

Democracy, Religion, and the Political Thought of Theobald Wolfe Tone

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Abstract

This article examines the vision of democracy evolved by Theobald Wolfe Tone, a leading thinker within the Society of United Irishmen and an iconic figure in Irish history. Focusing on 1790-92, it argues that Tone embraced democracy early, though his pragmatism ensured that he continued to work for goals short of his ideal. Through reading Tone's works in the context of his actions, it suggests that his vision of democracy was heavily influenced by the confessional nature of the Irish state and sectarianism within Irish society, and that it extended far beyond political reform to a belief in the need to reshape Ireland's society and economy in the interests of the lower and middle orders. Tone emerges as a truly revolutionary figure. In re-examining this crucial period for Tone's political thought, we gain a clearer understanding of the politics of the United Irishmen, and of Irish events in the 1790s, their relationship to events abroad, and of the origins of democratic thought and practice in Ireland.

Keywords: Theobald Wolfe Tone, United Irishmen, Democracy, Political Thought, 1798 Rebellion, Religion

‘It is needless, I believe, to say that I was a *Democrat* from the very commencement’. So claimed Theobald Wolfe Tone in the autobiography he began composing in August 1796. By then, he had not only successfully negotiated the dispatch of a French invasion fleet with an army of fifteen thousand men to help the United Irishmen establish a republic separate from Britain, he had also been commissioned a *chef de brigade* in the army of the French Republic. He awaited instructions to sail for Ireland under the command one of France’s most brilliant generals, Lazare Hoche. Recording his life story for his wife, children, and closest friends and comrades, he thought it important to describe the events in Ireland that had led to this juncture, and how he had formed the ‘theory’ of politics on which he had ‘unvaryingly acted’ since he had become active in radical politics in the early 1790s. He wrote that the debate on the French Revolution sparked by Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine had rent Ireland in two: ‘In a little time, the French revolution became the test of every man’s political creed, and the nation was fairly divided into two great parties, the *Aristocrats* and the *Democrats* (epithets borrowed from France)’. Being an ‘oppressed, insulted and plundered nation’, the majority supported the French Revolution, which had established the rights of man and ‘blown into the elements a despotism rooted for fourteen centuries’.¹ A democrat, then, was – at bottom – someone who supported the French Revolution, the rights of man, the sovereignty of the people, and the international struggle against monarchy, aristocracy, and clericalism, such as himself.

Tone found a definition of a ‘democrat’ that seemed to him concise and clear, but some historians have, as discussed below, questioned the extent to which he was a French-style democrat at all. This article, however, not only accepts Tone’s claim to have been a democrat, but argues that he embraced revolutionary, secularist democracy much earlier and more fully than previously realised. Reading his works with an eye to the political languages he deployed and within the context of his actions sheds new light on the early political career of one of the central figures of Irish history, and helps us better understand the emergence of democratic thought in Ireland and the process of radicalisation that led to the maelstrom of the attempted revolution of 1798. The article focuses on the years 1790-92 as these were the crucial years in the development of Tone’s vision of democracy, and argues that by the end of 1792 at the latest he had embraced revolutionary democracy – with a political, religious, and social element – as his ideal system of government. This is not to say that there were no developments in Tone’s thoughts after this period, but rather that he had developed a clear understanding of what his ideal polity would look like at this point that was clearly democratic, and that to properly understand his, and United Irish, activities in the 1790s we must recognise this.

Democracy was remaking the Atlantic world in the age of revolutions, but what it meant was fiercely contested among those who embraced the term. The tangled and often contradictory history of democracy during this period has received increasing attention in recent years.² Whereas for most of the previous fifteen hundred years or so, democracy had been widely regarded as impractical and/or a recipe for chaos, it now became an important concept in, and feature of, political life, including in Ireland. However, what exactly democracy meant, the types of political arrangements it required, who should get the franchise, and how far democracy necessitated social and cultural as well as political change, including altering religion’s relationship to the state and its role in society, proved combustible.

¹ T. W. Tone, *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) eds. T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell, and C.J. Woods, vol. 2, 294-295, 301.

² For example, J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic 2005); J. Innes & M. Philp (eds.), *Reimagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); J. T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)

While the counter-revolutionary peasant resistance to the French Revolution in the west of France was fuelled to a large extent by anger at its treatment of the Catholic Church, much of the fratricidal violence between the different groups of French republican revolutionaries sprang from competing visions of democracy, including issues such as the right to recall representatives, the right to rebel against the elected representatives, and whether a federal or a unitary republic was necessary.³ Given the twists and turns of the French Revolution – which had gone from limiting the franchise by a property qualification to virtual universal manhood suffrage to a property qualification again by the time the Directory had agreed to aid the United Irishmen – being a democrat even by Tone’s definition might mean supporting different policies at different times for institutionalising democracy and expressing the will of the sovereign people.⁴ Despite embracing the term ‘democrat’, he relatively rarely discussed politics in terms of democracy, and did not leave a specific discussion of the word’s meaning. This was not uncommon among revolutionaries in the Atlantic world at this time, with words like ‘republican’ often preferred. Nevertheless, by analysing Tone’s political thought, we can get a clear view of how he visualised democracy, and thus a valuable insight into the origins of Irish concepts of democracy, and their relationship to international trends.

The confessional nature of the Irish state ensured religion was central to the vision of democracy evolved by Tone and the United Irishmen. The removal of political power from any church and the creation of a secular state was fundamental to their politics. Tone was raised in the Church of Ireland, but his mother was a Catholic, though he never mentioned this fact in his diaries. Theologically, he was most likely a deist. He believed in equality for Catholics, but he was hostile to the institution of the Catholic Church at home and abroad, not from Protestantism but because he saw it as an opponent of revolutionary change.⁵ It was on the key question of the confessional state and religious equality that Tone distinguished himself from his Irish contemporaries, even those making similar arguments, by the power and passion of his prose and the quality of his work, especially in *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791). He emerged as the most eloquent, insistent, and influential writer advocating citizenship be extended to people of all religions on an equal basis. As well as producing many important documents from the United Irishmen’s early days, Tone’s role as agent to the Catholic Committee during the key period of 1792-3 meant that he also wrote much of its propaganda. This dual role made him one of the most important voices in public debates, and makes better understanding his political thought all the more important if we are to grasp not just the evolution of Irish visions of democracy, but the dynamics of radicalisation in 1790s Ireland.

Interpreting Tone’s vision of democracy and its relationship to religion means examining his political practices as well as his writings. As early as 1790, he appealed to the poor. He played a key role in organising the elections to the Catholic Convention of 1792-3, which were by universal manhood suffrage to the outrage of conservatives. Simultaneously, he helped found the National Battalion, which sought to mobilise Catholics and the poor. In January 1793, he

³ M. Durey, ‘The Dublin Society of United Irishmen and the Politics of the Carey-Drennan Dispute, 1792-1794’, *Historical Journal* 37, no. 1 (1994): 89-111, argues that the United Irishmen saw divisions that reflected issues of class and direct democracy, as between some of the sans-culottes and the Jacobins.

⁴ The Constituent Assembly on 29 October 1789 introduced a property qualification for the franchise. The elections for the National Convention following the overthrow of the monarchy on 10 August 1792 were by virtually universal manhood suffrage. The Constitution of the Year III (22 August 1795) reintroduced multi-stage elections, with a property qualification for the second stage.

⁵ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 122; vol. 3, 208-209

was elected to the committee of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen that proposed political reforms that included universal manhood suffrage. In his practices, Tone was a republican democrat long before the United Irishmen openly became such.

We must of course be careful not to accept, unquestioningly, Tone's account of his own political development. Historians have long doubted his claim to have been a democrat from the start of the Burke-Paine debate, arguing that his autobiography rewrote his past to fit the present.⁶ Moreover, the extent to which he was a French-style democrat at all has been questioned. Contemplating a successful invasion in France in March 1796, he noted his desire for 'a very strong, or in other words, a military government at the outset', and Tom Dunne argues that this and other comments suggest that had he gained power, Tone might have resembled Napoleon more than Washington or the French democrats. Dunne also portrays Tone as a social conservative whose vision of the people in political terms meant the bourgeoisie, and whose view of the Irish poor remained that of a coloniser.⁷ Marianne Elliott, while acknowledging Tone's commitment to political reform and voting rights for the poor, argues that his bourgeois social values and attitude towards the poor rendered him 'no democrat'.⁸ Tom Bartlett agrees that Tone was a social conservative, but accepts that he was a democrat.⁹ Tone's autobiographical account is inaccurate, his political thought changed over time, and at times he sought to benefit from the types of aristocratic power to which he was opposed – pragmatism was an important part of his political life, and it enabled him to sometimes succeed in trying circumstances. However, his ideology remained democratic even as he worked for lesser outcomes.

The Tone presented here was a democrat in the sense of believing not just in equal citizenship and political rights for all men, but also in his hostility to the social and economic, as well as the political, power of the aristocracy. His commitment to mobilising the poor politically and to improving their living conditions was also a key element of his vision of democracy. He wished to establish a democratic republic, built on secularism and a new political economy, that would transform the polity and society in the interests of the middle and lower orders. A commitment to better the lives of the poor can be found in his work very early, and the transformation of Irish society and the eradication of endemic poverty remained a central part of his political vision until his death. This article builds upon my previously-published analysis of the political languages from which Irish democratic thought in the age of revolution was constructed, but alters that model to better reflect the ideology of Tone and Irish democrats generally. It offers a new interpretation of the development of his political thought and the fullest discussion yet of his understanding of democracy, and of how religious division, the central fact of Irish political life, helped shape it.

I. The Political Languages of Irish Radicalism

In an influential essay published in 2000, Ian McBride identified the political languages used by Irish radicals in the 1790s to forge a new type of revolutionary politics as 'the myth of an

⁶ F. MacDermot, *Theobald Wolfe Tone* 2nd ed. (Tralee: Anvil Books, 1969 [1939]), vii; T. Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone, Colonial Outsider: An Analysis of his Political Philosophy* (Cork: Tower Books, 1982), 12, 24; M. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone* 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012 [1989]), 1; T. Bartlett, *Theobald Wolfe Tone* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1997), 72.

⁷ Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 17, 36-39, 44, 57; Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, 105.

⁸ Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 123, 276.

⁹ Bartlett, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 51-52, 65.

ancient constitution, classical republicanism, natural rights theory, Enlightenment rationalism and the rights of man'.¹⁰ In 2002, Stephen Small's monograph applying Cambridge School methodology to late eighteenth-century Irish political thought argued that Irish republicanism, patriotism, and radicalism were mostly constructed from 'five key political languages: Protestant superiority, ancient constitutionalism, commercial grievance, classical republicanism, and natural rights.'¹¹ In 2013, the present author argued that the most important political languages in Irish democratic thought in the age of revolution were 'claims of right (both natural rights and the rights of man, applied to individuals and the nation as a whole), classical republicanism, Enlightenment toleration and political economy, egalitarianism, and revolutionary internationalism.'¹² On reflection, this model needs adjusted somewhat. First, Tone (and the United Irishmen as a whole) believed in Enlightenment ideas of religious equality – 'toleration' is insufficiently strong to reflect this, while remaining accurate for more moderate thinkers at the time. Secondly, the reference to Enlightenment political economy is accurate, but it is useful to be more explicit about the extent to which Tone's ideology, like that of his movement as a whole, mixed classical republicanism – in the sense of active citizenship and idealisation of the armed citizen as seen in the Irish Volunteers – with a commitment to commercial republicanism, i.e. creating a thriving modern commercial economy, underpinned by appropriate republican political institutions and societal mores. These adjustments to our conceptual language help bring 1790s visions of democracy into clearer focus, and make clearer the importance of the role of the confessional nature of the state in shaping Irish democratic thought.

The three models above stemmed from different focuses, but there is a great deal of similarity between them. Small's model included non-revolutionaries, hence his inclusion of Protestant superiority, which, while it formed part of some Irish radical thinking in the late eighteenth century, was absent from democratic political thought (though suspicion of Catholic reliability persisted among some protestant radicals like William Drennan). Unlike the first two models, the third excludes ancient constitutionalism. Elements of ancient constitutionalism can be found in early works by Tone and the United Irishmen, but Irish democratic thought, including Tone's, quickly moved to a complete rejection of a constitution comprised of king, lords, and commons. Irish democratic thought had some roots in radical Irish Whig thought, but democrats stretched it to breaking point, and built a new ideology on revolutionary principles. While all three models recognise that Irish political thought at this time bore important similarities to that of other countries, the third model also places greater emphasis upon the international context and the importance of internationalism to Irish democratic thought. We can see this with Tone for example. In August 1792, well-before the United Irishmen sought an alliance with France, he responded to the overthrow of the French monarchy by lamenting that some Irish radicals were 'such fools' as not to realise their success depended upon that of the French Revolution.¹³

II. Understanding Tone's thought

¹⁰ I. McBride, 'The Harp without the Crown: Nationalism and Republicanism in the 1790s', in *Political Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. S. J. Connolly (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), 159

¹¹ S. Small, *Political Thought in Ireland, 1776–1798: Republicanism, Patriotism and Radicalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–2.

¹² U. Gillen, 'Constructing Democratic Thought in Ireland in the Age of Revolution, 1775-1800', in Innes and Philp (eds.), pp.149-161

¹³ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 250.

As with many others in the age of revolution, Tone's political thought underwent rapid change under the pressure of events, and it retained contradictions. An ambitious man seeking to make a name for himself, he operated for most of the 1790s in a world where his ultimate political aims were impractical, at least in the short term, and he acted accordingly. In 1788, he hand-delivered a proposal to 10 Downing Street for the creation of a British garrison on the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) supported by a quasi-feudal society in order to wage war against Spain's commercial shipping and thus increase the glory and power of the British empire. He hoped to be part of the expedition himself. By 1790, his *Spanish War!* pamphlet argued that Ireland had no obligation to fight alongside Britain in foreign wars, and voiced clearly separatist sentiments. But the same year, he revived the Sandwich Island proposals. There are other contradictory acts, such as condemning the social and political power of aristocracy in his writings while seeking to acquire a job with Lord Rawdon in 1792.¹⁴ Tone's pragmatic ability to justify to himself taking or supporting actions that fell short of his ideal political wishes was one of the things that enabled him to operate so successfully in his roles with the Catholic Committee and as the United Irish agent in France.

Tone never wrote political philosophy for its own sake – his individual works always had a concrete political and/or personal aim that addressed specific circumstances. However, he had a 'theory of politics', even if he sometimes claimed not to have read political philosophy.¹⁵ As Jim Smyth has noted, his 'self-declared ignorance of political theory' is as implausible as that of Tom Paine's.¹⁶ An oft-quoted line from an unpublished piece by Tone states, 'I confess I dislike abstract reasoning on practical subjects'.¹⁷ This claim has been accepted as representing Tone's own views even by historians who argue that Tone was a sophisticated political thinker.¹⁸ However, examined in its proper context, it becomes clear that this claim was a rhetorical device mocking the author of *The Protestant Interest Ascertained* (1792).¹⁹ In that pamphlet an opponent of Catholic relief mimicked phrases from the *Declaration of the Catholic Society of Dublin* (1791), which had expressed its demands for Catholic relief in the language of the Enlightenment and the discourse of rights, to make Burkean arguments against innovation.²⁰ Tone in his turn used Burkean language to undermine the conservative arguments of *The Protestant Interest Ascertained*. In reality, Tone's claim to dislike abstract reasoning was a satirical line.²¹ Tone's *Spanish War!* (1790) constructed its arguments partly by reference to abstract rights, supporting the interpretation offered here. The necessity of reading Tone's works within their political and polemical contexts is clear.

III. Before the United Irishmen

Tone's earliest pamphlet on Irish politics, *A Review of the Conduct of Administration during the Seventh Session of Parliament Addressed to the Constitutional Electors and Free People of Ireland, on the Approaching Dissolution* (1790) offered a defence of the programme and

¹⁴ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 240.

¹⁵ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 456.

¹⁶ J. Smyth, 'Wolfe Tone's Library: The United Irishmen and "Enlightenment"', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 3 (2012): 431.

¹⁷ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 174.

¹⁸ Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 25-6; Bartlett, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 69; McBride, 'The Harp without the Crown', 161.

¹⁹ The formal title of *The Protestant Interest Ascertained* was 'A Protestant', *To Every Moderate Man in Ireland; the Following Ideas on the Relative Situation of Protestants and Catholics, are Submitted* (Dublin: Richard White, 1792).

²⁰ See *To Every Moderate Man*, 1, 31 for examples.

²¹ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 173-4.

actions of the Whig opposition but not an uncritical one. It accused them of mistakenly ascribing the acquisition of Irish legislative independence in 1782 in part to Charles James Fox, rather than the Irish people alone. This belief in the capacity of the Irish people to govern themselves lay at the heart of all Tone's subsequent political thought. The *Review* offered a radical reading of the Regency Crisis rooted in contract theory, arguing that the king's incapacity had dissolved the entire Irish constitution, with the vote for regency restoring it. It also stressed the importance of the sovereignty of the people, especially in the new era opened by the French Revolution, and called on the whole population – not just the protestant political nation – to make their political views known.²² The Whigs welcomed the pamphlet, and their parliamentary leader George Ponsonby sought to attach Tone to them. However, it contained stronger claims for the rights of the Irish nation than the Whigs supported, and its insistence on the sovereignty of the people was also unusually strong, and implicitly recognised that Catholics had a right to full citizenship. Tone himself suggested that the positive reaction to the work stimulated him to contemplate Ireland's situation more deeply, and to realise the need for separation from England. Some of the most important elements of his later thought, when he considered himself a democrat, are therefore present in his first published political pamphlet.

Spanish War! An Enquiry How Far Ireland is Bound, of Right, to Embark in the Impending Contest on the side of Great Britain? Addressed to the Members of both Houses of Parliament (1790), Tone's next pamphlet, went much further in asserting Ireland's right to independence, perhaps the dominant theme in Tone's political thought. Its denial that Ireland was duty bound to fight alongside Britain went so far beyond the norms of the dominant political discourses that it upended the political nation's most basic constitutional assumptions – no wonder it stated its ideas might appear 'too hardy' to many. Ireland, it said, not only could, but should, stand as an independent country in the world. Given that the seemingly-impending war would be the first since 1782, 'the question of right had better be settled in the outset'. It argued that as the crown and parliament of Ireland were not subordinate to anything else, and as the respective powers of the crown and parliament were the same in Ireland as in Britain, the Irish government was not bound to support a war until parliament had voted to do so. In other words, neither the king nor Westminster possessed the right to commit Ireland's resources to war without the explicit agreement of the representatives of the Irish nation. Otherwise 'our charter of Liberties is waste paper'. Ireland must assert her rights, Tone argued, citing the need for an Irish navy as an example – Irish ships should no longer skulk underneath the British flag. The pamphlet derided the notion that the war would benefit the entire empire as a con – only England stood to gain. Moreover, if the good of the empire necessitated destroying Ireland's trade and her people suffering, 'it would be better for her there were none'. Reflecting a long Enlightenment intellectual tradition, associated most with the works of François Fénelon, that argued that international peace was the best means of promoting international trade and bringing wealth to populations everywhere, it argued that peace was in Ireland's interest.²³ Her priorities ought to be to 'foster and cherish a growing trade, to cultivate and civilize a yet unpolished people, to obliterate the impression of ancient religious feuds, to watch with incessant and anxious care the cradle of an infant constitution'.²⁴

²² Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 29, 31, 27, 48-9.

²³ François Fénelon (1651-1715) was a Roman Catholic archbishop who acted as tutor to Louis, Duke of Burgundy, second in line to the French throne. His influential *The Adventures of Telemachus* (1699), aiming to help the Duke avoid ruling like Louis XIV, opposed the ruinous effects of warfare and promoted the virtues of peace and trade.

²⁴ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 51-3, 56-7.

We see here a number of the key political languages from which Tone's vision of democracy was forged: claims of right (on behalf of the nation); the Enlightened belief in the ability of commerce to improve societies and to transform international relations to the benefit of all humanity; even a passing mention of the need to overcome religious divisions. Elements of ancient constitutionalism are present in the strong support for the rights of the Irish parliament, a common theme of Irish political discourse. The ideas in this pamphlet were not as advanced as Tone would advocate within a few years, but they were more advanced than the overwhelming majority of Irish opposition opinion, never mind supporters of government. One conservative Irish MP told the publisher that the author should be hanged. The printer suppressed the work.²⁵ A letter intended for the *Hibernian Journal* sought to bring the pamphlet's arguments to Dublin's poor, and is revealing about Tone's attitude at this time to another key component of his vision of democracy, egalitarianism. Central to the United Irish programme was popular politicisation, and we see here Tone planning to engage it in well before the Society's foundation. The letter warned that any war would – as the American conflict had done – destroy the economy, and see Dublin's artisans once more fed 'like hounds, at public *messes*.'²⁶ Tone was therefore clearly developing the revolutionary democratic politics and practices he espoused later in the decade. However, with his ideal polity an impossibility and his ambition burning brightly, he also used the Spanish crisis as an opportunity to submit his Sandwich Islands plan to cabinet ministers once more.

Religious equality was entwined with separatism for Tone, both as core principles and as a practical means to achieve independence. As noted above, his writings on this issue made him a key thinker in Ireland's emerging democratic ideology. If his claim that the dividing line between Irish democrats and aristocrats was the French Revolution is accurate, then his *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (August 1791) was a democratic work in origin as well as content. However, it is not that simple. Tone wrote the pamphlet because of a disagreement between radicals and Whigs during the 1791 Belfast celebrations of the storming of the Bastille over what applying the example of France to Irish politics meant in practical terms. In other words, supporters of the French Revolution disagreed over the practical implications of shared political terms such as liberty and equality.

Tone himself had written resolutions for the celebration, following an invitation from his closest friend and political ally, Thomas Russell, who had recently entered Belfast's radical circles. The resolutions were originally intended as a means of launching a new political movement capable of uniting radical and Whig activists across Ireland. In a famous letter to Russell explaining his intent in the resolutions, Tone explained that while he now believed the Whig MPs were '*not sincere friends to the popular cause*', he had written resolutions that their supporters on the ground might embrace. He wrote that English influence was 'the Bane of Irish prosperity' and told Russell to tell the Belfast leaders that although he believed separation would be '*a regeneration for this Country*', his resolutions did not even hint at it.²⁷ By regeneration (a word used often in Revolutionary France), Tone meant that separation, as well as its political benefits, would improve Ireland's economy and thus the people's living standards and society as a whole. The resolutions hid his commercially-inspired separatist views, but they hinted at the necessity for religious equality, causing serious controversy.

Tone's resolutions voiced the hopes raised by the French Revolution that a new and more liberal era in human history had begun, and they used many of the political languages

²⁵ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, 285.

²⁶ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 65.

²⁷ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 104-5.

associated with democracy, such as individual rights, the sovereignty of the people, and active citizenship. They cited the fall of ‘unjust governments’ in Europe, religious persecution being banished (primarily a reference to France’s revolutionary religious policies that had introduced religious freedom and stripped the Catholic church of its power), the rights of man being ‘ascertained in theory and that theory substantiated by practice’, and claimed that all government was now acknowledged as originating from the people. At such a time, they said, it was incumbent upon Irishmen to demand an end to their chief grievance, namely that Ireland had no national government, but instead a government ‘of Englishmen and the servants of Englishmen’. Defeating this influence necessitated parliamentary reform. For Ireland’s ‘true greatness and happiness ... a complete internal union of *all her people*’ was essential. The resolutions called on the Volunteers to make the independence they had won in theory a fact, and committed the members of the new organisation to ‘heartily cooperate in all measures tending to the abolition of distinctions between Irishmen ... which have been uniformly the source of weakness and misery and disgrace to the country’.²⁸ Tone thus referred to the complete abolition of the penal laws – without which talk of parliamentary reform was ‘wicked nonsense’. However, so as not to alarm those who retained anti-Catholic ‘prejudices’, he only hinted at abolition.²⁹ Despite these efforts at moderation, his resolution on religious distinctions was too radical for Belfast’s Whigs, and was dropped, as was the foundation of a new society.

The themes and language of these resolutions appear time and again not just in Tone’s vision of democracy, but that of the United Irishmen more generally, although their prominence and extent varied over time. In their emphasis on a new era opened by the French Revolution, the rights of man, the sovereignty of the people, and religious equality, they can be said to be democratic. The reference to greatness and happiness also fit with commercial republicanism. The strategy behind the resolutions – mobilising the power of public opinion through political clubs and the Volunteers to force the Irish parliament and London to enact real change – can be seen as democratic in spirit too, though it was inspired by 1782 as well as 1789. It differed from 1782, however, in that it looked for leadership not to parliamentary allies or liberal aristocrats, but to the middle and lower orders. Although we can see many themes familiar from later in the decade, Tone’s political thought was not as thoroughly democratic as it would become, as can be seen in his *Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, which he published in August 1791 in response to the failure of the resolution on religious equality.

The *Argument* sought to convince northern radicals who remained suspicious of Catholics’ capacity for liberty that they could be safely entrusted with political power, and that reform was possible only through an alliance of all religions – hence Tone’s pseudonym, ‘A Northern Whig’. It was written in less than two weeks, a feat possible because it distilled previously published and unpublished thoughts, including the rejected Bastille Day resolutions. The fundamentals of Tone’s political strategy outlined here – unite and mobilise the people of all religions to secure independence from British and aristocratic influence and a prosperous future – did not change until the alliance with France added a third basic element. He stated his case forcefully, arguing that ‘no reform is honourable, practicable, efficacious, or just, which does not include, as a fundamental principle, the extension of the elective franchise to the Roman Catholics’.³⁰ He thus sought to link the Catholic question to parliamentary reform in the public mind. He ascribed the failure of the reformers of the early 1780s to the refusal to make this link. Handicapped by bigotry, ‘they failed because they did not deserve to succeed.’ Their

²⁸ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 106-7.

²⁹ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 105.

³⁰ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 112-13.

failure meant that ever since ‘there has been *no people in Ireland*’.³¹ For Tone then, the rights of the nation depended upon the rights of the individual people who formed part of it, and the two should not and could not be separated. Sovereignty of the people – the defining political principle of the French Revolution – left no room for religious discrimination, as France herself, once a bastion of religious intolerance, now showed. That Catholic nation now understood both the theory and practice of the rights of man better than any other. This could be seen in their ignoring the ‘rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican’.³² At such a time, Irish Protestants must abandon the suspicions and fears of the past. Religious equality therefore lay squarely at the heart of Tone’s emerging democratic politics.

Nevertheless, although his central argument was an appeal for equal political rights for Catholics, the practical proposals Tone suggested either did not envisage Catholics being treated equally with Protestants, or aimed to reduce the number of existing voters. He suggested that Catholics acquire the franchise ‘under modifications’.³³ Either the vote should be restricted to wealthy Catholics with a freehold of ten pounds per year, or the franchise removed altogether from the ‘feculent mass’ and ‘disgrace to our Constitution’ that was the forty shilling freeholders, who were driven like cattle by their landlords to the polls. Whichever method was adopted, the ‘sound and respectable part of the Catholic community’ would regain its natural and just weight in society.³⁴ These are the arguments of a bourgeois reformer who saw those with property and education as the natural leaders of society, with the middle classes superior in virtue to both aristocrats and the lower classes, neither of whom could deliver the sort of good government and prosperous society the mercantile and professional strata who formed the backbone of Irish radicalism desired. How can we relate such proposals, which seem to us anti-democratic, to Tone’s vision of democracy?

As we have seen, in 1796, Tone defined a democrat as a supporter of the French Revolution, an admirer of Paine’s *Rights of Man*, and the opposite of an aristocrat. In October 1789, the French National Assembly had introduced the distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ citizens, a property qualification that meant only men over 25 who paid the equivalent of three days’ unskilled labour in taxes could vote, and higher qualifications were in place for the secondary electoral assemblies and to sit in the legislature. This outraged the radical revolutionaries, people like Maximilien Robespierre and Camille Desmoulins, who famously wrote that ‘the active citizens are the ones who took the Bastille’.³⁵ In proposing the tightening of the property qualification, therefore, Tone was in fact in tune with the dominant moderate group in a France that was now a constitutional monarchy, but not with those who would lead the French democratic republican ‘second revolution’ of 1792 that abolished the monarchy and the property qualification.

From Tone’s perspective, his proposal was democratic because it extended the vote to a previously excluded religious group, aligning with the crucial democratic principle of Enlightened religious equality. Even the proposal to disenfranchise the forty shilling freeholders might potentially be viewed as a democratic measure in that it would weaken the power of the aristocracy by depriving it of seats obtained by intimidating tenants. This would

³¹ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 116.

³² Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 123.

³³ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 114.

³⁴ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 125, 122.

³⁵ Cited in W. Doyle, *Oxford History of the French Revolution* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 124.

not be the last time Tone pragmatically suggested that an imperfect but sufficiently democratic system was defensible and worth fighting for.

However, there are some grounds for scepticism that these proposals represented Tone's ideal electoral system even at this early stage. The contempt for the poor voiced here contrasts with *Spanish War!* and the unpublished appeal to the lower orders. The *Argument* aimed to build support for political rights for Catholics, and these proposals could have been a tactical move to appeal to protestant radicals fearful of the supposed prejudices of poor Catholics, rather than a true statement of Tone's views. We do not know exactly when he embraced the idea of universal manhood suffrage, but given his connections to the northern United Irishmen – who, unlike their Dublin counterparts, never thought the idea of a property qualification even worth discussing – it is entirely possible it was before 1792.

IV. Tone and the United Irishmen

The founding resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen, composed by Tone based on those of July, contained his characteristic arguments that English influence in Ireland's government was so great that it could be combatted only by 'a cordial union among ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND' and a 'complete and radical reform' accompanied by equal rights for Catholics.³⁶ In other words, the United Irishmen were needed so that the current radical reform campaign would avoid the sectarianism of other reformers, past and present. For Tone, one could not uphold the rights of man, the principles of the French Revolution, and the rights of the Irish people – could not be a democrat – without supporting religious equality in both theory and practice. He and the United Irishmen sought to use the power of public opinion – meaning the public beyond the confines of the Protestant political nation – to pressure the governments in London and Dublin into reforms on such a scale that the political, religious, and social status quo would be overturned. Although they couched their aims in the language of the constitution, if carried through, their programme meant revolutionary change in who held political and social power, even if initially they pursued it by peaceful means. They challenged aristocracy and power defined by birth and religion with the force of numbers and the idea of inherent political rights – this was a politics founded on radically different principles to the status quo. Although publicly the United Irishmen continued to reference the idea of reforming the existing constitution even after embracing rebellion, in reality their ideal polity quickly proved to be a democratic republic.

The wave of writing on the United Irishmen during the bicentenary of the 1798 rebellion established a new orthodoxy, with popular politicisation its 'master-theme'.³⁷ Rather than frustrated reformers and a desperate population pushed into rebellion by repression, the rebellion was now portrayed as the result of a highly effective and innovative campaign to mobilise the lower orders to fight for a new type of government in an independent Ireland. The United Irishmen appear as more dedicated revolutionaries, having embraced insurrection earlier than before. As Nancy Curtin has shown, the leading Ulster United Irishmen, to whom Tone was politically close, were organising for the possibility of armed revolution as early as 1792-3.³⁸ In this context, then, and with an eye to understanding Tone's vision of democracy

³⁶ Tone, *Writings*, vol.1, 140-141.

³⁷ J. Smyth, 'Introduction', in *Revolution, Counter-Revolution and Union: Ireland in the 1790s*, ed. J. Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

³⁸ N. Curtin, 'The transformation of the Society of United Irishmen into a mass-based revolutionary organisation, 1794-6', *Irish Historical Studies* 24, no. 96 (1985): 471-473.

as comprising practice as well as theory, his actions at this time repay closer attention to understand the scope of his vision of democracy.

The journals of Tone's trip to Belfast in October 1791 for the founding meeting of the United Irishmen offer insight into the importance of economic considerations for the vision of a new Ireland he shared with Belfast's radical leadership. He participated in several conversations about the possibility of Ireland winning a war of independence, as America had done, and the potential economic consequences. Among his conversation partners was Thomas Digges, who had been agent for American prisoners-of-war in England during the American war. Digges assured him that revolutionary France would come to Ireland's aid to spread liberty, and that should religious divisions be overcome and Ireland emerge with a good system of government and free from debt, 'she would in arts, commerce and manufactures spring up like an air balloon and leave English behind her at an immense distance'.³⁹ William Sinclair, a leading radical and wealthy linen merchant agreed with Russell that the British army in Ireland would be easily annihilated, and used, Tone noted, the same language about an independent Ireland's economic prospects as Digges. Sinclair and other members of Belfast's radical industrial bourgeoisie also lamented the failure of the Irish parliament to support the introduction of new machinery, and compared the situation unfavourably with the US.⁴⁰

Tone and his allies therefore had an extraordinary amount of confidence in the economic prospects of an independent, democratic Ireland (and confidence in Ireland's economic potential was general across the political spectrum). The extent to which their political and economic ideas were inextricably linked, and how far they were motivated by commercial republicanism, has often been overlooked, partly because they focused more on political organisation and agitation than economic theorising.⁴¹ This is true of Tone. Rather than take his comments on economics and the desire to improve the lot of the poor as scattered and insubstantial, we are better seeing them as fundamental to his ideology from his earliest political writings, and thus a vital part of his vision of democracy.

Tone's propaganda for equal rights for Catholics soon paid dividends when he was appointed as agent to the Catholic Committee to replace Richard Burke, son of Edmund. The message to the governments in London and Dublin was obvious: meet Catholic demands or risk them joining forces with those seeking to emulate France. Tone's appointment also reflected the victory of the Catholic commercial elite within the Committee over the aristocratic and clerical leadership that had dominated for decades. The Committee's more assertive line drew an immensely hostile response from the majority of the political elite, who claimed that the Committee was unrepresentative. To establish its representative credentials, and to make clear to London the dangers of not giving way, the Committee decided to organise the election of a national representative body of Catholics, usually called the Catholic Convention, and derided by its opponents as a popish parliament.

Tone was one of the main organisers of the Convention, travelling round Ireland and writing much of the accompanying publicity campaign. It was elected, as its enraged opponents noted, by a system of indirect election similar to that of France.⁴² Unlike in France, every (Catholic)

³⁹ Tone, *Writings*, vol 1, 136.

⁴⁰ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 148-149, 137.

⁴¹ For exceptions, see J. Quinn, 'The United Irishmen and Social Reform', *Irish Historical Studies* 31, no. 122 (1998): 188-201; J. Livesey, 'Introduction', in A. O'Connor, *The State of Ireland* ed. J Livesey (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1998).

⁴² See, for example, *Freeman's Journal*, 30th August 1792

man had a vote at the initial stage, and the delegates would be subject to recall if they acted ‘in opposition to the general will and public good’.⁴³ The planned convention was thus a challenge to the status of parliament as the legitimate representative institution of the people, and the electoral system and subjecting delegates to recall represented radical – some thought revolutionary – interpretations of the principle of representation. The letter accompanying the call for people to hold elections said the outcome would determine whether Catholics would be ‘freemen or slaves!’⁴⁴ Tone, his modern editors speculate, may have been consulted on this letter, but whether he was or not, its contents demonstrate why he was appointed – he spoke the political language the Committee was adopting better than anyone else.⁴⁵ He proved an effective organiser as well as a propagandist. His propaganda insisted on the constitutionality of Catholic demands and actions, and it could not say anything else. He assisted the Catholic leaders in discussions with both allies like Henry Grattan and opponents like the ‘high aristocrat’ Lord Hillsborough.⁴⁶ But in organising a convention on the basis that political rights were inherent and not rooted in property, the Catholic Committee, and Tone, revealed a commitment to democratic principles and practice. Hence his being so enraged by the leadership settling for the franchise rather than full emancipation that he made it clear he was prepared to fight a duel on the issue with his closest ally on the Committee, John Keogh.⁴⁷ His role with the Catholic Committee caused some tensions with other United Irishmen, who resented him not keeping them better informed of its deliberations. However, it is clear that his roles as agent to the Catholics and leading United Irishman were rooted in the same ideology.

On 8th September 1792, the *Northern Star* ran an anonymous account of the US constitution, written by Tone. Its implicit comparisons with Ireland suggested republican democracy was the superior form of government. While he noted the existence of a property qualification in some states, he pointed out that ‘the absurd and unmeaning preference given by our laws to *freehold property* is rejected’, and that all religions enjoyed the right to vote, though he noted disapprovingly the existence of a ‘kind of *Protestant Ascendancy*’ for one state legislature. The article also argued that in the US government was cheaper and less corrupt, and approvingly cited the ban on the creation of an aristocracy. Freed from being seen to speak for the Catholics by anonymity, he made clear his preference for republican, secular democracy over the existing constitution. Republican democracy was presented as superior in every way, even when imperfect.

Democrats in the age of revolution placed great stress on the armed citizen defending his homeland, whether it was the Americans who named Cincinnati or the sans-culottes brandishing their pikes. The United Irishmen were no different, especially given the existing prominence of the Volunteers in Irish political culture following 1782. Tone and his allies hoped that volunteering would be ‘once more the salvation of Ireland’, and set about turning the Volunteers into a force they could wield.⁴⁸ Tone’s involvement in this project included his role in establishing the National Battalion in Dublin in winter 1792. The unit was better known as the National Guard, reflecting the influence of the French Revolution on its uniform and political principles. Its uniform was deliberately cheap, and echoed that of the French National Guard. Moreover, its symbol – designed by Tone – placed the harp under a cap of liberty, rather than a crown. This was a clear assertion of republican, separatist, and democratic principles.

⁴³ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 201.

⁴⁴ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 200.

⁴⁵ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 198.

⁴⁶ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 248.

⁴⁷ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 401-2.

⁴⁸ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 1, 312.

Catholics were also invited to join, in defiance of the law, and the egalitarianism that inspired its formation is obvious in the attempt to ensure the poor could participate. For Tone, the foundation of the unit was the literal embodiment of his democratic political principles. The government agreed, and with war with France looming quickly banned volunteering even though the National Battalion only ever recruited twenty percent of its target.

V. Conclusion

By examining Tone's writings more closely, and by studying them in the context of his actions and of developing concepts of democracy at this time, his political thought appears in a new light. His claim to have been a democrat early on holds true, and his politics look more revolutionary and more consistently so than previously realised, although we must also remember his pragmatism and contradictions. A closer examination of his political thought in their contexts helps us better understand not just how Tone ended up committed to armed revolution, but also his closest allies in the United Irish leadership. We get a better understanding of their ideology, with their vision for Ireland a lot more sophisticated than a simple desire for independence. Before December 1792, Tone had embraced the revolutionary democratic principles that were reshaping the Atlantic world, as is clear from his writings and actions – he did not embrace democratic theory and practice out of disappointment and desperation, but from the logic of his own political convictions. At the heart of his vision of a democratic Ireland lay religious equality and a belief that there should be no such thing as an established religion, Protestant, Catholic, or Dissenter. This explains the depth of his opposition to the political and social power of the Church of Ireland at home and the Catholic Church abroad. The fierce secularism of his politics grew not just from a conviction that Ireland's independence could never be achieved while her people remained divided, but also from the egalitarianism that is a fundamental but sometimes underappreciated aspect of his politics. He not only believed that men of all religions should enjoy equal political rights, but also men of all classes, despite some statements that suggest otherwise. Crucially, he and his allies believed that a democratic Irish republic would unleash the vast untapped productive capacity of four million people, and transform Ireland rapidly into a rich and powerful country. Tone's politics – like those of the times generally – were dynamic, and they continued to develop after 1792 in response to events. In exile in the US, for example, concerned that an aristocracy of wealth was corrupting the republic, he dismissed George Washington himself as a 'high-flying aristocrat', but would in his own trial speech in 1798 compare himself to Washington. In the Batavian Republic, too, he saw the struggle between aristocracy and democracy continuing, with the influence of wealth a danger to democracy. In France, however, he rejected the most radical of the democrats, welcoming the suppression of Babeuf's Conspiracy of the Equals because despite the imperfections in its representative system, the French Republic remained fundamentally democratic. It was in his view irrational to attempt to overthrow it, especially in the context of the war.⁴⁹ He formed his view of what arrangements constituted the best form of democratic government in the early 1790s, but would work for and accept less in the meantime, whether that was reforms to the constitution or the establishment of a new regime with imperfections. What mattered was that the polity and society were fundamentally democratic, i.e. that the power of monarchy, religious establishments of any denomination, and aristocracy was smashed, and that a new secular representative regime would introduce laws and policies that would benefit the poor. Tone believed that a democratic Ireland would truly liberate the people collectively and individually from political, religious, and social oppression. Grasping how early he adopted this ideology helps us better understand not just Tone's own life and

⁴⁹ Tone, *Writings*, vol. 2, 12; vol. 3, 68-9; vol. 2 179.

thought, but the dynamics of politics in 1790s Ireland and the spread of democracy in the age of revolutions.