



PRINCIPLES

of Freedom

TERENCE MACSWINEY

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MERCIER PRESS

*To the Soldiers of Freedom
in Every Land*

Preface

It was my intention to publish these articles in book form as soon as possible. I had them typed for the purpose. I had no time for revision save to insert in the typed copy words or lines omitted from the original printed matter. I also made an occasional verbal alteration in the original. One article, however, that on 'Intellectual Freedom', though written in the series in the place in which it now stands, was not printed with them. It is now published for the first time.

Religion

I wish to make a note on the article under this heading to avoid a possible misconception amongst people outside Ireland. In Ireland there is no religious dissension, but there is religious insincerity. English politicians, to serve the end of dividing Ireland, have worked on the religious feelings of the North, suggesting the danger of Catholic ascendancy. There is not now, and there

never was, any such danger, but our enemies, by raising the cry, sowed discord in the North, with the aim of destroying Irish unity. It should be borne in mind that when the Republican Standard was first raised in the field in Ireland, in the Rising of 1798, Catholics and Protestants in the North were united in the cause. Belfast was the first home of Republicanism in Ireland. This is the truth of the matter. The present-day cleavage is an unnatural thing created by Ireland's enemies to hold her in subjection and will disappear entirely with political freedom.

It has had, however, in our day, one unhappy effect, only for a time fortunately, and this is disappearing. I refer to the rise of Hibernianism. The English ruling faction having, for their own political designs, corrupted the Orangemen with power and flattery, enabled them to establish an ascendancy not only over Ulster, but, indirectly by their vote, over the South. This becoming intolerable, some sincere but misguided Catholics in the North joined the organisation known as THE ANCIENT ORDER OF HIBERNIANS. This was, in effect, a sort of Catholic Freemasonry

to counter the Orange Freemasonry, but, like Orangeism, it was a political and not a religious weapon.

Further, as a political weapon, it extended all through Ireland during the last years of the Irish Parliamentary Movement. In Cork, for example, it completely controlled city life for some years, but the rapid rise of the Republican movement brought about the equally rapid fall of Hibernianism. At the present moment it has as little influence in the public life of Cork as Sir Edward Carson himself. The great bulk of its one-time members have joined the Republican movement. This demonstrates clearly that anything in the nature of a sectarian movement is essentially repugnant to the Irish people. As I have pointed out, the Hibernian Order, when created, became at once a political weapon, but Ireland has discarded that, and other such weapons, for those with which she is carving out the destinies of the Republic. For a time, however, Hibernianism created an unnatural atmosphere of sectarian rivalry in Ireland. That has now happily passed away. At the time, however, of the writing of the article on

religion it was at its height, and this fact coloured the writing of the article. On re-reading it, and considering the publication of the present work, I was inclined to suppress it, but decided that it ought to be included because it bears directly on the evil of materialism in religious bodies, which is a matter of grave concern to every religious community in the world.

T. MacS.

Brixton Prison, Sept. 1920

The Basis of Freedom

I

Why should we fight for freedom? Is it not strange that it has become necessary to ask and answer this question? We have fought our fight for centuries, and contending parties still continue the struggle, but the real significance of the struggle and its true motive force are hardly at all understood, and there is a curious but logical result. Men technically on the same side are separated by differences wide and deep, both of ideal and plan of action; while, conversely, men technically opposed have perhaps more in common than we realise in a sense deeper than we understand.

II

This is the question I would discuss. I find in practice everywhere in Ireland – it is worse out of Ireland – the doctrine ‘the end justifies the means’.

One party will denounce another for the use of discreditable tactics, but it will have no hesitation in using such itself if it can thereby snatch a discreditable victory. So, clear speaking is needed: a fight that is not clean-handed will make victory more disgraceful than any defeat. I make the point here because we stand for separation from the British Empire and because I have heard it argued that we ought, if we could, make a foreign alliance to crush English power here, even if our foreign allies were engaged in crushing freedom elsewhere. When such a question can be proposed it should be answered, though the time is not ripe to test it. If Ireland were to win freedom by helping directly or indirectly to crush another people, she would earn the execration she has herself poured out on tyranny for ages. I have come to see it is possible for Ireland to win her independence by base methods. It is imperative, therefore, that we should declare ourselves and know where we stand. And I stand by this principle: no physical victory can compensate for spiritual surrender. Whatever side denies that is not my side.

What, then, is the true basis to our claim to

freedom? There are two points of view. The first we have when fresh from school, still in our teens, ready to tilt against everyone and everything, delighting in saying smart things – and able sometimes to say them – talking much and boldly of freedom, but satisfied if the thing sounds bravely. Then there is the later point of view. We are no longer boys; we have come to review the situation and take a definite stand in life. We have had years of experience, keen struggles, not a little bitterness, and we are steadied. We feel a heartbeat for deeper things. It is no longer sufficient that they sound bravely; they must ring true. The schoolboy's dream is more of a Roman triumph – tramping armies, shouting multitudes, waving banners: all good enough in their way. But the dream of men is for something beyond all this show. If it were not, it could hardly claim a sacrifice.

III

A spiritual necessity makes the true significance of our claim to freedom: the material aspect is only a secondary consideration. A man facing life is gifted

with certain powers of soul and body. It is of vital importance to himself and the community that he be given a full opportunity to develop his powers, and to fill his place worthily. In a free state he is in the natural environment for full self-development. In an enslaved state it is the reverse. When one country holds another in subjection, that other suffers materially and morally. It suffers materially, being a prey for plunder. It suffers morally because of the corrupt influences the bigger nation sets at work to maintain its ascendancy. Because of this moral corruption, national subjection should be resisted as a state fostering vice; and as in the case of vice, when we understand it we have no option but to fight. With it we can make no terms. It is the duty of the rightful power to develop the best in its subjects: it is the practice of the usurping power to develop the basest. Our history affords many examples. When our rulers visit Ireland they bestow favours and titles on the supporters of their regime – but it is always seen that the greatest favours and highest titles are not for the honest adherent of their power, but for him who has betrayed the national cause that he entered

public life to support. Observe how the men who might be respected are passed over for him who ought to be despised. In the corrupt politician there was surely a better nature. A free state would have encouraged and developed it. The usurping state titled him for the use of his baser instincts. Such allurements must mean demoralisation. We are none of us angels, and under the best of circumstances find it hard to do worthy things; when all the temptation is to do unworthy things we are demoralised. Most of us, happily, will not give ourselves over to the evil influence, but we lose faith in the ideal. We are apathetic. We have powers and let them lie fallow. Our minds should be restless for noble and beautiful things; they are hopeless in a land everywhere confined and wasted. In the destruction of spirit entailed lies the deeper significance of our claim to freedom.

IV

It is a spiritual appeal, then, that primarily moves us. We are urged to action by a beautiful ideal. The motive force must be likewise true and beautiful. It is love of country that inspires us; not

hate of the enemy and desire for full satisfaction for the past. Pause awhile. We are all irritated now and then by some mawkish interpretation of our motive force that makes it seem a weakly thing, invoked to help us in evading difficulties instead of conquering them. Love in any genuine form is strong, vital and warm-blooded. Let it not be confused with any flabby substitute. Take a parallel case. Should we, because of the mawkishness of a 'Princess Novelette', deride the beautiful dream that keeps ages wondering and joyous, that is occasionally caught up in the words of genius, as when Shelley sings: 'I arise from dreams of thee'? When foolish people make a sacred thing seem silly, let us at least be sane. The man who cries out for the sacred thing but voices a universal need. To exist, the healthy mind must have beautiful things – the rapture of a song, the music of running water, the glory of the sunset and its dreams, and the deeper dreams of the dawn. It is nothing but love of country that rouses us to make our land full-blooded and beautiful where now she is pallid and wasted. This, too, has its deeper significance.

If we want full revenge for the past, the best way to get it is to remain as we are. As we are, Ireland is a menace to England. We need not debate this – she herself admits it by her continued efforts to pacify us in her own stupid way. Would she not ignore us if it were quite safe so to do? On the other hand, if we succeed in our efforts to separate from her, the benefit to England will be second only to our own. This might strike us strangely, but 'tis true, not the less true because the English people could hardly understand or appreciate it now. The military defence of Ireland is almost farcical. A free Ireland could make it a reality – could make it strong against invasion. This would secure England from attack on our side. No one is, I take it, so foolish as to suppose, being free, we would enter quarrels not our own. We should remain neutral. Our common sense would so dictate, our sense of right would so demand. The freedom of a nation carries with it the responsibility that it be no menace to the freedom of another nation. The freedom of all makes for the security of all. If there are tyrannies

on earth, one nation cannot set things right, but it is still bound so to order its own affairs as to be consistent with universal freedom and friendship. And, again, strange as it may seem, separation from England will alone make for final friendship with England. For no one is so foolish as to wish to be for ever at war with England. It is unthinkable. Now the most beautiful motive for freedom is vindicated. Our liberty stands to benefit the enemy instead of injuring him. If we want to injure him, we should remain as we are – a menace to him. The opportunity will come, but it would hardly make us happy. This but makes clear a need of the human race. Freedom rightly considered is not a mere setting up of a number of independent units. It makes for harmony among nations and good fellowship on earth.

VI

I have written carefully that no one may escape the conclusion. It is clear and exacting, but in the issue it is beautiful. We fight for freedom – not for the vanity of the world, not to have a fine conceit of ourselves, not to be as bad, or if we

prefer to put it so, as big as our neighbours. The inspiration is drawn from a deeper element of our being. We stifle for self-development individually and as a nation. If we don't go forward we must go down. It is a matter of life and death; it is our soul's salvation. If the whole nation stands for it, we are happy; we shall be grandly victorious. If only a few are faithful found, they must be the more steadfast for being but a few. They stand for an individual right that is inalienable. A majority has no right to annul it and no power to destroy it. Tyrannies may persecute, slay or banish those who defend it; the thing is indestructible. It does not need legions to protect it nor genius to proclaim it, though the poets have always glorified it, and the legions will ultimately acknowledge it. One man alone may vindicate it, and because that one man has never failed, it has never died. Not, indeed, that Ireland has ever been reduced to a single loyal son. She never will be. We have not survived the centuries to be conquered now. But the profound significance of the struggle, of its deep spiritual appeal, of the imperative need for a motive force as lofty and beautiful, of the consciousness that

worthy winning of freedom is a labour for human brotherhood – the significance of it all is seen in the obligation it imposes on everyone to be true, the majority notwithstanding. He is called to a grave charge who is called to resist the majority. But he will resist, knowing his victory will lead them to a dearer dream than they had ever known. He will fight for that ideal in obscurity, little heeded; in the open, misunderstood; in humble places, still undaunted; in high places, seizing every vantage point, never crushed, never silent, never despairing, cheering a few comrades with hope for the morrow. And should these few sink in the struggle, the greatness of the ideal is proven in the last hour; as they fall their country awakens to their dream, and he who inspired and sustained them is justified; justified against the whole race, he who once stood alone against them. In the hour he falls, he is the saviour of his race.

*'It is love of country that inspires us:
not hate of the enemy ...'*

Terence MacSwiney, the renowned Republican lord mayor of Cork, died on 25 October 1920, on the seventy-fifth day of a hunger strike he started in Brixton Prison in an attempt to gain recognition as a political prisoner of war. His sacrifice brought worldwide media attention to Ireland's struggle for independence.

Principles of Freedom, his collection of writings, provides an insight into the thinking of a man prepared to give his all for Irish freedom.

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