

SPEECH TO THE IRISH CONFEDERATION, 4th February, 1848.

By John Mitchel.

Republished in *The Nation*, 12 February, 1848.

Mr. Mitchel then rose to reply, and was received with great applause. He said the patience of the meeting was admirable, but it was time to take some step towards bringing this long debate to a close.

With so much of the eloquence, weight, and influence of the Confederation against me on this question, I begin almost to fear that I must be wrong.

Why, after the speeches I have heard to-night, I hardly know my fundamental rules when I saw them; after the solemn charges of breaking faith, I really feared that I must have some time or other been making professions of a balmy, moral-force kind, though when or where I can not remember.

One thing is agreeable to learn, that most of the gentlemen who spoke to-night are quite favourable to my views about a national armament except in the matter of time. This is not the time, they say, to recommend the use of arms. At some remote period in past history, or in the case of some distant nation, arms may have been proper, or even necessary, or they may become so at some future time, but not just now or here.

Now, I am reminded curiously of an eloquent speech spoken by my friend Mr. O’Gorman a few months ago in this very room, when we entertained the captain of an American ship.

Standing between these two pillars there, Mr. O’Gorman said we Irish had had too much drinking of toasts and making of speeches; “but if you would know,” he continued, “how nations win freedom, ask Captain Clarke.”

Oh! but then they tell us the Americans said nothing about war till they actually declared war; they did not vaunt, they did not

threaten; the first intimation England had of their intention was conveyed in the deadly volleys of their musketry; well, and how did they prepare for this? Was it by education and conciliation? Why, sir, it was by steady, long-continued and assiduous rifle-practice.

They made not many speeches, but they fired perpetually at targets; and so, in the very first collision, they smashed the red-coats, horse, foot, and artillery.

All I say is, do not turn away the Irish people from that necessary preparation, and teach them to rely on something else.

Now, there is one charge brought against me, I mean that of attempting to use the Confederate organization to propagate my own views, on which I have not one word to say in defence. I plead guilty to that charge; I have used the organization for that purpose, and for no other; and to show you how deeply I have sinned in that respect let me read you some alarming sentiments expressed by me in two lectures delivered four months ago in the Swift Club, on the Land Tenures of Europe.

In those lectures, after giving an account of our Irish cheap-ejectment statutes, I continue as follows:

“It needs but this record of exterminating legislation, and the parallel series of “arms acts” which accompanied it, to satisfy all men, that on this soil, the people and the persons called “government” are deadly enemies; so that by the first law of nature it lies upon the “government” to be on its guard against the people – and upon the people to take means of saving themselves from the government.”

And again, speaking of tenant-right, I say:

“After all that has been said and written about this ‘tenant-right,’ the plain fact remains, that it was created at first, and is sustained now, by force and intimidation. What we call ‘law’ in this country is entirely against it; and the power which guarantees it is that called ‘midnight legislation,’ which (though somewhat blind and savage occasionally in its executive department) is, after all, the only impartial and national government Ireland knows.”

In the conclusion of the second lecture you will find this passage:

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“I have imperfectly, but I trust faithfully, described the ways of country life in various other lands, and shown how the condition of an Irish farmer differs from

them all, and I think you will agree with me that it is a matter of some importance to make these things well understood in Ireland just at the beginning of this winter – not merely as a matter of useful knowledge or curious inquiry into men and manners, but with direct reference to the deliberate attempt now made by our enemies – that is, by the British government – to complete the conquest of Ireland in the degradation, pauperisation, and destruction of her people – an attempt which I firmly believe will be signally successful, or else finally defeated, within a year and a day.

It is now, now especially, that we are bound to learn how the ‘rights of property’ and the rights of labour are generally understood and acted on by other nations of the globe. We have no government to protect us – no Hardenberg to do us justice. It is by standing on our *rights*, each man of us upon his own rights, as a man and citizen, that we can present a living barrier, six millions strong – we are six millions still – against the further progress of legislative conquest and extermination.”

“The Prussian state and people fell at Jena; *our* Jena was the famine of 1847. Twenty thousand Prussians fell at Jena. Twenty times twenty thousand Irishmen, with all their women and children, were ignominiously slain this year by hunger and plague. Within one year after the carnage of Jena most extensive land reforms were commenced to raise up the fallen nation anew; for the government of Prussia was *not* the enemy of Prussia. But, my friends, we hear of no land reform for Ireland. Neither shall we, I firmly believe, unless the survivors of the people take the affair into their own hands.”

Here now are the very same doctrines which have alarmed and shocked you all in my letter of a few days ago. Here they are, as broad and strong four months ago. And when those lectures appeared in print, you may suppose our Council took instant alarm, and prepared resolutions to repudiate me. No; they did nothing of the kind. Well, then, you must conclude they at least gravely rebuked me in the Council, and warned me not to say such things again. No; not that either. But I will tell you what they did; they unanimously voted that those lectures should be printed in their name as one of the Confederate educational tracts.

And I have here in my hand a proof of them from the printer; and I find that two thousand copies of them will be ready for distribution to-morrow.

And as I have no interest in the sale, I feel at liberty to recommend these lectures to the attentive perusal of all the farmers and labourers in Ireland, for whose use, no doubt, our Council has printed them in this cheap form.

In short, sir, if I have now broken the fundamental rules, I have also been breaking them systematically, openly, and with the sanction of the Council, ever since I drew them up, twelve months ago.

Most of the arguments advanced to-night I have no need to controvert. Generally speaking, they are arguments against the declaration of immediate war on the Queen of England – against leading out a starving peasantry to be mown down in the open field by the regular troops. None of these things, as of course you are aware, I have recommended.

But, even if I had, there are far worse things going on around us than bloodshed. Mr. Dillon has a great horror of local insurrections – perhaps he prefers local starvations – local desolation and pauperism, local exterminations.

Sir, I hold that the most disastrous insurrections were not half so horrible as any of these things; I hold that it is a more hideous national calamity for ten men to be cast out to die of hunger, like dogs in the ditches, than for ten thousand to be hewn to pieces, fighting like men and Christians in defence of their rights.

But beware, says Mr. McGee, beware of exasperating class against class; once disturb the ethereal calm – the sweet confidence and affection that reigns between classes in Ireland, and you know not where it may end. I answer, Skibbereen! Bantry! Schull! Westport! I point to the exterminations, the murders, the hangings, the coercion act!

But, sir, with this part of the argument I have done. Mr. Dillon, however, has put it to me that I ought to withdraw my amendment, in order to put what he considers the true issue before you – namely, an insurrectionary policy, or a parliamentary one. I will tell you why I do not; because I deny the competency of this meeting to settle upon either the one or the other, without full notice to all the Confederates in Ireland. And now I will complain of our Council in this matter. There has been for weeks in preparation a report purporting to fix an

exclusive policy for the Confederation, a copy of which I insisted should be sent to all town and country Clubs in England and Ireland, and to all Confederates with whom the secretary corresponds – and I was led to believe this would have been done before attempting to get the vote of a public meeting on so important a measure. But after weeks spent in the discussion of that document, at the very last hour it is withdrawn, and the very same thing is attempted to be done by another document – namely, by these resolutions. My reason then for putting my amendment in this simply negative form, is that I do not desire to thrust my opinion on the Confederation at present. I deny the right of either party to do so, and I only want to preserve the freedom of speech and action within our rules which we have hitherto enjoyed.

And now, I say, adopt these resolutions and you seal the fate of the Confederation; you make it merely one of the long series of moral-force agitating associations that have plagued Ireland for forty years. Adopt these, and all the world will see that you have thrown the people over board to conciliate the gentry.

If you pass these resolutions you may as well write on your walls, at one side “Patience and Perseverance,” and at the other, “The man who commits a crime gives strength to the enemy.” And so you may count upon a seven years’ course of organising, agitating, and speechifying; and at the end of that time you can begin again, and try another seven years. The thing will last your time, and dying in a good old age you will leave to your children a noble legacy of Confederate cards.