

SPEECH OF GENERAL THOMAS F. BURKE,

Who was Convicted of High Treason and Sentenced to Death, at Green Street Court, Dublin.

ON THE 24th APRIL, 1867.

My LORDS—It is not my intention to occupy much of your time in answering the question—what I have to say why sentence should not be passed upon me? But I may, with your permission, review a little of the evidence that has been brought against me. The first evidence that I would speak of is that of Sub-Inspector Kelly, who had a conversation with me in Clonmel. He states that he asked me either how was my friend, or what about my friend, Mr. Stephens, and that I made answer and said, that he was the most idolised man that ever had been, or that ever would be in America. Here, standing on the brink of my grave, and in the presence of the Almighty and ever-living God, I brand that as being the foulest perjury that ever man gave utterance to. In any conversation that occurred the name of Stephens was not mentioned. I shall pass from that, and then touch on the evidence of Brett. He states that I assisted in distributing the bread to the parties in the fort, and that I stood with him in the waggon or cart. This is also false I was not in the fort at the time; I was not there when the bread was distributed. I came in afterwards. Both of these assertions have been made and submitted to the men in whose hands my life rested, as evidence made on oath by these men—made solely and purely for the purpose of giving my body to an untimely grave. There are many points, my lords, that have been sworn to here to prove my complicity in a great many acts it has been alleged I took part in. It is not my desire now, my lords, to give utterance to one word against the verdict which has been pronounced upon me. But fully conscious of my honour as a man which has never been impugned, fully conscious that I can go into my grave with a name and character unsullied, I can only say that these parties actuated by a desire either of their own aggrandisement, or to save there paltry miserable lives have pandered to the appetite, if I may so speak, of justice and my life shall pay the forfeit. Fully convinced and satisfied of the righteousness of my every act in connection with the late revolutionary movement in Ireland, I have nothing to recall—nothing that I would not do again, nothing for which I should feel the blush of shame mantling my brow; my conduct and career, both here as a private citizen, and in America, if you like—as a soldier are before you; and even in this, my hour of trial, I feel the consciousness of having lived an honest man, and I will die proudly, believing that if I have given my life to give freedom and liberty to the land of my birth, I have done only that which every Irishman and every man whose soul throbs with a feeling of liberty should do. I, my lords, shall scarcely—I feel I should not at all—mention the name of Massey. I feel I should not pollute my lips with the name of that traitor, whose illegitimacy has been proved here—a man whose name even is not known, and who, I deny point blank, ever wore the star of a colonel in the Confederate army. Him I shall let rest. I shall pass him, wishing him, in the words of the poet:—

May the grass wither from his feet;
The woods deny him shelter; earth a home;
The dust a grave; the sun his light;
And heaven its God!

Let Massey remember from this day forth that he carries with him, as my able and eloquent counsel (Mr. Dowse) has stated, a serpent that will gnaw his conscience, will carry about him in his breast a living hell from which he can never be separated. I, my lords, have no desire for the name of a martyr; I seek not the death of a martyr; but if it is the will of the Almighty and Omnipotent God that my devotion for the land of my birth shall be tested on the scaffold, I am willing there to die in defence of the right of men to free government—the right of an oppressed people to throw off the yoke of thralldom. I am an Irishman by birth, an American by adoption; by nature a lover of freedom—an enemy to the power that holds my native land in the bonds of tyranny. It has so often been admitted that the oppressed have a right to throw off the yoke of oppression, even by English statesmen, that I do not deem it necessary to advert to the fact in a British court of justice. Ireland's children are not, never were, and never

will be, willing or submissive slaves; and so long as England's flag covers one inch of Irish soil, just so long will they believe it to be a divine right to conspire, imagine, and devise means to hurl it from power, and to erect in its stead the God-like structure of self government. I shall now, my lords, before I go any further, perform one important duty to my learned talented, and eloquent counsel. I offer them that which is poor enough, the thanks, the sincere and heartfelt thanks of an honest man. I offer them, too, in the name of America, the thanks of the Irish people. I know that I am here without a relative—without a friend—in fact, 3,000 miles away from my family. But I know that I am not forgotten there. The great and generous, Irish heart of America to-day feels for me—to-day sympathises with and does not forget the man who is willing to thread to the scaffold—aye, defiantly—proudly, conscious of no wrong—in defence of American principles—in defence of liberty. To Messrs. Butt, Dowse, O'Loughlin, and all the counsel for the prisoners, for some of whom I believe Mr. Curran will appear, and my very able solicitor, Mr. Lawless I return individually and collectively my sincere and heartfelt thanks.

I shall, now, my lords, as no doubt you will suggest to me, think of the propriety of turning my attention to the world beyond the grave. I shall now look only to that home where sorrows are at an end where joy is eternal. I shall hope and pray that freedom may yet dawn on this poor down-trodden country. It is my hope, it is my prayer, and the last words that I shall utter will be a prayer to God for forgiveness, and a prayer for poor old Ireland. Now, my lords in relation to the other man, Corridon, I will make a few remarks. Perhaps before I go to Corridon, I should say much has been spoken on that table of Colonel Kelly, and of the meetings held at his lodgings in London. I desire to state I never knew where Colonel Kelly's Lodgings were. I never knew where he lived in London, till I heard the informer Massey, announce it on the table. I never attended a meeting at Colonel Kelly's; and the hundred other statements that have been made about him. I now solemnly declare on my honour as a man—as a dying man—these statements have been totally unfounded and false from beginning to end. In relation to the small paper that was introduced here, and brought against me as evidence, as having been found on my person in connection with that oath, I desire to say that that paper was not found on my person. I knew no person whose name was on that paper. O'Beirne, of Dublin, or those other delegates you heard of, I never saw or met. That paper has been put in there for some purpose. I can swear positively it is not in my handwriting. I can also swear I never saw it; yet it is used as evidence against me. Is this justice? Is this right? Is this many? I am willing if I have transgressed the laws to suffer the penalty, but I object to this system of trumping up a case to take away the life of a human being. True I ask for no mercy. I feel, that, with my present emaciated frame and somewhat shattered constitution, it is better that my life should be brought to an end than that I should drag out a miserable existence in the prison dens of Portland. Thus it is my lords, I accept the verdict. Of course my acceptance of it is unnecessary, but I am satisfied with it. And now I shall close. True it is there are many feelings that actuate me at this moment. In fact these few disconnected remarks can give no idea of what I desire to state to the court. I have ties to bind me to life and society as strong as any man in this court can have. I have a family I love as much as any man in this court loves his family. But I can remember the blessing I received from an aged mothers lips as I left her the last time. She, speaking as the Spartan mother did, said—'Go my boy, return either with your shield or upon it.' This reconciles me—this gives me heart; I submit to my doom; and I hope that God will forgive me my past sins. I hope also that inasmuch as He has for seven hundred years preserved Ireland, notwithstanding all the tyranny to which she has been subjected as a separate and distinct nationality, He will also assist her to retrieve her fallen fortunes—to rise in her beauty and majesty, Sister of Columbia, the peer of any nation in the world."

