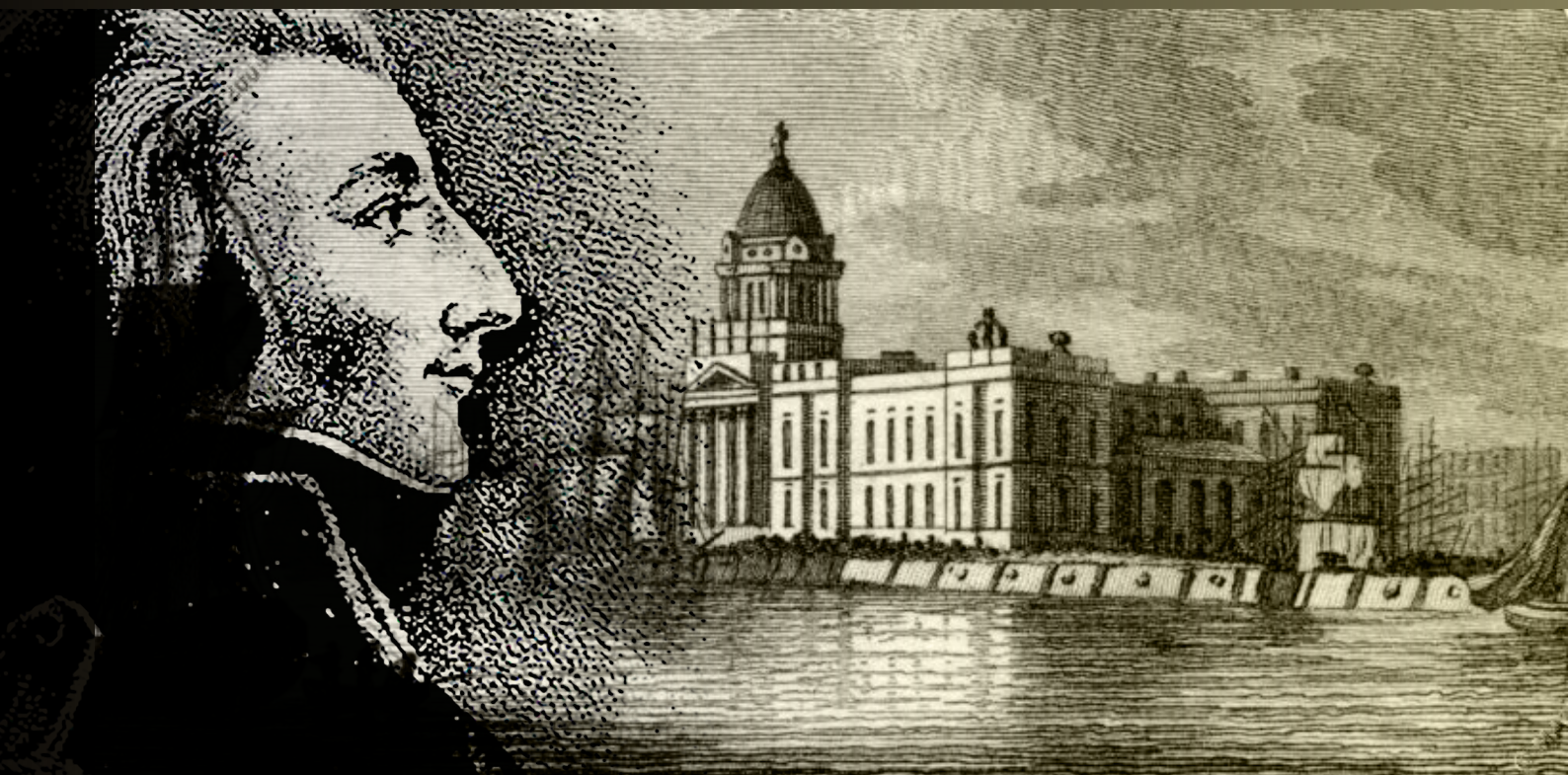


# Theobald Wolfe Tone

Speech from the Dock, Dublin,  
November 1798



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The members of the Court having been sworn, the Judge Advocate called on the prisoner to plead guilty or not guilty to the charge of having acted traitorously and hostilely against the King.

**TONE REPLIED:** *"I mean not to give the court any useless trouble, and wish to spare them the idle task of examining witnesses. I admit all the facts alleged, and only request leave to read an address which I have prepared for this occasion."*

**COLONEL DALY:** *"I must warn the prisoner that, in acknowledging those facts, he admits, to his prejudice, that he has acted traitorously against his Majesty. Is such his intention?"*

**TONE:** *"Stripping this charge of the technicality of its terms, it means, I presume, by the word traitorously, that I have been found in arms against the soldiers of the King in my native country. I admit this accusation in its most extended sense, and request again to explain to the court the reasons and motives of my conduct."*

The court then observed they would hear his address, provided he kept himself within the bounds of moderation.

Tone rose, and began in these words:

*"Mr. President and Gentlemen of the Court-Martial, I mean not to give you the trouble of bringing judicial proof to convict me legally of having acted in hostility to the government of his Britannic Majesty in Ireland. I admit the fact. From my earliest youth I have regarded the connection between Great Britain and Ireland as the curse of the Irish nation, and felt convinced that, whilst it lasted, this country could never be free nor happy. My mind has been confirmed in this opinion by the experience of every succeeding year, and the conclusions which I have drawn from every fact before my eyes. In consequence, I was determined to employ all the powers which my individual efforts could move, in order to separate the two countries. That Ireland was not able of herself to throw off the yoke, I knew; I therefore sought for aid wherever it was to be found. In honourable poverty I rejected offers which, to a man in my circumstances, might be considered highly advantageous. I remained faithful to what I thought the cause of my country, and sought in the French Republic an ally to rescue three millions of my countrymen from—"*

The President here interrupted the prisoner, observing that this language was neither relevant to the charge, nor such as ought to be delivered in a public court.

A Member said it seemed calculated only to inflame the minds of a certain description of

people (the United Irishmen), many of whom might be present, and that the court could not suffer it.

**THE JUDGE ADVOCATE SAID:** *"If Mr. Tone meant this paper to be laid before his Excellency in way of extenuation, it must have quite a contrary effect, if the foregoing part was suffered to remain."*

The President wound up by calling on the prisoner to hesitate before proceeding further in the same strain.

**STONE THEN CONTINUED:** *"I believe there is nothing in what remains for me to say which can give any offence; I mean to express my feelings and gratitude towards the Catholic body, in whose cause I was engaged."*

**PRESIDENT:** *"That seems to have nothing to say to the charge against you, to which you are only to speak. If you have anything to offer in defence or extenuation of the charge, the court will hear you, but they beg you will confine yourself to that subject."*

**STONE:** *"I shall, then, confine myself to some points relative to my connection with the French army. Attached to no party in the French Republic—without interest, without money, without intrigue—the openness and integrity of my views raised me to a high and confidential rank in its armies. I obtained the confidence of the Executive Directory, the approbation of my generals, and I will venture to add, the esteem and affection of my brave comrades. When I review these circumstances, I feel a secret and internal consolation which no reverse of fortune, no sentence in the power of this court to inflict, can deprive me of, or weaken in any degree. Under the flag of the French Republic I originally engaged with a view to save and liberate my own country. For that purpose I have encountered the chances of war amongst strangers; for that purpose I repeatedly braved the terrors of the ocean, covered, as I knew it to be, with the triumphant fleets of that power which it was my glory and my duty to oppose. I have sacrificed all my views in life; I have courted poverty; I have left a beloved wife unprotected, and children whom I adored fatherless. After such a sacrifice, in a cause which I have always considered—conscientiously considered—as the cause of justice and freedom, it is no great effort, at this day, to add the sacrifice of my life. But I hear it said that this unfortunate country has been a prey to all sorts of horrors. I sincerely lament it. I beg, however, it may be remembered that I have been absent four years from Ireland. To me these sufferings can never be attributed. I designed by fair and open war to procure the separation of the two countries. For open war I was prepared, but instead of that a system of private assassination has taken place. I repeat, whilst I deplore it, that it is not chargeable on me. Atrocities, it seems, have been committed on both sides. I do not less deplore them. I detest them from my heart; and to those who know my character and sentiments I may safely appeal for the truth of this assertion; with them I need no justification. In a case like this success is everything. Success, in the eyes of the vulgar, fixes*

*its merits. Washington succeeded, and Kosciusko failed. After a combat nobly sustained—combat which would have excited the respect and sympathy of a generous enemy—my fate has been to become a prisoner, to the eternal disgrace of those who gave the orders. I was brought here in irons like a felon. I mention this for the sake of others; for me, I am indifferent to it. I am aware of the fate which awaits me, and scorn equally the tone of complaint and that of supplication. As to the connection between this country and Great Britain, I repeat it—all that has been imputed to me (words, writings, and actions), I here deliberately avow. I have spoken and acted with reflection and on principle, and am ready to meet the consequences. Whatever be the sentence of the court, I am prepared for it. Its members will surely discharge their duty—I shall take care not to be wanting in mine."*

The court having asked if he wished to make any further observation,

**TONE:** *"I wish to offer a few words relative to one single point—the mode of punishment. In France our emigres, who stand nearly in the same situation in which I now stand before you, are condemned to be shot. I ask that the court shall adjudge me the death of a soldier, and let me be shot by a platoon of grenadiers. I request this indulgence rather in consideration of the uniform I wear—the uniform of a Chef de Brigade in the French army—than from any personal regard to myself. In order to evince my claim to this favour, I beg that the court may take the trouble to peruse my commission and letters of service in the French army. It will appear from these papers that I have not received them as a mask to cover me, but that I have been long and bona fide an officer in the French service."*

**JUDGE ADVOCATE:** *"You must feel that the papers you allude to will serve as undeniable proof against you."*

**TONE:** *"Oh, I know they will. I have already admitted the facts, and I now admit the papers as full proof of conviction."*

[The papers were then examined; they consisted of a brevet of Chef de Brigade from the Directory, signed by the Minister of War, of a letter of service granting to him the rank of Adjutant-General, and of a passport.]

**GENERAL LOFTUS:** *"In these papers you are designated as serving in the army of England."*

**TONE:** *"I did serve in that army, when it was commanded by Buonaparte, by Dessaix, and by Kilmaine, who is, as I am, an Irishman; but I have also served elsewhere."*

The Court requested if he had anything further to observe.

He said that nothing more occurred to him, except that the sooner his Excellency's approbation of the sentence was obtained the better.

*(For a long time a section of the speech was suppressed, the court having forbade it's reading at the trial. It was not until the publication of the "Correspondence" of Lord Cornwallis (Lord Lieutenant in Ireland at the time) decades later that the suppressed passage came to light, in which he thanks the Catholics of Ireland. I have included it below)*

*"I have laboured to abolish the infernal spirit of religious persecution, by uniting the Catholics and Dissenters. To the former I owe more than ever can be repaid. The service I was so fortunate as to render them they rewarded munificently; but they did more: when the public cry was raised against me—when the friends of my youth swarmed off and left me alone—the Catholics did not desert me; they had the virtue even to sacrifice their own interests to a rigid principle of honour; they refused, though strongly urged, to disgrace a man who, whatever his conduct towards the Government might have been, had faithfully and conscientiously discharged his duty towards them; and in so doing, though it was in my own case, I will say they showed an instance of public virtue of which I know not whether there exists another example."*