SOLICITORS' APPRENTICES' DEBATING SOCIETY

I N A U G U R A L M E E T I N G
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"Arthur Griffith - The man and his Policy"

Address delivered in Solicitors' Buildings, Four Courts, Dublin.
by
P. J. O'Brien. Auditor

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both my desire and my duty this evening to return my sincere thanks to the Members of this Society who elected me to the position of Auditor and conferred upon me the privilege of addressing this distinguished gathering. I am mindful of the honour they have done me and it is with no slight feeling of diffidence that I assume the mantle of office which has been worn with such distinction by my many illustrious predecessors. I shall endeavour during my year of office to follow the path which they have trod, so that the members of this Society may not regret the choice they have made, nor say that their confidence in me was misplaced. If when I come to vacate the chair I can leave the Society in as flourishing a condition as that in which I found it, I think I may rest satisfied and to this end it shall be my care and my pleasure to direct my efforts. The present happy and progressive condition of the Society is due in no small measure to the support of the Incorporated Law Society, and to that body, on behalf of my brother members and myself, I desire to express our thanks. I would further thank the Incorporated Law Society for the generosity and assistance we have always received from it, and for the many medals and certificates it annually presents. We would lack in gratitude did I neglect to mention our indebtedness to Mr. William George Wakely now for over forty years the courteous Secretary of the Incorporated Law Society, who during that period has never failed to show us every kindness, and whose aid and help always been forthcoming.

We further wish to acknowledge our obligations to the gentlemen who so kindly occupy the Chair at our various meetings, to all who subscribe to make our Annual Dance the success it is, and to our many other benefactors.

On behalf of all the members of this Society and in particular on my own behalf, I wish to record our gratitude to the gentlemen who do us the honour of speaking on this platform to-night. No one of them needs an introduction, for each looms large in the public life of Ireland.

And Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I regard it as a signal honour that I should have the privilege of delivering the first Inaugural Address in this Hall which with its surrounding Courts will I hope long stand upon Liffey's side as a symbol that the era of destruction in this country is at an end and it is surely fitting upon such an occasion that my Address should be concerned with the greatest constructive Statesman that Ireland has produced in Modern times.

"Ireland is the Mary Stuart of Causes - she ruins most of those that love her".

Many years ago those words were written of a great national Leader who went down to his grave in sorrow and apparent defeat and they are no less true of Arthur Griffith who having through the labour of thirty years forged a new bond of union amongst his countrymen found his motives aspersed, his policy decried and the Ireland of his hopes devastated by the horrors of Civil War.

In 1898 Griffith returned from South Africa to find an Ireland torn between conflicting loyalties, indifferent to the name of Nationality, and heedless of the cause of Freedom. With the exception of a small band of Separatists who still clung to the forgotten creed of

Fenianism, the bulk of the Nation had abandoned the idea of Liberty. The people who divided into two groups, the one - the Unionists - sought to preserve the same alliance with England which had prevailed since 1800, and the other, and by far the larger group - the followers of the Irish Party, who regarded Home Rule as the ideal for which to strive. Of the two Griffith looked on the Irish Party with the greater disfavour. He regarded their presence in Westminster as an admission of England's right to control Ireland's affairs. He decided that the only hope for Ireland's regeneration was to get the Irish people to adopt the same policy of passive resistance to English Government and abstention from the British Parliament, which the Hungarians had so successfully used against Austria. With the example of Deak in Hungary before him, he set himself a similar task to unite his countrymen, to fire them with some of his own national spirit, and with them as his allies to repeal the Union and to restore to Ireland her Parliament and place as a free and ancient Nation.

In the Middle of the 19th Century, Hungary, by threat of arms, had wrung from an unwilling Austria recognition as a free and equal Nation. The Emperor of Austria was proclaimed King of Hungary and crowned with the Iron Crown of the good King Stephen, a Hungarian Diet was established and Hungary's Rights were embodied in the Constitution of 1848, never more to be questioned or gainsaid. But Austrian pride was deeply hurt and within a few years the Constitution was violated, the Diet abolished, and Hungary was ordered to send her representatives to the Austrian Parliament in Vienna. Then began a struggle which excited the admiration of the world. Francis Deak arose in Hungary determined to win back his country's rights. Adopting the policy of passive resistance he refused to treat with Austria until the Constitution of '48 was restored. "Hungary" he sais, "is a free and equal nation and will only negotiate as such. Her representatives will never plead her cause in a foreign Parliament". The Candidates, whom Austria nominated at the polls, were defeated on every side and the empty Hungarian benches in Vienna bore evidence to Deak's success. The Austrian Diplomats had yet another card to play - the Emperor graciously offered his Hungarian subjects Home Rule. Deak spurned the offer and Hungary applauded. Finally, in 1866, Prussia and Italy went to war with Austria, and Austria, finding herself unable to bear the combat singlehanded, agreed to comply with all Hungary's demands - to restore her violated Constitution, to re-establish her Parliament, and to recognise her as a free and equal nation, at the price of Hungary's assistance in the war. He rejected the Austrian offer, declining, as he said, to make the liberty of his country a matter of barter. The war ended disastrously for Austria, degraded by Prussia, deprived of Venice by Italy, she adopted the only course that remained. The Constitution of '48 was restored, the Parliament re-established, and Hungary stood before the world a free and equal member of the family of nations.

Griffith, steeped in the annals of his country, saw the parallel in Irish history. He saw how the Irish Volunteers had won from England the Renunciation Act of 1782 which had declared that the right of Ireland to be bound only by the laws of her own Parliament, should never more be questioned or questionable. He saw how the man who on behalf of England had acknowledged the sovereignity of Ireland's Parliament, had denied the work of his own hands, and by force and guile incorporated the Irish Parliament in that of England, and here Griffith saw the parallel fail. The Irish members

betook themselves to Westminster and there they sought to serve their country whilst by their very actions they denied her existence as a nation. There Grattan, O'Connell, Parnell and Redmond begged for the favours which they should have demanded as rights. Griffith determined to restore the Hungarian parallel. Ireland, he held, must recognise the right of no foreign Parliament to make her laws. She is a nation, she will treat with England only as a nation, and her representatives will urge her cause only in her Parliament. Such was the conviction which he had to force upon an unwilling country. Gathering round him a meagre band of followers inspired by his zeal and energy, he founded Sinn Fein. His was the mind which evolved the policy and his was the hand which steered it to success. At the National Convention held in the Rotunda on November 28th, 1905, he outlined his policy as (1) non-recognition of foreign interference in Irish affairs on the Hungarian lines and national self-development through the recognition of the duties and rights of citizenship. "The Policy of Sinn Fein", he said, "proposes to bring Ireland out of the corner and make her assert her existence in the world. The basis of the policy is national self-reliance. No laws and no series of laws can make a nation out of a people which distrusts itself." The better to reach the mass of the people he founded his paper "Sinn Fein". His versatile pen was ever busy in its service through which he hoped to win the Irish people from their misplaced faith in the Irish Party. The struggle seemed fruitless. On all sides he met apathy and distrust and opposition. Five times his paper was suppressed and five times it reappeared under a new name. "Including the Parliamentary Party" says James Stephens, "Mr. Griffith had to fight every other social and economic unit in Ireland and he may be said to have faced and been faced by the whole of Ireland in what must have appeared an irreducible antagonism. Cucullain, striding the ford and prepared to take all the fighters of Ireland on his single sword point, could scarcely have conceived himself as bearing a more hopeless fight than did Arthur Griffith during those years, and if Cucullain's courage never failed in that heroic combat, no more did Arthur Griffith's courage fail the Ireland that he loved and meant to create".

Year after year the weary task of National Regeneration went on but success was coming with slow and heavy steps. The numbers of Griffith's followers increased. Parties and associations grew up all working by different methods and striving by various routes to reach the same objective. Some counselled Force and others Patience but Griffith persevered with his campaign of passive resistance. The country was gradually awakening and in Easter week of 1916 Ireland groaned in her slumbers.

The sacrifice of Pearse and his comrades, the world war and the attempted conscription of its later years all gave a fresh filip to Griffith's movement. The struggle went on and finally at the General Election of 1918 Ireland awoke from her stupor.

The Sinn Fein candidates won an overwhelming victory capturing 73 of the available 106 Seats. The first half of the battle had been won. The nation had shouldered the rights and duties of citizenship. Then followed the war of the Black and Tan. The spirit which had been conjured up at the blood-sacrifice of 1916 stalked the land. The nation was aroused but Passive Resistance was forgotten. Griffith's Policy was submerged in its own triumph to reappear again with the truce of the Summer of 1921.

The details of that long fight are known to all and it is unnecessary for me to dwell further upon the ultimate victory of Arthur Griffith: To-day the world bears testimony to his

success. Much that he had hoped and worked for has been achieved But much remains yet to be done before the dreams of Arthur Griffith will have become a reality. The national language must be resuscitated and made a living and potent force. "The nation" said Arthur Griffith, "must be rebuilt upon the Gael, and while it is impossible to undo the Plantation it is essential to undo the conquest". The conquest can only be undone through the resurrection of the language. The mentality of the Gael can only be restored to our minds when the speech of the Gael is restored to our tongues. The subservience which has been bred into the Irish character by centuries of repression will linger until the language restores self-confidence. And Griffith who strove that Ireland's soul might be saved, was no less anxious for her material welfare. He saw that industry is an essential to her Prosperity, that without assistance such industry could never be hers.

Protection for our industries was a cardinal factor in his policy which has been too little regarded by the Parliament which his policy created. Protection and Free Trade are tangled questions beyond the scope of this address. But no commentary on Griffith's policy would be complete without some reference to the point which he never failed to stress.

Universal Free Trade is an ideal for which the world should strive as it should for complete disarmament. Tariffs are a necessity which an imperfect world accepts, as individuals accept the necessity for bolted doors to secure their possessions from the rapacity of marauders. When the nations of the world adopt Free Trade let not Ireland be the last. In the meantime she must not play the part of the man who throws open his doors trusting that his own good faith will be sufficient guarantee of the good faith of others.

There can be no doubt that the unrest so rife to-day is due in large part to unemployment which in its turn is due to want of industries to absorb our working population. But owing to our geographical situation it is useless to hope for an industrial revival without a wide system of Protection and this Griffith always regarded as one of the essentials to our material prosperity.

I have endeavoured but cursorily to sketch the policy which brought into existence The Irish Free State. It would be amiss did I neglect some slight notice of the personality to whom the policy is due.

Griffith was a man devoid of personal ambition whose one aim was to serve the cause of Roisin Dubh. The forces opposed to him would have borne down any man less enthusiastically patriotic. There was an undistinguished, almost unknown, Irishman, preaching the apparent heresy that even the policy of Parnell was wrong - calling upon his countrymen to withdraw their representatives from the British Parliament, asserting that their presence there was a recognition of alien rule and that Freedom would be won only if and when the Irish people disavowed the right of any English Legislature to make their Laws, and relied upon themselves alone in a free Parliament in Dublin. Almost alone, but always unwearied, he preached this policy at a time when the Irish Parliamentary Party claimed and received the allegience of the great body of Irish Nationalists, he pursued it in spite of apathy, derision and poverty. Often, in addition to writing the main articles in his paper "Sinn Fein", he had to set the type with his own hands. He reduced himself to pitiful straits, and in the end he proved not alone to Ireland but to the world that his was the only road to Freedom. He completed his great work of National Regeneration and saw the fruition of almost all his hopes when the Parliament of Saorstat Eireann was established in 1921. But the Civil War which he vainly sought

to avert arrested the fruition of his policy and with grief and blighted hopes he was borne to the grave. But his memory will never die for his adherence to the Mary Stuart of causes has won for him an abiding place in the thoughts and affections of his countrymen.

Griffith's is the policy which will make Ireland the country he would have had her. National self-reliance and unity must be our watchword as it was his. The spirit of subservience, that last vestige of the Penal Days must be for ever eradicated. The men and women of Ireland must learn to bear with pride the rights and duties of citizenship. "It is the duty of a free citizen" he wrote, "to live so that his country may be the better of his existence. Let each Irishman do so much and I have no fear for ultimate triumph of our policy. If we place our duty to our country before personal interest and live not each for himself, but each for all, the might of England cannot prevent our ultimate victory". No doubt the continuance of British Rule in North East Ulster was a great disappointment to him, but who will say that but for the disastrous Civil War which dashed all his hopes, the ideal he had striven for would not now be a reality. Who will have the temerity to say that had he lived his gifts for conciliation, his aptitude for reasonable compromise and the respect due to his unquestioned patriotism, would not have won for us our lost province. But Time and Tolerance I believe will work this change and if we of the South can show an active realisation of our duties as citizens we will hope that our example may spur our Northern brothers to a proper appreciation of theirs. "Every misfortune that we have suffered for centuries past", said Griffith, "may be traced to one cause and that is what we have ceased to consider ourselves a united nation of brothers", and never can we hope to fulfill the trust which Griffith has reposed in us while we look upon our fellow-countrymen in the North as our foes. "For the Orangeman in the North", he said, "ceasing to be the blind instrument of his own as well as his fellow-countryman's destruction, we have the greeting of Brotherhood as for the Nationalist of the South long taught to measure himself by English standards".

Here I may fitly end. The materials available for an appraisement of Griffith are singularly slight but such as they are they make it clear that the pith and essence of his policy was confidence in ourselves and the exercise of an apportune and prudent compromise which while abating no jot or tittle of principle would

"Take
Occasion by the hand and make
The bounds of freedom wider yet"

And this policy I, with every deference, venture to recommend to men of all parties and all creeds unless Ireland is to sit for ever another Venice amid the waters yearning in vain for one glimmer of her ancient glory or one whisper of her old renown.
