

# SPEECHES OF ROBERT EMMET.

By Robert Emmet.

**The following excerpts are taken from *The Life, The Trial and Conservations of Robert Emmet*, first published in 1845, author unknown. The author is however assumed to have been a contemporary of Emmet's. Whether the speeches are authentic or simply artistic license is an assessment to be made by the reader.**

*During the first four months after Emmet's arrival, nothing of his machinations transpired. Soon after the King's Proclamation, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, conceiving the moment of national alarm at the renovation of hostilities, and a threatened invasion, favourable to his projects, he became more active in his preparations. The whole of his family portion, which consisted of two thousand five hundred pounds, he devoted to his enthusiasm. In the beginning of April, he quitted his lodgings at Harold's Cross, with the name of Hewit, and in the new name of Ellis he took the lease of a house, for which he paid a fine of sixty-one guineas, in Butterfield Lane, near Rathfarnham. Here he harangued his associates, and encouraged them by hopes of a happy result to their labours.*

Liberty is the child of oppression, and the birth of the offspring is the death of the parent; while tyranny, like the poetical desert bird, is consumed in flames ignited by itself, and its whole existence is spent in providing the means of self-destruction. We have a complete exemplification of this in the past history and present state of Ireland, where increase of numbers and increase of intelligence, have been the direct result of that system which too long has ruled this kingdom.

The relentless oppression of the English Government forced the people into habits of temperance – necessity made them abstemious, and time reconciled them to their wholesome esculent, which providentially came, like the manna of the desert, to feed the sojourners in the land of their fathers.

When nature is easily satisfied, and the necessities of life procured with little labour and care, increase of population will follow;

because parents, who are contented with their own condition, will feel no uneasiness for their offspring, who can, without any difficulty, procure a situation similar to their own. Emigration from such a country was not to be expected; for men whose modified wants were amply satisfied at home, had no need to seek elsewhere for wealth they did not desire, or distinctions they did not value. Besides, Ireland has always had peculiar attractions in retaining her children; a Scotchman loves a Scotchman, but a Hibernian loves the green fields of his youth and to enjoy these there are few privations to which he will not cheerfully submit. The eccentric humour, the boisterous mirth, the kind and social intercourse, that characterize the peasantry, likewise spread their charms, and generally succeeded in subduing the aspiring notions of adventurers, and helped to retain the people at home. When to these were added the allurements of a more tender kind, and when no restraint was placed upon the natural instinct of man, we must not wonder that Ireland is blessed with a population without a parallel in Europe.

The base and cowardly conduct of the Irish proprietors in deserting the country, though at the moment a grievance, was absolutely productive of good. Their large domains were parcelled out to humble cottages; farms were divided and subdivided; cabins everywhere raised their unostentatious roofs; and every floor was blessed with a numerous progeny.

Ireland has been forced into agriculture; and this still farther tends to increase the population, and to give her that political importance she never could have acquired if the people had been immured in mineral dungeons, or confined to the fetid vapours of a manufacturing bastille. Rural labour is not more conducive to the health of the body, than it is beneficial to the exercise of the mind; and we always find the agriculturist superior to the mechanic not only in physical strength, but in moral energy. The one is a natural soldier, who commands respect, and exacts consideration; while the other is a mere animated machine, whose ideas serve but as internal wheels to keep his hands in motion. His frame is distorted, his mind crippled, and his courage annihilated; but the agriculturist is a man such as nature intended – fearless, active and resolute; the air he breathes

ensures him health; the ground he tills supplies him with sustenance; and his occupations make him moral, hardy and brave. This is the copy of a million portraits, and they are all found in Ireland.

The aspirations of civilized men after freedom are coeval with his existence. His rights, like the mountain torrent, may be diverted from their original channel, but cannot be effectually impeded in their course. Dams may be raised to stop the coming stream; but, if the congregated waters cannot find another way to the place of their destination, they will burst through every opposition, and overwhelm in destruction all the works of lordly and presumptive men.

*'But we find,' observed a bystander, 'that very populous countries have continued in slavery.'*

Numbers whose minds are more enslaved than their bodies may submit to injustice; but numbers inspired with intelligence never can. The Irish people are not only shrewd, but informed; and for this good, as well as for every other blessing they possess, they are indebted to the folly and wickedness of their governors, *Divide et impera* has long been the maxim of those who oppressed us; but the result has been the reverse of their anticipations. The continued agitation, faction, and discord, consequent upon such a system of legislation, produced their moral effects, and, like the vivid lightning, served to purify the element they disturbed. The political whirlpool has drawn within its vortex every man in Ireland; discussion has been universally provoked; and the passions have been enlisted in the general conflict. The human intellect has been propelled, vulgar errors corrected, and the spirit of enquiry and investigation has gone abroad.

To reason upon the political state of his country, has long been the propensity of the Irish peasant; and, from continually thinking upon that subject, he has at length learned to think right. He not only knows his degraded condition, but is well acquainted with the cause. There is not a subject connected with the country, on which he cannot give an accurate opinion; he knows, as well as any man in the Castle, the purpose of every measure of Government, whether it be to enrich a spend-thrift nobleman by a job, or coerce the unfortunate peasantry by an Insurrection Act.

I know my countrymen; I have conversed with them, and have found them practical philosophers. Their sentiments are the pure emanations of acute minds, instructed in the school of nature, and taught by adversity. They are, in consequence, generally correct, and without any great exertion of thought, are frequently profound. How often have I seen them smile at the abortive efforts of their friends, who endeavour to procure them redress in a constitutional way, while, at the same time, they have told me very pertinently, and very truly, that they expected no concession from Government, until they were able to insist on it!

.....

*The following is a recollection of a conversation an anonymous acquaintance of Emmet's had with Emmet and his friends leading up to the rebellion. Emmet had 'began to expatiate on the ease with which Ireland could throw off the English yoke, and the benefits that would ensue from such an erasure.'*

K: Your enthusiasm, my friend, carries you beyond the bounds of probability; for, in anticipating a revolution in this country, you forget that England calculates on the subjection of Ireland, and that she is able to compel what it is her interest to desire.

E: That she desires it, I have no doubt; but that she is able to compel it, I unhesitatingly deny. The belief in England's superior strength has too long prevailed in this kingdom, but it is now, happily, beginning to disappear. In comparing the two countries, we must exclude from our calculation every thing but physical strength alone, and then the balance will be entirely in favour of Ireland; for I believe it will be readily admitted that she has the greater military population; and in a struggle for liberty, men are only valuable. It is a matter of arithmetical calculation. Ireland can, in the event of a well-organized revolution, turn into the field between seven and eight hundred thousand effective men – an army certainly more numerous than any force England could send against her.

K: Admitting your calculation to be correct, you are not to deny the superiority of disciplined troops over rebel numbers. An army of fifty thousand men would soon rout your invincible phalanx.

E: The time has passed, my dear sir, when such an exploded notion found credence among mankind. In a barbarous age, when two

armies drew up within gun-shot of each other, each serving as an immovable target for its opponent to fire at, such a belief was natural, because he who possessed a musket had a fearful advantage over the man who had not one. But modern times have a different and more natural mode of warfare; personal prowess now, as in periods of antiquity, is likely to be victorious; and all necessary discipline can be learned in a very few days. A man does not necessarily acquire either superior courage or address from the colour of his coat, and a soldier with a fixed bayonet has no advantage over a fierce peasant with a well-tempered pike. Almost every victory of modern times has been gained by coming to close action, and that mode, to which a well-regulated army is indebted for success, is as available to a determined band of freemen as to any hired troops in Europe. But, as different animals have different modes of attack and defence, an insurgent army has a discipline of its own, recommended by reason, and sanctioned by experience. With walled towns and close garrisons they have nothing to do; the hills of their country serve them as places of retreat; marshes, rivers, and lakes are their best bastions, while defiles affords them opportunities of attack, and woods and valleys serve them as places of ambush. The face of nature solicits the oppressed to regain their freedom; and certainly, no country on the globe has so many invitations to revolt as our own. Scarcely a mile, from one extremity of the island to the other, in which an hostile army could not be successfully harassed, and, if needful, successfully opposed. To this may be added, that an Irish insurgent army would materially differ from a similar one in any kingdom of Europe; for nearly every peasant, and certainly every man above the rank of a peasant, is intimately acquainted with the use of fire-arms. Those near the sea-shore (and those are a large portion) are excellent marksmen; while the inhabitants of mountains, and the neighbourhoods of bogs, lakes and marshes are expert fowlers. The Wexford insurgents, in the late rebellion, gave a proof of their abilities, and showed that the peasantry of Ireland, when aroused, are nothing inferior to the best disciplined troops in Europe.

The Exile: I know it, for I witnessed their skill in bringing down an enemy, and I must confess that, had they leaders of experience, they

were nothing inferior, man for man, to any force that might be brought against them.

K: There is always a deficiency, in some part, that renders every effort of the remainder abortive. Out of a hundred revolts, scarcely one has been successful.

E: Pardon me, if I set you right; for history furnishes us with few instances of failure where a nation has been unanimous. It is giving the enemies of man a new weight, to add to the burden of oppression, by dignifying pigmy insurrections and partial rebellions with the name of open revolt. They should rather be called sanguinary riots, and thus reduced to their proper level; their ghosts might not be summoned from oblivious neglect to scarce mankind from an assertion of their rights. Instances of national resuscitation are neither few nor unfrequent. Tyranny was expelled from Rome by the rebellion of the people; and Switzerland and the Netherlands are memorials of successful revolts. In our own day, America has shown us what a few thousand peasants could accomplish when actuated by a love of liberty. Ireland is superior in numbers to any of these, equals them in address and courage, and stimulated by wrongs greater than have been experienced by all these together. Soldiers are but men, and generally the most imbecile of men. Let the people be taught to despise the glare and glitter of polished arms, and the terror they are wont to inspire will be converted into objects of ridicule and contempt. Happily an opinion prevails in Ireland, that a soldier is an inferior mortal, and that three hundred athletic peasants would be equal to the regiment of a thousand men. I don't say that this opinion is correct, but it must be admitted that, in case of a rising, it would be of infinite service, as tending to inspire confidence in the insurgents, and contempt for their enemies – two things that materially conduce to victory. Leaders in a harassing war, would be easily procured, for the sagacity of an unlettered peasant might serve for the purpose. Who does not remember the servant boy at Oulard, whose advice was followed by the destruction of a whole regiment? Great occasions produce great men, and generals are formed in the study as well as in the camp. The Catholics are not what they formerly were, - intelligence is diffused, thousands of them are in the British army, and

every man of these would desert on the first opportunity, for the *amor patriae* is not extinguished by the imposition of the military oath.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The third speech of Emmet's is set at the eve of the rebellion; the scene is a back house, with a dozen men at work; making cartridges, casting bullets, fabricating rockets and making pikes. Having bolted the door and now sitting down, Emmet stood in silence for several minutes before giving the following impassioned speech:*

E: My friend, how ungrateful are mankind! How thoughtless are nations! The philosopher is neglected, and the patriot unhonoured; yet, without knowledge and liberty, how valueless all the possessions of man! How little do those who profit by wisdom, or glory in the possession of freedom, know of the student's privations, or the conspirator's danger! And without study and treason, now few could be either wise or free? Nations, exulting in the enjoyment of their rights, but too often forget those to whom they are indebted for the blessing. Englishmen continually boast of their liberty, yet how many Britons are the names of Sydney and Hampden as vague as those of Gallitzin and William Tell? The sound is familiar, but it scarcely raises a single association.

K: The hope of applause, thought it may stimulate our exertions, should never be allowed to direct our actions, and he that is honoured by the discerning may readily dispense with the plaudits of the vulgar.

E: True, but those who benefit mankind may at least expect gratitude; and, if the danger encountered by the patriot may be allowed to enhance the debt, I know of none who has so large a demand as the conspirator, whose object is universal good. After once he imparts his schemes to others, he lives in continual apprehension; every stranger is an object of suspicion; every incident is pregnant with danger. The mistakes of his friends may ruin him, and a concealed enemy may lurk amongst his associates; for, as his designs require numerous abettors, it is very difficult to select many men without including some traitor; and one informer is sufficient to blast all his hopes – as a single spark will cause the explosion of the largest powder magazine. I have latterly felt so acutely the uncertainty of my

situation, that I am determined to hasten the event of our plan; for any conclusion would be preferable to protracted suspense.

K: I know not, whether it is desirable to persist in your scheme, for the reasoning of our friend, the Exile, never appeared to me so rational as since I entered this depot of Rebellion. A thousand thoughts start up in my mind, which I can neither allay nor satisfactorily account for. These scattered instruments of destruction proclaim, that in the event of an insurrection, numbers must die; but how many are to taste the bitterness of death defies human calculation. Ourselves, too, may be among the fallen, and, what is more, the cause may be unsuccessful.

E: All these depend upon events and circumstances, about which we can know nothing positive; 'tis for us only to ascertain the probability of success, and to persevere in the course which honour and duty point out. Enough for us to know, that Ireland requires the standard of revolt to be raised by someone, and that neither defeat nor triumph can add to or diminish our consciousness of rectitude. Impediments may crowd the long perspective before us, but beyond these are glory, honours, and immortality – rewards, for obtaining which no sacrifice is too great – no enterprise too dangerous. Let not my apprehensions too carelessly expressed, damp the ardour of your soul, for the reasons which first induced you to embark in this best of causes are the same now as then, whatever arguments you may have heard to the contrary. We are young and unincumbered; defeat can neither distress our friends nor ruin ourselves, for what have we to lose but life? And life is held on so uncertain a tenure, that a thousand daily accidents may deprive us of it, and that too so suddenly and so soon as to leave our memory without an accompanying deed to keep it afloat on the stream of time. Admitting for an instant that we shall (which Heaven forbid!) be unsuccessful, think not that our endeavours will be forgotten, or that our country will cease to remember us. No, my friend, the tyrant laws may condemn us, and tyrant authority asperse and vilify our characters; but rely on it that Irishmen shall reverence the names of K— and Emmet while patriotism has admirers, or Ireland a friend. Our country has never been ungrateful, and so few have been her benefactors, that she is prodigal of thanks for even

dubious favours. Of us she can have but one opinion, for ingenious enmity cannot attribute any but laudable motives to our designs. For Ireland I will spend my private fortune, and for Ireland I shall, please God, venture my life. Kosciusko is a name as beloved in Poland as that of Washington in America. But reverse this gloomy picture, and look – as humanity should ever look – upon the bright side of things; for defeat does not always terminate daring enterprises. Reflect upon the consequences of success; our enemies vanquished, our arms triumphant, and Ireland free! Our names associated with the liberators of nations, and ourselves overwhelmed with the grateful benedictions of an emancipated people. Our youth will increase the general wonder, and the means by which we shall achieve such illustrious actions will augment the pleasing amazement. Add to this the exalted stations we shall occupy, and the joyful approbation of our own bosoms; and tell me, is not our present situation, taking all things into account, one that might well be envied? Defeat cannot deprive us of honour, nor death of glory; while success, if obtained, has in store for us all those rewards which ever graced the most fortunate of mankind?

The Moralist: Opportunities for great actions occur but seldom, and surely he ill deserves honour who lets the opportunity pass when it presents itself. Glory has found us, and let us embrace her; the tide of our affairs is at the flood, and let us embark upon the waves of fortune; we are all attended, and Heaven seems propitious. A thousand years may pass, and a more favourable moment may not again occur.

E: What, still thoughtful? Oh, I see, Miss J— has whispered something into your ear which has operated unfavourably upon your mind. Well, I can excuse you, for a being of such perfect loveliness might well disturb a hermit's prayer, though I will not allow her to divert a patriot's purpose.

K: Then, you will not pardon love in a conspirator?

E: I can not only pardon it but sincerely wish that the tender passion may be always blended with the *amor patriae*, for he that anticipates the commendation of a beloved mistress, can never act dishonourably. My friend, I, too, have one whose praise I wish to merit, and whose exaltation, next to my country, is the first wish of

my heart. She is kind, she is lovely, and Heaven only knows how good!—

K: And yet, you would fling away this jewel, without having the untutored Indian's apology, for you know its value.

E: I know its value, and, because I know it, I wish to place it where its worth may be appreciated. The stagnant vale of inglorious ease is for those domestic enamoured souls who are content to pass a life of inactive worthlessness, and who wish to enjoy affection without having merited love. Mine is a higher ambition; I must make myself worthy of the woman of my choice, and the glory which shed its lustre on the husband shall reflect its splendour on the wife. Heaven forbid that an excusable passion should thwart the great design of my life, or cause me for an instant to neglect my country's good, for the purpose of promoting my own personal advantage. What earthly possession could equal the glory of having freed Ireland from foreign domination? And, though failure might partially obstruct its rays, we never can be deprived of the consciousness of having deserved it.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The fourth and final speech is an address by Emmet to his men following the defeat of the rebellion:*

For defeated in our first grand attempt, all further endeavours must be futile. Our enemies are armed; our friends are dispirited; and our only hope is now in patience. The justice of our cause must one day triumph, and let us not indiscreetly protract the period by any premature endeavours to accelerate it. No doubt I could, in forty-eight hours, wrap the whole kingdom in the flames of rebellion; but as I have no ambition beyond the good of my country, best study her interest, and the interest of freedom, by declining to elevate my name upon the ruin of thousands, and afford our tyrants an apology to draw another chain around unhappy Ireland.

In revolts, the first blow decides the contest, - we have aimed one, and missing the mark, let us retire unobserved, and leave the enemy ignorant of the hand that was raised for their destruction. Impenetrable secrecy surrounds all our measures; the loss we have sustained is inconsiderable; and, unacquainted with their own danger,

and the extent of our resources, the tyrants of Ireland will relapse into false security, and afford us, perhaps, sooner than we imagine, another opportunity to attack the hydra of oppression. Let me, therefore, my friends, advise you to act with that prudence which becomes men engaged in the grandest of all causes, the liberation of their country. Be cautious, be silent, and do not afford our enemies any ground for either tyranny or suspicion; but, above all, never forget that you are *United Irishmen*, sworn to promote the liberty of your country by all the means in your power.

I have now relieved my bosom from a load of apprehension, and in preventing the revolt of last night from assuming the form of rebellion, I am conscious of having saved the lives of thousands of my fellow-countrymen. When the libeller of my name and intentions shall charge the blood of yesterday to my memory, I hope there will not be wanting some one to recollect, that if a little has been shed through my means, I have saved the effusion of one hundred times as much, on which I might have floated to a disreputable notoriety.

Over my future destiny Fate has thrown a veil which mortal eyes cannot penetrate. Should I succeed in evading the pursuit of my enemies, you may expect to see me once more armed in the cause of Ireland; but should I fall on the scaffold, let not the coward or the knave intimidate you from again and again appealing to Heaven on behalf of your rights and liberties by appealing to my recent failure. Oh! I beseech you, as friends and fellow-patriots, to believe me, and in the name of our common country I charge you to transmit it to your children, that, had I only one thousand pounds more, and another thousand men, I had overthrown the temple of despotism, and given liberty to Ireland. My plan was an admirable one, but there was failure in every party, and from these defects let future patriots learn to prevent similar consequences. Our attempt will not be unproductive of good; our government will learn from it, that they will never be secure while an *Emmet* is in existence, and the conspirator will see, that tens of thousands may know his secret without even one being found capable of betraying it. Gentlemen, you will now look to your own safety, and as for me, I shall do the best I can to quit the country, in the hope of again meeting you under more happy auspices.

