

**TEXT OF AN ADDRESS**

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**TO THE BYRON SOCIETY**

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**UNITED ARTS CLUB**

**SUBJECT: BYRON AND CATHOLIC  
EMANCIPATION**



In 1812, when George Byron, a member of the House of Lords, addressed that chamber, he was 24 years old and, although he did not know it, his life was two-thirds over.

Ireland, was in its twelfth year of the Union and already the dissatisfaction of the Catholic Irish with the disabilities affecting their religion was rumbling towards the political outcome of Emancipation. From 1799 onwards, the Catholic church had been engaged in a struggle with the British establishment on the issue of the Veto of government on Episcopal appointments in Ireland.

In 1810, the suggestion re-emerged that the Catholic church in Ireland would offer a Veto in order to expedite emancipation. Notwithstanding the obviously controversial nature of such a Veto, it seemed quite probable that some understanding would emerge giving the British Government a decisive say in the appointment of Catholic Bishops as a *quid pro quo* for emancipation.

Catholics such as Arthur James Plunkett, the first Earl of Fingall, supported the Veto in the interests of emancipation and in order to provide a more secure foundation for clerical finances.

In 1810, the Prince of Wales became Regent and George Canning became a Minister in Lord Liverpool's Government in 1812.

In that year, George Canning presented a bill providing for Catholic emancipation to the Commons. The Commons passed the bill but it was rejected in the House of Lords.

This was the occasion of Byron's celebrated speech to the House of Lords on Catholic emancipation.

It is, perhaps, worthwhile to record that the following year, Henry Grattan again attempted to legislate for emancipation and secured the agreement of the House of Commons. However, the Veto issue again dogged Establishment attitudes to emancipation. English Catholics were willing to accept the concept of a consultative commission of prominent Catholics who would exercise a power of Veto in the name of the Crown. Daniel O'Connell however, was a passionate agitator against the Veto. He believed that it would

increase Crown patronage, breach the principle of separation of Church and State and undermine the confidence of the Catholic Irish in their Bishops.

Attacking the Veto, he wrote to the Knight of Kerry (who then was a member of Parliament for that County and a supporter of emancipation) in the following terms:

*“The Crown Priests will be despised and deserted by the people, will be amply supplied with enthusiastic anti-Anglican friars from the continent”.*

Later in 1814, the Pope being Napoleon’s prisoner in Fontainbleu, a re-script was sent to the Catholics of England by the ageing Vice Prefect of Propaganda in the Vatican, Monsignor Quarantotti urging acceptance of this modified Veto. But this Veto was later recalled by the Pope.

In this context, Byron’s speech in the House of Lords supporting Canning’s Bill must be judged.

By any standards, the speech, as I hope to demonstrate, was an intelligent, far-sighted, and brave statement of the real linkage between the political and religious liberties and prospects of the Irish people.

Referring to previous projects for emancipation, Byron stated:

*“But with each discussion, difficulties have been removed, objections have been canvassed and refuted, and some of the former opponents of Catholic Emancipation have at length conceded to the expediency of relieving the petitioners”.*

He noted, however, that a new objection had now been raised, namely, the timing of the measure.

Timing was of some importance bearing in mind the British perception of the Napoleonic threat. This was the year of the great French invasion of Russia and there were still three years to go before Napoleon would finally be seen off at Waterloo.

However, Byron said with some irony:

*"In some degree I concur with those who say it is not the time exactly; that time is passed; better had it been for the country that the Catholics possessed at this moment their proportion of their privileges, that their nobles held their due weight in our councils, than that we should be assembled to discuss their claims."*

Byron had little time for distinctions between established and un-established Christianity, which he described as Lilliputian sophistries, and regarded the issue as one which posed a threat to the cohesion of the King's subjects. He invoked the great statement of Lord Peterborough to the House of Lords to the effect that he favoured a *"parliamentary King and a parliamentary constitution, but not a parliamentary God and a parliamentary religion"*.

Castigating the opponents of emancipation, he divided them into two camps:

- Those who assert that Catholics had too much already
- Those who allege that the Catholic lower orders have nothing more to require.

The former, he said, held that Catholics never will be contented: the latter believed that they were already too happy. Comparing attitudes to Catholic emancipation with attitudes to the emancipation of Negro slaves, he said:

*"I pity the Catholic peasantry for not having good fortune to be born black."*

Notwithstanding the reforms enacted by the pre Union Grattan Parliament, Byron correctly stated that Irish Catholics were still second class citizens within their State, subject to extensive and annoying discrimination and incapable of receiving justice from the Irish Courts.

Echoes of modern Portadown are to be found in his description of the fate of the Catholics of Newtownbarry, now Bunclody, where the local congregation, prohibited from owning a church, had converted two barns for Catholic worship only to be dispersed at the point of a bayonet by a Yeoman Officer and Magistrate threatening to read the Riot Act.

Citing the disabilities of the Catholics in the legal system, Byron informed the lordships of the scandalous acquittal of another Protestant Yeoman in Enniskillen on a charge of murdering a Catholic prisoner by an all Protestant jury. Referring to their verdict, Byron stated:

*"So glaring was the partiality, that Mr. Justice Osborne felt it his duty to bind over the acquitted, but not absolved assassin in large recognisances; thus for a time taking away his licence to kill Catholics."*

The grand jury of County Fermanagh, when at last obliged to permit the Catholic prisoners in Enniskillen jail to have a Catholic chaplain responded by appointing a defrocked clergyman. Byron noted that *"such is law, such is justice, for the happy, free, contented Catholic!"*

Dealing with an issue which is still very much alive, namely the religious education of Protestant children to regard Catholics as inferior and damned, Byron stated:

*"A catechism is put into their hands, consisting of, I believe, 45 pages, in which there are three questions relative to the Protestant religion; one of these queries is, 'where was the Protestant religion before Luther?' Answer, 'In the gospel'. The remaining 44 pages and a half, regard the damnable idolatry of papists."*

Appealing for religious tolerance from the Protestant clergy, Byron said:

*"Allow me to ask our spiritual pastors and masters, is this training up a child in the way which he should go? Is this the religion of the gospel before the time of Luther? That*

*religion which preaches 'peace on earth and glory to God' Is it bringing up children to be men or devils? Better would it be to send them anywhere than teach such doctrines; better send them to those islands in the South Seas, where they might more humanely learn to become cannibals; it would be less disgusting that they were brought up to devour the dead, than persecute the living. Schools do you call them? Call them rather dung hills, where the viper of intolerance deposits her young that when their teeth are cut and their poison is mature, they may issue forth, filthy and venomous to sting the Catholic."*

Byron also touched on another topic, the existence of Orange Lodges among the militia. Referring to this problem, he queried whether such militia could fairly function in the general interest.

He continued:

*"And is this general system of persecution to be permitted, or is it to be believed that with such a system the Catholics can or ought to be contented? If they are, they belie human nature; they are then, indeed, unworthy to be anything but the slaves you have made them."*

Conscious of the fact that he had never been to Ireland, Byron countered:

*"Should it be observed that I was never in Ireland, I beg leave to observe that it is as easy to know something of Ireland without having been there, as it appears with some to have been born, bred, and cherished there, and yet remain ignorant of its best interests."*

Byron appealed to English self interest as a justification for emancipation. He made a strong claim for emancipation in the interest of solidarity referring to Sir John Moore's campaign in the Peninsular War, he stated:

*“At this moment the only triumph obtained through long years of continental disaster has been achieved by an Irish general.”*

Appeals to British self interest were not the fundamental motives in Byron's opposition to subjection of Irish Catholics. He was a brave and consistent opponent of the Act of Union. He described it as a union *“which in its first operation gave a death blow to the independence of Ireland, and its last, may be the cause of her eternal separation from this country”*.

With these words Byron emphasised his conviction that the mistreatment of the Irish generally and the Catholics in particular would lead inexorably to Irish separatism. Speaking of the Union he said:

*“If it must be called An Union, it is the union of the shark with his prey, the spoiler swallows up his victim, and thus they become one and indivisible. Thus has Great Britain swallowed up the parliament, the constitution, the independence of Ireland and refuses to disgorge even a single privilege, although for the relief of her swollen and distempered body politic.”*

Byron however was speaking to the centre of reaction and the heart of British self interest. His last appeal was to the immediate threat of Napoleon. Claiming that the subjection of Irish Catholics was of value to the French, he stated:

*“There is no measure more repugnant to the designs and feelings of Bonaparte than Catholic emancipation; no line of conduct more propitious to his projects than that which has been pursued, is pursuing, and, I fear, will be pursued, towards Ireland. What is England without Ireland and what is Ireland without the Catholics? It is on the basis of your tyranny that Napoleon hopes to build his own”*.

The thrust of Byron's speech demonstrates a clear grasp of the forces which in 1812 were slowly building towards O'Connell's



triumph in the form of Catholic emancipation and O'Connell's defeat in the form of the Repeal Movement.

Byron seems to have understood with a passionate intensity and clarity the unbreakable link between repression and revolution. His plea for justice was not a mere insurance policy against revolution, but demonstrated his thirst for liberty and his passionate commitment to the underdog, qualities which would attract him in the long run to his end at Missolonghi among the swamps bounding the Gulf of Patras in the cause of Greek liberty.

Byron's concern for the Irish underdog was reflected in his opposition to the repression against English weavers which proposed the death penalty for the infamous crime of frame breaking.

In his poem the Irish Avatar, Byron invoked Curran's great description of post Union Ireland:

*"And Ireland, like a bastinod elephant, kneeling to receive  
the paltry rider"*

That poem, dripping with contempt for the post Union British treatment of the Irish, likewise rang the liberty bell for the Irish. Pre-echoing Padraig Pearse's reference to the fools that had left us our Fenian dead, Byron addresses Ireland thus:

*"Till now I had envied their sons and their shore,  
Though their virtues were hunted, their liberties fled,  
There was something so warm and sublime in the core,  
Of an Irish man's heart, that I envy – thy dead.*

*Or, if aught in my bosom can quench for an hour,  
My contempt for a nation so servile though sore,  
Which though trod like the worm will not turn upon power,  
Tis the glory of Grattan, and genius of Moore".*

It is hard to believe that Byron did not, although from his privileged and albeit pampered viewpoint, have a rare insight into

the truth of the Irish experience and the real course which those who oppressed the Irish were setting for this country's destiny.