you may protect yourselves.'

An answer not easily to be forgiven or forgot, and which, perhaps, England herself would now, were it possible, wish

unsaid. What were the armaments equipped to compel Portugal to do us justice, but a very few years since? Did the navy of England appear in the Tagus to demand satisfaction for our woollens seized and detained? No: we were left at last, and not without a long and strenuous opposition from the British Minister in Ireland, to extort justice as we might for ourselves, by a heavy duty on the wines of Portugal.

After this, let us not be told of the protection of England. I have examined the question in three great views: as a question of strict right, as a question of expediency, and as a question of moral obligation; and, to my apprehension, in every one of the three, war is peremptorily evil for Ireland. If the Spaniards fall by our hands in an unjust war, their deaths are murder; if we seize their property, it is robbery. Let me now submit to your consideration the probable consequences of your refusing your countenance and support to this war, with respect to the two countries, Spain and England.

It maybe said that Spain will not consider you as a neutral, though you may call yourselves so. But I saw, if you were to address his majesty, praying him to direct his ministers to acquaint the Spanish Court with your absolute neutrality, do you think her so unwise a nation as to choose you rather for her enemy than her customer, and so to fling you into the scale of England, already more than a match for her? Do you think that the communication between Spain and Ireland, when the ports of England were closed against her, would not be a source of opulence yet unknown in this country?

Would you not have, circuitously, the Spanish trade of England pass through your hands? Would not Spain pay every attention and respect to your flag? Or, if she did not, then you would have a lawful and fair ground for quarrel, and might, and would, soon teach her that you were not a nation to be insulted with impunity. That England would exclaim, is what we might expect. We know with what reluctance she has ever renounced

any badge of her domination over this country, and it cannot be supposed she would give up this last without a pang.

But, surely, where the right is clearly established, your first duty is to your native land. I renounce the idea of national generosity. What was the language of the wisest of your senators on a great occasion? 'Individuals maybe generous, but nations never.' I deny the tie of national gratitude; we owe no gratitude where we have received no favour. If we did, in 1782, extort our rights from England at the very muzzle of the cannon, whom have we to thank but ourselves? Interested individuals may hold forth the nonsensical cant of the generosity of England; let us, on this important occasion, speak the language of truth and common sense.

It is the spirit of Ireland, not the generosity of England, to which we owe our rights and liberties; and the same spirit that obtained, will continue to defend them. What can England do to us? With what countenance, what colour of justice, can she upbraid us for following her own process? What should Irish policy be, by British example? First of all, take care of ourselves.

We invade none of her rights; we but secure our own. Why then should we fear her resentment? But the timid will say, she may withdraw the protection of her flag from us, and I answer, let her do so; every thing is beneficial to Ireland that throws us on our own strength. We should then look to our internal resources, and scorn to sue for protection to any foreign state; we should spurn the idea of moving a humble satellite round any power, however great, and claim at once, and enforce, our rank among the primary nations of the earth. Then should we have what under the present system we never shall see, a national flag and spirit to maintain it.

If we then fought and bled we should not feel the wound, when we turned our eyes to the harp waving proudly over the ocean. But now, what are the victories of Britain to us? Hers is the quarrel, hers the glory, hers the profit, and to us nothing but the certainty of danger and of death; the action is over, and the

name of Ireland is never heard; for England, not our country, we fight and die. Yet, even under these forbidding circumstances, such as the restless valour of Irishmen that we rush to action as eagerly, and maintain it as firmly, as if our interests or our honour were at stake.

We plant the laurel and water it with our best blood, and Britain reposes under the shade, I have now done, and with you, my lords and gentlemen, it rests to estimate the weight of what I have advanced. The parliament ye constitute is a young parliament. Your innocence is yet, I trust, untainted by the rank leaven of corruption. Ye have no interests to bias your judgement but the interest of Ireland. Your first opportunity for exertion is a great one – no less than fixing the rank of your country among the nations of the earth.

May the gracious wisdom of providence enlighten your minds, expand your hearts, and direct your councils to the advantage of your own honour, and the establishment of the welfare and glory and independence of Ireland, for ever and ever.

HIBERNICUS