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A  
L E T T E R  
TO THE  
PEOPLE OF IRELAND,  
&c. &c.

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SPECIAL  
COLLECTIONS



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QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
AT KINGSTON

KINGSTON ONTARIO CANADA

A  
L E T T E R  
TO THE  
PEOPLE OF IRELAND,  
UPON THE INTENDED APPLICATION  
OF THE  
*ROMAN CATHOLICS*  
TO  
P A R L I A M E N T  
FOR THE  
EXERCISE OF THE ELECTIVE FRANCHISE.

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FROM WILLIAM KNOX, Esq.

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D U B L I N :

Printed by ALEX. PORTER, No. 66, Dame-street.

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MDCCXCIII.

10 11 1793. K59



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FRIENDS AND COUNTRYMEN,

THE zeal with which I have upon former occasions endeavoured to promote the welfare of Ireland, and the success with which it was attended, may give some reason to expect that I should not content myself with being a silent observer of those symptoms of perturbation, which already appear in the public mind, or omit to suggest to you such considerations, as I conceive might have weight to induce a temperate and friendly discussion of the great questions which are now agitated among you ; for sure I am, that what-

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ever may be their decision, no good can arise from it equal to the preservation of that happy unanimity which has lately subsisted between the Protestants and Catholics of Ireland, nor any evil to be dreaded equal to that of a renewal of their ancient animosities. The disinterested services I have rendered to the collective body of the nation, ought to give me a right to the public attention; but I have likewise a separate claim to the confidence of each of the three great parties into which it is divided, as the papers \* I circulated among you will testify for me, that I have been a champion of the Established Church,

\* Extra Official State papers, Vol. I. to be had at No. 66, and No. 72, Dame-street, Dublin.

an oppugner of the penal laws against the Roman Catholics, as well as those which affect the Dissenters, and a friend to a general toleration ; and the assurance which my own mind gives me, that I deserve your good opinion, encourages me to believe I possess it. My present situation is, indeed, very different from what it was in the year 1778, and I cannot now boast of any influence with Ministers, or even suppose that any ideas of mine will be deemed worth their adoption. I do not, therefore, pretend to guess at the measures of Administration, but profess myself utterly ignorant of the part they mean to take, or rather, I believe I may say, of what they may hereafter resolve on ; for I do not  
imagine

imagine they have yet resolved upon any thing respecting this great controverfy. My sincere good wishes are, therefore, all that I can now offer you; and I trust you will not be displeas'd that I accompany them with such reflections upon your present situation, as the anxious feelings of my heart for your welfare may produce.

The object of the little pamphlet I published in 1777, with the title of *Considerations on the State of Ireland*, was to prove your right to all the privileges and advantages of Englishmen, upon the ground *of your being one people with them*; and it was in consequence of the then Ministers being convinc'd of the justice of your claim *upon that ground*, that you were  
admitted

admitted into a participation with the people of England in the Colony Trade and Fisheries ; but that was no sooner done than you thought fit to turn the tables upon England, and declare yourselves an Independent Kingdom ; and your Parliament, from being a subordinate, became a Supreme Legislature ; and your Courts of Judicature admitted of no appeal to England, but became absolute and final in their decrees ; and it was declared in your Parliament, that neither law or legal authority was to be submitted to but what was enacted or sanctioned by them. I confess to you, that I felt no exultation at this aggrandisement of my country, and, to speak the truth, I chose to decline

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taking any steps in 1778, that might lead towards it, and I will give you my reasons——The principle upon which your claim to independence of the British Legislature could only be supported, was that of your being a Sovereign State within yourselves, a separate people, intitled to make your own laws, and to be governed by only such as you gave your assent to by your representatives; now when all this was granted, what became of your claim to the privileges and advantages of Englishmen? for did you not thereby consequentially renounce them? You have, indeed, adopted some of the English laws, and made them of force in Ireland, by acts of your own Parliament; but that could  
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not intitle you to the benefit of them out of Ireland, if England should be inclined to refuse it; and though I trust England will never have occasion to make any distinction between the natives of the two Islands, I did not think it wise to give her the right to do so. But there were other reasons which had still more weight with me: I considered, that if it was deemed an usurpation in the British Parliament to make laws to affect Ireland in 1782, it might be said that it was always so; for an usurped authority a hundred years ago cannot be made legitimate a century after; and, if that be the case, your own reflections will spare me the pains to pursue the

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consequences, and, indeed, they are of too shocking a nature to be fully pointed out ; and yet I was withheld from taking part in procuring your emancipation, as you called it, by another reason also, which was, that if, as it was asserted, the British Parliament had no right to make laws to affect Ireland, because Ireland had no representatives in the British Parliament, I feared it would be asked, where was then the justice of the Irish Protestants *alone* making laws for the whole inhabitants of the island, of which they compose only one-fourth part? Nor could I see upon what ground it could be denied, that the instant Ireland became a separate kingdom her constitution would appear to be

founded



founded upon these two absurdities : viz. That the Minority had a right to govern the Majority, and that the Minority had a right to withhold from the Majority a community of privileges and advantages—and as you obtained your object, such is your present condition ; and perhaps you will *now* allow that I ought not to forfeit your good opinion for declining my assistance to bring you into it. I mean not, however, to throw blame on those who did ; the desire of independence, or self-government, is the first wish of the human heart ; and a nation, who had not the same feelings, would be too abject to possess any virtuous sentiments——The occasion was favourable, the Irish pride was roused, and  
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it was happily gratified without a contest; but it is fit that you should now consider your situation as it really is, and act accordingly.

Ireland is said to contain four millions of souls, and three of them are Catholics, not one of whom enjoys any share in the Legislative or Executive Government: Is that just, I will ask the governing party, upon your own principles? Yes, you will answer, for Ireland is a Protestant Government. But was it not English Power and English Laws which made it so? and was not Ireland then deemed a part of England? whereas it is now a separate kingdom, and governed by no laws but such as it makes itself; the constitution, therefore, ought to be

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be such as the majority of the inhabitants choose to live under; and they, being Catholics, the Government ought to be Catholic, and the established religion Catholic also, upon your own principles. The Catholics, however, do not mean to take the Government out of your hands at present, they only desire to participate with you in the right of electing representatives to Parliament. Surely, then, you ought to hear them with attention, and receive their request with kindness and complacency. But you will say, if the Catholics get the elective franchise, as they are so great a majority of the inhabitants, they will choose the majority of the members, and then instruct their representatives

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tatives to make laws in their favour, and in time seize the Government. This was the mode of reasoning which the Egyptians made use of to justify their orders to the midwives, to strangle all the male children of the Israelites; and it is likewise used by the planters in the West Indies, to justify their withholding education from their Negroes; but then the people who were or are the subjects of it, in both cases, *were or are slaves*, whereas the Irish Catholics are your fellow-subjects and free men. But you will say further, that their political as well as their religious principles are adverse to liberty—If that has always been so, then was there no liberty in England before the reformation;

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ation ; for all the inhabitants, as well as the Government, were Catholics. But the English Catholics were enlightened men in those days, whereas the bulk of the Irish Catholics are ignorant and illiterate, the mere machines of their Priests, who are attached to France or Italy, where they get their education—*Now*, I confess, you have urged a good objection. Ignorance of the rights of the subject, and of the true nature of the constitution, and being under the influence of foreign States, are unquestionably disqualifications for the exercise of so high and sacred a trust ; and shame upon that barbarous policy which has rendered the Irish Catholics so long obnoxious to them. Thank God !

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those savage Acts, which deprived them of the advantage of education in their own country, no longer disgrace the Statute-book. The Catholics may now free themselves from the reproach of ignorance and illiterature, and their emancipation from the dominion of their priests will soon follow. In a few generations therefore, I trust, the bulk of the Catholics will be as well informed as the Protestants\*, and they profess to entertain no religious tenets that are hostile to British liberty, or inconsistent with it; and if their priests were allowed salaries by Government, they would be better able to instruct their people in their  
civil

\* Their late publications shew that their leaders are fully so.

civil and religious duties, by having obtained better instruction themselves, and would feel the incentive of interest to attach them to a constitution from which they derived support. In the mean time, it would perhaps be prudent in the Catholics to confine their request for the elective franchise to such qualified voters as can read the Lord's Prayer in English, when they come to vote; and if that should be found a sufficient inducement for all who are able to put their children to school I should rejoice in the occasion which produced so happy an effect. Perhaps, too, the Catholics might be prevailed upon, by the consideration of the present illiterate condition of the lower classes among them,

to wait the operation of the late permission to have schoolmasters of their own persuasion, before they claimed the exercise of their right to the elective franchise, rather than expose the unfitness of so large a number of their people to judge of the qualifications of representatives; for how should a totally illiterate man be able to judge of the propriety of a public measure, where much is said and written on both sides? or how instruct his representative to act upon it? But whatever be the proceeding, I must again repeat my earnest hope, that mutual good-will and brotherly kindness may direct and conduct it throughout; for *why should ye strive together, seeing ye are all brethren?* and there is no doubt  
but



but that by temper and good-humour matters may be accommodated. The Catholics have clearly the best of the argument, considering their request as an abstract proposition, and the Protestants can only found their objections to it upon *special circumstances*; and the Catholics themselves have hitherto acquiesced in the distinction those circumstances have created. The question then is reduced to this single point:— Do those *special circumstances* still continue to operate against the general propriety of the proposition, so as to justify the refusal of the Catholics' request at this time? or are they so much changed as to have lost their influence? And surely this is a matter which admits of the most good-humoured discussion,

cussion, and the clearest decision. Let then the *improvement* of the Catholic body, in civilization and literature, be enquired into; let it be shewn how generally they have embraced the opportunity the alteration of the State oaths afforded them of testifying their allegiance; their practical renunciation of all those doctrines so unfriendly to Protestants, which have formerly been inculcated among them; the fraternal kindness of their priests to Protestant clergymen; their peaceable submission to the laws, and cheerful payment of tythes and taxes; these, and such like *improvements*, being shewn and made out to the satisfaction of Government, no possible objection could, I am persuaded, be made to restore to them the  
exercise

exercise of the elective franchise. But if these and such like *improvements* cannot yet be shewn, the objections which have hitherto operated to withhold the exercise of it must still be allowed to retain their force. Which of these is the case the Catholic leaders best know; and, I trust, *that* temper and good sense which they have already manifested in the conduct of this business will continue to direct them in the further prosecution of it, and that they will give a serious and impartial consideration to all the circumstances I have suggested, and, as they shall appear upon the result, determine to postpone or press their application. But whatever course they may resolve to pursue, or whatever may be  
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the determination of Parliament upon their petition, whenever it is presented, I would not have the good people of Ireland flatter themselves with the vain hope, that this is the only question of difficulty and embarrassment which will arise out of their acquisition of independence. In the preceding part of this letter I have hinted at some others of still greater importance; and, to speak out my candid opinion, I really do not see how you can avoid the dreadful consequences of their agitation, but by taking shelter again under that parental wing from which you so inconsiderately withdrew. Do not, however, imagine, I wish you to tread back your steps, or cancel any thing you have done, for I have no such wish;

wish ; *every thing you have done may be rendered perfectly consistent with the more intimate connection between Great Britain and Ireland, which I mean to recommend.*

A plan for the purpose was formed in the year 1778, and some idea of the nature of it may be collected from the second volume of extra official state-papers\* I have published respecting America ; for it was meant to comprehend all the members of the empire, and peace with America was only waited for in order to propose it, and it will be forth-coming whenever there appears a disposition to adopt it, if that happens in the life-time of your friend and countryman,

WILLIAM KNOX.

SOHO-SQUARE,  
Nov. 5, 1792.

\* Vide State-papers.

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## P O S T S C R I P T.

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THE preceding pages were sent to the Press before the printed speeches of some of the gentlemen who composed the late Catholic meeting in Dublin fell into my hands; and although I was not ignorant of the hardships the Catholic body laboured under, I confess I did not conceive their *peculiar* grievances were so numerous as the detail of them given by one of the Speakers shews them to be, and I do not think it possible for any dispassionate Protestant to read over the melancholy catalogue, even without attending to the strong sense and forcible language of the Speakers, without feeling himself

self convinced that the Catholics have not been treated as fellow-subjects and countrymen, and that they have submitted with unexampled patience to injurious and degrading distinctions; and although he might be averse to the conceding to them the exercise of the elective franchise, he would be forced to allow that their *grievances ought to be redressed*: and, indeed, what better argument could the Protestant electors use to reconcile their Catholic brethren to the want of it, than *their* instructing their representatives to consider the Catholics as equally their constituents with them, and to obtain for them *equal* privileges in all other respects? And until they do so the Catholics cannot be blamed for endea-

vouring to obtain *that franchise*, which, they very naturally suppose, would draw after it the redress of their other grievances. The stale objection to all concessions, viz. the dread of opening a door to innovations, is, I know, urged against paying any attention to the claims of the Catholics; and the horrible consequences of yielding, even in what is just, are held up to deter from the consideration of their petitions. But let the facts, upon which this principle of *principis obstat* is said to be so wisely founded, be examined, and I will venture to assert that the evils which attended the yielding in *right things* are solely to be imputed to the *not yielding in proper time*. Had Charles the First, I will ask, made the  
concessions



concessions two years before which he sent to his Parliament from Oxford, would he have lost his head? Had Parliament in 1774 passed the Act relinquishing its claim to tax America, which it passed in 1780, would the Thirteen Colonies have declared themselves independent? Had Mr. Calonne advised the French King to call the *States* when he called the *Notables*, and the King, and the Nobles and Clergy made to the *States* the same concessions they, by Neckar's advice, afterwards made to the *Notables*, would the French Monarchy have been overturned? I need not produce more instances in proof of my assertion, and God forbid that the *present times* should furnish others in addition to them; but I trust

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our rulers, both in Church and State, will take warning by those I have mentioned, and *concede in time, whatever they think right to be conceded at all,* and that is, *whatever they themselves think wrong to be continued.* And let them do it *of themselves,* and with good will, upon principles of justice and benevolence, not under the appearance, or even suspicion, of necessity or compulsion ; for it is the duty, and ought to be the wisdom, of the governing powers to watch the public mind, and to foresee and *prevent* the public wishes, by doing of themselves what they perceive they will be required by the people to do. *Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum.*

T H E E N D.

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*All by the same Author.*







