

Toast to 'The United Irishmen'
Response by John Hume MP MEP

Dunn's Night Dinner
The Tom Dunn Summer School
Rostrevor, County Down, 2 August 2003

Chairman and members of the Directory, Teachtaí Dála, fellow
Citizens,

Thank you for the kind invitation from the Directory to respond to
this toast this evening. It is a great pleasure for me to be with you all
during this wonderful weekend and an honour to follow in the
footsteps of Theobald Wolfe Tone, some 211 years on from his
appearance at this dinner.

We gather here to celebrate a wonderful heritage, a rich tradition of
philosophy and ideals with its origins in the ideas of the European
enlightenment. That revolutionary concept that all men - and women
- are created equally. As we gather here in the shadow of the
Mournes, there is much to savour, in mind and in feast.

I was set to thinking about the relationship between Wolfe Tone, the
man whose place I fill this night and Tom Dunn, the man in whose
name we gather here in Kilbroney. Tone was a man who rode the
wave of contemporary thinking. He and his colleagues in the Society
of United Irishmen observed developments elsewhere, acquainted
themselves with the revolutionary thinking of Thomas Paine and

others and forged a vision for an Ireland of the future where there would be no place for division, bitterness and injustice.

The name of Tom Dunn, on the other hand, is not on the tongue of every student of Irish history. He was the peasant scholar, the schoolmaster who received his education from itinerant teachers. His background was markedly different to the privileged background of the agitator Tone. Yet he took up the cause of the United Irish, inspiring local people with the message of Paine's 'Rights of Man'.

Cardinal Ó Fiaich described Tom Dunn as representing 'the nobility of the common man', which he did. But he was part of a great tradition of learning, of the sharing of ideas and the cultivation of thinking, which sowed the seeds of revolutionary ideas in this country and abroad. Ulster through her emigrés and places of learning (like at Strabane) was, after all, one source of the enlightened thought that inspired the American revolution and, in turn, that of France.

Each in their own way, Dunn and Tone, in a tradition that was more recently espoused by my late friend Tip O'Neill, epitomised the wider significance of local events. Each played their part in their own theatre, be it Dunn in Kilbroney, Tip in Massachusetts or Tone across Ireland, in movements and patterns that had an international significance and impact.

I think it is appropriate, then, that gatherings such as this to celebrate the place of Dunn in County Down and of Tone in Ireland within

international patterns of events. Now more than ever before we see the impact of localised or regional events, in New York, Iraq, Ramallah or elsewhere. We should be mindful of their wider significance. Tone surely was, as his readiness to seek the aid of France for one demonstrated.

The United Irishmen, of which Tone was part, finely encapsulated this symbiosis between the local and the global. Here was a group, living in times of limited communications, which drew upon the ideas and events that had occurred in the new world and in France. Yet the group itself started with only a few individuals, gradually spreading their ideas from Belfast and Dublin. Ideas which espoused a radical and new vision for a better Ireland.

Ideas which relied on the exposure of people to ideas through education and through political activism. The movement that was borne of this demonstrated the importance of new ideas in the emancipation of people's hopes, aspirations, and expectations. Ordinary people came to see that things could be better.

With the outbreak of more recent troubles in Ireland than those of the 18th Century, that vision was an inspiration to many of us.

We were inspired by the ideals of equality. We were inspired by the ideals of justice. We were inspired by the ideals of rights for all.

And that inspiration was not restricted to the ideals for which they stood. We were also inspired by their radicalism. We were inspired

by their courage of thought. We were inspired by their example that everyone had a role in bringing about change. That was the way of the Civil Rights Association as well as the way of the United Irishmen.

Above all else, we were inspired by the audacity of their thinking and their willingness to look for new solutions for age-old problems.

That is their legacy to us today. And their legacy to the world.

In many ways, we looked to the past in order to find a way forward to a better future. We took our lead from the ideals of the founding fathers of the United States, those who founded a country under the aegis of 'E pluribus unum', from many we are one. We drew strength from the ideals of the French Revolution, of liberté, égalité, fraternité which would guarantee equal rights for all.

And we looked at the model of the European Union, built upon the foundation stones of recognition of diversity, of the protection of rights and the creation of institutions to reflect and protect these.

In coming to an Agreement based upon the core principle of respect for diversity and dealing with the three core sets of relationships pertaining to our conflict, we bore fruit of the true inheritance of the United Irishmen. In the endorsement of the Agreement by the overwhelming majority of the people of Ireland, North and South, we saw delivered the real unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter of which Tone had dreamed.

We had learned from the tragic experience of the United Irishmen that our people cannot be united by force. We have been inspired by their idealism. The United Irishmen recognised that freedom for one depends on freedom for all. Only by securing agreement between the diverse sections of the people of this island can we all be free.

Like the United Irishmen, we recognise that Ireland cannot stand aloof from the rest of Europe. Wolfe Tone and his colleagues struggled to bring Ireland into the European mainstream. This generation, over the last thirty years, has devoted itself to making that objective a reality through our membership of the European Union.

Like the ideas of the United Irishmen, the Agreement offers a way forward for the descendants of colonised and coloniser alike within the wider European context.

As political actors, observers and as a society, we are very often caught up in the vagaries of current affairs, of political developments and of party positions. The thinking of Tone was concerned with more basic matters than that.

He was concerned with the elimination of discrimination. He was concerned with the elimination of injustice. And he was concerned with the elimination of false division - the elimination of division arising from difference.

And Tone recognised the importance of every citizen in reaching those goals. Like Tom Dunn at the hedge school, he valued the talent and potential of each person. That is the real republican inheritance which we should honour and live up to.

That is why I take such pride in being here tonight. Pat and I are pleased to be here with you to discuss ideas. Joyous to be here tonight to celebrate a proud political, philosophical and educational heritage. And delighted to be here to share your company.

For I am sure that at the end of the day, when the politics of the day was over and the discussions adjourned until the next morning, Theobald Wolfe Tone and his fellow United Irishmen appreciated the value of a happy life and of happy times.

Tonight Tone and the United Irishmen bring us together - Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter - to feast!

A fine inheritance!

To the United Irishmen!!