



Robert Emmet's speech from the dock¹

Mr. Emmet, standing forward in the dock, in front of the bench, said, — “My lords, as to why judgment of death and execution should not be passed upon me, according to law, I have nothing to say; but as to why my character should not be relieved from the imputations and calumnies thrown out against it, I have much to say. I do not imagine that your lordships will give credit to what I am going to utter; I have no hopes that I can anchor my character in the breast of the court, I only wish your lordships may suffer it to float down your memories until it has found some more hospitable harbour to shelter it from the storms with which it is at present buffeted. Was I to suffer only death, after being adjudged guilty, I should bow in silence to the fate which awaits me; but the sentence of the law which delivers over my body to the executioner, consigns my character to obloquy. A man in my situation has not only to encounter the difficulties of fortune, but also the difficulties of prejudice. Whilst the man dies, his memory lives; and that mine may not forfeit all claim to the respect of my countrymen, I seize upon this opportunity to vindicate myself from some of the charges alleged against me. I am charged with being an emissary of France : it is false — I am no emissary. I did not wish to deliver up my country to a foreign power, and least of all, to France. Never did I entertain the remotest idea of establishing French power in Ireland. From the introductory paragraph of the address of the Provisional Government, it is evident that every hazard attending an independent effort, was

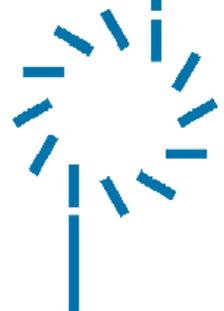
¹ Madden's account was originally published in Dublin in 1847. It gives Emmet's speech from the dock, before the pronouncement of his death sentence following the failure of his separatist rebellion, in the embellished form which became canonical among later Irish nationalists. For the textual transmission, see R.N.C. Vance, “Text and Tradition: Robert Emmet's Speech from the Dock”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 71.282 (Summer, 1982): 185-191.

Source: R.R. Madden, *The life and times of Robert Emmet* (New York: Haverty, 1868), 238-246

deemed preferable, to the more fatal risk of introducing a French army into this country. Small, indeed, would be our claim to patriotism and to sense, and palpable our affectation of the love of liberty, if we were to sell our country to a people, who are not only slaves themselves, but the unprincipled and abandoned instruments of imposing slavery on others. And my lords, let me here observe, that I am not the head and life's blood of this rebellion. When I came to Ireland, I found the business ripe for execution. I was asked to join in it. I took time to consider; and after mature deliberation, I became one of the Provisional Government; and there then was, my lords, an agent from the United Irishmen and Provisional Government of Ireland at Paris, negotiating with the French Government, to obtain from them an aid sufficient to accomplish the separation of Ireland from Great Britain, the preliminary to which assistance has been a guarantee to Ireland similar to that which Franklin obtained for America; but the intimation that I, or the rest of the Provisional Government, meditated to put our country under the dominion of a power which has been the enemy of freedom in every part of the globe, is utterly false and unfounded. Did we entertain any such ideas, how could we speak of giving freedom to our countrymen? how could we assume such an exalted motive? If such an inference is drawn from any part of the proclamation of the provisional government, it calumniates their views, and is not warranted by the fact.

“Connexion with France was, indeed, intended, but only as far as mutual interest would sanction or require. Were they to assume any authority inconsistent with the purest independence, it would be the signal for their destruction. We sought aid, and we sought it — as we had assurance we should obtain it — as auxiliaries in war, and allies in peace.

“Were the French to come as invaders or enemies, uninvited by the wishes of the people, I should oppose them to the utmost of my strength. Yes! my countrymen, I should



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advise you to meet them upon the beach, with a sword in one hand, and a torch in the

other. I would meet them with all the destructive fury of war. I would animate my countrymen to immolate them in their boats, before they had contaminated the soil of my country. If they succeeded in landing, and, if forced to retire before superior discipline, I would dispute every inch of ground, burn every blade of grass, and the last intrenchment of liberty should be my grave. What I could not do myself, if I should fall, I should leave as a last charge to my countrymen to accomplish : because I should feel conscious that life, any more than death, is unprofitable, when a foreign nation holds my country in subjection.

“Reviewing the conduct of France to other countries, could we expect better towards us? No; let not then any man attain my memory by believing that I could have hoped to give freedom to my country, by betraying the sacred cause of liberty, and committing it to the power of her most determined foe. Had I done so, I had not deserved to live; and, dying with such a weight upon my character, I had merited the honest execration of that country which gave me birth, and to which I would give freedom. What has been the conduct of the French towards other countries? they promised them liberty, and when they got them into their power, they enslaved them. What has been their conduct towards Switzerland, where it has been stated that I had been? had the people there been desirous of French assistance, I would have sided with the people, I would have stood between them and the French, whose aid they called in, and, to the utmost of my ability, I would have protected them from every attempt at subjugation; I would, in such case, have fought against the French, and, in the dignity of freedom, I would have expired on the threshold of that country, and they should have entered it only by passing over my lifeless corse. Is it then to be supposed that I would be slow in making the same sacrifices for my native land; am I, who lived but to be of service to my country, and who would subject myself to the bondage of the grave to give her freedom and independence,

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am I to be loaded with the foul and grievous calumny of being an emissary of French tyranny and French despotism? My Lords, it may be part of the system of angry justice, to bow a man's mind by humiliation to meet the ignominy of the scaffold, but worse to me than the scaffold's shame* or the scaffold's terrors, would be the imputation of having been the agent of the despotism and ambition of France; and, whilst I have breath, I will call upon my countrymen not to believe me guilty of so foul a crime against their liberties, and against their happiness. I would do with the people of Ireland as I would have done with the people of Switzerland, could I be called upon at any future period of time so to do. My object, and that of the rest of the provisional government, was, to effect a total separation between Great Britain and Ireland, to make Ireland totally independent of Great Britain, but not to let her become a dependant of France.

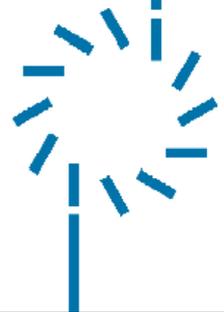
“When my spirit shall have joined those bands of martyred heroes, who have shed their blood on the scaffold, and in the field, in defence of their country, this is my hope, that my memory and name may serve to animate those who survive me.

“While the destruction of that government which upholds its dominion by impiety against the Most High, which displays its power over man as over the beasts of the field, which sets man upon his brother, and lifts his hands, in religion's name, against the throat of his fellow, who believes a little more or less than the government standard, which reigns amidst the cries of the orphans and of the widows it has made.”

(Here Mr. Emmet was interrupted by Lord Norbury).

After a few words on the subject of his objects, purposes, and the final prospect of success, he was again interrupted, when he said —

“What I have spoken was not intended for your lordships, whose situation I commiserate rather than envy; my



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expressions were for my countrymen. If there be a true Irishman present, let my last words cheer him in the hour of affliction.”

Lord Norbury interrupted the prisoner.

“I have always understood it to be the duty of a judge, when a prisoner has been convicted, to pronounce the sentence of the law. I have also understood that judges sometimes think it their duty to hear with patience, and to speak with humanity; to exhort the victim of the laws, and to offer, with tender benignity, his opinions of the motives by which he was actuated, in the crime of which he was adjudged guilty. That a judge has thought it his duty so to have done, I have no doubt; but where is the boasted freedom of your institutions — where is the vaunted impartiality, clemency, and mildness of your courts of justice, if an unfortunate prisoner, whom your policy, and *not justice*, is about to deliver into the hands of the executioner, is not suffered to explain his motives, sincerely and truly, and to vindicate the principles by which he was actuated?

“My Lords, it may be a part of the system of angry justice, to bow a man's mind by humiliation, to the purposed ignominy of the scaffold; but worse to me than the purposed shame, or the scaffold's terrors, would be the tame endurance of such foul and unfounded imputations as have been laid against me in this court. You, my Lord, are a judge. I am the supposed culprit. I am a man — you are a man also. By a revolution of power, we might change places, though we never could change characters. If I stand at the bar of this court, and dare not vindicate my character, *what a farce is your justice!* If I stand at this bar, and dare not vindicate my character, *how dare you calumniate it?* Does the sentence of death, which your unhallowed policy inflicts on my body, condemn my tongue to silence, and my reputation to reproach? Your executioner may abridge the period of my existence, but, while I exist, I shall not forbear to vindicate my character and motives from your aspersions; and, as a man to whom fame is dearer than life, I will make the last use of that life in doing justice to that reputation which is to live after me, and which is the only legacy I

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can leave to those I honour and love, and for whom I am proud to perish. As men, my Lords, we must appear on the great day at one common tribunal; and it will then remain for the Searcher of all hearts to shew a collective universe, who was engaged in the most virtuous actions, or actuated by the purest motives — my country's oppressors, or”

(Here he was interrupted, and told to listen to the sentence of the law.)

“My Lords, will a dying man be denied the legal privilege of exculpating himself in the eyes of the community from a reproach thrown upon him during his trial, by charging him with ambition, and attempting to cast away, for a paltry consideration, the liberties of his country, why then insult me, or rather, why insult justice, in demanding of me why sentence of death should not be pronounced against me? I know, my Lords, that the form prescribes that you should put the question, the form also confers a right of answering. This, no doubt, may be dispensed with, and so might the whole ceremony of the trial, since sentence was already pronounced at the Castle before your jury were impanelled. Your Lordships are but the priests of the oracle, and I submit, but I insist on the whole of the forms.”

(Here Mr. Emmet paused, and the court desired him to proceed.)

“I have been charged with that importance in the efforts to emancipate my country, as to be considered the key-stone of the combination of Irishmen, or, as it has been expressed, «the life and blood of this conspiracy». You do me honour overmuch; you have given to the subaltern all the credit of the superior. There are men concerned in this conspiracy, who are not only superior to me, but even to your own conceptions of yourself, my Lord; men, before the splendour of whose genius and virtues I should bow with respectful deference, and who would not deign to call you friend — who would not disgrace



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themselves by shaking your blood-stained hand.”

(Here he was interrupted by Lord Norbury.)

“What my Lord, shall you tell me on my passage to the scaffold — which that tyranny of which you are only the intermediate minister, has erected for my death — that I am accountable for all the blood that has and will be shed in this struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor? Shall you tell me this — and must I be so very a slave as not to repel it?”

“I do not fear to approach the Omnipotent Judge, to answer for the conduct of my short life; and am I to stand appalled here before a mere remnant of mortality? Let no man dare, when I am dead, to charge me with dishonour — let no man attain my memory, by believing that I could have engaged in any cause, but of my country's liberty and independence. The proclamation of the provisional government speaks my views — no inference can be tortured from it to countenance barbarity or debasement. I would not have submitted to a foreign oppression, for the same reason that I would have resisted tyranny at home.”

Lord Norbury—”Mr. Emmet, you have been called upon to shew cause, if any you have, why the judgment of the law should not be enforced against you. Instead of shewing any thing in point of law, why judgment should not pass, you have proceeded in a manner the most unbecoming a person in your situation; you have avowed, and endeavoured to vindicate principles totally subversive of the government, totally subversive of the tranquillity, well-being, and happiness of that country which gave you birth; and you have broached treason the most abominable.

“You, Sir, had the honour to be a gentleman by birth, and your father filled a respectable situation under the government. You had an eldest brother, whom death snatched away, and who, when living, was one of the greatest ornaments of the bar. The laws of his country were the study of his youth; and the study of his maturer life was to cultivate and support them. He left you a

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proud example to follow; and if he had lived, he would have given your talents the same virtuous direction as his own, and have taught you to admire and preserve that constitution, for the destruction of which you have conspired with the most profligate and abandoned, and associated yourself with hostlers, bakers, butchers, and such persons, whom you invited to council, when you erected your Provisional Government

“If the spirits,” said Emmet, “of the illustrious dead participate in the concerns of those who were dear to them in this transitory scene, dear shade of my venerated father, look down on your suffering son, and see has he for one moment deviated from those moral and patriotic principles which you so early instilled into his youthful mind, and for which he has now to offer up his life.

“My Lord, you are impatient for the sacrifice. The blood which you seek is not congealed by the artificial terrors which surround your victim — it circulates warmly and unruffled through its channels, and in a little time it will cry to heaven — be yet patient! I have but a few words more to say — I am going to my cold and silent grave — my lamp of life is nearly extinguished — I have parted with every thing that was dear to me in this life, and for my country's cause with the idol of my soul, the object of my affections. My race is run — the grave opens to receive me, and I sink into its bosom. I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world, it is *the charity of its silence*. Let no man write my epitaph; for as no man who knows my motives dare now vindicate them, let not prejudice or ignorance asperse them. Let them rest in obscurity and peace, my memory be left in oblivion, and my tomb remain uninscribed, until other times and other men can do justice to my character. When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written. I have done.”



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