

# To the Confederate and Repeal Clubs of Ireland

*The Irish Felon*, No. 2.

The paper that follows was written in the last week of January, 1847—just one year and five months ago—and was forwarded to one of the leading members of the Confederation, for private circulation among the council of that body. I now address it to you just as it was written, except that I have made one or two verbal alterations, and omitted one sentence. It might possibly be better to revise and re-write it altogether, in order to adapt it more closely to the change of date, and to present conditions. But even were I to do this there would be little to alter; and I have reasons for preferring to publish it just as it stands.

It requires to be recollected that I was addressing a particular and picked audience, and was consequently entitled to *assume* things which it would be necessary to *prove* in addressing the general public. I assume, for example, that ‘moral means’ alone are incompetent to achieve Repeal, because I believed that this was admitted by those I wrote for.

I see no reason to prevent me mentioning that in about a month from the date and delivery of my paper, I received a letter from John Mitchel, stating that on perusal and consideration of its contents, he had fully adopted my views, and that he meant to act on them so soon as occasion should fit and serve.

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It is scarcely necessary to state that the measure I wish to have substituted for a simple Repeal of the Union was absolute independence, with abolition of the tenures by which the lands of this country are now holden in fee for the British crown.

It will be seen that the present paper was to have been followed by a second. That second was written; but it assumed the form of a private correspondence, addresses to several members of the Confederation, and to others—the greater portion of it to John Mitchel, between whom and myself there was from the first an *almost* perfect agreement. May his fetters weigh light, and his spirit live among us!

*January 25<sup>th</sup>, 1847.*

In putting on paper the following ideas on the course of action which the Irish Confederation ought to take—as I am convinced it must soon and speedily fix on that course, in some more determinate shape and precise terms than it has yet thought fit to adopt—I wish it to be understood and apparent that I do not mean, and have not time to draw out anything that can purport to be a perfect and complete statement of my views on the subject, and still less to exhibit in detail the principles on which they are based, or the argument in support of them.

My sole wish or intention is to *suggest*. Any attempt to *convert* or *convince* would be useless. *Individuals* are never converted; they must convert themselves. Men are moved only in masses; and it is easier to convert a million of men than a single man. But neither is the attempt necessary. To you, or any other of those for whom this paper is intended, the end of the clue line is enough. You will be able, *if you chose*, to follow it out yourself. To lead on link by link would be needless and absurd.

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To any one who considers their speeches, resolutions and proceedings, it will, I think, appear manifest and marked, as it does to me, that the 'seceders' have gone into organised action upon mere vague impulse and general feeling; with their objects undefined, their principles unsettled, their course unmarked; without any determinate plan, or consequently any fixed purpose; for no purpose can long remained fixed, but must ever be veering and wavering, without a plan to guide, control and sustain it; and a purpose without a plan to confine and confirm it, is no purpose at all.

Such a plan, too, is wanting as a warrant and guarantee, to yourselves and to others that your object is feasible, and your means adequate; that you have *gauged* your *enterprise*, and *measured* your *means*; and that the work you call upon us to do will not be wasted. There are few worse things, even in the ethics or economy of private life, than labour mis-directed; but what should be said of those who would, for want of a full and exact survey and calculation, mislead, and exhaust the labour and means and strength of a people.

It is not principles alone, however pure, nor purposes the highest and noblest, that ever command success; and few will be willing to go into a ship without chart or compass, even though it steer its course by the stars of heaven.

Assuming therefore, as I have a clear right to assume, that the leading members of the Confederation, or a certain number of them, cannot long defer coming to some agreement among themselves as to what their objects are to be; and that some surer and better defined plan for attaining those objects must be laid down and adopted than 'sixty member reading-rooms, and rose-water,'—I proceed to submit the following considerations:—

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1. Repeal, as *commonly understood*, taken by itself and STANDING ALONE, on its own merits and means, is an impracticable absurdity. Impracticable, because it cannot be effected except by means which would dissolve the connection altogether, any means that can be used being either too feeble or too strong—either *inadequate* or *incompatible*. *Absurd*, because both common sense and history concur in telling us that the resulting arrangement could not possibly endure or be endured.
2. It is *impracticable*. It does not contain, nor can it command the means of possible success. It has no force to call into action on which it can rely, whether moral, military or mixed. Its *moral* means acting in the mode admitted by the constitution, and within the limits allowed by law, are wholly incompetent; and such as they are in Mr. O'Connell's possession, to be used, abused, or not used at all.
3. That those means are incompetent, I could easily show; but surely it is unnecessary. The fact of incompetency will, I think, at once be recognised; or if any one denies it, I require of him to state, in positive and precise terms, the mode of action in which those means can be made effective. The complete and ridiculous failure of every such attempt ought to be evidence sufficient on this point. The fact briefly stated is this—that a 'moral agitation' exhausts its whole power—its power of influencing opinion, and of producing danger, damage, and inconvenience—it exhausts this power on the country in which it takes place. It was not England, but Ireland itself that suffered evil and injury by our 'glorious agitations' and 'gorgeous ethic experiments.' The most powerful moral agitation that could be 'got up' in Ireland would not act

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upon *London*. If 'Emancipation' be quoted, I can prove the quotation false in application to the present case.

4. But it is no less certain that those means, whether efficient or impotent, are, in full effect, the property of Mr. O'Connell. What may possibly have been the hasty and premature protest of the seceders against the Repeal question, has forced him to adopt the policy of not giving it up in *terms*. I attach no blame to the seceders for this somewhat precipitate proceeding. But the effect is that Repeal, in its constitutional shape, remains still his private property, in full, effective possession, to manage or mismanage to make much or little of, to sell or suspend, surrender or exchange as best he can. The mass of the people can neither estimate nor understand the points in dispute, nor the reasons for secession; and can never be brought to join what could so easily be represented as an antagonistic and hostile movement. If any member of council doubts this opinion, I challenge him to *test* it.
5. The use of military means, if you had them, would be more than adequate. Those means would do more than repeal the Union; nor could they be limited to any such result. This might be no objection; and I mention the fact here, not as an objection, but for another and different reason, which I need not state as yet. But in truth on this question you possess no such means nor can you command or create them; neither, if you had them, could you employ them with success.
6. You possess no military means. Repeal is not an armed man, but a naked beggar. You fail in finding the first and fundamental element of military force—you fail in finding men. The only martial population that Ireland possesses—the small farmers and labourers—will never wield a weapon

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in favour of Repeal. This might be enough to say; but the full and entire fact ought to be told, that you can never count again on the support of the country peasantry in any shape or degree, on the question of Repeal. Their interest in it was never ardent; nor was it native or spontaneous, but forced, and fictitious. Such as it was, it is now extinct, and can never be re-created. The *small farmers*, more especially, are weary and heart-sick of Repeal, as well as of agitation—that agitation which has been called a bloodless one, but which *to them* was not bloodless. You have with you on Repeal—provided you can take them from Mr. O’Connell—the *town population* of three provinces, and a portion of that of Ulster. Such and more is the real amount of your force. This statement may be disagreeable, and disagreeable statements are not easily believed. But you may trust in its truth, and it requires to be made. No error could be more fatal than a false estimate of your force. But, be this true or false in reference to *moral* means, you can never make Repeal a *military* question. You are without an army—I need not ask where is your arsenal?

7. But even had you those means or if you could create them—if you had at command the whole military power of the people and the full means of a popular armament, I say you cannot use them to effect on the question of Repeal. To make it successful, your fight must be a *defensive* one. The force of England is *entrenched* and *fortified*. You must draw it out of position; break up its mass; break its trained line of march and manoeuvre, its equal step and serried array. You cannot organize, or train, or discipline your own force to any point of efficiency. You must therefore disorganize, and untrain, and undiscipline that of the enemy, and not

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alone must you *unsoldier*, you must *unofficer* it also; nullify its tactique and strategy, as well as its discipline; decompose the science and system of war, and resolve them into their first elements. You must make the hostile army a mob, as your own will be; force it to act on the *offensive*, and oblige it to undertake operations for which it was never constructed. Nothing of all this could you do *on Repeal*. A Repeal-war should, of necessity, be an aggressive one on your part. You must be the attacking party. On all the questions involved in Repeal, England is in *occupation of the disputed points*; and you must assail them. You must send your forces against armed positions, marshal your men for a stricken field, and full in its front, meet England's might in unbroken mass on its ordered march. But further and finally, you must get time and licence for preparing, enlisting, organizing, drilling. A REPEAL-war would have to be prepared in presence of the enemy. Need I point out to 'Ulster on your flank?'

Enough of this, and far more was needed. I doubt if a single man ever held the belief, *full and firm*, that Ireland could at any time be brought to buckle a belt and march out for Repeal. The tone and topics adopted by the *Nation* in '43 and '44 I never attributed to anything but this—that a 'glorious agitation' *affords no poetry*, while insurrection does. It was the mere craving of genius for a *magnificent* subject, instead of a *mean* one.

8. There is yet another class of means and mode of force better founded in moral right, and more efficient in action, than either agitation or military insurrection. I can find no fit and defining name for it on the spur of the moment. Its theory may briefly be stated as founded on the principle of natural

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law—a principle beyond dispute, denial, or doubt:—

- I. That no man has any right to assume or claim any species of authority or jurisdiction whatsoever over any other man, against the will, or without the consent of that other.
- II. That should he attempt to exercise such assumed authority over another man without his consent, that other is not bound to obey.
- III. And that, should he take proceedings for enforcing obedience, such proceeding may be lawfully, and ought to be, resisted by any and every means and mode of force whatsoever.

This is the rigid expression of the principle, in its first form; and this principle, so expressed, is the nucleus round which a nation gathers and grows. Enlarged into size and expanded into shape sufficient to give ground for a people to stand on, and to fit for operation, the principle I state is this—that every distinct community or nation of men is owner of itself; and can never of right be bound to submit to be governed by another people.

Its practical assertion forms the third mode of action which this country might have recourse to; and consists:—

- I. In refusal of obedience to usurped authority.
- II. In maintaining and defending such refusal of obedience.
- III. In resisting every attempt to exercise such usurped authority, and every proceeding adopted to enforce obedience.
- IV. In taking quiet and peaceable possession of all the rights,

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and powers of government, and in proceeding quietly to exercise them.

- V. In maintaining and defending the exercise of such rights and powers, should it be attacked.
9. I have just thought of a name for this system of means, and for want of a better, I may call it *moral insurrection*. The difference between it and *true military* insurrection amounts to nothing more in practical effect than the difference between the *defensive* and the aggressive use of physical force—a difference, however, which is often important, whether as regards moral right or mechanical efficacy.
10. As an instrument for effecting Repeal this class of means is liable to the fatal objection stated against the preceding class. The right of moral insurrection is worthless without a military force to sustain it, and unless you be prepared and willing to use that force. On the question of Repeal, you have no so such force. That question is far too away from the hearts of the peasantry. They do not feel, and scarcely understand it. They may be brought to see its light, but never to feel its heat. Other circumstances, too, render the right not available in favour of Repeal. You never could organise such an insurrection on that question. The practical assertion of the right consists of two parts:—
- I. *Abolition* of British government.
- II. *Formation* of a national one.
- I. How would you proceed to accomplish the former?  
By a general refusal to obey the entire *existing* law?

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Impossible. You could not do this even *mentally* to your own satisfaction; much less could you do it in actual fact. Or by selecting, and seizing some one particular law to take your stand on, trample down and nullify? What law? The law you select for assailing must have four requisites:—First, it must form no part of the moral code; second, it must be essential to government—a part of its substance not a mere accident—one the abrogation of which would be an abrogation of sovereignty; third, it must be one easily disobeyed; and fourth, difficult to enforce; in other words, a law that would *help* to repeal itself. There is no such to serve the purpose of Repeal. In Ireland, unluckily, there is no direct and general state-tax, payment of which might be refused and resisted.

II. The second component part of the system—formation of a national government—is rendered impossible by the fact that the owners of the soil are not on your side, and are not *Irish*, but English all, in blood and feeling.

11. If those men could now at length be brought to adopt and acknowledge Ireland as their mother-country, and to give you their adhesion and support, this latter mode of moral insurrection might be put in action with success. To try the experiment of inducing them to do so seems to be the present police and *forlorn hope* of the Confederation and the *Nation*. I am quite willing to join in trying that experiment, PROVIDED it be based and conducted on the condition that the *commons* of Ireland, as well as its *nobles*, be consulted

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and cared for—that the *land-owners* will consent to take the *land-holders* into council—to admit them as portion of the ‘Irish party’—making of that ‘party’ a great national league—and finally, to frame and subscribe terms of accommodation and amnesty for the past, and articles of agreement for the future, between themselves and the tenants of the soil—one of those articles to be security of tenure in some effective shape or other, to the present occupiers of the land. On this basis, and on no other, would I be willing to try this experiment; but not to make it a ‘life’s labour.’ Until the—day of—I am willing to try it—no longer.

12. But the success of that experiment is scarce to be hoped, especially now that the famine has been recognised as an ‘Imperial calamity’—and the policy of the Confederation contains *apparently* no *dernier resort*—nor its proceedings any preparations for having any recourse to it. The policy I wish, and mean to press on your attention, does contain such *dernier resort*; and the course of proceeding I would fain have the Confederation adopt contains, and comprises within it, the *preparatory* movement.
13. Repeal is not alone impracticable—as commonly understood, a simple repeal of the act of Union—it is an absurdity. The resulting connection and state of things could neither endure nor be endured. Reflection tells us so—history agrees. Two independent co-equal, and sovereign legislatures, forming one state under own crown, is an arrangement repugnant alike to common sense and experience. Reason repudiates, and history never heard of it. Two wheels in the same machine, of equal power, independent, unconnected, and not under control of the same prime mover, would be a

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better arrangement. Inanimate wheels perchance, *might* work together but under the action of human interests and passions, separate *sovereign* legislatures never could. The examples quoted in favour of such an arrangement are beneath being urged, and beneath being answered. Between Sweden and Norway it may possibly subsist, for aught I know; and it may continue to subsist, for aught I know; and it may continue to subsist, so long as the pulse of those countries continue to beat twenty per minute, and their blood remains at twenty degrees Fahrenheit. But when their atmosphere begins to beat up, and their blood to thaw and flow—when they shall have got a *Times* in Sweden, and a *Nation* in Norway—then will the two wheels begin to crash—stop the machine, or shiver it to atoms. It subsisted between England and Ireland for *eighteen* years. But eighteen years is less in the life-time of a nation than an hour in the life of man; and as well might you urge that two quarrelsome men, ill-affected to each other, might safely and reasonably enter into partnership for life, because they had made shift to pass an hour together, without knocking each other down. And this, too, was the very form of connection which TONE and LORD EDWARD died to repeal—as well as many others beside, whose epitaph has now at last been written, since the ‘better times’ came; that epitaph, being short, sublime, and consoling—and encouraging too—such as Ireland awards to her dead—‘*a gang of miscreants.*’

14. No mode of connection between the kingdom could be solid, desirable, or lasting, except a *federal union*, such as that existing between New York and Pennsylvania. But a federal union must be the result of *negotiation*, and agreement

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between the federating parties. I deny the competency of the Imperial (British) parliament to frame the act, or make the terms of federation. But in order to negotiate, the parties must stand on equal terms, and each be *independent* of the other. *Independence*, therefore, full and entire independence, is a necessary preliminary to any permanent, or satisfactory arrangement with Britain. The steps are—independence, negotiation, and federal union. What the terms should be I will not state—I dislike needless theorising.

15. Do not suppose I am insisting on useless *forms*. My object is very different. I think every one should familiarize his mind to the foregoing proceeding; for such is the proceeding, or one analogous, which must eventually be adopted. You will NEVER, in form of law, repeal the Act of Union. *Never*, while the sun sits in heaven, and the laws of nature are in action. *Never*, before night goes down on the last day.
16. But a declaration of independence is yet far away—at least in the distance that is measured by *events*, if not in the distance that is measured by days. I return to Repeal.
17. I sum up by again asserting that Repeal is destitute of all intrinsic force, and that *standing alone* on its own merits it does not furnish or command the means of success.
18. Indeed so plainly apparent is the impossibility of carrying Repeal, that its best and truest leaders are forced to throw themselves on a blind and helpless appeal to *futurity*. Broad daylight is on the present, and shows too clearly there is neither means nor hope. The future is dark; and the dark is full of shadows which fancy may shape to what form it will; and folly make the forms to be real. But men may keep theorising and dreaming too long—the building up or

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restoring an airy and ideal nationality, which time is wearing down, and wasting away, faster than they can work it up; and when they awake from their dreams they will find, I fear, that one other people has gone out of the world, as nations and races have gone ere now.

19. For a revolution is beginning which will leave Ireland *without a people*, unless it be met and conquered by a revolution which will leave it without landlords. The operation of the terrible famine will turn half the small tillage farmers—the sole strength and hope of this island—into mere labourers working for wages. The operation of the measure for repealing the corn-duties—rendered more sure and speedy by the sudden increase of demand for foreign corn—will leave landless the remainder. Heretofore, tillage land has been able to pay a higher rent than grass land. Henceforth it will be the reverse—more especially should the potato have finally failed or disappeared. The only bar that existed to the universal removal of the tillage farmer—the landlords' own personal interest in retaining him—is gone now. The result is no matter of doubt; and even if it were doubtful it ought to be provided against. Else will Ireland lose the only weapon she possesses that could conquer or cow the English government; else, too, will she cease to have a people, for a population of pauperized labourers is not a people. I fear the English government, and *that English garrison* who say they own *our* soil, have a full view of their opportunity, and are determined to take advantage of it. We hear of nothing but plans and schemes to absorb surplus labour—the surplus labour that is in process of creation. The farmers are to pass over into the condition of labourers, and to be supported during their

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passage. Ireland is playing out her last game—and is she then, after all, to be checkmated, conquered, abolished? Not if her leaders and people be true and no cravens—true, not to any petty objects of personal distinction, or personal pelf—true, not to the foreign gang who call Ireland their own, and hold her lands by the robber’s right—but true to their country and to themselves. One move will save checkmate. By one move alone you can meet and match—and by that same move you can checkmate England. One move alone can save the stakes now—and among those stakes are the name and fame of you and yours. Men have given to you their faith, and hearts, and hopes, for your bold bearing and bold words. Even I myself am now trusting to you and to *your* help, instead of looking round for other help and another course. Are you ready to redeem your own words, pledged in the sunshine of summer weather—are you ready to redeem now in this day of sadness and storm? And to justify our faith when we followed your leading? Are you up to the mark and work of this one hour, *in lieu* of the ‘life’s labour’ you promise? Strip then, and bid Ireland strip. *Now or never*, if indeed it be not too late. Oh, for one year of the bulldog soul of England! Oh, for one year of Davis now! Whatever he may have thought *in the autumn of ’43*, his voice would have now been louder than mine, to say what mine is too feeble to say. He would not have lain dreaming while Ireland was being trodden down, and her people conquered finally and forever. For England *is now actually winning her crowning and DECISIVE* victory over us and ours for ages coming.

20. To prevent this result, and at the same achieve independence—the only form in which Repeal can ever be carried—there is,

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I am convinced, but one way alone; and that is to link Repeal to some other question, like a railway carriage to the engine; some question possessing the intrinsic strength which Repeal wants; and strong enough to carry both itself and Repeal together—if any such question can be found. And such a question there is in the land. One ready prepared—ages have been preparing it. An engine ready-made—one too that will generate its own steam without cost or care—a self-acting engine, if once the fire be kindled; and the fuel to kindle—the sparks for kindling, are everywhere. Repeal had always to be *dragged*. This I speak of will carry itself—as the cannon ball carries itself down the hill.

What that other question is, I may possibly state, very briefly, in another paper.

Yet if its name and general character be not already known, I have lost my labour.