Irish Revolutionaries and the French Revolution

Ultán Gillen

On Saturday 10 November 1798, an adjutant general in the army of the French Republic was marched into a court martial in Dublin barracks. He had been captured as part of an expedition dispatched to help the United Irish rebellion, which sought to establish an independent democratic republic with French aid. The prisoner, disgusted at being clamped in irons, had previously protested to both the military and civilian authorities in Ireland that he ought to be treated as befitted a French citizen and a French officer. On 9 November, he penned a letter intended for the Directory in Paris asking that they insist to the British government that the honour of the French nation and its armies be respected in his person. However, the following day, he was tried and found guilty of treason. His request to be shot rather than hanged like a criminal was denied, and he consequently cut his own throat. The wound was not fatal and he lingered, dying in agony on 19 November. The life and death of Theobald Wolfe Tone epitomised the link between Irish revolutionaries and the French Revolution. Tone formulated many of the key ideas of the Society of United Irishmen as they sought to translate the principles of the French Revolution to Irish conditions on their foundation in 1791, he helped initiate the programme of popular politicisation that would transform the United Irishmen into a revolutionary mass movement, and he personally forged their military alliance with France in 1796. In his final days, the man remembered in Ireland as the founder of Irish separatism proudly proclaimed his citizenship of the French revolutionary republic as well as his dedication to the cause of Irish independence. This chapter examines the influence of the French Revolution on the world around it through a case study of the links between Irish revolutionaries and France, exploring the ideological impact of the Revolution in Ireland, as well as the establishment of the Franco–United Irish military alliance. Irish revolutionaries, believing that

the rights of man offered the means to change the course of Irish history, sought to remake their world in the image of the French Revolution.

'We celebrated the 14th July with more pomp than it was done in any part of the world, save the *Champ de Mars*'[1], claimed a proud Belfast man in May 1792. There is certainly a good case to be made that it was in Ireland that the ideas of the French Revolution – as opposed to its armies as in other parts of Europe – had their greatest impact; the 1798 rebellion was a civil war between those hoping to implement its ideas in Ireland and those opposed to them, as well as a blow for separation from Britain. To understand the French Revolution's impact on Irish political culture, it is important to grasp several structural factors deeply rooted in Irish history that conditioned that impact. Most important were the religious divisions among the population and the confessional state; Ireland's relationship with Britain; economic progress, which saw the development of social and political forces capable of challenging the established order by the time of the French Revolution; and the place of France itself within Irish political imaginations in the eighteenth century.

In the aftermath of the victory of the forces loyal to William of Orange over those loyal to James II and Louis XIV, political power was monopolised by the adherents of the Established Church of Ireland (an Anglican church), who in the decades after 1691 passed a number of laws aimed at disenfranchising Irish Catholics and Dissenters (mostly Presbyterians, concentrated in the province of Ulster in the north-east). By 1727, these Penal Laws excluded Catholics from political power completely, and deprived Dissenters of the ability to hold important government posts, although Dissenters who met the property qualification retained the vote. The Penal Laws also sought to encourage conversion among Catholic landowners by splitting estates on inheritance unless they went to a protestant heir. Other laws targeted the religious practice of Catholics and Dissenters. As a result of these laws, Anglicans, about 10 per cent of the

population, monopolized political power, and possessed the vast majority of land and wealth. Towards the end of the century, the term Protestant Ascendancy (with Protestant meaning specifically Anglicans, rather than all Protestants) became a popular means to describe this monopoly of political power. Naturally, there was a great deal of resentment among Catholics (about 80 per cent of the population) and Dissenters (about 10 per cent of the population) at their treatment, and the desire for religious equality lay at the heart of the revolutionary programme in the 1790s, and went far to explain its ability to attract mass support.

Ultimate political power in Ireland did not, however, rest with the Protestant Ascendancy. It in fact lay with the government in London, as it was its military forces that sustained Ireland's status quo. After the final defeat of the Franco–Jacobite forces in 1691, Ireland theoretically enjoyed the same constitution as England did following 1688, with power shared between king, lords and commons. Furthermore, Ireland was theoretically a sister kingdom of England (and, after 1707, Britain), linked through having the same monarch but equal in status. This was a fiction. Ireland did indeed have its own parliament, but it was subordinate to that at Westminster, a situation strengthened by Westminster's Declaratory Act of 1720. The Irish parliament could not draw up bills, but only heads of bills, which were altered by the Privy Council in London, before being sent back for rejection or approval, but not further amendment. In addition, the lord lieutenants (viceroys) appointed by London used patronage to ensure a government majority in the Irish parliament. Laws made at Westminster restricted Irish trade. Resentment at this state of affairs among the Irish political elite and wider public opinion developed as the century progressed. The anger of patriots such as the writer Jonathan Swift centred on economic and legislative restrictions and caused occasional crises that were fairly easily overcome until the era of the American Revolution. With large numbers of troops sent from Ireland to America, a volunteer army sprang up that soon turned its attention to politics, demanding free trade (an end to British laws restricting Irish trade) and legislative independence

(an end to Westminster's superiority over the Irish parliament). The so-called revolution of 1782 forged by an alliance of the volunteers, parliamentary politicians, and public opinion achieved these goals. In reality, however, the viceroys continued to use patronage to manage the Irish parliament, where only one hundred of the three hundred seats were genuinely open to contestation. The crisis caused by George III's illness in 1788 nearly saw Ireland and Britain have a regent with fuller powers in Ireland than in Britain, reflecting the extent to which the Irish political elite was jealous of the powers of its parliament, even while accepting British management of it. The revolution of 1782 ultimately disappointed radical Irish patriots, being labelled by Wolfe Tone as 'the most bungling imperfect business that ever threw ridicule on a lofty epithet'.[2] On the other hand, British politicians such as the Prime Minister William Pitt began to consider legislative union a superior arrangement. Separation from Britain became another central part of the planned Irish revolution of the 1790s.

Although Ireland was renowned at the time for the poverty of its peasantry, the eighteenth century in fact saw much economic progress, with an era of sustained growth (despite periods of reversal) beginning about 1740 and lasting until the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The provisions trade and the linen industry in particular flourished, and by 1789, industrial production in these areas could be found in Ulster, Munster and Leinster. The population grew at an unprecedented rate for Western Europe to about 5 million between 1750 and 1800, and Dublin was easily the second city of the British Empire, and the sixth biggest in Europe. Both physical communications and the public sphere developed rapidly during the century, and by 1792 there were at least 35 newspapers being published across the island, most often twice a week. The number of readers grew significantly, although the literacy rate may actually have fallen given the spectacular population growth. The middle classes – lawyers, doctors, merchants, printers, manufacturers and the like – grew in numbers, wealth, and influence. Many merchants and professionals were Catholics, and Dissenters dominated the linen industry. By

1792, Ireland's reputed richest man, Edward Byrne, was a merchant rather than a landowner, and a Catholic to boot. Due to the penal laws, then, many within the middle classes were excluded from the share in political power to which they felt their wealth, education and talent entitled them (echoing the feelings of French bourgeois revolutionaries like Danton). Associational culture and the culture of sociability saw increasing contact between people of different religions, and on major political questions such as economic development and the powers of the Irish parliament, attitudes were increasingly shared across religious lines. Inspired by the importance of political clubs in the French Revolution and the alternative they offered to aristocratic traditional political institutions and assumptions, the Society of United Irishmen began life as a network of political clubs seeking to mobilize public opinion behind reform and dominated by the radical elements of the professional, mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie of Belfast and Dublin who were searching for a means to play a greater role in political life, and who believed that greater independence would mean greater national prosperity. Resistance to reform facilitated their embrace of revolution. The bulk of the revolutionaries of the 1790s were drawn from the artisanate, schoolmasters, and later from an increasingly politicized peasantry, many of whom had benefited from proto-industrialization. The economic growth of recent decades created the conditions for the revolutionary challenge to emerge from the middle and lower orders.

In the aftermath of the Williamite victory over the Franco-Jacobite forces, France took on conflicting roles in Irish political culture. Seen as the home of spiritual and temporal despotism, and economically backward, it was the antithesis of everything Irish Protestants liked to think the British and Irish political system stood for. For Irish Catholics, France represented a source of hope, the country most likely to restore the Stuart king, their church and their community in general to their rights, estates and possessions. Many Irish Catholics entered the French military service in 1691 and the following decades. French invasion seemed the solution to many

problems, and the French considered the possibility of invasion during the various wars with Britain. Hope for an invasion persisted among many within the Catholic and Gaelic-speaking lower orders even after French support for the Stuarts had ended. At the same time, however, France was recognized within Irish intellectual culture as Europe's leading cultural centre, and a beacon of Enlightenment. The era of the American Revolution saw many of the more hostile attitudes breaking down. Many Irish patriots sympathized, to some degree at least, with the Americans, and Louis XVI's role in bringing liberty to America saw some reappraise their attitude towards him. By the late 1780s, contrasts were even being drawn between Louis XVI's increasing toleration towards Protestants, and the failure to further relax the penal laws in Ireland. The Revolution then transformed attitudes towards France, before the war caused a further fundamental shift as support for France became treasonous. When a committee of Irish revolutionaries approached the French about arms and aid in 1792; when the French sent agents to Ireland in 1793 and 1794 to sound out Irish radicals about the possible reaction to a potential invasion; and when the United Irishmen dispatched Tone to Paris in 1795 to negotiate for an invasion, they were appealing to a long tradition that envisaged the overthrow of the Irish status quo by an alliance of domestic rebels and French troops, albeit it one transformed by the Revolution. The alliance between Irish and French revolutionaries was in many senses, then, a case of old wine in new bottles, the result of geopolitics as well as ideology.

How did the French Revolution make its impact on Irish politics? In 1796, Tone ascribed its influence to the Burke-Paine debate. 'This controversy, and the gigantic event which gave rise to it, changed in an instant the politics of Ireland'.[3] Jim Smyth's remark that 'Public opinion was initially stirred in a dramatic way by the debate which the revolution provoked between Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine' reflects a historiographical consensus that agrees with Tone.[4] However, an examination of the Irish press demonstrates that the reason Burke and Paine stirred such a debate in Ireland was precisely because the Revolution had already made a

substantial impact on public opinion, and had already begun to reshape the terms of Irish politics. To understand the Revolution's impact on Irish political culture, then, we need to alter the accepted chronology that led to the creation of a mass revolutionary movement, and also place less emphasis on the Burke–Paine debate, while recognizing its substantial importance.

Given France's place in Irish culture, and its position within European geopolitics and culture, the events that made up the pre-Revolution were naturally followed closely. Many newspapers printed accounts of French events and commented on them, and frequently documents from both the monarchy and the opposition were printed in Irish newspapers.[5] This was particularly true in Ulster, where the United Irishmen would later be strongest. Comment tended to take the side of the patriot opposition, and some of it displayed a keen insight into what was at stake. The *Belfast Newsletter* remarked that 'the day on which the Notables met will form an era in the Liberties of France, which future historians may look to with astonishment. On that day, the *Monarchy* of the country had its deepest wound: for then Government had recourse to the People for power … And what the *Notables* began, the *Parliaments* will finish.'[6]

Once the Bastille fell, the Irish press became obsessed with events in France, with extensive reports of debates in the various assemblies, official documents, eyewitness accounts, letters from people resident in or visiting France, and comment on the Revolution from the editors and readers becoming a staple of Irish newspapers. References to the Revolution also filled the pages of innumerable pamphlets, and soon found their way into debates in the Irish parliament as well. In the months and years that followed 14 July 1789, Irish people discussed and debated the Revolution incessantly, with attempts made across the political spectrum to associate their policies with the positive aspects of events in France, or to link opponents to negative aspects of events in France either before or during the Revolution. The sense that events in Ireland were linked to, or even depended upon, events in France quickly became widespread. When Irish

people took positions on the French Revolution, if they read the newspapers (or listened to others read them aloud), they took informed positions.

The storming of the Bastille was welcomed across the Irish political spectrum, but disagreements soon arose over whether it had lessons to teach Ireland. The reformist *Dublin Evening Post* noted that 'the ghost of French tyranny' could be seen in the recent prosecutions of newspaper owners.[7] Supporters of the status quo believed that Ireland already had an excellent political constitution, whereas reformers believed that lessons needed to be learned from France to overcome the limitations that had stymied attempts to achieve parliamentary reform after 1782. Belfast Whigs toasted 'the present Spirit of France all over the world – three times three.'[8] The extent to which reformers regarded the French Revolution as a decisive moment was revealed by the *Belfast Newsletter*'s comment that it was 'the most glorious Revolution the world has ever witnessed.'[9] 1688 was central to the self-image of the newspaper and its readership as protestant Whigs. The suggestion that it had been surpassed by a revolution in a Catholic country that had been synonymous with despotism meant that a new world of possibilities had opened up, and the reform campaign was reenergized by the example of France in the run-up to the 1790 general election, where an alliance of radical and moderate reformers saw a good deal of success for the Whigs, who took both of the most prestigious seats in parliament, those representing Dublin city.

Although the Revolution inspired a widespread belief that the age of universal liberty was about to dawn, there was still a long way to go before a revolutionary movement would emerge. However, there is evidence from 1790 that some of those who would go on to found and lead the United Irishmen throughout their existence were already contemplating revolution. This primarily takes the form of a fake *Address from the National Assembly of France to the People of Ireland* that was serialized in opposition newspapers in Dublin and Belfast and printed as a

pamphlet in Dublin in August 1790. It was produced by a group of Dublin radicals known as the Whigs of the Capital. The Whigs of the Capital were drawn mainly from the middle orders and the artisanate and were led by the mercurial Dublin city politician James Napper Tandy, whose activities would soon see him fleeing the country to avoid a capital charge of taking an illegal oath, and who would lead the last of the French flotillas that sought to intervene in 1798. Many of the United Irishmen's ideas, much of their rhetoric, and their strategy of popular politicization were anticipated within the pages of the *Address*. It therefore offers an insight into the early development of the revolutionary movement in Ireland.

The *Address* was fundamentally a call for the people of Ireland to achieve freedom, both in how they governed themselves and independence from Britain. It also portrayed a Europe about to fight a civil war, a Manichean struggle between the forces of liberty, led by revolutionary France, and those of the old regime of monarchy, aristocracy and clergy, which would be led by Britain, a nation that called itself free but sought to deny freedom to others (i.e. Ireland). It held out the prospect of French and Irish patriots united and galvanizing the international struggle for liberty. It thus demonstrated the mixture of patriotism and internationalism characteristic of those who believed in the 'brotherhood of humanity' in the age of revolution.[10]

The *Address* was firm in its rejection of the supposed British and Irish constitutional tradition of gradual reform, instead arguing that the rights of man were the only principles on which a government ought to be founded. France, it said, had aroused such hostility from the 'aristocracies of the earth' because it had founded its government on the rights of man, declaring law to be the expression of the general will, embracing meritocracy and making government truly representative of the people. In doing so, the Revolution had declared that any society that did not guarantee equal rights to all its citizens had 'NO CONSTITUTION'.[11] It was this demonstration that had aroused British opposition, according to the *Address*. Despite its

pretensions, it argued, Ireland had no real constitution due to its confessional state. Nor could the current system be effectively reformed – it would have to be replaced. The French had realized the inadequacy of 'merely keeping the ruins in repair' and rebuilt 'from the very foundation. – By doing so, we discovered the hollowness and instability of those artificial principles on which some nations so fondly rest. Political abuses must be overturned completely and at once, or not at all – A slow and partial reform always ends where it begun.'[12]

The *Address* asserted the need for revolutionary change (though the means for achieving this were not discussed). Such change would entail true independence from Britain, a complete change of Ireland's political system to make it genuinely representative, the end of the aristocratic social order, and the abolition of religious discrimination. In all this, and in its emphasis on forgetting past hostilities, it prefigured key elements of the ideology of the United Irish revolutionaries. However, the pamphlet defended the distinction between active and passive citizens in France, suggesting that even Ireland's most radical elements had not yet embraced universal manhood suffrage. Nor was there any mention of a republic. As in France itself, it would be events over the next few years that created mass support for democratic republicanism.

The *Address* aimed to mobilize the middle and lower orders of Dublin behind the Whigs of the Capital, but failed. Its authors were forced to accept that public opinion was not yet ready to embrace such radical sentiments. Instead, they concentrated for now on working for more limited reform with the parliamentary Whig Club, and on propaganda about the need for change at home and the benefits of the Revolution for the people of France. The *Address* deployed a central theme in revolutionary propaganda, whereby France was held up as an exemplar to be followed. To their enemies, the Whigs of the Capital were 'a few obscure men' seeking to overturn the established order for their own gain. Their attempts to spread the 'political

delusion' of 'tucking up necks' in Ireland in imitation of France deserved punishment, but so secure was the liberty gained by Ireland's 'renovated constitution' in 1782 that there was no need to deliver it.[13]

The themes of the *Address* and the attacks on the Whigs of the Capital serve to illustrate how many of the many themes of both *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and *Rights of Man, Part I* already figured prominently in Irish discussion of the Revolution and its possible lessons before either work was published. The Revolution made its initial impact through the extensive newspaper coverage provided across the island, and the debate that coverage sparked. Debate on the Revolution was carried on not just in those pages, but in the broader public sphere. By the time *Reflections* appeared, the conservative Irish press had already turned against the Revolution, and had never accepted it had anything to teach Ireland. Paine strengthened reforming opinion in favor of the Revolution, and moderate reformers only turned against the Revolution in large numbers once war had been declared in 1793. *Rights of Man* also played an extremely prominent part in the efforts to politicize the lower orders in the early 1790s.

How did the Burke-Paine debate on the Revolution aid the development of a revolutionary movement in Ireland? It was not just through Paine's rendering of the rights of man in a form easily comprehensible to the lower orders in town and countryside. *Rights of Man* had a galvanizing effect on Irish radicals, who committed themselves to ensuring that it would get into the hands of the lower orders. The Whigs of the Capital produced the world's first cheap edition of *Rights of Man, Part I*, paying for it through a subscription. It was one of seven Irish editions, another of which was produced by radicals in Derry. In November 1791, Paine claimed 40,000 copies had been sold in Ireland, and Irish revolutionaries would use it as one of their main propaganda weapons throughout the 1790s.[14] The momentum created by the success of Paine's arguments with the public, and the effort to produce the cheap edition, carried over into

the summer. In Belfast, an alliance of Whigs and radicals set about organizing a commemoration of the fall of the Bastille modelled on the Revolution's own Feast of the Federation.

Belfast, centre of the Irish linen industry, had long been the capital of Irish radicalism. A mainly Presbyterian town with a vibrant economy and well-established bourgeoisie, it was ruled by an Anglican clique in the pocket of the local landed aristocrat. Something of the political flavor of the place may be gleaned from the fact that one of the local pubs was named the Benjamin Franklin, whose portrait hung outside – only a few years after the American revolutionaries had humiliated the British and left the empire. The Volunteers had remained highly active in Belfast, and their activities were largely directed by a secret committee of radicals drawn from the local middle classes. These were the men most responsible for organizing the Bastille commemoration, and they would provide the impetus for the foundation of the United Irishmen in October 1791, and its transformation into a mass revolutionary movement beginning in 1792. The Volunteer companies they controlled became the nucleus for their underground army.

The commemoration was a huge success, the biggest demonstration ever seen in Belfast (and one of at least nine in Ireland). The event struck a self-consciously internationalist tone, with a banner of Franklin bearing the quotation 'Where Liberty is…THERE IS MY COUNTRY'. The Revolution represented the 'TRIUMPH OF HUMAN NATURE', not merely of Frenchmen. The lessons for Ireland were made clear in the resolutions passed and toasts drunk at the celebrations. Included among these was the statement that 'we wish ALL CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE annihilated in this land'. However, this was not as radical a statement as William Drennan, the resolutions' author, had intended. Although Belfast's radicals had embraced the idea of political rights for Catholics, the moderate reformers had not, and the original resolution had to be toned down to secure unanimous support. This failure to

secure greater support for their interpretation of what the principles of the French Revolution should mean when applied to Ireland had major implications for radical politics in Ireland. Firstly, it led Tone to pen *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (August 1791) and secondly, it convinced Belfast's radicals of the need for a new movement, and helped lead to the foundation of the United Irishmen in October 1791.

Tone's *Argument* was the most successful Irish pamphlet of the 1790s, selling 6,000 copies. Its target audience was the Presbyterians of Ulster. Tone argued that the French Revolution proved that Catholics possessed the capacity for liberty. Irish Catholics, he said, were no less prepared for liberty than their French counterparts. He appealed to Irish Protestants to put aside their traditional hostilities, and look at the world as it stood now. The 'rusty and extinguished thunderbolts of the Vatican' meant nothing to French or Irish Catholics. He reminded his readers that the 'rights of man are at least as well understood there [France] as here, and somewhat better practiced'.[15] Tone's pamphlet succeeded in turning the tide in Ulster on the Catholic question in favor of the radicals, so that on 28 January 1792 the radicals easily won a vote on the issue at a Belfast town meeting.

The strong dissenting religious beliefs of much of Ulster's population also helped them embrace the principles of the French Revolution and, later, the idea of armed revolution. Many interpreted the French Revolution and the destruction of the absolute monarchy in the eldest daughter of the Catholic Church as a sign that the second coming was imminent. They believed that in supporting the French Revolution and fighting against monarchy, aristocracy and the privileges of the Established Church at home they were literally doing God's work. The United Irishmen exploited such belief by spreading prophecies supporting this line of thought both verbally and in print.

The foundation of the Society of United Irishmen was an attempt to reshape Irish politics using a mobilized public opinion, in the manner in which political clubs operated in France. In the words of Thomas Addis Emmet, a prominent United Irish leader, the world was indebted to the Revolution for 'completely demonstrating the political efficacy of clubs'.[16] The inaugural resolutions reflected how the Revolution shaped United Irish thinking:

> In the present great era of reform, when unjust Governments are falling in every quarter of Europe; when religious persecution is compelled to abjure her tyranny over conscience; when the rights of men are ascertained in theory and that theory substantiated by practice; when antiquity can no longer defend absurd and oppressive forms against the common sense and common interest of mankind; when all government is acknowledged to originate from the people and to be so far only obligatory as it protects their rights and promotes their welfare: we think it our duty, as Irishmen, to come forward and state what we feel to be our heavy grievance and what we know to be its effectual remedy.[17]

In other words, the French Revolution inspired the United Irishmen to think that change was possible, if not inevitable, and demonstrated to them how best to achieve it. Ireland's main problem was that 'WE HAVE NO NATIONAL GOVERNMENT' but instead merely the servants of Britain. The solution lay in 'AN EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN PARLIAMENT' to be achieved through building 'a cordial union among ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND', of all religious denominations.[18] Once built, this union would secure a new constitution based on the rights of man. Although couched in terms of reform, this was a revolutionary vision, one where the political, social and religious underpinnings of the status quo would be done away with.

There has been debate amongst Irish historians about whether the reformist programme of the United Irishmen in the phase before they were made illegal in 1794 represented their true aims. It is argued here firstly that the revolutionary implications of the reforms they did advocate need to be recognized, and secondly that there is ample evidence that for the majority of the leadership these were only a starting point, and that they had in mind total separation from Britain and a genuinely representative form of government as their ultimate aim. In a letter of summer 1791 that was later used by the Irish government against them, Tone told the Belfast radicals who invited him to help found the United Irishmen that he believed that separation was essential, and his diaries for the years 1791–92 record several conversations indicating that United Irish leaders were already contemplating the possibility of an armed uprising. As will be discussed below, the use of French political symbolism also suggests they had embraced revolutionary republican democracy early on.

At first, the United Irishmen used constitutional means of agitation. Well aware that the Irish parliament could never be the vehicle for procuring change, they began an intensive campaign of popular politicization, hoping that pressure out-of-doors would force change upon a reluctant political elite. Key to this was their newspaper, the *Northern Star*, which rapidly became Ireland's most popular journal. The *Northern Star* prioritized news from France, and, until its presses were smashed by government troops in 1797, consistently published pieces praising the French Revolution. It also printed articles such as a 'Dialogue between an Aristocrat and a Democrat' (4 April 1792) that left little doubt where the United Irishmen stood. The United Irish press (they published several other newspapers and many pamphlets) played a central role in their campaign to 'make every man a politician', but they used every means of propaganda available to them skillfully – handbills, songs, poetry, oaths, humor, public gatherings, sporting events, funerals all were exploited to carry their message to the people in simple and comprehensible language.[19]

Inspired by the leading role of the Volunteers in 1782, the United Irishmen attempted to revivify them. The United Irishmen sought to build support for a national reform convention drawn from Volunteer units and political societies that would force change from government. At the same time, the Catholic Committee was organizing a Catholic convention to demand political rights. Every adult male in every parish in Ireland could theoretically contribute to the choice of the delegates in an electoral system its opponents claimed was modelled on that of France. Tone, having replaced Edmund Burke's son Richard as secretary to the Catholic Committee earlier that year in a very deliberate appointment by the Committee, was central to its organization. The United Irishmen and their allies were challenging the status of parliament as the legitimate political representative of the nation.

Concern about this turn of events among the elite was greatly heightened when in late 1792 the United Irishmen in Dublin announced the formation of a Volunteer corps called the National Battalion, which was clearly modelled on the French National Guard. Its uniform was similar in appearance to the National Guard and cost little to facilitate membership among the poor. In the words of a government informer, the green and white striped trousers were those of the '*Sans Cullantes* [sic]'.[20] Catholics were invited to join in an assertion of their rights as men and citizens. The symbol adopted for the new unit was the Irish harp but without the crown above it: a specifically republican symbol. Arming the poor and Catholics also symbolized a commitment to democracy. The National Battalion revealed its authors as revolutionary republican democrats. The corps never took off, but its emergence contributed a great deal to the government decision to ban the Volunteers in late 1792 and early 1793.

At the same time as the National Battalion was being formed, the first attempt was made by Irish revolutionaries to gain material support from France. A still-mysterious Revolutionary

Committee made contact with the French in London. In the course of these contacts, invasion was discussed and artillery requested. The French embassy in London reported to the Girondin government that Ireland was on the verge of revolution, a view endorsed by the former consul in Dublin.[21] This was not the case, but reading the fears expressed in the conservative press it is understandable why some might think so, especially when the activities (real and imagined) of French agents in Britain were causing real fears of revolution there at the same time. Marianne Elliott has speculated that the Committee was made up of Defenders, an oath-bound armed secret society.[22] The Defenders had emerged in the mid-1780s during sectarian troubles in county Armagh, but they were now spreading throughout the island, and mixed pro-French revolutionary politics with social, economic and religious grievances. While some Defenders were nakedly sectarian, it was for taking the Defender oath that the protestant Tandy was forced to flee the country.

During 1793, fearing revolt, the government moved to choke off alternative expressions of political opinion and to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the state. As well as the Volunteers being banned, the Convention Act banned unofficial elected assemblies, the Gunpowder Act sought to control weapons outside government hands, and a new militia was created, sparking massive riots. The propaganda campaign against the United Irishmen was stepped up, and some members prosecuted. Catholics were granted the right to vote, but denied the chance to sit in parliament, leaving a legacy of bitterness. When added to the economic dislocation caused by the war, these circumstances transformed the political situation in Ireland, creating sufficient discontent for a mass revolutionary movement to emerge. It became clear to the United Irishmen that constitutional means could not work, and in their eyes the constitution had effectively been overturned. The population was angered and radicalized by the Catholic question, the militia riots and the war. In Ulster, the work of building an underground United Irish organization had in fact begun during 1792. The foundation of three French-inspired

societies in December 1792 – the Republicans, the Federates and the Irish Jacobins – in Belfast was indicative of a more open embrace of revolution. The fact that the cannon of the newly-banned radical Belfast Volunteers were hidden rather than surrendered to government is also telling. It was not until 1794 that the United Irishmen were banned, and until 1795 that the underground organization began to spread far beyond Ulster. The sometimes difficult and incomplete merger of the United Irishmen with the Defenders starting that year created a mass revolutionary underground movement across most of the island.

During 1792, Tom Paine and Irish revolutionaries in Paris such as Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Henry Sheares lobbied the French government to explore the possibility of invading Ireland. They were pushing at something of an open door, given the fact that France had long regarded Ireland as Britain's potential weak spot. The presence of many Irishmen and men of Irish descent in the French military increased the likelihood of a French attempt at invasion. British involvement in the Vendée practically guaranteed it. In March 1793, Eleazer Oswald arrived in Dublin on behalf of the Girondin government. Fitzgerald, back in Ireland, introduced him to some of the Dublin leaders of the United Irishmen, but not to the northern leaders and those who were closest to them in Dublin. Possibly suspicious that he was an *agent provocateur*, they told him that nothing could be done in the current circumstances of government reaction. This did not, of course, rule out the possibility of a different response in different circumstances. In the event, Oswald returned disappointed. The French did not give up.

Robespierre and the Jacobins rejected Girondin internationalism and adventurism, as Anarchisis Cloots and others found to their cost. However, the Committee of Public Safety continued to contemplate an invasion of Ireland, though possibly they were motivated by the desire for revenge as much as by any spirit of internationalism. Their agent, the Irish-born Anglican Reverend William Jackson, arrived in Dublin on 3 April 1794, having been sent to

Britain and Ireland to canvas opinion on likely reactions to a French invasion. He had spoken of the real purpose of his trip to a friend in London, John Cockayne, who had immediately gone to government, and been told to accompany Jackson and spy on him. Jackson made contact with the United Irishmen, and began a series of meetings with Archibald Hamilton Rowan and Tone. The United Irishmen were much more positive about the prospect of an invasion than they had been the previous year, perhaps reflecting how low their political fortunes in Dublin had sunk. The British radicals he spoke to told Jackson that a French invasion there would be fiercely resisted, but Rowan and Tone assured Jackson that the Irish people as a whole would welcome the invaders as liberators.

The accounts of public opinion they wrote for Jackson to take back to France somewhat flattened out the complexity of the situation, but gave a clear message that a large-scale invasion would be welcome. They argued that both the Catholics and the Dissenters greatly desired independence from Britain and a change of government, even if for different reasons. They naturally stressed the extent of support for the Revolution within Ireland, but also talked about deep-seated hatred for England among the people. They emphasized the need for a strong invasion force if the people were to rise in its support. Tone's version also argued that 'very much, perhaps the whole, success of the measure would depend upon the manifesto to be published on the landing being effected.'[23] The French must stress that they came as liberators and allies, to guarantee the rights of the people, and not as conquerors. The fundamentals of this document were repeated by Tone in every memorandum he wrote for the Directory and its military officials following his arrival in Paris as United Irish ambassador in 1796. On 24 April 1794, Jackson was arrested, and Rowan shortly thereafter. Tone escaped arrest as it was Rowan the authorities were after, but also because he had been more careful, not speaking in front of Cockayne and burning documents in his own handwriting. In the event, Rowan escaped to Paris where he had a personal interview with Robespierre, and another with the Committee of Public

Safety, but after Thermidor he soon left for America. Tone negotiated a deal whereby he would implicate himself and no one else, and be banished from the kingdom. Jackson was tried and convicted, dramatically dying of poison he had taken in the dock.

The Jackson affair was a victory for the government, but also a boost for the revolutionaries. The government took the opportunity to make the United Irishmen illegal. However, it proved to the revolutionaries and the masses whose support they wanted that the French were serious about the prospect of an invasion, thus adding greatly to the credibility of the developing revolutionary underground.

It was the Jackson affair that set Tone on the course that would end in his suicide. He had refused Jackson's requests to go to France but in 1795 left for exile in America with plans to head ultimately to France. He immediately made contact with the French Ambassador in Philadelphia, Adet, who responded coolly. Disheartened, Tone settled near Princeton, only to be urged back into action by several letters from home assuring him that the tide of public opinion had turned in the United Irishmen's favor, and urging him to go to France. He approached Adet once more, who by then had been told to encourage him, and who sent him to France with letters of recommendation. Once he arrived in France, Tone, guided by the US ambassador James Monroe, quickly made contact with Carnot, whose questions about the harbor at Cork at their first meeting convinced Tone he was already contemplating an invasion. The full story of Tone's negotiations with the French, and those of other United Irishmen, has been told in Elliott's magisterial *Partners in Revolution*, and need not be repeated here.

The efficacy of Tone's diplomacy is remarkable, even allowing for the factors mentioned above that to some degree pre-disposed the French to an invasion of Ireland. He arrived in France on 1 February. By June preparations to invade Ireland under the leadership of General Lazare

Hoche, one of the Republic's star commanders, had begun. It was December before they set sail with 15,000 battle-hardened troops, complete with 40,000 stand of arms and a manifesto written by Tone promising liberation, not conquest. The fleet evaded the Royal Navy, but was broken up by atrocious weather. Tone spent several agonizing days just off the Irish coast at Bantry Bay unable to land, and the fleet limped home.

The near miss at Bantry Bay was a visible demonstration of French intentions, and many thousands rushed to join the United Irishmen. Some hoped to be on the winning side when the French made what everyone assumed would be a second attempt in the near future. According to their own records, United Irish numbers peaked at a huge 280,000. Low-level conflict between the forces of the state and the revolutionary movement intensified. But while it boosted the United Irishmen, Bantry Bay was also the beginning of the end. The government responded ruthlessly, unleashing a white terror on the United Irishmen's stronghold, popularly remembered as the dragooning of Ulster. The movement never recovered from the blows inflicted on it. Sectarian tensions increased, with rumors that both Protestants and Catholics were planning to massacre their religious rivals spreading rapidly during 1797 and 1798. Both official and unofficial loyalist bodies dedicated to defeating the revolutionary challenge became better organized.

Divisions also grew among the United Irishmen over strategy and over their attitude to France. One result of popular politicization had been to increase nervousness among some of their propertied elements about social order in the event of a successful rebellion. Those United Irish leaders harboring such fears were wedded to the invasion strategy, believing that a French army was the best guarantee of securing order and property rights. Other United Irish leaders argued that, with no sign of another invasion, France could not be relied upon and that, given government attacks on the movement, they had to strike quickly on their own. Although the

popular image of France remained that of the land of liberty and the revolutionary armies continued to be seen mainly as liberators, French treatment of conquered territories and incessant counter-revolutionary propaganda on that topic did reduce the popularity of the Revolution, and some who previously would have welcomed invasion now feared it. Fearful of sectarian violence, and sensing a shift in the balance of power towards government, many abandoned the United Irishmen for the loyalist cause in the months before the Rebellion broke out in May 1798, and even during it.

The 1798 Rebellion was far from that Irish revolutionaries originally envisaged, due to the repression after Bantry Bay, the arrest of much of the national leadership, desertions, sectarian tensions, and the failure of the French to invade. The French, caught unawares by the Rebellion and with their attention having shifted to Egypt and continental Europe, proved able to send only a number of small flotillas with a small number of troops, and after the Rebellion had been largely defeated. Their intervention was almost the opposite of what Tone and the United Irishmen had long sought. The main force that landed comprised only around 1,500 men, and though, in alliance with hastily raised locals, it won one spectacular victory and a number of smaller engagements, it was ultimately easily defeated. While the surrendering French were well-treated, many of their native allies were killed after the fighting had stopped. The Rebellion left a legacy of suspicion of the French among the Irish for failing to provide sufficient support, and of the Irish among the French as the Irish revolutionary forces had not proved as substantial as they had been led to believe. Whereas the Irish had been treated as serious players before, they were now viewed as more akin to the band of patriots from across Western Europe whose promises of support for the Revolution and for invading troops had proven hollow.

Nevertheless, there remained a deep reservoir of support for the French Revolution, its principles, and the prospect of an invasion in Ireland. When Robert Emmet was attempting to

generate support for what would prove to be his abortive rebellion in 1803, he impersonated a French army officer, on the grounds that a widespread belief that the French were coming was key to his prospects of success. Although many former United Irishmen did make their peace with the existing regime in Ireland, especially as Napoleon's power grew, it seems that had Napoleon invaded he would have met with a substantial popular uprising in his support.

The French Revolution inspired Irish revolutionaries with a belief that they were living at the dawn of a new era in world history, and that in this new era anything was possible. In their eyes, the principles and example of the French Revolution offered the means to break free from the shackles of Irish history, to forge a united, free and prosperous people liberated from both the sectarian divisions of the past and British control. They looked at the new political culture being forged in the Revolution, and sought to adapt its methods and principles to Irish conditions. They created a new ideology that was both recognisable as a local example of the revolutionary democracy convulsing the Atlantic world, and distinctly Irish. It reflected their interests as members of the bourgeoisie and popular classes, and as members of the 90 per cent of the Irish population that suffered religious discrimination. If implemented, whether peacefully or violently, it would have revolutionised the political, social, and religious status quo. A revolutionary vision of what Irish society could look like existed before the French Revolution, but the influence of the Revolution sharpened that vision, dramatically increased its popularity, and made it seem much more realistic. Unlike much of Europe, the Revolution's primary influence lay in the realm of ideas and in its domestic example, rather than in the experience of French troops and French administrators. This contributed to the persistence of a popular vision of the Revolution more akin to the reality of 1792–94 than life under the Directory. Nevertheless, the Directory's dealings with Ireland do reveal a great deal of revolutionary idealism, both among the political elite and at a popular level in the army. The French Revolution made a major impact on Irish politics earlier than is often believed, and through

different means. The intensity of Ireland's Burke-Paine debate was the result of a pre-existing dividing line that cut across print culture and political debate, one that was fostered primarily by extensive newspaper coverage, which brought the message of the French Revolution to the lower orders. The political ideologies created in the whirlwind of the 1790s – republicanism, unionism, democracy – have to a large extent shaped Irish history ever since, and continue to do so. Irish revolutionaries did not so much observe the French Revolution as they lived it, and in some cases died for it. Tone and his comrades were emblematic of the age of bourgeois and democratic revolution.

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[1] Letter to the *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 May 1792.

[2] T.W. Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, Dublin: order of the Society of United Irishman of Belfast, 1791, p.11.

[3] T.W. Moody, R.B. McDowell and C.J. Woods (eds) *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 3 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998–2007, vol. I, p. 294.

[4] J. Smyth, *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century*, revised ed., London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1998, p.52. See also, for example, I. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998, p.165; D. Dickson, *New Foundations: Ireland 1660–1800*, 2nd ed., Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2000, p.189; S. Small, *Political Thought in Ireland 1776–1798: Republicanism, Patriotism and Radicalism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, p.176.

[5] For example, *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 March 1787 contained an account of the Assembly of Notables received from its own sources. The *Dublin Evening Post*, 28 June 1787 unfavourably compared the greed of the Irish political elite to the disinterested patriotism displayed by the Notables. The *Cork Evening Post*, 20 August 1787 printed a remonstrance to the king of the 'purest elegance'.

[6] *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 January 1788.

[7] *Dublin Evening Post*, 25 July 1789.

[8] *Morning Post, or Dublin Courant*, 18 August 1789.

[9] *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 September 1789.

[10] *Address from the National Assembly of France to the People of Ireland*, Dublin, 1790, p. 3.

[11] Ibid., p. 8.

[12] Ibid., p. 13.

[13] *Freeman's Journal*, 24 July 1790.

[14] D. Dickson, 'Paine and Ireland', in D. Dickson, D. Keogh & K. Whelan (eds), *The United Irishmen: Republicanism, Radicalism and Rebellion*, Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993, pp. 137–8.

[15] T. W. Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, pp. 37, 39.

[16] T. A. Emmet, 'Part of an essay towards the history of Ireland' in W. J. MacNeven, *Pieces of Irish history, illustrative of the condition of the Catholics of Ireland, of the origins and progress of the political system of the United Irishmen; and of their transactions with the Anglo – Irish government*, New York: Printed for Bernard Domin, 1807, p. 15.

[17] Moody, McDowell and Woods (eds), *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone* vol. I, pp. 140–1.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Emmet, 'Part of an essay towards the history of Ireland', p. 77.

[20] R. B. McDowell, 'Proceedings of the Dublin Society of United Irishmen', *Analecta Hibernica* 17, 1949, p. 41.

[21] Archives des Affaires Étrangères, Correspondence Politiques Angleterre 584, ff. 408–11; Mémoires et Documents, Angleterre, 53, ff. 147–56 for the Revolutionary Committee; CP Angleterre, 584, ff. 214–7, 583 ff. 153–5 for the representatives' reports. I am grateful to Marianne Elliott for a transcription of the first document.

[22] M. Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1982, p.58.

[23] Moody, McDowell and Woods (eds), *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, vol. I, p. 508.