

## BYRON'S THREE PARLIAMENTARY SPEECHES<sup>1</sup>

In 1812, the English House of Lords was one of the most corrupt and obscurantist bastions of entrenched privilege yet devised by man. It was not an arena in which reasoned argument could expect a sympathetic hearing. For the Tory majority in the Lords, whatever was, was right, and their Lordships were both. If the impatient Whig Byron had a political ambition, the Lords was not the place where it would flourish – and it did not. Three speeches are all he's recorded as having given. His friend Hobhouse – elected to the Commons in 1820 – had the doggedness and perseverance which he lacked.

His seemingly casual attitude to his political career, and to these speeches, is seen in two extracts. First, from Moore's Life:

On the 2d of June, in presenting a petition to the House of Lords, he made his third and last appearance as an orator, in that assembly. In his way home from the House that day, he called, I remember, at my lodgings, and found me dressing in a very great hurry for dinner. He was, I recollect, in a state of most humorous exaltation after his display, and, while I hastily went on with my task in the dressing-room, continued to walk up and down the adjoining chamber, spouting forth for me, in a sort of mock heroic voice, detached sentences of the speech he had just been delivering. "I told them," he said, "that it was a most flagrant violation of the Constitution—that, if such things were permitted, there was an end of English freedom, and that ——"—"But what was this dreadful grievance?" I asked, interrupting him in his eloquence.—"The grievance?" he repeated, pausing as if to consider—"Oh, *that* I forget." It is impossible, of course, to convey an idea of the dramatic humour with which he gave effect to these words; but his look and manner on such occasions were irresistibly comic; and it was, indeed, rather in such turns of fun and oddity, than in any more elaborate exhibition of wit, that the pleasantry of his conversation consisted.

Though it is evident that, after the brilliant success of Childe Harold, he had ceased to think of Parliament as an arena of ambition, yet, as a field for observation, we may take for granted it was not unstudied by him. To a mind of such quick and various views, every place and pursuit presented some aspect of interest; and whether in the ball-room, the boxing-school, or the senate, all must have been, by genius like his, turned to profit.<sup>2</sup>

Second, from Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron*:

"I only addressed the House twice [*in fact three times*], and made little impression. They told me that my manner of speaking was not dignified enough for the Lords, but was more calculated for the Commons. I believe it was a Don Juan kind of speech. The two occasions were, the Catholic Question, and" (I believe he said) "some Manufacturing affair".<sup>3</sup>

The casual tone of one who has been disappointed and is trying to make light of it *may* be audible here – individuals must judge.

---

**1: I am grateful to Emily Cochran for help in preparing these texts.**

**2:** Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron, with notices of his Life* 2 vols 1830, I pp.402-3.

**3:** Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron*, ed. Lovell (Princeton 1966), p.229.

### **Debate on the Frame-Work Bill, February 27th 1812:**

*[This is one of Byron's most famous public statements. The stocking frame-workers of his county, Nottinghamshire, had been breaking up the new, more efficient machinery which was pushing most of them into destitution; the militia had been called out – led by Jack Musters, Byron's successful rival for the hand of Mary Chaworth – and much damage done to the manufacturers' property. The Act before the House proposed increasing the penalty for frame-breaking from fourteen years' transportation, which is what it had been, to hanging.]*

The order of the day for the second reading of this Bill being read, Lord Byron rose, and (for the first time) addressed their Lordships as follows: –

My Lords; the subject now submitted to your Lordships for the first time, though new to the House, is by no means new to the Country. I believe it had occupied the serious thoughts of all descriptions of persons, long before its introduction to the notice of that legislature, whose interference alone could be of real service. As a person in some degree connected with the suffering county, though a stranger not only to this House in general, but to almost every individual whose attention I presume to solicit, I must claim some portion of your Lordships' indulgence, whilst I offer a few observations on a question in which I confess myself deeply interested.

To enter into any detail of the riots would be superfluous: the House is already aware that every outrage short of actual bloodshed, has been perpetrated, and the proprietors of the Frames obnoxious to the rioters, and all persons supposed to be connected with them, have been liable to insult and violence. During the short time I recently passed in Nottinghamshire, not twelve hours elapsed without some fresh act of violence; and on the day I left the county I was informed that forty Frames had been broken the proceeding Evening, as usual, without resistance and without detection.

Such was then the state of that county, and such I have reason to believe it to be at this moment. But whilst these outrages must be admitted to exist to an alarming extent, it cannot be denied that they have arisen from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress: The perseverance of these miserable men in their proceedings, tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious, body of people, into the commission so hazardous to themselves, their families, and the community. At the time to which I allude, the town and county were burthened with large detachments of the military; the police was in motion, the magistrates assembled, yet all movements, civil and military, had led to – Nothing. Not a single instance had occurred of the apprehension of any real delinquents had been detected; men, liable to conviction, on the clearest evidence, of the capital crime of Poverty; men, who had been nefariously guilty of lawfully begetting several children, whom, thanks to the times! They were unable to maintain. Considerable injury has been done to the proprietors of the improved Frames. These machines were to them an advantage, inasmuch as they superseded the necessity of employing a number of workmen, who were left in consequence to starve. By the adoption of one species of Frame in particular, one man performed the work of many, and the superfluous labourers were thrown out of employment. Yet it is to be observed, that the work thus executed was inferior in quality; not marketable at home, and merely hurried over with a view to exportation. It was called in the cant of the trade, by the name of “Spider work.” The rejected workmen, in the blindness of their ignorance, instead of rejoicing at these improvements in arts so beneficial to mankind, conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in Mechanism. In the foolishness of their hearts they imagined, that the maintenance and well doing of the industrious poor, were objects of grater consequence than the enrichment of a few individuals by any improvement, in the implements of trade, which threw the workmen out of

employment, and rendered the labourer unworthy of his hire. And it must be confessed that although the adoption of the enlarged machinery in that state of our commerce which the County once boasted, might have been beneficial to the Master without being detrimental to the servant; yet, in the present situation of our manufactures, rotting in warehouses, without a prospect of exportation, with the demand for work and workmen equally diminished; Frames of this description tend materially to aggravate the distress and discontent of the disappointed sufferers. But the real cause of these distresses and consequent disturbances lies deeper. When we are told that these men are leagued together not only for the destruction of their own comfort, but of their very means of subsistence, can we forget that it is the bitter policy, the destructive warfare of the last eighteen years, which has destroyed their comfort, your comfort, all men's comfort? That policy, which, originated with "great statesmen now no more," has survived the dead to become a curse on the living, unto the third and fourth generation! These men never destroyed their looms till they were become useless, worse than useless; till they were become the actual implements to their exertions in obtaining their daily bread. Can you, then, wonder in times like these, when bankruptcy, convicted fraud, and imputed felony are found in a station not far beneath that of your Lordships, the lowest, though once most useful portion of the people, should forget their duty in their distresses, and become only less guilty than one of their representatives? But while the exalted offender can find means to baffle the law, new capital punishments must be devised, new snares of death must be spread for the wretched mechanic, who is famished into guilt. These men were willing to dig, but the spade was in other hands; they were not ashamed to beg, but there was none to relieve them: their own means of subsistence were cut off, all other employments pre-occupied, and their excesses, however to be deplored and condemned, can hardly be subject of surprise.

It has been stated that the persons in the temporary possession of Frames connive at their destruction; if this be proved upon enquiry, it were necessary that such material accessories to the crime, should be principals in the punishment. But I did hope, that any measure proposed by his Majesty's government, for your Lordships' decision, would have had conciliation for its basis; of, if that were hopeless, that some previous enquiry, some deliberation would have been deemed requisite; not what we should have been called at once without examination, and without cause, to pass sentences by wholesale, and sign death-warrants blindfold. But, admitting that these men had no cause of complaint; that the grievances of them and their employers were alike groundless; that they deserved the worst; what inefficiency, what imbecility had been evinced in the method chosen to reduce them! Why were the military called out to be made a mockery of, if they were to be called out at all? As far as the difference of seasons would permit, they have merely parodied the Summer campaign of Major Sturgeon; and, indeed, the whole proceedings, civil and military, seemed on the model of those of the Mayor and Corporation of Garratt.<sup>4</sup> – Such marchings and counter-marchings! From Bulwell to Basford, from Basford to Mansfield! And when at length the detachments arrived at their destination, in all "the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war,"<sup>5</sup> they came just in time to witness the mischief which *had* been done, and ascertain the escape of the perpetrators, to collect the "spoila opima"<sup>6</sup> in the fragments of broken frames, and return to their quarters amidst the derision of old women, and the hootings of children. Now, though in a free country, it were to be wished, that our military should never be too formidable, at least to ourselves, I cannot see the policy of placing them in situations where they can only be made ridiculous. As the Sword is the worst argument that can be used, so should not be the last. In this instance it has been the first; but providentially as yet only in the Scabbard. The present measure will, indeed, pluck it from the Sheath; yet had proper meetings been held in the earlier stages of these riots, had the grievances of these men and their masters

---

4: B. refers to Samuel Foote's 1764 play *The Mayor of Garratt*.

5: *Othello*, III iii 358.

6: "The spoils of war."

(for they also had their grievances) been fairly weighed and justly examined, I do think that means might have been devised to restore these workmen to their avocations, and tranquillity to the County. At present the county suffers from the double infliction of an idle military and a starving population. In that state of apathy have we been plunged so long, that now for the first time the House has been officially apprized of these disturbances? All this has been transacting within 130 miles of London, and yet we, “good easy men, have deemed full sure our greatness was a ripening,”<sup>7</sup> and have sat down to enjoy our foreign triumphs in the midst of domestic calamity. But all cities you have taken, all the armies which have retreated before your leaders, are but paltry subjects of self congratulation, if your land divides itself, and your dragoons and your executioners must be let loose against your fellow citizens. – You must call these men a mob, desperate, dangerous, and ignorant; and seem to think that the only way to quiet the “*Bellua multorum capitum*”<sup>8</sup> is to lop off a few superfluous heads. But even a mob may be better reduced to reason by a mixture of conciliation and firmness, than by additional irritation and redoubled penalties. Are we aware of our obligations to a *Mob*? It is the *Mob* that labour in your fields and serve in your houses, – that man your navy, and recruit your army, – that have enabled you to defy all the world, and can also defy you when Neglect and Calamity have driven them to despair. You may call the people a *Mob*; but do not forget, that a *Mob* often speaks the sentiments of the People. And here I must remark, with what alacrity you are accustomed to fly to the succour of your distressed allies, leaving the distressed of your own country to the care of Providence or – the Parish. When the Portuguese suffered under the retreat of the French, every arm was stretched out, every hand was opened, from the rich man’s largess to the widow’s mite, all was bestowed to enable them to rebuild their villages and replenish their granaries. And at this moment, when thousands of misguided but most unfortunate fellow-countrymen are struggling with the extremes of hardships and hunger, as your Charity began abroad it should end at home. A much less sum, a tithe of the bounty bestowed on Portugal, even if those men (which I cannot admit without enquiry) could not have been restored unnecessary the tender mercies of the bayonet and the gibbet. But doubtless our friends have too many foreign claims to admit a prospect of domestic relief; though never did such objects demand it. I have traversed the seat of war in the Peninsula, I have been in some of the most oppressed provinces of Turkey, but never under the most despotic of infidel governments did I behold such squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of Christian country. And what are your remedies? After months of inaction, and months of action worse than inactivity, at length comes forth the grand specific, the never-failing nostrum of all state physicians, from the days of Draco<sup>9</sup> to the present time. After felling the pulse and shaking the head over the patient, prescribing the usual course of warm water and bleeding, the warm water of your mawkish police, and the lancets of your military, these convulsions must terminate in death, the sure consummation of the prescriptions of all political Sangrados.<sup>10</sup> Setting aside the palpable injustice and the certain inefficiency of the Bill, are there not capital punishments sufficient in your statutes? Is there not blood enough upon your penal code, that more must be poured forth to ascend to Heaven and testify against you? How will you carry the Bill into effect? Can you commit a whole county to their own prisons? Will you erect a gibbet in every field and hang up men like scarecrows? Or will you proceed (as you must to bring this measure into effect) by decimation? Place the county under martial law? Depopulate and lay waste all around you? And restore Sherwood Forest as an acceptable gift to the crown, in its former condition of a royal chase and an asylum for Outlaws? Are these the remedies for a starving and desperate populace? Will the famished wretch who has braved your

---

7: *Henry VIII* III ii, 357-8.

8: “The many-headed monster.”

9: Draco was the Athenian law-giver (late seventh century B.C.) who suggested the death penalty for almost every offence.

10: Sangrado is the quack doctor in Alain René le Sage’s popular novel *Gil Blas* (1735).

bayonets, be appalled by your gibbets? When death is a relief, and the only relief it appears you will afford him, will he be dragooned into tranquillity? Will that which could not be effected by your grenadiers, be accomplished by your “Jack Ketches”?<sup>11</sup> If you proceed by the forms of law where is your evidence? Those who have refused to impeach their accomplices, when transportation only was the punishment, will hardly be tempted to witness against them when death is the penalty. With all due deference to the noble Lords opposite, I think a little investigation, some previous enquiry would induce even them to change their purpose. That most favourite state measure, so marvellously efficacious in many and recent instances, *temporizing*, would not be without its advantages in this. When a proposal is made to emancipate or relieve, you hesitate, deliberate for years, you temporize and tamper in the minds of men; but a death-bill must be passed off hand, without a thought of the consequences. Sure I am from what I have heard, and from what has been seen, that to pass the Bill under the existing circumstances, without enquiry, without deliberation, would only be to add injustice to irritation, and barbarity to neglect. The framers of such a Bill must be content to inherit the honours of that Athenian lawgiver whose edicts were said to be written not in ink but in blood. But suppose it past; suppose one of these men, as I have seen them, – meagre with famine, sullen with despair, careless of a life which you Lordships are perhaps about to value at something less than the price of a stocking-frame – suppose this man, and there are ten thousand such from whom you may select your victims, dragged into court, to be tried for this new offence, by this new law; still, there are two things wanting to convict and condemn him; and these are, in my opinion, – Twelve Butchers for a Jury, and a Jefferies for a Judge!<sup>12</sup>

*[The Act was passed, and remained in effect until March 1814. No one was hanged as a result of it.]*

---

**11:** Common nickname for the public executioner, after John Ketch, who killed many of Judge Jefferies’ victims. Later, B. affected to confuse the words “Keats” and “Ketch.”

**12:** Judge Jeffreys (1648-89) legendary for the savage punishments he gave the followers of the Monmouth Rebellion in 1685.

**Debate on the Earl of Donoughmore's Motion for a Committee on the Roman Catholic Claims, April 21st, 1812:**

*[Roman Catholics had, since the reformation, and even more since the Glorious Revolution of 1688, been regarded as potential traitors, and been debarred from voting. Irish Catholics had the right to vote, but could not be M.Ps. By 1812 the idea that a Catholic was ipso facto an anti-patriot should have worn thin; Jacobins and radicals should have by then taken over as Britain's number one bogey man; but prejudice can and could see nothing, and it was not until 1829 that a very unhappy George IV gave propertied Catholics the right to sit in parliament. Byron's speech is a witty and inventive statement of the Whig position, arguing for their emancipation. In its last section he attacks the government in more general terms; but the Tories, with Lord Liverpool as Prime Minister, ruled until well after his death.]*

Lord BYRON rose and said :—

My Lords,—The question before the House has been so frequently, fully, and ably discussed,<sup>13</sup> and never perhaps more ably than on this night, that it would be difficult to adduce new arguments for or against it. But with each discussion difficulties have been removed, objections have been canvassed and refuted, and some of the former opponents of Catholic Emancipation have at length conceded to the expediency of relieving the petitioners. In conceding thus much, however, a new objection is started; it is not the time, say they, or it is an improper time, or there is time enough yet. In some degree I concur with those who say it is not the time exactly; that time is past; better had it been for the country that the Catholics possessed at this moment their proportion of our privileges, that their nobles held their due weight in our councils, than that we should be assembled to discuss their claims. It had indeed been better—

“Non tempore tali  
Cogere concilium cum muros adsidet hostis.”<sup>14</sup>

The enemy is without,<sup>15</sup> and distress within. It is too late to cavil on doctrinal points, when we must unite in defence of things more important, than the mere ceremonies of religion. It is indeed singular, that we are called together to deliberate, not on the God we adore, for in that we are agreed; not about the King we obey, for to him we are loyal; but how far a difference in the ceremonials of worship, how far believing not too little, but too much (the worst that can be imputed to the Catholics), how far too much devotion to their God may incapacitate our fellow-subjects from effectually serving their King.

Much has been said, within and without doors, of Church and State; and although those venerable words have been too often prostituted to the most despicable of party purposes, we cannot hear them too often: all, I presume, are the advocates of Church and State,— the Church of Christ, and the state of Great Britain; but not a state of exclusion and despotism; not an intolerant Church; not a Church militant, which renders itself liable to the very objection urged against the Romish communion, and in a greater degree, for the Catholic merely withholds its spiritual benediction (and even that is doubtful), but our Church, or rather our churchmen, not only refuse to the Catholic their spiritual grace, but all temporal blessings whatsoever. It was an observation of the great Lord Peterborough, made within these walls, or with the walls where the Lords then assembled, that he was for a “parliamentary king and a parliamentary constitution, but not a parliamentary God and a parliamentary religion.”<sup>16</sup> The interval of a century has not

**13:** The question of Roman Catholic Emancipation had been debated four times since 1805.

**14:** Virgil, *Aeneid* XI, 303-4: “It is not the time to hold a counsel, while the enemy is besieging our walls.”

**15:** England was still at war with France when B. made this speech.

**16:** The Earl of Peterborough said this in 1721.

weakened the force of the remark. It is indeed time that we should leave off these petty cavils on frivolous points, these Lillipution sophistries, whether our “eggs are best broken at the broad or narrow end.”<sup>17</sup>

The opponents of the Catholics may be divided into two classes; those who assert that the Catholics have too much already, and those who allege that the lower orders, at least, have nothing more to require. We are told by the former, that the Catholics never will be contented: by the latter, that they are already too happy. The last paradox is sufficiently refuted by the present as by all past Petitions: it might as well be said, that the Negroes did not desire to be emancipated; but this is an unfortunate comparison, for you have already delivered them out of the house of bondage without any Petition on their part, but many from their task-masters to a contrary effect; and for myself, when I consider this, I pity the Catholic peasantry for not having the good fortune to be born black. But the Catholics are contented, or at least ought to be, as we are told; I shall, therefore, proceed to touch on a few of those circumstances which so marvellously contribute to their exceeding contentment. They are not allowed the free exercise of their religion in the regular army; the Catholic soldier cannot absent himself from the service of the Protestant clergyman; and unless he is quartered in Ireland, or in Spain, where can he find eligible opportunities of attending his own? The permission of Catholic chaplains to the Irish militia regiments was conceded as a special favour, and not till after years of remonstrance, although an Act, passed in 1793, established it as a right. But are the Catholics properly protected in Ireland? Can the Church purchase a rood of land whereon to erect a chapel? No! all the places of worship are built on leases of trust of sufferance from the laity, easily broken, and often betrayed. The moment any irregular wish, and casual caprice of the benevolent landlord meets with opposition, the doors are barred against the congregation. This has happened continually, but in no instance more glaringly than at the town of Newton Barry, in the county of Wexford.<sup>18</sup> The Catholics enjoying no regular chapel, as a temporary expedient hired two barns; which, being thrown into one, served for public worship. At this time, there was quartered opposite to the spot an officer whose mind appears to have been deeply imbued with those prejudices which the Protestant Petitions now on the table prove to have been fortunately eradicated from the more rational portion of the people; and when the Catholics were assembled on the Sabbath as usual, in peace and good-will towards men, for the worship of their God and yours, they found the chapel door closed, and were told that if they did not immediately retire (and they were told this by a Yeoman officer and a magistrate), the Riot Act should be read, and the assembly dispersed at the point of the bayonet! This was complained of to the middle-man of government, the Secretary at the Castle in 1806, and the answer was (in lieu of redress), that he would cause a letter to be written to the colonel, to prevent, if possible, the recurrence of similar disturbances. Upon this fact no very great stress need be laid; but it tends to prove that while the Catholic Church has not power to purchase land for its chapels to stand upon, the laws for its protection are of no avail. In the mean time, the Catholics are at the mercy of every “pelting petty officer,” whom may choose to play his “fantastic tricks before high heaven,”<sup>19</sup> to insult his God, and injure his fellow-creatures.

Every schoolboy, any footboy (such have held commissions in our service), any footboy who can exchange his shoulder-knot for an epaulette, may perform all this and more against the Catholic by virtue of that very authority delegated to him by his sovereign for the express purpose of defending his fellow-subjects to the last drop of his blood, without discrimination or distinction between Catholic and Protestant.

---

**17:** Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, I, 4.

**18:** Hobhouse had been in Ireland with the militia between August 23rd 1811 and February 16th 1812. B.'s knowledge of Irish affairs may come in large part from him (B.L. Add. Mss. 56530, ff. 28r.-37r.)

**19:** *Measure for Measure*, II ii, 112 and 118.

Have the Irish Catholics the full benefit of trial by jury? They have not; they never can have until they are permitted to share the privilege of serving as sheriffs and under-sheriffs. Of this a striking example occurred at the last Enniskillen assizes. A yeoman was arraigned for the murder of a Catholic named Macvournagh; three respectable, uncontradicted witnesses, deposed that they saw the prisoner load, take aim, fire at, and kill the said Macvournagh. This was properly commented on by the judge; but, to the astonishment of the bar, and indignation of the court, the Protestant jury acquitted the accused. So glaring was the partiality, that Mr. Justice Osborne felt it his duty to bind over the acquitted, but not absolved assassin, in large recognizances; thus for a time taking away his licence to kill Catholics.

Are the very laws passed in their favour observed? They are rendered nugatory in trivial as in serious cases. By a late Act, Catholic chaplains are permitted in gaols; but in Fermanagh county the grand jury lately persisted in presenting a suspended clergyman for the office, thereby evading the statute, notwithstanding the most pressing remonstrances of a most respectable magistrate named Fletcher to the contrary. Such is law, such is justice, for the happy, free, contented Catholic!

It has been asked, in another place, Why do not the rich Catholics endow foundations for the education of the priesthood? Why do you not permit them to do so? Why are all such bequests subject to the interference, the vexatious, arbitrary, peculating interference of the Orange commissioners for charitable donations?

As to Maynooth college,<sup>20</sup> in no instance, except at the time of its foundation, when a noble Lord, (Camden), at the head of the Irish administration,<sup>21</sup> did appear to interest himself in its advancement, and during the government of a noble Duke, (Bedford),<sup>22</sup> who, like his ancestors, has ever been the friend of freedom and mankind, and who has not so far adopted the selfish policy of the day as to exclude the Catholics from the number of his fellow-creatures; with these exceptions, in no instance has that institution been properly encouraged. There was indeed a time when the Catholic clergy were conciliated, while the Union was pending,<sup>23</sup> that Union which could not be carried without them, while their assistance was requisite in procuring addresses from the Catholic counties; then they were cajoled and caressed, feared and flattered, and given to understand that “the Union would do everything”: but the moment it was passed, they were driven back with contempt into their former obscurity.

In the conduct pursued towards Maynooth college, every thing is done to irritate and perplex — every thing is done to efface the slightest impression of gratitude from the Catholic mind; the very hay made upon the lawn, the fat and tallow of the beef and mutton allowed, must be paid for and accounted upon oath. It is true, this economy in miniature cannot sufficiently be commended, particularly at a time when only the insect defaulters of the Treasury, your Hunts and your Chinnerys,<sup>24</sup> when only those “gilded bugs”<sup>25</sup> can escape the microscopic eye of ministers. But when you come forward, session after session, as your paltry pittance is wrung from you with wrangling and reluctance, to boast of your liberality, well might the Catholic exclaim, in the words of Prior —

“To John I owe some obligation,  
But John unluckily thinks fit  
To publish it to all the nation,

---

**20:** Maynooth College in County Kildare was the first college permitted for the education of Catholic priests.

**21:** The Marquis of Camden had been Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1795.

**22:** The Duke of Bedford had been Lord Lieutenant of Ireland from 1755 to 1761.

**23:** The Act of Union, dissolving the Dublin Parliament and enabling Ireland to be governed from Westminster, had come into effect in 1801.

**24:** Hunt and Chinnery were recent embezzlers from government funds.

**25:** Pope, *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, 309.



So John and I are more than quit.”<sup>26</sup>

Some persons have compared the Catholics to the beggar in *Gil Blas*:<sup>27</sup> who made them beggars? Who are enriched with the spoils of their ancestors? And cannot you relieve the beggar when your fathers have made him such? If you are disposed to relieve him at all, cannot you do it without flinging your farthings in his face? As a contrast, however, to this beggarly benevolence, let us look at the Protestant Charter Schools; to them you have lately granted 41,000*l.*: thus are they supported; and how are they recruited? Montesquieu observes on the English constitution, that the model may be found in Tacitus, where the historian describes the policy of the Germans, and adds, “This beautiful system was taken from the woods;”<sup>28</sup> so in speaking of the charter schools, it may be observed, that this beautiful system was taken from the gipsies. These schools are recruited in the same manner as the Janissaries at the time of their enrolment under Amurath,<sup>29</sup> and the gipsies of the present day, with stolen children, with children decoyed and kidnapped from their Catholic connections by their rich and powerful Protestant neighbours: this is notorious, and one instance may suffice to show in what manner:— The sister of a Mr. Carthy (a Catholic gentleman of very considerable property) died, leaving two girls, who were immediately marked out as proselytes, and conveyed to the charter school of Coolgreny; their uncle, on being apprised of the fact, which took place during his absence, applied for the restitution of his nieces, offering to settle an independence on these his relations; his request was refused, and not till after five years’ struggle, and the interference of very high authority, could this Catholic gentleman obtain back his nearest of kindred from a charity charter school. In this manner are proselytes obtained, and mingled with the offspring of such Protestants as may avail themselves of the institution. And how are they taught? A catechism is put into their hands, consisting of, I believe, forty-five pages, in which are three questions relative to the Protestant religion; one of these queries is. “Where was the Protestant religion before Luther?” Answer: “In the Gospel.” The remaining forty-four pages and a half regard the damnable idolatry of Papists!

Allow me to ask our spiritual pastors and master, is this training up a child in the way which he should go? Is this the religion of the Gospel before the time of Luther? That religion which preaches “Peace on earth, and glory to God”? Is it bringing up infants to be men or devils? Better would it be to send them any where than teach them such doctrines; better send them to those islands in the South Seas, where they might more humanely learn to become cannibals; it would be less disgusting that they were brought up to devour the dead, than persecute the living. Schools do you call them? call them rather dunghills, where the viper of intolerance deposits her young, that when their teeth are cut and their poison is mature, they may issue forth, filthy and venomous, to sting the Catholic. But are these the doctrines of the Church of England, or of churchmen? No, the most enlightened churchmen are of a different opinion. What says Paley? “I perceive no reason why men of different religious persuasions should not sit upon the same bench, deliberate in the same council, or fight in the same ranks, as well as men of various religious opinions upon any controverted topic of natural history, philosophy, or ethics.”<sup>30</sup> I know nothing of his orthodoxy, but who will deny that he was an ornament to the church, to human nature, to Christianity?

I shall not dwell upon the grievance of tithes, so severely felt by the peasantry; but it may be proper to observe, that there is an addition to the burden, a percentage to the gatherer, whose interest it thus becomes to rate them as highly as possible, and we know that in many large livings in Ireland the only resident Protestants are the tithe proctor and his family.

**26:** B. quotes, with his usual fearless inaccuracy, an *Epigram* by Matthew Prior.

**27:** *Gil Blas*, referred to also in B.’s first speech, above..

**28:** B. quotes Montesquieu, *L’Esprit des Lois*, I, xi, quoting Tacitus, *Germania*.

**29:** The Janissaries were the Turkish imperial bodyguard. For Sultan Amurath, see *Henry IV 2*, V ii 48.

**30:** William Paley was an Anglican theologian much studied at Cambridge. B. quotes his essay *Of Religious Establishments and Toleration*.

Amongst many causes of irritation, too numerous for recapitulation, there is one in the militia not to be passed over,— I mean the existence of Orange lodges amongst the privates; can the officers deny this? And if such lodges do exist, do they, can they tend to promote harmony amongst the man, who are thus individually separated in society, although mingled in the ranks? And is this general system of persecution to be permitted; or is it to be believed that with such a system the Catholics can or ought to be contented? If they are, they belie human nature; they are then, indeed, unworthy to be any thing but the slaves you have made them. The facts stated are from most respectable authority, or I should not have dared in this place, or any place, to hazard this avowal.<sup>31</sup> If exaggerated, there are plenty as willing, as I believe them to be unable, to disprove them. Should it be objected that I never was in Ireland, I beg leave to observe, that it is as easy to know something of Ireland, without having been there, as it appears with some to have been born, bred, and cherished there, and yet remain ignorant of its best interests.

But there are who assert that the Catholics have already been too much indulged. See (cry they) what has been done: we have given them one entire college; we allow them food and raiment, the full enjoyment of the element, and leave to fight for us as long as they have limbs and lives to offer; and yet they are never to be satisfied! – Generous and just declaimers! To this, and to this only, amount the whole of your arguments, when stript of their sophistry. Those personages remind me of a story of a certain drummer, who, being called upon in the course of duty to administer punishment to a friend tied to the halberts, was requested to flog high, he did – to flog low, he did – to flog in the middle, he did,— high, low, down the middle, and up again but all in vain; the patient continued his complaints with the most provoking pertinacity, until the drummer, exhausted and angry, flung down his scourge, exclaiming, “The devil burn you, there’s no pleasing you, flog where one will!” Thus it is, you have flogged the Catholic high, low, here, there, and every where, and then you wonder he is not pleased. It is true that time, experience, and that weariness which attends even the exercise of barbarity, have taught you to flog a little more gently; but still you continue to lay on the lash, and will so continue, till perhaps the rod may be wrested from your hands, and applied to the backs of yourselves and your posterity.

It was said by somebody in a former debate, (I forgot by whom, and am not very anxious to remember,) if the Catholics are emancipated, why not the Jews? If this sentiment was dictated by compassion for the Jews, it might deserve attention, but as a sneer against the Catholic, what is it but the language of Shylock transferred from his daughter’s marriage to Catholic emancipation –

“Would any of the tribe of Barabbas  
Should have it rather than a Christian!”<sup>32</sup>

I presume a Catholic is a Christian, even in the opinion of him whose taste only can be called in question for this preference of the Jews.

It is a remark often quoted of Dr. Johnson, (whom I take to be almost as good authority as the gentle apostle of intolerance, Dr. Duigenan,)<sup>33</sup> that he who could entertain serious apprehensions of danger to the church in these times, would have “cried fire in the deluge.” This is more than a metaphor; for a remnant of these antediluvians appear actually to have come down to us, with fire in their mouths and water in their brains, to disturb and perplex mankind with their whimsical outcries. And as it is an infallible symptom of that distressing malady with which I conceive them to be afflicted (so any doctor will inform you Lordships), for the unhappy invalids to perceive a flame perpetually flashing before their eyes, particularly when their eyes are shut

---

**31:** Hobhouse found the officers of the Wexford militia “all most gentlemanly ... protestants all ... violent against the catholics.” B. had written to him on January 16th 1812: “*Do* leave Ireland, I fear your Catholics will find work for you, surely *you* won’t fight against them. – Will you?” (BLJ II 155).

**32:** *The Merchant of Venice*, IV i, 291-2; misquoted.

**33:** Patrick Duigenan was a law professor at Trinity College Dublin, and a bigoted hater of Catholics.

(as those of the persons to whom I allude have long been), it is impossible to convince these poor creatures that the fire against which they are perpetually warning us and themselves is nothing but an *Ignis fatuus* of their own drivelling imaginations. “What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug can scour that fancy thence?”<sup>34</sup> – it is impossible, they are given over,— theirs is the true

“Caput insanabile tribus Anticyris.”<sup>35</sup>

These are your true Protestants. Like Bayle,<sup>36</sup> who protested against all sects whatsoever, so do they protest against Catholic Petitions, Protestant Petitions, all redress, all that reason, humanity, policy, justice, and common sense can urge against the delusions of their absurd delirium. These are the persons who reverse the fable of the mountain that brought forth a mouse;<sup>37</sup> they are the mice who conceive themselves in labour with mountains.

To return to the Catholics: suppose the Irish were actually contented under their disabilities; suppose them capable of such a bull as not to desire deliverance, — ought we not to wish it for ourselves? Have we nothing to gain by their emancipation? What resources have been wasted? What talents have been lost by the selfish system of exclusion? You already know the value of Irish aid; at this moment the defence of England is intrusted to the Irish militia; at this moment, while the starving people are rising in the fierceness of despair, the Irish are faithful to their trust.<sup>38</sup> But till equal energy is imparted throughout by the extension of freedom, you cannot enjoy the full benefit of the strength which you are glad to interpose between you and destruction. Ireland has done much, about will do more. At this moment the only triumph obtained through long years of continental disaster has been achieved by an Irish general:<sup>39</sup> it is true he is not a Catholic; had he been so, we should have been deprived of his exertions: but I presume no one will assert that his religion would have impaired his talents or diminished his patriotism; though, in that case, he must have conquered in the ranks, for he never could have commanded an army.

But he is fighting the battles of the Catholics abroad; his noble brother has this night advocated their cause,<sup>40</sup> with an eloquence which I shall not depreciate by the humble tribute of my panegyric; whilst a third of his kindred, as unlike as unequal, has been combating against his Catholic brethren in Dublin, with circular letters, edicts, proclamations, arrests, and dispersions;— all the vexatious implements of petty warfare that could be wielded by the mercenary guerrillas of government, clad in the rusty armour of their obsolete statutes. Your lordships will doubtless divide new honours between the Saviour of Portugal, and the Disperser of Delegates.<sup>41</sup> It is singular, indeed, to observe the difference between our foreign and domestic policy; if Catholic Spain, faithful Portugal, or the no less Catholic and faithful king of the one Sicily,<sup>42</sup> (of which, by the way, you have lately deprived him,) stand in need of succour, away goes a fleet and an army, an ambassador and a subsidy, sometimes to fight pretty hardly, generally to negotiate very badly, and always to pay very dearly for our Popish allies. But let four millions of fellow-subjects pray for relief, who fight and pay and labour in your behalf, they must be treated as aliens; and although their “father’s house has many mansions.” There is no resting-place for them. Allow me to ask, are you not fighting for the emancipation of Ferdinand

---

**34:** *Macbeth*, V iii 55-6, deliberately mangled.

**35:** Horace, *Ars Poetica*, 300, inverted: “... his head, which the three Anteyrasas would not be able to cure.”

**36:** Pierre Bayle, French encyclopaedist. His *Historical and Critical Dictionary* was one of B.’s favourite books.

**37:** Another allusion to Horace’s *Ars Poetica*: see 139.

**38:** Compare *Don Juan* VIII, 126, 7-8: “Gaunt Famine never shall approach the throne - / Though Ireland starve, great George weighs twenty stone.”

**39:** The Duke of Wellington.

**40:** Marquis Wellesley, Wellington’s brother, had earlier in the debate spoken in favour of Catholic Emancipation.

**41:** The references are again to Wellington and Wellesley.

**42:** Ferdinand IV, oppressive Bourbon King of Naples, supported by the English.

VII.,<sup>43</sup> who certainly is a fool, and, consequently, in all probability a bigot? And have you more regard for a foreign sovereign than your own fellow-subjects, who are not fools, for they know your interest better than you know your own; who are not bigots, for they return you good for evil; but who are in worse durance than the prison of an usurper, inasmuch as the fetters of the mind are more galling than those of the body?

Upon the consequences of your not acceding to the claims of the Petitioners, I shall not expatiate; you know them, you will feel them, and your children's children when you are passed away. Adieu to that Union so called, as "*Lucas a non lucendo*,"<sup>44</sup> an Union from never uniting, which in its first operation gave a death-blow to the independence of Ireland, and in its last may be the cause of her eternal separation from this country. If it must be called an Union, it is the union of the shark with his prey; the spoiler swallows up his victim, and thus they become one and indivisible. Thus has great Britain swallowed up the Parliament, and constitution, and independence of Ireland, and refuses to disgorge even a single privilege, although for the relief of her swollen and distempered body politic.

And now, my Lords, before I sit down, will his Majesty's ministers permit me to say a few words, not on their merits, for that would be superfluous, but on the degree of estimation in which they are held by the people of these realms? The esteem in which they are held has been boasted of in a triumphant tone on a late occasion within these walls, and a comparison instituted between their conduct and that of noble lords on this side of the house.

What portion of popularity may have fallen to the share of my noble friends (if such I may presume to call them), I shall not pretend to ascertain; but that of his Majesty's ministers it were vain to deny. It is, to be sure, a little like the wind, "no one knows whence it cometh or whither it goeth;" but they feel it, they enjoy it, they boast of it. Indeed, modest and unostentatious as they are, to what part of the kingdom, even the most remote, can they flee to avoid the triumph which pursues them?<sup>45</sup> If they plunge into the midland counties, there will they be greeted by the manufacturers, with spurned petitions in their hands, and those halts round their necks recently voted in the behalf, imploring blessings on the heads of those who so simply, yet ingeniously, contrived to remove them from their miseries in this to a better world.<sup>46</sup> If they journey on to Scotland, from Glasgow to John o'Groat's, every where will they receive similar marks of approbation. If they take a trip from Portpatrick to Donaghadee, there will they rush at once into the embraces of four Catholic millions, to whom their vote of this night is about to endear them for ever. When they return to the metropolis, if they can pass under Temple Bar without unpleasant sensations at the sight of the greedy niches over that ominous gateway,<sup>47</sup> they cannot escape the acclamations of the livery, and the more tremulous, but not less sincere, applause, the blessings, "not loud, but deep,"<sup>48</sup> of bankrupt merchants and doubting stock-holders. If they look to the army, what wreaths, not of laurel, but of nightshade, are preparing for the heroes of Walcheren!<sup>49</sup> It is true, there are few living deponents left to testify to their merits on that occasion; but a "cloud of witnesses"<sup>50</sup> are gone above from that gallant army which they so generously and piously despatched, to recruit the "noble army of martyrs."

What if in the course of this triumphal career (in which they will gather as many pebbles as Caligula's army did on a similar triumph, the prototype of their own,) they do not perceive any of those memorials which a grateful people erect in honour of their benefactors; what although

---

**43:** King Ferdinand VII of Spain, another Catholic tyrant supported by English arms and money.

**44:** A complex allusion indicating a failure to relate words to meaning (the Act of Union has failed to unite anything). See *Don Juan VI*, stanza 55.

**45:** B. addresses the Government benches with heavy irony.

**46:** A reference to the Nottingham frame-workers.

**47:** The niches over Temple Bar were used to display the severed heads of traitors.

**48:** *Macbeth*, V iii 27.

**49:** B. refers to the disastrous Walcheren expedition of 1809, when thousands of soldiers died of fever.

**50:** See Hebrews 12 1; B. quotes the line again at *TVOJ*, 58, 2.

not even a sign-post will condescend to depose the Saracen's head in favour of the likeness of the conquerors of Walcheren, they will not want a picture who can always have a caricature, or regret the omission of a statue who will so often see themselves exalted into effigy. But their popularity is not limited to the narrow bounds of an island; there are other countries where their measures, and, above all, their conduct to the Catholics, must render them pre-eminently popular. If they are beloved here, in France they must be adored. There is no measure more repugnant to the designs and feelings of Bonaparte than Catholic Emancipation; no line of conduct more propitious to his projects than that which has been pursued, is pursuing, and, I fear, will be pursued towards Ireland. What is England without Ireland, and what is Ireland without the Catholics? It is on the basis of your tyranny Napoleon hopes to build his own. So grateful must oppression of the Catholics be to his mind, that doubtless (as he has lately permitted some renewal of intercourse) the next cartel will convey to this country cargoes of Sevres china and blue ribands, (things in great request, and of equal value at this moment,) blue ribands of the Legion of Honour for Dr. Duigenan and his ministerial disciples. Such is that well-earned popularity, the result of those extraordinary expeditions, so expensive to ourselves, and so useless to our allies; of those singular inquiries, so exculpatory to the accused, and so dissatisfactory to the people; of those paradoxical victories, so honourable, as we are told, to the British name, and so destructive to the best interests of the British nation: above all, such is the reward of the conduct pursued by ministers towards the Catholics.

I have to apologise to the House, who will, I trust, pardon one not often in the habit of intruding upon their indulgence, for so long attempting to engage their attention. My most decided opinion is, as my vote will be, in favour of the motion.

### Debate on Major Cartwright's Petition, June 1st 1813

[Major John Cartwright (1740-1824) was a well-known campaigner for an enlarged suffrage based on tax-payers, and annual parliaments. John Cam Hobhouse refers to him as "Old Prosy".<sup>51</sup> He had been hassled by officious law-officers while on a visit to Huddersfield. This speech is the shortest and least entertaining of Byron's three. It seems undertaken from a sense of duty, which is not to say that Byron's sense of fair play and of the threatened liberty of the subject is not to be seen in it.]

Lord Byron rose and said: —

My Lords,— The Petition which I now hold for the purpose of presenting to the House is one which, I humbly conceive, requires the particular attention of your Lordships, inasmuch as, though signed but by a single individual, it contains statements which (if not disproved) demand most serious investigation. The grievance of which the petitioner complains is neither selfish nor imaginary. It is not his own only, for it has been and is still felt by numbers. No one without these walls, nor indeed within, but may to-morrow be liable to the same insult and obstruction, in the discharge of an imperious duty for the restoration of the true constitution of these realms, by petitioning for reform in Parliament. The petitioner, my Lords, is man whose long life has been spent in one unceasing struggle for the liberty of the subject, against that undue influence which has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished;<sup>52</sup> and whatever difference of opinion may exist as to his political tenets, few will be found to question the integrity of his intentions. Even now oppressed with years, and not exempt from the infirmities attendant on his age, but still unimpaired in talent, and unshaken in spirit — "*frangas non flectes*"<sup>53</sup> — he has received many a wound in the combat against corruption: and the new grievance, the fresh insult, of which he complains, may inflict another scar, but no dishonour. The Petition is signed by John Cartwright; and it was in behalf of the people and Parliament, in the lawful pursuit of that reform in the representation which is the best service to be rendered both to Parliament and people, that he encountered the wanton outrage which forms the subject-matter of his Petition to your Lordships. It is couched in firm, yet respectful language — in the language of a man, not regardless of what is due to himself, but at the same time, I trust, equally mindful of the deference to be paid to this House. The petitioner states, amongst other matter of equal, if not greater importance, to all who are British in their feelings, as well as blood and birth, that on the 21st January 1813, at Huddersfield, himself and six other persons, who, on hearing of his arrival, had waited on him merely as a testimony of respect, were seized by a military and civil force, and kept in close custody for several hours, subjected to gross and abusive insinuation from the commanding officer, relative of the character of the petitioner; that he (the petitioner) was finally carried before a magistrate, and not released until an examination of his papers proved that there was not only no just, but not even statutable charge against him; and that, notwithstanding the promise and order from the presiding magistrates of a copy of the warrant against your petitioner, it was afterwards withheld on divers pretexts, and has never until this hour been granted. The names and conditions of the parties will be found in the Petition. To the other topics touched on in the Petition I shall not now advert, from a wish not to encroach upon the time of the House; but I do most sincerely call the attention of your Lordships to its general contents — it is in the cause of the Parliament and people that the rights of this venerable freeman have been violated, and it is, in my opinion, the highest mark of respect that could be paid to the House, that to your justice, rather than by appeal to any inferior court, he now commits himself. Whatever may be the fate of

51: *Byron's Bulldog, The Letters of John Cam Hobhouse to Lord Byron*, ed. Peter W. Graham (Ohio 1984), p.286.

52: It was Baron Ashburton who said, in 1780, "that the Influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished."

53: "You may break, but you will not bend him."

his remonstrance, it is some satisfaction to me, though mixed with regret for the occasion, that I have this opportunity of publicly stating the obstruction to which the subject is liable, in the prosecution of the of the most lawful and imperious of his duties, the obtaining by Petition reform in Parliament. I have shortly stated his complaint; the petitioner has more fully expressed it. Your Lordships will, I hope, adopt some measure fully to protect and redress him, and not him alone, but the whole body of the people, insulted and aggrieved in his person, by the interposition of an abused civil and military force between them and their right of petition to their own representatives.

His Lordship then presented the petition from Major Cartwright, which was read, complaining of the circumstances at Huddersfield, and of interruptions given to the right of petitioning in several places in the northern parts of the kingdom, and which his Lordship moved should be laid on the table.

Several Lords having spoken on the question,

Lord Byron replied, that he had, from motives of duty, presented this petition to their Lordship's consideration. The noble Earl had contended that it was not a petition, but a speech; and that, as it contained no prayer, it should not be received.<sup>54</sup> What was the necessity of a prayer? If that word were to be used in its proper sense, their Lordships could not expect that any man should pray to others. He had only to say, that the Petition, though in some parts expressed strongly perhaps, did not contain any improper mode of address, but was couched in respectful language towards their Lordships; he should therefore trust their Lordships would allow the Petition to proceed.

---

**54:** It was Lord Lauderdale who objected – correctly, according to procedure – that Cartwright had appended no “prayer” to his petition. Lauderdale was the brother of “King Tom” Maitland, Governor of the Ionian Islands. He was also uncle to Lady Julia Tomlinson Hay, destined to be Hobhouse's wife. In December 1818 B. employed him to bring the manuscript of *Don Juan I* from Venice to London.