




PUBLISHED BY S. LEITCH, BY BRUSHFIELD STREET, BISHOPSGATE LONDON.

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THE UNITED IRISH  PATRIOTS 1798

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Proof

# Up The Republic! *Really?*

Michael Quigley

*The United Irish Patriots of 1798.*  
Unknown artist.  
Coloured lithograph, 1798

### The Great Day

*Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!  
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.  
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!  
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.*

### Parnell

*Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:  
'Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.'*<sup>1</sup>

## I

Samuel Beckett's all-upper-case-no-breaks message of solidarity with the anti-fascist fighters in Spain in 1936 may have been 'a sardonic irony', as Fintan O'Toole believes, though he adduces no evidence for the assertion<sup>2</sup>. It was entirely in keeping with his minimalism; and it should not be forgotten that Beckett joined the French resistance not long after the Nazi occupation. The economic collapse of the Celtic Tiger in 2008 has produced a predictable flood of works purporting to diagnose and prescribe for the sick beast, by re-examining the shibboleths of the Irish state, in particular, 'the Republic'. The impending centenary of the alleged foundation of this purported Republic will surely produce its own fizzy brew of celebration and codology.

O'Toole makes the important, but actually unremarkable, point that although Irish people habitually refer to themselves as from 'the Republic', neither the Constitution of 1937 nor the government of Ireland make that claim. In the words of John A. Costello, '[t]here is the name of the State and there is the description of the State. The name of the State is Ireland<sup>3</sup> and the description of the State is the Republic of Ireland.' Nor should it be forgotten that until very recently, it was de rigueur among Northern nationalists to refer to 'the twenty-six counties', 'the Free State' or, simply, 'the South', but never 'the Republic'.

Why do we Irish – republicans, nationalists, socialists, democrats, liberals, progressives and all – pursue this ideal when it sometimes appears as an outworn, ugly travesty? Are we in love with Kathleen ni Houlihan or the Old Hag of Beare? What is it about 'the Republic' that seems to have us bewitched, bothered and bewildered?

Let us assert that it is the idea of happiness, that we are entitled to liberty, equality and fraternity. In short, the easy life, but not a life of ease. Where did this utterly brilliant idea come from? It was innate in the hearts of mankind, a force of nature, everyone's lifelong dream. It was an abiding and guiding principle of the Jacobins and the United Irishmen, as the Dublin Society's oath testified:

*'I shall do whatever lies in my power to forward a brotherhood of affection, an identity of interests, a communion of rights, and a union of power among Irishmen of all religious persuasions, without which every reform must be partial, not national, inadequate to the wants, delusive to the wishes and insufficient for the **freedom and happiness** of this country.'*<sup>4</sup>

1 W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London, 1956), 309.

2 Fintan O'Toole, *Enough is Enough: How to Build a New Republic* (London, 2010), 21.

3 Quoted in O'Toole, 25.

4 Cited by Rosamund Jacob, *The Rise of the United Irishmen* (London, 1937), 72, emphasis added.



Maximilien de Robespierre (1793)  
Carnavalet Museum, Paris. ©  
Masterpics / Alamy Stock Photo

An examination of the notion of the Republic can lead to a quagmire. In part, the task is archaeology: digging up, dusting off and bringing into the light the idea and practice of the Republic in Ireland, an idea and practice which have been submerged and disguised, but not entirely hidden or suppressed by the victors' rendering of history. It also demands a wider comparative perspective, especially a consideration of the original [French?] inspiration of 'republicanism'.

It is conventional (because it is convenient?) to speak of three revolutions as underlying and conditioning events in Ireland in the 1790s: the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789.<sup>5</sup> This triptych is worth a second look. The first, the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 was the supposed guarantor of the Protestant ideal of freedom. In truth, 1688 was quite the opposite – a thorough-going counter-revolution, copper-fastening the reversals begun by Cromwell in the suppression of all the democratic forces of the 1640s. The republican Cromwell told his bourgeois supporters 'you must cut these people in pieces or they

will cut you in pieces'.<sup>6</sup> He was speaking of the Levellers, who demanded complete religious toleration, democratic control of the army and biannual parliamentary elections, the Diggers, who claimed that the land belonged to the whole people of England, the Commonwealthmen and the New Model Army rank and file.

It is not at all coincidental that this suppression was immediately exported to Ireland. An external enemy is always a handy distraction. It is no great stretch to describe the vaunted 'constitution' of 1688 as the establishment of a theocracy (which it remains to this day). Similarly, and despite or contrary to the opinions of Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Alexander Hamilton Rowan, nor more especially of Tom Paine, American liberty was spangled from the start by slavery and by the deep-seated oligarchic fears of democracy, both written into the US Constitution. Thus we are left, as far as revolutions go, with France.

## II

*'An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all,'<sup>7</sup>*

My purpose is polemic, and my starting point, yardstick and epitome is the First (French) Republic – the Jacobin Republic of the Committee of Public Safety and the Terror and the Directory that followed the *coup d'état* of 9 Thermidor. All of its successors progressively (sic) shed the rigour and discipline and coherence of their progenitor. As Republican standards fell, '[i]t goes without saying that the honourable republicans surrendered the noble sentiments of their ideology more cheaply than the worldly pleasures of governmental power.'<sup>8</sup> Marx, of course, was talking about the

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Kevin Whelan, 'Three revolutions and a failure', in Cathal Póirtéir, ed., *The Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (Cork, 1998), 26–36.

<sup>6</sup> A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (London, 1938).

<sup>7</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* ([1891] New York, 1968), 388.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850* (1850).

republicans of all stripes – royalist, bourgeois, petit bourgeois – in France in 1849, on the road to 18 Brumaire and the military dictatorship of Napoleon III.

The essential feature of the Republic is that it was (and remains) Janus-faced – looking towards the future in its destruction of feudalism and its elevation of reason and secularism as guiding principles of human society, but always simultaneously keeping a weather-eye on the rear-view mirror, defensively fearful of the demons it has itself unleashed. Liberty, equality and fraternity offer hope to aspirations which may have to be suppressed.

The sequence in the slogan is important. Liberty is itself a dialectical proposition. Freedom *from* oppression and freedom *to* aspire to happiness, presupposes and demands the overthrow of the constraints imposed by the hierarchies of monarchy, aristocracy, and religion. But liberty without equality would be (and is) a sham, a mockery of itself. And finally, it is fraternity, the recognition of the brotherhood of all mankind, which is the foundation upon which liberty and equality can be built and guaranteed. But they are means to an end: as the first article of the Jacobin Constitution of 1793 declared, ‘the goal of society is common happiness’.<sup>9</sup> In the Irish context, it must be recalled that these were ideas which came to life in the minds of the radicals of the English civil war in the 1640s, for they continued to live on in an underground stream which burst into the light in the Presbyterian grounding of the United Irishmen.<sup>10</sup>

The best, because clearest and most elevated, description of the ideal republic, its immanent form, is Maximilien Robespierre’s:

*We wish in our country that morality may be substituted for egotism, probity for false honour, principles for usages, duties for good manners, the empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion, a contempt of vice for a contempt of misfortune, pride for insolence, magnanimity for vanity, the love of glory for the love of money, good people for good company, merit for intrigue, genius for wit, truth for tinsel show, the attractions of happiness for the ennui of sensuality, the grandeur of man for the littleness of the great, a people magnanimous, powerful, happy, for a people amiable, frivolous and miserable; in a word, all the virtues and miracles of a Republic instead of all the vices and absurdities of a Monarchy. (Speech to the Convention, May 1794)<sup>11</sup>*

Half a century later, the last surviving member of the revolutionary dictatorship of the Year II, Bertrand Barère, the alleged trimmer who was also called ‘Anacreon of the Guillotine’, then in his eighties, persisted in the faith:

*The Republic is the wish of elevated minds and free hearts. It is the utopia of ardent and energetic spirits nourished on the enlightenment of civilization and independence. It is the government of common sense, justice and economy. It is the inevitable tendency of the human race.<sup>12</sup>*

It is worth restating the salient elements of the Jacobin dictatorship. As Albert Soboul argues, after the events of August 1792 finally toppled the throne, when ‘the

9 Cited by Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York, 2006), 261.

10 Fergus Whelan, *Dissent into Treason: Unitarians, King-killers and the Society of United Irishmen* (Dingle, 2010).

11 Maximilien Robespierre, *Report upon the Principles of Political Morality Which Are to Form the Basis of the Administration of the Interior Concerns of the Republic* (Philadelphia, 1794). [www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/political-morality.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/robespierre/1794/political-morality.htm)

12 Cited by R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1941), 396.