Robert Emmet

Trinity Monday Discourse

Distinguished guests, Provost; Fellows, Scholars and Colleagues.

Trinity College Dublin figured large in Robert Emmet's career – in his life and in his death. At the opening of his trial for high treason on the 19th of September 1803, Emmet was reminded by the presiding judge that he had been educated 'at a most virtuous and enlightened seminary of learning and amidst the greatest youth of the country'. The judge, Lord Norbury, was chastising Emmet for having squandered the education he had received within these walls – and Norbury was all the more self-righteous because he himself had graduated from Trinity, albeit with a less than distinguished academic record. There were more Trinity connections in the courtroom that day. The chief prosecutor was William Plunket, a friend of Emmet's older brother Thomas, from their time in Trinity, but from that day a friend no longer. Peter Burrowes, the defence counsel, had been a less that diligent classmate. He was notorious among the college fraternity for having walked 45-miles to Portarlington for a masked ball one evening – and then for dancing the night away. And finally, members of the yeomanry who guarded Robert Emmet, while he stood chained in the dock, were former classmates who abhorred his treason. After his death, another classmate of a more sympathetic persuasion would immortalise him in verse. Thomas Moore ensured that Emmet's name would not be allowed to 'sleep in the shade, where cold and unhonoured his relics are laid'. Indeed Moore, a year behind Emmet in Trinity, would become his chief

mythologiser in the years ahead, familiarising his name across the English-speaking world.

It took the jury only 30 seconds to reach its verdict that day in 1803 and Emmet was found guilty of high treason. But when Lord Norbury asked him if he had anything to say why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon him as according to law, Emmet seized upon the opportunity to redeem his botched rebellion by delivering one of the greatest courtroom orations in history. One of his former classmates recorded that: 'Emmet seemed to consider himself as rising into a martyr'. Six times during his speech Lord Norbury interrupted, to attack him for using the 'medium of eloquence' to defend 'his perverted talents'.

Despite his reputation as a hanging judge, Norbury was a somewhat comical figure on the bench. He had a fat face and grey eyes and a predilection for taking off his gown, and turning his wig back-to-front when it became too hot in the courtroom. But on this day he was not smiling. He was anxious to see justice done, especially after the brutal murder of his friend Lord Kilwarden - another Trinity man - on the night of the rebellion. However, by the end of the evening, Emmet's oratory undermined his resolution to such an extent that when he pronounced the death sentence he struggled to hold back the tears. The next day Emmet was hanged and beheaded opposite St. Catherine's Church on Thomas Street. He was 25 years old.

Robert Emmet was born on the 4th March 1778 at St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, right beside what is now the Fitzwilliam Hotel. He was a precocious youth and was educated at some of the best schools in Dublin. One of these was Samuel Whyte's academy on Grafton Street where he studied a truly broad curriculum, which included geography, history, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, book-keeping, music, dancing, languages and fencing. Whyte was considered to be one of the finest educationalists of the day, and excelled in teaching his students the finer points of oratory. As a child, Emmet learned that accent and emphasis were the 'body and soul' of eloquence, and he was trained how to modulate and vary his tone of voice. Whyte was cruelly dismissive of speakers who constantly mumbled 'as if they were conjuring up spirits' and was even less impressed with those who 'bawled as loudly' as street-traders.

One of the most difficult things when delivering any speech or lecture is knowing what to do with your hands. Emmet was told that he should not 'throw his hands about as if he was performing magic tricks', but should become a master of 'decent and natural motion'. This was something he took to heart, and he developed his own unique and effective style - he would sway his body when he spoke in public , and he appeared to use this as a metronome to modulate his tone. One observer said the effect was remarkable - 'his greater or lesser vehemence corresponded with the rise and fall of his voice'.

When delivering his speech from the dock, Emmet's hands were chained. But one observer recorded that when Emmet was: 'enforcing his arguments against his

accusers, his hand was stretched forward, and the two-forefingers of the right hand were slowly laid upon the open palm of the other'.
Rhythmically, he would gently tap his fingers on his palm for added emphasis during a speech.

Brimming with a youthful self-confidence - which was to become his trademark - at the age of nine Emmet promised his father, the state physician, that he would win more prizes at university than either of his older brothers. This was some boast. His brothers, Christopher Temple and Thomas Addis Emmet, had both excelled at Trinity College. Indeed Temple on his own had carried home ten academic awards. He had also been one of the great debaters in the College Historical Society; the only flaw according to his friends was that he could not speak in prose - everything was poetry. At the age of 23 he had already rejected a seat in parliament and the gown of a king's counsel, but his meteoric rise came to a tragic end when he died suddenly in 1788.

Robert followed in his brothers' footsteps and entered Trinity College on the 7th of October 1793, aged fifteen. As a 'pensioner' he paid an annual fee of £15 and thus was classed with the majority of students who were 'persons of moderate income'. Even as a freshman his academic gown conferred certain status and privileges, including the right to enter the public gallery of the House of Commons across the road. That privilege was withdrawn from the students in 1795 after the Speaker of the House, John Foster, reacted furiously to some loud heckling from the gallery.

In Trinity, as in Oxford and Cambridge in the late 18th century, examinations were conducted *viva voce.* Students were questioned out-loud in the examination hall at the start of each term, on the material that had been studied in the previous one. Robert won a premium for coming first in his class in Trinity Term of his Senior Freshman year, and won a clean sweep in all his examinations in the following year. This gave him a total of five academic awards over his time in college, two more than Thomas Addis, but only half as many as the prodigious Temple. Nevertheless it marked him out as one of the brightest scholars of his generation, and certainly the leading student in his year. To be awarded a degree, candidates had to pass exams in eleven terms over at least four years. By the end of 1797 Emmet had completed thirteen terms, and was all set for his commencement in the summer of 1798.

A clubbable young man, Emmet had many friends, most notably Richard Curran and Thomas Moore. Often when Moore was playing melodies on his piano, Emmet would come and sit beside him to listen and reflect. One day, when Moore was playing 'Let Erin remember the days of old', Emmet sank into a reverie and then awoke suddenly to exclaim, 'Oh that I were at the head of 20,000 men marching to that air'.

Moore never stopped insisting that Emmet was, 'altogether a noble fellow, full of imagination, tenderness of heart, and manly daring'. And he also revealed that it was only when roused by a cause that Emmet became animated, otherwise he was 'as mild and gentle in his manner as any girl'. But when he was seized by an important issue, then his features changed and his inner strength became apparent as he 'rose above the level of

ordinary men'. Another college friend, Archibald Douglas, who later became a Protestant clergyman and a renowned pulpit-orator, gave perhaps the strongest tribute to Emmet: 'So gifted a creature does not appear in a thousand years'.

Physically, Emmet was not particularly impressive. He was about average height for the period - around 5' 8". He was 'rather slight and delicate, although endowed with nervous strength which enabled him to support great fatigue. He walked with a quick step, and all his movements were rapid'. His hair was brown and his eyes black, and it was said that his looks had 'a remarkable expression of pride, penetration and mildness'.

Today we are gathered in the chamber where 'the Hist' meets every Wednesday. It has traditionally been the most prestigious college society, for it long served as a training ground for the country's top barristers, politicians, clergymen (and even academics).

In Emmet's time the society also met every Wednesday, and the debates took place in the Historical Room. The meetings began at six in the evening and usually continued until midnight, with members punished if they left before 11 o'clock. There was a serious component to the society, with all members required to study thirty pages of history each week for examination. But there was also a convivial element to the evenings. Tea and cakes were made available to everyone before the meetings commenced.

There were about 110 members of the Historical Society in the 1790s, and around 60 attended each week. Its relationship with the college authorities had always been fraught with difficulties, and numerous attempts had been made to suppress the society. For the board of the university, the idea of a student debating body was at best unappealing, and in the 1790s it was seen as positively pernicious - a breeding ground for revolutionary thinking. In Emmet's second year in Trinity, the society was expelled from the college grounds. This was immediately applauded by an unholy alliance of the capital's brewers, publicans and courtesans. At a meeting chaired by the notorious brothel queen, Margaret Leeson, the group thanked the board for helping their 'respective trades'. It seems that the Historical Society 'considerably injured' their profits, as it kept their 'best customers' occupied during the week studying history and preparing for the debates. An uneasy compromise was reached between the society and the college authorities in 1795, with the students promising to avoid the discussion of any questions relating to modern politics, or even to allude to contemporary events. In return, the society was allowed back on the university grounds, and was once again given access to the Historical Room. A further condition was that former members were forbidden from attending, although this rule was changed in 1798 as the college authorities attempted to take control of the proceedings of the society.

It was only in December 1797 that Emmet decided to join the College Historical Society. Unlike the students of today perhaps, he had preferred to concentrate on his studies, or perhaps he was just nervous in following in his brothers' illustrious footsteps. On the 7th of February the two students who had been selected to speak that night failed

to turn-up and the chair asked for volunteers from the members present. Emmet immediately volunteered, and thus made his maiden speech, which is always an intimidating rite of passage, without any notes or preparation.

Speaking in favour of the motion that 'unlimited freedom of discussion is the best means of stopping the progress of erroneous opinions', Emmet displayed no fear at the dispatch-box. It was evidently a spellbinding performance and left a lasting impression on those who heard it. The board's new rules prevented any reference to modern politics, but Emmet managed to make clever allusions to the Anglo-Irish relationship while still remaining within the narrow confines of the question. We are fortunate to have the extensive records for the College Historical Society, as well as the records for every single exam Emmet took, now preserved in the Manuscripts Room. We know that Emmet argued that a good government encouraged freedom of discussion, and compared the governments of ancient Greece and Rome, while also 'portraying the evil effects of the despotism and tyranny' that could sometimes be found in the classical world. Concluding his speech, Emmet issued a challenge to any state which restricted the liberties of the people:

> If a government were vicious enough to put down the freedom of discussion, it would be the duty of the people to deliberate on the errors of their rulers, to consider well the wrongs they inflicted, and what the right course would be for their subjects to take, and having done so, it would then be their duty to draw practical conclusions.

The debate was one of the most closely fought in the Historical Society. When the question was finally put to the house to decide, the motion passed by twenty-seven votes to twenty.

The extraordinary debut of the young Robert Emmet, and his clever disregard of the prohibition on contemporary political allusion, chilled the college board. Deeply disturbed by Emmet's growing importance in the society, it plotted ways of bringing his debating (and university) career to an end.

In private, Emmet was reticent, but he shed his inhibitions once he stood to speak. Then he was a different person and Moore explained that, 'the brow that had appeared inanimate, and almost drooping, at once elevated itself to all the consciousness of power, and the whole countenance and figure of the speaker assumed a change as of one suddenly inspired'. This was 1833, and Moore admitted he was writing from 'youthful impressions', but he insisted that he had heard little oratory since those days of a better quality; indeed few had been ever able to match Emmet's eloquence. Possessing complete mastery over his fellow speakers, Emmet dominated the debates in university. As Moore recorded, quite simply there was no-one else who 'enchained the attention and sympathy of his young audience'.

So great was Emmet's influence over his fellow students that the college authorities increasingly regarded him as a serious threat. The year was 1798 and Ireland

that spring was on the brink of open insurrection; therefore steps were taken to counter his influence and damage his reputation. Emmet was seen as a dangerous demagogue, and the authorities were taking no chances in their attempts to curb his power. Not only was his brother a leading radical, but he himself was the head of one of the United Irishmen cells in the university, and was suspected of being involved in the purchase and smuggling of guns.

Led by the reactionary bursar, Thomas Elrington, the senior fellows of the college began attending the meetings of the Historical Society to observe proceedings. Elrington was present at the debate on the 21st of February and was horrified to discover that the motion in a fortnight's time would be on the question: 'Is duelling of advantage to society?' It was a topic that Emmet had suggested, and Elrington was determined to prevent it being discussed. Another controversial question was due to be debated in seven days time, on Wednesday the 28th of February, 'Ought a soldier to consider the motives of a war, before he engages in it?' The political and philosophical bent of the motion was an indication of where Emmet was taking the society. A number of members were anxious to speak, including Emmet himself, and the college authorities decided it was time to put the troublesome students in their place. As Thomas Moore later recounted, a former member of the Historical Society was brought in, 'a man of advanced standing and reputation for oratory... expressly for the purpose of answering Emmet, to neutralise the impressions of his fervid eloquence'. This man was James Geraghty, a twenty-nine-year-old barrister, who had been a brilliant debater during his time in Trinity. Elrington had decided to turn the debate into a battle for supremacy between 'the

supporters of power', and the radical 'popular side' that was being championed by Robert Emmet.

The debate at the Historical Society on the final day of February was eagerly awaited. It was another opportunity to hear Emmet speak, and the room was filled with students wanting to listen to his views on the contentious question. Also present was a delegation from the college board - three fellows and Elrington himself. Emmet arrived just before seven o'clock. Speaking in favour of the motion he delivered a brilliant oration full of dramatic rhetoric and youthful sensibility. Posing the question of whether a soldier was bound on all occasions to obey the orders of his commanding officer, he claimed that such a proposition was dangerous to society and degrading to human nature. His speech electrified the audience. One observer later reported that Emmet spoke with 'his back to the fire place, his hand moving backwards and forwards along the chimney piece', his graceful movements reinforcing his superior arguments. Emmet talked in a 'most impassioned manner' and 'gave utterance to language of singular force and beauty'.

The atmosphere at the debate was tense, as students jostled each other to watch Geraghty challenge the new 'chief champion' of the Historical Society. The barrister was joined by seven other speakers in opposing the motion, while Emmet had only one other student speaking on his side. After Geraghty's speech, there was a hush in the chamber as Emmet stood to make his second speech of the evening. And, for the first time in his life, he was beaten. Subjected to sustained heckling and interruption, he struggled to

deliver his remarks but his confidence deserted him. He forgot what he was trying to say, and began repeating himself, before stopping abruptly and returning to his seat in the middle of his address. Moore later recorded that it 'left us deeply humiliated to see our hero, for the first time, inferior to himself'. Emmet would be better prepared for such tactics when he encountered them five years later.

Emmet's university career was now hurtling towards an end. Soon after he stopped attending the debates of the society, as attempts were made to expel him from college. He did not turn up to the debate on the 21st of March when he was scheduled to speak. And it is intriguing to speculate about what he would have made of the motion that 'individual happiness is more promoted by matrimony than celibacy'.

On the 19th of April 1798 the University of Dublin held a formal visitation, carried out by the Earl of Clare who had been called in to investigate the reports of sedition among the students. Clare gathered everyone in the dining hall to examine their loyalty. As one student later wrote in his memoirs:

> There followed, in order, the provost, the senior and junior fellows and scholars; then the graduate and undergraduate students; and lastly, the inferior officers and porters of the college. The great door was closed with a portentous sound and shut in many an anxious heart.

Robert Emmet was not present. He had made an application to withdraw from the college, but this had been rejected because Lord Clare said he wanted the pleasure of expelling 'young Emmet' himself. However Emmet ignored this and dropped out anyway.

Clare began the interrogation in a loud and booming voice. One student arrived late, wearing boots. Clare immediately ordered him to leave and return properly attired. When the student promised that he would do his best, Clare snapped 'I will have no ifs; you shall do so or be expelled'. A roll call was taken of everyone who should be present, starting with the provost and working down, and few excuses were accepted. When Robert Emmet's name was called there was complete silence and, although his tutor half-heartedly argued his case, he was still marked down as wilfully disobedient. The fact that his brother had been arrested the previous month as part of the government's counter-revolutionary crackdown did little for his cause. Lord Clare launched into a vehement denunciation of Emmet:

> I have been for some time in possession of everything that has been going forward in the college - and I know that Emmet is one of the most active and wicked members of the Society of United Irishmen.

Everyone present was then questioned by the lord chancellor, starting with the provost and ending with the porters. The examination of Dr Whitely Stokes, a junior fellow, caused much excitement in the hall. Stokes admitted that he was aware of illegal

groups in the college, but, when asked what they were, he replied that they were Orange societies. Clare was not amused.

Before examining the undergraduates Clare lectured them on the value of evening classes as a way of keeping out of mischief. The visitation ended on the 21st of April and nineteen students, including Emmet, were expelled from Trinity College. It marked the end of his academic studies, and the beginning of his career as a revolutionary. The barrister Charles Phillips interviewed Emmet's friends and contemporaries in Trinity College and concluded that his university education had a lasting influence on his subsequent adventures:

> Emmet's mind was naturally melancholy and romantic - he had fed it from the pure fountain of classic literature, and he might be said to have lived, not so much in the scene around him, as in the society of the illustrious and sainted dead. The poets of antiquity were his companions, its patriots were his models, and its republics his admiration.

Phillips applauded the education Emmet had received in Trinity College. But he also paid tribute to the influence the young man had wielded on the university. He had entered at the age of fifteen a young patriot, and left (under a cloud) five years later, a committed revolutionary. It was clear to Phillips that Emmet 'was gifted with abilities and virtues which rendered him an object of universal esteem and admiration. Everyone loved, everyone respected him; his fate made an impression on the university which has

not yet been obliterated'. Phillips concluded that only 'an ungenerous loyalty' could 'not weep over the extinction of such a spirit'. But, to the authorities, Emmet was suspect: of subversion, of treason, of jacobinism.

Robert Emmet denied the French three times, twice in his speech from the dock, once on his way to the gallows. Of all the aspects of his life, this is the one which remains the most controversial. That Emmet, in his final chance to address the Irish nation, should choose to attack his supposed allies. Some commentators have claimed that these lines were British propaganda, invented afterwards to damage relations between the United Irishmen and France. But, in reality, the sentiments reflected Emmet's deep thinking on world politics. Unfairly perceived as a naive, immature, vain young man, Emmet had in fact a far more shrewd understanding of international affairs than many of his contemporaries. After the failure of the 1798 rebellion he had toured Europe and had witnessed at first-hand the treatment of smaller countries absorbed by Napoleon, who, after 1799, was pursuing his own imperialist agenda. It horrified him, and he became determined to ensure that the French would never be allowed to turn Ireland into another satellite state, or to use it for plunder.

The republican model for Robert Emmet, from his childhood, was not France but America. He grew up hearing stories about the American War of Independence, and it became his ambition to be an Irish George Washington. He was prepared to accept French support, just as the Americans had, but he was very clear that they would only be allowed to come to Ireland with specific terms of reference, and leave once an

independent Irish republic was established. And just as the United States and Britain had become allies in the 1790s, Emmet looked to a future when Britain would become the natural friend of the Irish republic. On both a political and a personal level he disliked the French. While he was living in France he refused to dine-out with the Parisians, preferring to spend his time with English and Irish visitors. It was the principle of British rule that Emmet rejected, not the practice, and he saw no reason why the two countries should not work closely together in the future. All of the political poetry that Emmet wrote while in Trinity reflects these preoccupations, and he returned to the same themes in his speech from the dock.

Emmet returned to Ireland in the autumn of 1802 and was soon asked by 1798 veterans to consider getting involved in plans for another United Irishman rebellion. He accepted. It is a measure of his talents and abilities that within days he was invited to take over the leadership of the entire conspiracy. He was still only 24 years old. Emmet's plans for a rebellion in the summer of 1803 were complex and precise. His plan was to seize Dublin in a coup d'etat, and then co-ordinate uprisings in some 19 counties. It was to be Irishmen who would do all of the initial fighting, and the French would only be invited to land once key strategic locations were in the hands of the rebels. This was to provide a safeguard against the imperialist instincts of the French.

Unfortunately for Emmet, things on the 23rd of July 1803 very quickly went wrong. The key strength of his conspiracy was its secrecy - Emmet ensured that the government would be caught by surprise because no spies or informers knew what was

going on - only a select band of trusted rebels. This also proved to be its greatest weakness. The government did not know what was going on, but neither did most of the potential rebels, and it proved impossible to mobilise them at short notice. And, while Emmet was charismatic and inspirational when talking to his men face-to-face, he proved deficient when it came to the subtler arts of leadership. He was too trusting - and believed the men who promised him 5,000 rebels once the fighting started. He always wanted to believe the best about people, and on numerous occasions was betrayed. No guns were purchased because of incompetence, and when Emmet gave the last of his funds to a man to acquire some on the morning of the rebellion, he took the money and ran. There was some truth in the assessment of the Wicklow rebel, Michael Dwyer, when he said that 'if Emmet had added brains to his education he'd be a fine man'.

Nowadays we read a lot in the newspapers about crime and drunkenness on the streets of Dublin. 200 years ago it was not very different. On the night of the 23rd of July 1803, Emmet ordered his men to meet at the secret depot on Thomas Street. He was expecting 3,000 men to attend - 80 arrived. And worse, they were drunk The complex scheme for seizing the capital now disintegrated before Emmet's eyes, and he later accepted that there had been failure in everything: 'plan, preparation and men'. At nine o'clock in the evening they took to the streets, but by the time Emmet arrived on Patrick Street he realised that the men were more interested in destruction rather than liberation. He decided to abort the rising, and escaped to Rathfarnham and then to the Wicklow mountains. The fighting soon fizzled out, with the only notable casualty the murder of Lord Kilwarden, the chief justice.

Emmet soon returned from the Wicklow mountains, and began living in a house at Harold's Cross under a pseudonym, so that he could co-ordinate with other rebel leaders and make sure they escaped to safety. He also had regular meetings with the love of his life, Sarah Curran, sister of his best friend in Trinity, and daughter of the celebrated lawyer, John Philpot Curran. But Emmet's house was raided by the police on the evening of 25 August and he made a brave dash for freedom, escaping out the window after knocking a guard unconscious. However, he was tackled to the ground by Major Sirr, who then apologised for the rough treatment. Emmet replied casually that 'All was fair in war'. He was taken to Dublin Castle where he revealed that his name was Robert Emmet and the date was set for his public trial on the 19th of September 1803.

The reinvention of Robert Emmet began while he was in prison, as he deliberately began looking to the future and the creation of a political legacy. He was determined to play the hero and this gave him an inner strength in moments of despair. The trial for high treason was held on 19 September: throughout its twelve hours he was standing, with his hands chained, and no break for food or refreshments. But none of this prevented him from delivering one of the greatest courtroom orations in history, a speech that was memorised in its entirety by a young Abraham Lincoln, and which became one of the key texts for anyone interested in oratory in the 19th and 20th centuries.

It was Emmet's first major public address since his humiliation at the hands of Geraghty five years earlier, and he showed that he had learned much from the experience.

Every time Norbury interrupted him, he answered strongly, defending his right to speak as much as his leadership of the rebellion. It was not enough. Sentenced to death, he was brought back to Kilmainham Jail to spend his final night. The next morning he was taken out of his cell to be brought to the gallows, the 'site of physical pain'. On his way down the steps he remembered one final task he had left undone. He received permission to return to his cell and write a letter to the chief secretary, William Wickham, the man who, in his own words, had done more than anyone else to capture Emmet and bring him to his death. Emmet wrote the letter quickly, in a firm hand, without pausing for thought. When finished, he sealed it and said 'I am now quite prepared'. The letter arrived at Wickham's desk two hours after Emmet had died. It would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The Castle had confidently predicted that Emmet would 'wince when about to experience the terror of execution'. This was not a comment on his courage, but a recognition of just how horrific the immediate prospect of hanging was at this time. 'A man was suffocated by hanging from a rope just as if he had a pillow pressed on his face. The law killed people who were powerless to prevent that outcome and whose bodies were dissolving in terror.' But Emmet displayed no fear on the scaffold. He shook hands with the hangman, helped put the noose around his neck, and declared that he died, 'with sentiments of universal love and kindness towards all men'. He died bravely without a struggle or a cry. The journalist from the London Chronicle, who was the paper's hanging expert, reported that 'Emmet behaved without the least symptom of fear', and added that 'he never saw a man die like him, and God forbid that I should see many with

his principles'. After Emmet's body was taken down, his head was severed and held up with the cry 'This is the head of a traitor'.

Two hours later, Emmet's final letter reached the desk of William Wickham. It was a message of forgiveness, toleration and hope, and Wickham was so moved by it that he resigned his position in the British government. Over 30 years later, while living in Switzerland, he would write out the letter from memory for visitors from England or Ireland. Wickham believed the letter offered a template for the future, demonstrating how Ireland and Britain could live peacefully together. He would speak of 'how light the strongest of feelings must appear when compared with those which Emmet overcame even at his last hour, on his very march to the scaffold'. In this bicentenary year this will be much discussion about whether Emmet's epitaph should now be written. But I think there could be no more poignant tribute than the words of his enemy, William Wickham, thirty years later, when he said: 'Had I been an Irishman, I would most unquestionably have joined him'.

The final resting place of Robert Emmet has never been satisfactorily proved. But the fact that Emmet died, and then his body disappeared, only facilitated his resurrection into a nationalist icon. It provided a point of controversy to encourage two centuries of debate and added an extra layer of mystery to the circumstances of his death. To borrow the Yeatsian description, 'He died and immediately became an image'.

Robert Emmet is one of the founding fathers of the Irish republic and also one of its favourite sons. This year we commemorate his bicentenary, and there is much in his biography of which Trinity can be justifiably proud. But his legacy was more complex than has sometimes been presented. Emmet inspired. He inspired the romantic poets, like Shelley and Coleridge, who became obsessed by his fate. He inspired Robert Southey, the future poet laureate, who wrote an admiring poem on Emmet's epitaph. But this was in contrast to his initial thoughts on the rebellion, when he was relieved that it had failed so spectacularly. He wrote that: 'De Paddies always make some noble blunder – happily for all quiet people who have an objection to being murdered'.

Emmet inspired John Mitchel, who became his greatest disciple in the 19th century. He inspired Yeats. Yeats' Emmet was an extraordinary character, a romantic idealist with unique talents and abilities, whose only failing was that he understood everything except human nature.

This explained his miscalculations, the fact that he was regularly betrayed by people close to him, and the failure of his attempted insurrection. Yeats believed that Emmet was important because of his inspirational legacy, which ensured that he became the leading saint of Irish nationalism. Central to this, of course, was the success of his speech from the dock. Yeats's lecture was essentially a character study, with the emphasis on how Emmet redeemed himself, and his botched rebellion, by his courage in the courtroom and then on the scaffold.

Emmet also inspired Pearse, who was so anxious to follow in Emmet's footsteps in 1916 that he copied him many respects - even his failure.

Pearse's Emmet of 1914 reflected different concerns and preoccupations. Once again the speech from the dock was important, 'the most famous words ever uttered by an Irishman', but Pearse was more interested in the details of the 1803 rebellion. He was looking forward to a future Dublin insurrection, which he believed was necessary, not least because it would erase the guilt of the Dublin people for not rising with Emmet. The 1916 Proclamation was directly inspired by Emmet's Proclamation of the Provisional Government, and Pearse imitated Emmet in reading it aloud before the start of fighting. Emmet was one of those heroes who, in Pearse's words, 'stood midway between God and men. Patriotism, he suggested, is in large part a memory of heroic dead men and a striving to accomplish some task left unfinished by them'. Pearse believed that Emmet had won a victory 'which was greater than the memory of the victory of Brian Boru at Clontarf or Owen Roe at Benburb - it was the memory of a sacrifice Christ-like in its perfection. Emmet had died, so that his people might live, even as Christ had died'. And with this, the deification of Emmet was complete.

It is perhaps no wonder that Yeats believed that Pearse was 'half-cracked and wanting to be hanged'. He shrewdly noted that Pearse had 'Emmet delusions, the same way some people think they are Napoleon or God'. Emmet also inspired Joyce, but in a manner that at this time and in this place it is perhaps best not to elaborate upon.

But above all, Emmet inspired after the winning of Irish independence. While some fretted about whether Ireland had indeed taken her place among the nations of the earth, others were more concerned with taking their place in this nation. Even more than Wolfe Tone, Emmet epitomised the idea of an Irish identity that could be 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. This was of immense value, and for Protestants in the Irish state, Emmet offered an example of how religion did not have to, and should not have to, determine your Irishness.

Today, in the Ireland of the 21st century, Robert Emmet still resonates. This year marks the bicentenary of his rebellion, trial and execution, and once again a spectre is haunting Ireland – the spectre of commemoration. Some aspects of the bicentenary programme are to be valued, including events in this university, like the academic symposium next September and the successful Emmet debate organised by the Hist in this room two months ago. Others are faintly ridiculous. The sight of 200 pikemen marching during the St. Patrick's Day parade in Dublin was diverting, if only because it was 120 more than Emmet could muster in 1803. But even then, there were unintentional parallels with the fiasco of Emmet's rebellion: there was serious dissension in the commemorative ranks - the two groups of pikemen refused to march together because of a disagreement dating back to 1998 as to the speed they should march. And so you had the provisional wing of the pikemen marching about ten yards ahead of the official pikemen.

Robert Emmet was someone who fought and died for the principle of an Irish republic, but was not motivated by hatred of Britain, or by sectarianism, or by hatred. Instead, he wanted a future that was based on toleration, hope and forgiveness. If it is too much to claim him as the liberator of his nation, then it is enough for us to acknowledge him as a representative of its spirit.