

# MEMORIAL DISCOURSE

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**Henry Grattan**

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*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirits.*

I Cor. Xii.4.

It may strike some as strange that the inspired writer who composed the muster roll of the heroes of Faith in the Eleventh Chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews should have ranked Gideon and Barak, Samson and Jephthah, with Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and placed their rude patriotism on a level with the devotion of martyrs.

And yet it is a true and inspiring lesson, that not only do directly spiritual and religious gifts come from above, but that the spirit which impels a man to use his other powers for the love of country or the defence of the oppressed, is Divine in its origin, and akin to the faith of prophet and martyr; - that “there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.” It cannot, therefore, be unbecoming to my office or to the sacredness of this place that I should on this day – so near the anniversary of his death, 81 years ago – speak of Henry Grattan – patriot and statesman.

Grattan’s political life extended over nearly forty years of a most eventful crisis in Irish History, and had its ample share in the changes and chances that usually come to a man, who, at such a crisis, endeavours always to do right without regard to common opinion.

In the land which he served so strenuously he was sometimes idolized, sometimes denounced. At one time the citizens of Dublin followed him with tumultuous applause, and at another they assaulted and threatened his life. Through all he passed consistent and unchanged, in a life which friends and opponents alike pronounced of spotless honour and enthusiastic patriotism. Even the Imperial Legislature, to which he had been transplanted from the more congenial soil of his native parliament gave him no ungenerous audience, and bowed before the magic of his eloquence, and when the end came, bestowed on him, unsought and unwished, a place in the great Abbey of Westminster.

In such a life we do no wrong to recognize what the Epistle to the Hebrews recognizes in the virtues of the Jewish patriots – the gift and inspiration of Almighty God.

Grattan’s most striking gift was his eloquence. I need not pause to characterize it. That has often been done both by those who heard him, and by those who have read his printed speeches. I would rather dwell on the spirit which prompted it, and the purposes to which it was devoted.

In speaking of Grattan it is impossible to avoid dwelling on the political questions which occupied his life, but I shall, so far as possible, treat them in a non-political spirit.

His Parliamentary life was mainly directed to two objects – to obtain the Independence of the Irish Parliament, and the Emancipation of his Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen.

The first step to an independent Parliament was the awakening of national feeling, and Swift, Molyneux, and Flood had done this. But it was Grattan who really conducted the movement in the country and in Parliament to a triumphant issue; and it was to Grattan that his countrymen felt their thanks were mainly due. It was, indeed, the completeness of his success which rendered imperatively necessary the measure which did away with what has been called “Grattan’s Parliament.” Had he been less successful in rousing and inspiring popular feeling, and in bringing the Parliament into sympathy with its demands, the Act of Union would never have been necessary. With a cowed and broken-spirited nation, and a House of Commons out of sympathy with the people, and only occasionally rousing itself to repel English usurpation, things might have been left to go on as before. But when the old order passed, and Ireland had extorted from England her parliamentary independence, the Crown remained the only bond of Union between the two countries, and it required very little to prove how inadequate that bond was to secure continuously united action between the Parliaments of the two kingdoms. The theory of the Constitution is one thing; its practical working is another. The danger was too great to be risked. A union in some shape between England and Ireland became a matter of life or death for the former.

It is no impeachment of Grattan’s work that his success in 1782 rendered necessary the step that in 1800 destroyed the separate existence of the Irish Parliament. There is nothing final in Politics. The best to-day must give place to something better still to-morrow, if the body politic lives and grows. The question is, whether Grattan himself ought not to have seen this, and to have bowed to the inevitable.

But how much there is to be said on the other side! He was supported by the best and ablest Irishmen of the day. He was opposed by unblushing corruption, and a policy almost, if not actually, treacherous. It was, indeed, a political necessity for England, but he might well be excused that he thought first of Ireland.

The Union, as every one but Mr. Ingram admits, was carried in a way repulsive to all honest men. It has been defended or excused by Lord Rosebery and others on the extraordinary plea that it was the only means of passing a measure through an Irish parliament, and that such corruption was the custom of the day\*. May we not ask what Government had made it the custom? But, passing by this, the Union was not accompanied by any of the changes which might have softened the opposition of a patriotic Irishman. It postponed Roman Catholic emancipation for many years. It left the gross abuses of the Established Church untouched. It increased Irish taxation. It took away the Irish Representatives from their country, removing them from the constant reminder of the evils that cried for redress, and by merging them in a far larger body totally ignorant of Ireland it made the passage of Irish measures more slow and precarious. It ruined the chief city of the nation. It ultimately brought about a severance between the classes and the masses greater than existed before. It deprived the poor of the natural leadership of the wealthy and educated; and deprived the latter of their cohesion and

*\*Ashbourne’s Pitt, p.292*

power to act together. Irish Society became merged in London Society. “In a word, the Union,” as Mr. Lecky says,\* “was not only a great crime, but a great blunder.” It has driven every popular movement to seek its leaders in a lower stratum of society, and has given those movements an anti-English tone. It has, moreover, inflicted a strange political incapacity upon the educated and wealthy classes. During the last century Irish gentlemen have played a remarkable part in India and Colonies, but they have done little or nothing in political life at home. Never, perhaps, did what had been till lately a ruling class show its incapacity in a more melancholy way than did the Irish gentry in their total inability to forecast the two greatest changes that the last century wrought in Ireland – the disestablishment of the Church, and the revolution in land legislation. Both seem to have come upon them utterly by surprise, though plain indications of both had been long apparent.

The Union has caused these evils not from any inherent viciousness in the idea of the Legislative Union, but by reason of the time and the way in which it was carried out. Against it Grattan struggled in vain. As he said, years after, in language equally true and pathetic, it was his fate to “follow the hearse” of that national Parliament “by whose cradle he had sat,” and from which he had hoped so much. But though he lived to see most of the warnings he had uttered fulfilled, he was too generous and too true a patriot to rejoice in their fulfilment, or to indulge in useless recriminations.

The second great task proposed to himself by Grattan was the Emancipation of his Roman Catholic countrymen. What that phrase covers can only be understood by those who know what the penal laws affecting Roman Catholics were. It is to the honour of human nature that they were never carried out to their full extent. But, however, modified by disuse or by the repeal of the most intolerable provisions, the system was utterly vicious and unjust. To the attempts to destroy this system, Grattan, though he was the strongest of Protestants, devoted himself, as he said, with “desperate fidelity.” This was the cause to which, in his old age, he consecrated his eloquence in the Imperial Parliament, and he shortened his life by the journey he made during his last illness to speak in its behalf. The Irish Parliament, though exclusively Protestant, had taken considerable steps in the direction of Emancipation before the Union. In 1793 it admitted Roman Catholics to the elective franchise, and there can be that had not the Union intervened, Grattan would, before long, have obtained all the boon for which he sought. Many of his finest and most ably-reasoned speeches were devoted to the subject. In them we see how his soul revolted from the injustice which excluded the mass of tax-payers from all the sacrifices of patriotism, while it denied them the possession of its virtue; and took advantage of every excuse to add to the oppression under which they suffered. “I have heard,” he once exclaimed (Feb. 19, 1787) when the Irish Government proposed to demolish any Roman Catholic place of worship in which illegal meetings took place – “I have heard of transgressors being dragged from the Sanctuary, but I never heard of the Sanctuary being demolished ... yet they have one common God, one common Saviour with gentlemen themselves; and surely the God of the Protestant Temple is the God of the Catholic Temple.” He urged that the worship of the Virgin Mary and the belief in Transubstantiation were no justification for excluding a man from the privileges of citizenship. That if Roman Catholics were good enough to fight for the country, they were good enough to hold commissions in the army, and to be allowed degrees in medicine, and seats in Parliament on the judicial

\*Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland, *Henry Gattland*, p.194

bench. One would think such truths were too obvious and elementary to need reception or enforcement if one did not know that FitzGibbon, and Castlereagh, and even Alexander Knox refused to accept them. The belief that to be a Roman Catholic was to be an enemy of liberty was strong enough to make them forget that, as Grattan reminded them, Magna Charta was originally extorted from the King by Roman Catholic Barons and Bishops, and had been guarded by them for centuries. With something of prophetic insight, Grattan warned the Imperial Parliament that in denying, or even delaying, justice to Roman Catholics they were sowing the seed of separation. "When you finally decide against the Catholic question you abandon the idea of governing Ireland by affection, and you adopt the idea of coercion in its place. This misfortune will be very great to both of us. In what particular way it will break out I know not, but I know that it will be ruin: when I say ruin you must know that I mean ultimate separation; separation either in fact or separation in disposition." (April 22, 1812).

As he grew older he touched a higher chord (May 3, 1819). In denying Roman Catholic Emancipation "I say we affect the foundation of our Faith, and disobey a prime Order of Natural and Revealed Religion, which is to love one another. In no other way can you *serve* your Maker: Prayer is adoration, not service: by serving one another you become a part of this Creation; and an auxiliary member of His system. For this the Redeemer came among you; to ordain two great truths – the love of God, and the love of man." Again he said in the same speech – "Gentlemen call this a question of Empire: the Gospel is not a question of Empire: it is the highest imaginable interest pronounced by Infinite Wisdom; as the Empire swerves from it she falters; as she stands by it she prospers." Once more he said – "Whenever you attempt to establish your Government or your prosperity or your Church on religious restrictions, you establish them on a false foundation, and you oppose the Almighty, and though you had a host of mitres on your side, you banish God from your ecclesiastical constitution, and freedom from your political."

And here I desire to call your particular attention to the fact that Grattan's protest was not only or chiefly against the infliction of political disabilities. His first charge against the existing system was its injustice in the matter of education. This he summed up (Feb. 23, 1793) under three heads – 1. That Roman Catholics were refused a degree in Trinity College; 2. That they were refused the right of endowing their own University; and 3. That they were driven to seek education abroad. It was to remedy this so far as he could that he supported the grant to Maynooth. In this matter of Emancipation we may reflect with pardonable pride that Irish Protestants took the lead, and that the students of Trinity College presented an address to Grattan (in 1795), thanking him for his exertions in the Cause, while the University itself was the first to open her doors and admit to her honours members of the Roman Catholic Faith. Nevertheless, it still remains a reproach to Protestants and to the Legislature of the United Kingdom, that Roman Catholics are refused a University of their own: a refusal which Grattan more than a century ago denounced as an act of injustice, and a denial of Christian Charity. I believe that this refusal is not by the wish of the great mass of Irish Protestants; it is certainly not by that of Irish Churchmen, who seek nothing for themselves that they would not give to all their fellow-countrymen.

I ask you to turn now to a side of Grattan's work less showy and less recognized, but equally characteristic of the man; - his efforts to reform the Church Establishment, and to improve the material condition of his poorer countrymen. He was no democrat. The rule of the ignorant many was abhorrent to him. He loved the people; but he thought that a statesman should lead

them. And not follow them. He faced unpopularity rather than use the forces of disorder and revolution to compel even a necessary reform. But he saw that social and economical evils unredressed are often the seed-bed of Revolution, and his heart beat in sympathy with the sorrows and wants of the poor. "Ireland," he said once (Feb. 14, 1788) in a noble appeal to the National Parliament, "is a great capacity not yet brought into action; much has been civilized, much has been reclaimed, but something is to be redressed: the lower orders of the people claim your attention; *the best husbandry is the husbandry of the human creature*. What! can you reclaim the tops of your mountains, and cannot you improve your people? Every animal except the tiger (as I have heard) may be tamed: the method is to feed, to feed after hunger: you have with your own pleasantries begun the process, you had better complete the experiment."

In this matter nothing can be more instructive than the contrast between the words and spirit of Bishop Berkeley and those of Grattan. Berkeley – as a philosopher and philanthropist the glory of this University – was struck by the misery and degradation of the lower orders in Ireland, and he exerted himself to find a practical remedy, even going so far on that behalf as to wear clothes and a wig made in his village of Cloyne. He, moreover, published in the *Querist* and elsewhere his views on the subject.

But he speaks always as an Englishman to a debased and inferior race. He is never tired of railing at the idleness, dirt, and the beggary of the Irish. He preaches industry and cleanliness as a benevolent slave-master might to his negroes. If they venture to complain of political bondage, commercial restrictions, or exorbitant rents, he silences them by reminding them that the Government has treated them with leniency, that they might be worse off, that it is their duty to make the best of what they have. A tight house, warm clothing, and enough to eat is the *summum bonum* he puts before them. His exhortations read like a transcript from the speech of Mammon, "the least erected spirit that fell from Heaven," to the assembled devils in Hell, exhorting them to make themselves as comfortable as they can there!

"Our greatness will appear  
Then most conspicuous, when great things of small,  
Useful of hurtful, prosperous of adverse  
We can create, and in what place so'er  
Thrive under evil, and work ease out of pain  
Through labour and endurance."

But Grattan always speaks as an Irishman, as one of themselves, whose welfare and happiness is bound up with theirs, who desires that they should all possess the same liberty and the same privileges as himself.

There were two crying evils which he desired above all to remedy. One was the condition of the Established Church which paralysed her influence for good. The other was the iniquity of the Tithe Laws, which, especially in the south, pressed most heavily upon the very poor.

With regard to the Church – Grattan was not a well taught Churchman. He thought, for instance, that in the Communion Service we curse our neighbours. But he was sincerely religious, and was certainly more Church-like in his views than the bishops and statesmen

who used the Church as an instrument of state policy. "Revelation," he said (April 23, 1812), "is the gift of God, given to man, to be interpreted according to the best of that understanding which his Maker has bestowed. The Christian religion is the property of man independently of the state. The naked Irishman has a right of approach to his God without a licence from his King: in this consists his duty here and his salvation hereafter. The state that punishes him for the discharge of his duty, violates her own and offends against her God."

When others refused to touch abuses connected with the Church for fear of reducing her wealth, or of impairing the Protestant ascendancy, Grattan held his course straight for what would better enable her to do her spiritual work in the country, a work which some of her hierarchy had forgotten.

The church had no doubt been ruthlessly plundered from time to time, and by none with less pity than by some of her own Bishops. But in spite of this she still retained ample endowments. All that was needed was that they should be better distributed. Grattan's first proposal was to redress the excessive inequalities of clerical incomes. In the next place he desired to put an end to the scandal of the non-residence of wealthy bishops and clergy who went to enjoy their income in England, leaving, as he said, the tithe-proctor as a sort of wolf to take the place of the shepherd, while some half-starved curate undertook the spiritual ministrations. He proposed, as a remedy for this, a moderate tax for non-residence; and to take away all excuse for it he wished to make effectual provision for building parsonages where they were required. Lastly, he never concealed his hatred over the chief places in the Church to men who were strangers to the country, greedy of money, or unscrupulous partizans. If such a wise reform had been carried out, the Church would have started afresh well equipped for her work. But the bishops and higher clergy were hostile, and the inferior clergy powerless, so things remained as they were.

Nor had Grattan better success when he tried to deal with the Tithe Laws, though the abuses of this system had become an intolerable burden to the poor, and a real danger to the Church. We must remember that, at that time, direct taxation laid its hands on nearly every article of consumption. Besides this, the poorest cabin had to pay its hearth money and window tax. In addition came the tithe proctor, who seized from the miserable labourer in the South of Ireland the potato tithe: and, not content with this, levied a new and illegal tax on the poor man's turf, which was known by the name of "smoke money": crowning all by demanding his fees for collection. Infamous, as the Publicans in Palestine of old – the tithe proctors cheated both parson and peasant, and while the latter was mercilessly taxed, the wealthy grazier escaped. Often when the tenant had "set out" his harvest and gave notice to parson and proctor to claim the tithe, no attention was paid to the notice, and the unfortunate man was forced either to leave his crops on the land long after they ought to have been harvested; or if he gathered them into safety, to incur vexatious and ruinous law proceedings in the vicarial courts, which sometimes enforced illegal charges, and even went so far as to excommunicate defaulters. Here again the bishops and clergy opposed all reform, and raised the cry that the Church was in danger. The country gentlemen too were indifferent if not hostile, fearing that the burden taken from the backs of the peasantry would fall upon them. Year after year Grattan renewed his attacks. To the plea of the poverty of the Irish Church, made by six Bishops of the Southern Province, he replied, in a fine strain of irony (May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1789), "When certain Right Reverend dignitaries insist on the poverty of the Church of Ireland, they suggest to the people of Ireland the following questions: What induced those

dignitaries to come to Ireland? Am I to understand that they left their great pretensions in the English Church from a contempt of riches; and sought preferment in the Irish Church from a love of its poverty? Am I to understand that a contempt for dignity, added to a contempt of riches has induced them to stand in the way of our native clergy, and happily fixes their humble eye upon the Irish Mitre?" But in truth their alarm was pretended. Grattan did not propose to reduce the legitimate income of the Church, but to put an end to extortion. His main proposals were two.

1. To get rid of the tithe proctor and his illegal charges by giving the clergy power to recover the tithe value according to certain rates *fixed by Act of Parliament*.
2. To exempt the poor of the Southern Provinces from the potato tithe, and those of other parts of the country from various small vexations dues, but to make full compensation for the tithes so remitted by a levy of the Barony.

Here again his efforts were defeated, and tithes remained to generate untold misery, and lasting ill feeling in the country.

I do not fear to say that these attempts of Grattan to reform the abuses of the Church establishment, and to give relief to the very poor, were noble, Christian, and statesmanlike actions, worthy to stand on a level with his more brilliant achievements for the Irish Parliament, and for the emancipation of Roman Catholics.

I had no brief to maintain that Grattan was perfectly wise or perfectly unprejudiced. I do not pretend that his speech was never disfigured by an undue violence. He was probably on reflection little pleased with himself for his crushing reply to his former friend Flood, though it was uttered after bitter provocation. But making every reduction that truth requires, I believe that we shall find no great orator of ancient or modern times whose eloquence was less disfigured by personal attacks; whose sincerity in the cause of liberty and justice was more transparent; and who was so entirely free from the lust of power, wealth and position.

It has been said that Grattan was rather a poet than a statesman. The remark shows some want of discernment. Grattan was not a poet, though he had the poet's gift of imagination. The one gift common to both poet and statesman is this. Without imagination a man may be a politician, but never a statesman. Imagination gives the statesman his insight into the principles of things, the lines of Divine Government, and the motives of human actions, and enables him to grasp the real necessities of the State, and steer it safely through the perils around. The Hebrew prophets had that gift, and they were better statesmen than the politicians of Jerusalem and Samaria. Grattan was a good statesman, but a bad politician. He was seldom on the winning side; never in office; mostly in opposition. But his proposals for Roman Catholic Emancipation, for the Reform of Parliament, and the Church Establishment, and for Tithe Commutation, and for the benefit of the labouring poor were addressed to the great evils under which Ireland laboured. They were in advance of the age, and though defeated, they have been stamped by experience and by history as truly patriotic and truly unstatesmanlike.

The same keen insight into the tendencies of the age showed him the change that was coming over European thought in the matter of religion. To many, at that time, the Revolution seemed to have spent its force, and to have been hopelessly discredited. But Grattan warned all Christians that it was a moment when they ought to lay aside their suspicions and their

quarrels, and unite against the coming danger. Speaking of “the drift of the age,” just a year before he died, he uttered these impressive words: “The question is not *which* Church? But whether any? Church or no Church? God or no God? When you attack the religion of Europe – you attack the religion of England. When you attack Dr. Troy, you attack the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

In concluding a sketch which I feel only too keenly is not worthy of its subject, I will say but this. It is given to very few to be either orators or statesmen of the first rank, and in that respect probably none of us expect or hope that the mantle of Grattan may be ours. But there is one thing in which we may without arrogance emulate him – the spirit that breathed through his eloquence and inspired his labour of the State – the love, not of Ireland only, but of Irishmen. “I love,” he said, in one of his last speeches in the Irish Parliament, “I love the Protestants, I love the Presbyterians, I love the Catholics, that is, I love the Irish. If ever my affection abates, it is when they hate one another.”

Ireland can never forget the man whose whole life breathed this spirit; who united genuine loyalty with genuine patriotism, and rose above the jealousy of party spirit, and the littleness of personal ambition. “No bust nor epitaph marks the spot where he sleeps in Westminster Abbey,” but Grattan’s memory needs none there; it is enshrined in the hearts of his fellow countrymen. And yet, it is well that his figure, moulded by the hand of Irish genius, should stand in front of the Parliament house in which his voice contended for truth and justice and that it should face with uplifted arm this ancient College, as if appealing to the generous youth who issue from its portals, charging them to consecrate their learning, their talents, and all their natural forces to the service of their native land, and of their fellow-countrymen of every creed.