

John Philpot Curran (1750-1817)

JOHN PHILPOT CURRAN

Oratory is the peculiar gift of the Emerald Isle, and, among the crowd of celebrated men whom she can proudly point to, the name of Curran stands preeminent, whether we look at him as a most able lawyer, a first-rate debater, and, in a society boasting of Erskine, Macintosh, and Sheridan, the gayest wit and most brilliant conversationalist of the day. From the village of Newmarket, in Cork, of a poor and low origin, he, at nine years of age, attracted the attention of the rector, the Rev. Mr. Boyse, who sent him to Middleton School, and then to Dublin, where he was 'the wildest, wittiest, dreamiest student of old Trinity;' and, in the event of his being called before the fellows for wearing a dirty shirt, could only plead as an excuse, that he had but one. Poverty followed his steps for some years after this; instead of briefs to argue before the judge, he was amusing the idle crowd in the hall with his wit and eloquence. 'I had a family for whom I had no dinner,' he says, 'and a landlady for whom I had no rent. I had gone abroad in despondence, I came home almost in desperation. When I opened the door of my study, where Lavater could alone have found a library, the first object that presented itself was an immense folio of a brief, and twenty gold guineas wrapped up beside it.'

As with many other great lawyers, this was the turning-point; his skill in cross-examination was wonderful, judge and jury were alike amused, while the perjured witness trembled before his power, and the audience were entranced by his eloquence. His first great effort was in 1794, in defence of Archibald Rowan, who had signed an address in favour of Catholic emancipation. In spite of the splendid speech of his advocate, he was convicted; but the mob outside were determined to chair their favourite speaker. Curran implored them to desist, but a great brawny fellow roared out: 'Arrah, blood and turf! Pat, don't mind the little cratur; here, pitch him up this minute upon my showlder!' and thus was he carried to his carriage, and then drawn home.

After the miserable rebellion of 1798, it fell to Curran's part to defend almost all the prisoners and, being reminded by Lord Carleton that he would lose his gown, he replied with scorn: 'Well, my lord, his majesty may take the silk, but he must leave the stuff behind!' Most distressing was the task to a man of his sense of justice; the government arrayed against him, and every court filled with the military, yet with swords pointed at him, he cried: 'Assassinate me, you may; intimidate me, you cannot!' Added to this, came domestic sorrow.

His beautiful daughter fell in love with the unfortunate Emmet, who was executed in 1803, and she could not survive the shock, but drooped gradually and died; an

event which Moore immortalised in his songs, 'O breathe not his name, let it sleep in the shade;' and, 'She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps.' The gloom which had always affected Curran's mind became more settled; he resigned the Mastership of the Rolls in 1813, and sought alleviation in travelling, but in vain, his death took place at Brompton, on the 14th of October 1817. The witticisms which are attributed to him are numberless. 'Curran,' said a judge to him, whose wig being a little awry, caused some laughter in court, 'do you see anything ridiculous in this wig?' 'Nothing but the head, my lord;' was the reply. One day, at dinner, he sat opposite to Toler, who was called the 'hanging judge.' 'Curran,' said Toler, 'is that hung-beef before you?' 'Do you try it, my lord, and then it's sure to be!'

Lundy Foot, the celebrated tobacconist, asked Curran for a Latin motto for his coach. 'I have just hit on it,' said Curran, 'it is only two words, and it will explain your profession, your elevation, and contempt for the people's ridicule; and it has the advantage of being in two languages, Latin and English, just as the reader chooses. Put up, "Quid rides," upon your carriage.' The hatred he always felt for those who betrayed their country by voting for the Union, is shewn in the answer he gave to a lord who got his title for his support of the government measure. Meeting Curran near the Parliament House, in College Green, he said: 'Curran, what do they mean to do with this useless building? For my part, I hate the very sight of it.' 'I do not wonder at it, my lord,' said Curran contemptuously, 'I never yet heard of a murderer who was not afraid of a ghost.'

Curran, John Philpot, was born at Newmarket, County of Cork, 24th July 1750. His father was Seneschal of the Manor of Newmarket; his mother, Sarah Philpot, a woman of culture and feeling, had her memory stored with Irish legends. Her recitals cultivated the imaginative faculties of her son, and the tender love between them continued strong through life. We do not hear much of his brothers and sisters. Curran grew up a rough country lad, speaking Irish as well as English, fonder of amusement than of books. Mr. Boyse, a neighbouring clergyman, early took a liking to the boy, gave him a preliminary education, and then sent him to Midleton school, chiefly at his own cost. He entered Trinity College as a sizar, and obtained a scholarship in 1770. He was intended for the Church, and studied divinity, but never wrote more than two sermons- one for his friend "Dick Stack" (afterwards a Fellow of the College and author of a Treatise on Optics), the other preached by himself in the College Chapel as a task. In the college rows between "town and gown" he was a foremost combatant- in short, we are told, he was " the wittiest and dreamiest, the most classical and ambitious of the scamps of Trinity College." On coming of age he abandoned all thoughts of entering the Church, and, having graduated, went to London and entered at the Middle Temple. His address and utterance were then so defective that he was known as " Stuttering Jack Curran." By constant practice, declaiming before a looking-glass, and studying Shakspeare and Bolingbroke, he overcame natural deficiencies, and great was the surprise of the members of a debating club he occasionally attended, when one evening " Orator Mum" completely silenced an orator who had theretofore carried all before him. Thenceforward] he was a constant speaker in debating societies, where from his utterances in favour of Catholic rights he was called "The Little Jesuit of St. Omers." During his second year in London he married his cousin, Miss Creagh. Her fortune and some money supplied by his family supported them until he was called to the Irish Bar in 1775. He used to say, his wife and children were the chief furniture of his apartments, and as to rent it stood much the same chance of liquidation as the National Debt. On the occasion of his first appearance, making a motion before the Chancellor at the old Courts in Dublin, his original nervousness overmastered him, and he had to resign the case into the hands of a friend. His brilliant talents soon asserted themselves, however. The first year his fees amounted to £100, the second to between £100 and £200, and they continued to increase rapidly every year. He was materially assisted in his advancement at the Bar by the steady friendship of Lord Kilwarden, his political opponent. At the Cork Summer Assizes of 1780, he sprang at once into fame and popularity by acting as counsel for a Catholic clergyman who had been brutally horsewhipped by Lord Doneraile. Other lawyers on the circuit had feared to take up the case, and Curran secured a verdict for his client; having afterwards to fight a duel with a Captain St. Leger, and to endure the hostility of the Doneraile family. About this period we find him prior of the "Monks of the Screw," a literary and convivial club numbering amongst its

members the most brilliant men in Dublin-Grattan, Charlemont, Barry, Daly, Temple, Emmet, and others. The charter song of the society, written by Curran, is to be found in most collections of Irish ballad poetry. In 1783 he entered Parliament as member for Kilbeggan; three years afterwards he was returned for Rathcormack, which he represented until 1797. But meagre reports of his parliamentary speeches have been handed down to us. He spoke on Flood's Reform Bill in 1783, again on the right of the Commons to originate money bills; and his speech in February 1785, on the abuse of attachments by the King's Bench led to a duel with FitzGibbon. That on Catholic Emancipation delivered on 4th February 1792, is perhaps the only one worthy of his reputation as an orator. He showed "that a disunited people cannot long subsist, and declared that the certain result of a union would be that public spirit would die out in Ireland, while "fifteen or twenty couple of Irish members, might be found every session sleeping in their collars under the manger of the English minister." In 1797, with Grattan and other members, he retired, hopeless of being able to assuage revolution or stem the torrent of ministerial intrigue. It was at the Bar that Curran made his reputation as a brilliant orator, and his greatest flights of genius were in defence of the United Irishmen. He acted not alone as a paid counsel, but as a friend and adviser, sympathizing to a certain extent in their aspirations, and throwing his whole heart into their defence. On Hamilton Rowan's trial for seditious libel in 1793, he gave utterance to that well-remembered apostrophe to the spirit of liberty, under which, on British soil, the slave "stands redeemed, regenerated, and disenthralled by the irresistible genius of universal emancipation." His last effort in the trials of 1798 was for Wolfe Tone. He was not in Parliament to oppose the Union, which measure threw a cloud over the rest of his life. He even contemplated emigration to the United States. He had no sympathy with Emmet in 1803, and was little prepared to make allowance for Emmet's having become privately engaged to his daughter Sarah. Curran's treatment of her was most severe, and she had to find a home among strangers. On Pitt's death in 1806, Curran was appointed Master of the Rolls for Ireland, a position for which he was not very well qualified, and which he held but for eight years-resigning in 1814 upon a pension of some £3,000 per annum. After his resignation of this office he resided much at his mansion in Brompton, where he enjoyed the society of Erskine, Horne Tooke, Sheridan, the Prince Regent, Thomas Moore, and William Godwin. His latter days were embittered by domestic troubles. The depressed state of his mind may be gathered from one of his letters written at this period: "Everything I see disgusts and depresses me: I look back at the streaming of blood for so many years, and everything everywhere relapsed into its former degradation - France rechained, Spain again saddled for the priests, and Ireland, like a bastinadoed elephant, kneeling to receive the paltry rider." In the summer of 1817 he was attacked by paralysis at the table of his friend Thomas Moore, in London. After his return home, another attack supervened, and he succumbed in London, 14th October 1817, aged 67. A few days before his death, while dining with a friend, he hung down his head and burst into tears an allusion being made

to Irish politics. He was buried at Paddington; but his remains were in 1834 brought to Ireland and reinterred at Glasnevin, resting during the few days between their arrival and interment, in his friend Lord Cloncurry's mausoleum at Lyons. His own words were verified: "The last duties will be paid by that country on which they are devolved. Nor will it be for charity that a little earth will be given to my bones: tenderly will those duties be paid, as the debt of well-earned affection and of gratitude, not ashamed of her tears." His bust in St. Patrick's Cathedral is considered a striking likeness - one portraying the brilliancy of his talents. "Byron wrote of Curran: "The riches of his Irish imagination were exhaustless. I have heard that man speak more poetry than I have ever seen written, though I saw him seldom and but occasionally." Grattan's son writes: "He was a man of surprising natural talents. . . Give him a subject and he ornamented it in the best and brightest manner; he illumined it in the most brilliant and dazzling style. His mind was a perfect prism, and cast the colours of the rainbow upon whatever passed through it. . . Peace to his ashes. His faults stand redeemed by the splendour of his talents, and fade away before the virtuous affection he bore his native country." Curran lived in Dublin, first on Redmond's- hill, then in Fade-street, and afterwards on Hog-hill, now St. Andrew-street, About 1780 he removed to 12 (now 4) Ely-place, in 1807 to Harcourt-street, and he finally occupied 80 Stephen's-green. His suburban residence, the Priory, near Rathfarnham, became specially endeared to him as the burial place of a beloved daughter Gertrude. Curran was low-sized, and his features when in repose were not prepossessing. Lord Brougham speaks of him as "the greatest orator after Grattan and Plunket that Ireland has produced, and in every respect worthy of being placed on a line with the great masters of speech." His witticisms would fill a small volume. His rejoinder to a venal judge, who in his early days at the Bar remarked he "suspected his law library was rather contracted," was singularly dignified: "It is very true, my Lord, that I am poor, and the circumstance has somewhat curtailed my library. My books are not numerous, but they are select, and I hope they have been perused with proper dispositions. I have prepared myself for this high profession rather by the study of a few good books, than by the composition of a great many bad ones. I am not ashamed of my poverty; but I should be ashamed of my wealth, could I have stooped to acquire it by servility and corruption. If I rise not to rank, I shall at least be honest; and should I ever cease to be so, many an example shows me that an ill-gained elevation, by making me the more conspicuous, would only make me the more universally and more notoriously contemptible."

Famous Quotes from: John Philpot Curran

It is the common fate of the indolent to see their rights become a prey to the active. **The condition upon which God hath given liberty to man is eternal vigilance**; which condition if he break, servitude is at once the consequence of his crime and the punishment of his guilt. (1790)

Topic: Politics / Government

Source: None

Dear Erin, how sweetly thy green bosom rises! An emerald set in the ring of the sea. Each blade of thy meadows my faithful heart prizes, Thou queen of the west, the world's cushla ma chree.

Topic: Ireland

Source: Cushla ma Chree

To brand man with infamy, and let him free, is an absurdity that peoples our forests with assassins.

Topic: Liberty

Source: Speech

The first inventions of commerce are, like those of all other arts, cunning and short-sighted.

Topic: Politics / Government

Source: None