

**THE IRISH POSITION IN BRITISH
AND IN REPUBLICAN NORTH
AMERICA: A LETTER TO THE
EDITORS OF THE IRISH PRESS
IRRESPECTIVE OF PARTY, PP. 3-44**

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The Irish Position in British and in Republican North America: A Letter to the Editors of the Irish Press Irrespective of Party, pp. 3-44 by Thomas D'Arcy McGee

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THOMAS D'ARCY MCGEE

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THE IRISH POSITION

IN

BRITISH AND IN REPUBLICAN NORTH AMERICA

A LETTER

TO THE

EDITORS OF THE IRISH PRESS

IRRESPECTIVE OF PARTY.

BY THE HON. THOMAS D'ARCY M^oGEE

Minister of Agriculture and Emigration, Canada.

SECOND EDITION.

MONTREAL:

M. LONGMOORE & Co., PRINTING HOUSE, 67 GREAT ST. JAMES STREET.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

Many friends have desired to have this letter in a more convenient shape, than the newspaper form in which it first appeared, a fortnight ago, and I have great pleasure in complying with their wishes.

Some short notes on the antecedents of the Irish in British America will be found in the Appendix. The subject would bear very considerable amplification.

ND

T. D. M.

Montreal, St. Patrick's Day, 1866.

Dir. Emery
Angeley
7-22-43
48370

L E T T E R .

MONTREAL, 3rd March, 1866.

GENTLEMEN :

If I venture to address the following paragraphs to your attention as a body, irrespective of party, I do so in the fullest confidence, that whether you agree with me in part, or in whole, or not at all, you are at least all equally disposed to give to a respectful statement, over a responsible name, a fair and candid consideration.

MS. A. 9. 2. 43

In what I have to say, I own at once I bear the testimony of a minority only of the Irish in North America. But the minority with whom my views coincide is not so small as some here and in Ireland may imagine. Many are silent from a constitutional distaste of controversy—many from a weak desire for their own personal ease and tranquillity—many from downright disgust of all things Irish, of a polemical sort. But our minority includes in its numerous ranks, so far as I know, all the Catholic Bishops, and a vast majority of the Priests of Irish origin in North Ame-

rica ; includes a majority of all our well-to-do settled agriculturists ; our men of business, and professional men ; includes all the influential and wealthy Irish Protestant population ; includes almost all, I observe, of those who have won on this side the Atlantic any distinction in literary or politico-literary pursuits. The voice of such a minority, not rashly raised, will not, I am satisfied, be lightly regarded ; and of this voice, I dare to assert, I shall be found in this letter the faithful interpreter.

The chief obstacle to the true understanding of the Irish position in America, Republican or British, which I found last year in Ireland, arose from an excessive attachment to preconceived opinions. Men who had never seen a sun rise and set on the Atlantic, much less on the world beyond, had framed for themselves a fancy picture of this continent, and were prepared to swear it was the only true likeness. Their notions were like those of that gifted daughter of the gifted house of Sheridan, who makes her emigrant declare that when he reaches America he will sit and sigh away his hours, with closed eyes, in our "grand old woods." If he did so in some of them, he would need to carry a charm, or he might find a garter snake about his legs and the mosquitoes about his ears before he was seated in the "grand old woods" many minutes. In the same way all our trans-Atlantic visitors are, at first sight, disappointed

with Niagara; for stupendous as nature is in that place, the soaring imagination of man overtops and looks down on all material grandeur. The cataract, the snake or the mosquito, displaces by actual contact preconceived opinions, and substitutes simple realities. I cannot hope that any words of mine should dispel mental or moral Niagaras, but the understanding must be deranged indeed, to which the words of truth and earnestness cannot convey conviction, as readily as the sting of an insect or the venom of a reptile conveys pain to the body.

Of the erroneous impressions existing in Ireland, alike as to Republican and British America, it must be owned the main source is a want of downright candor on the part of the Irish on this side, in their communications with their friends "at home." To give pleasure instead of pain—to keep up heart and hope in anxious relatives and friends—to dazzle the neighbours—to enjoy a triumph even in their absence—the worst fortune has been made to appear better, the middling lot has been puffed into a prodigious run of luck, and even the best success has been exaggerated beyond bounds. I remember one of our countrymen in Boston about twenty years ago writing to his friends that he inhabited a four-storied house and drove his own carriage. So, indeed, he did; he inhabited the cellar, and drove a hack about town at a quarter dollar a fare!

If I have sinned against my countrymen in the States, as they are so constantly told by their misleaders, at all events it never was in this base way. I may have given many a sore shake to their fanciful and groundless self-satisfaction; but if the truth, as I know it, is bitter, or if the relish for it is destroyed by a surfeit of stimulants, am I, therefore, to shirk my duty? I would rather never raise a public voice, nor put pen to paper again, than betray them, and dishonor myself by such flagrant denials of the known truth, as, I grieve to say, are too common among them, when the subject is, their own position in Republican America.

This very Fenian organization in the United-States, what does it really prove, but that the Irish are still an alien population, camped but not settled in America, with foreign hopes and aspirations unshared by the people among whom they live? If their new country was their true country, would they find time and money to spare in the construction of imaginary Republics beyond seas? If their leaders were real rulers at Washington, would they be playing at governments, think you, in Moffatt's pill-box? * It is because the active spirits are conscious that, being Irish, they have no hopeful public career in the land of the "Know-Nothings," and the rank

* The "head-quarters" of the O'Mahony republic in New York, so-called from a notorious maker of patent-medicines who built it.

and file feel that while their stomachs are filled their affections are starved in that hard and fast new state of society, that all this weak and wicked yearning after the impossible has developed itself in both classes. It is on the one part folly ; on the other part crime ; but it is human nature after all ; at least it is a new Irish-American variety of human nature.

There is a fundamental distinction to be drawn, however, between those of our countrymen of whom *you* hear so much at home, namely, the town, and what I shall call the settled, well-ordered country, Irish. Unfortunately for their own peace, and yours and ours, the former bear the proportion of fully 75 per cent. to the whole. Causes, some natural and justifiable enough—such as ready employment for their labor on landing,—detained them at the great seaports, or drew them to the factory and railway centres. Never in the world's history, were a purely agricultural population so suddenly and unpreparedly converted into mere town laborers. They did not, indeed, exchange agriculture for artificial pursuits, for you cannot well call mere loading and unloading ships, or portorage, or digging drains, or domestic service, works of art. But the tens of thousands of this class who were peasants in Iréland in the Spring, and town laborers in America the same Summer, threw up to the surface, by the natural law of their numbers, a small fry of demagogues and overseers [or