

Tone, Theobald Wolfe

by Thomas Bartlett

Tone, Theobald Wolfe (1763–98), United Irishman, political publicist, diarist, and French army officer, was born 20 June 1763 in 27 St Bride's St., just behind Dublin castle, but the family soon moved to 44 Stafford St. (now Wolfe Tone St.) where he spent his childhood. Tone was born into a modest, middle-class protestant family, the eldest of sixteen children, only five of whom, William (qv), Mathew Tone (qv), Mary (c.1779–1802), Arthur (1782–fl. 1812) and Fanny (c.1784–1792), survived infancy besides himself. His father, Peter Tone (d. 1805), was born in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare, on the estate of the barrister and politician Theobald Wolfe, Tone's godfather, and where later Tone and his family lived in a cottage. Peter Tone was a coachbuilder – a tradesman certainly, but at the luxury end of the market – and he had property interests too, and the family could afford servants. In the late 1770s, however, Peter's business failed and, after a protracted and costly lawsuit with his brother, Jonathan, he lost all rights to any family property. Tone's mother, Margaret Lamport (d. 1818), was the daughter of a captain in the West Indies trade. She was a catholic who had converted to protestantism when Tone was eight years old.

Education and early life From his autobiography composed many years later in Paris, we learn that Tone was sent at the age of eight or nine 'to an excellent English school kept by Sisson Darling (qv)' at 35 Mabbot St. in Dublin and then, at the age of 12, was enrolled in a Latin school conducted by the Rev. William Craig. A fellowship at Trinity College, sole constituent college of the University of Dublin, was fixed on by his father and his teachers as an appropriate goal in life for him. However, Tone had his sights set on becoming a soldier, but in the event he submitted, albeit 'with a very bad grace', to his father's wishes and entered Trinity in February 1781. He proved a talented if lazy student, but involvement in a duel in which a student was killed led to a one-year suspension (1782–3). He resumed his studies with more diligence in 1783, and by the time he graduated (1786) he had been awarded a scholarship and three premiums. He had also won three medals from the College Historical Society, a rigorous debating club founded by Edmund Burke (qv) in 1745.

By the time of his marriage (1785), although Tone had had a number of sexual encounters or 'fugitive passions', as he calls them, he was by no means sexually experienced. For example, a notable *amour* for Eliza Martin, wife of Richard Martin (qv) of Dangan, Co. Galway, while it had a huge effect on him, was, on the evidence supplied by Tone himself, certainly unconsummated. The affair had more than its fair share of the absurd about it, and Tone's son William, who edited his father's diaries (almost certainly with the approval of Tone's widow Matilda) probably suppressed the whole episode in the published *Life* more from embarrassment than from shame.

Tone's relationship with Eliza Martin was over by the end of 1783, and around January 1785 Tone set his eyes on Martha Witherington (qv), then aged 15 and 'as beautiful as an angel'. She was the daughter of William Witherington, a Dublin woollen draper. Having spent months in futile agonising over Eliza, Tone was determined to waste no time pressing his suit with Martha, or 'Matilda', his preferred name for her. He quickly inveigled his way into the Witherington household, proposed marriage to Matilda without consulting her parents, and when she accepted 'we ran off together and were married' (21 July 1785). Predictably, relations with Matilda's family were soured by this unexpected elopement, and they remained frosty, by and large, thereafter. The couple had four children: Maria (1786–1803), William Theobald Wolfe Tone (qv), Francis (1793–1806) – all of whom died of tuberculosis – and Richard (d. 1789), who died in infancy.

Marriage had rendered Tone ineligible for a fellowship at Trinity, and he now decided on a legal career. He left his wife (and Maria) to his family's protection, and moved to London in early 1787 'to enroll as a student at law on the books of the Middle Temple'. But legal study bored Tone stiff and his mind soon wandered – to the theatre, to schemes for a military colony in the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii), to journalism, to writing a novel (*Belmont Castle*, published in 1790 and co-authored with Richard Jebb (qv) and Thomas Radcliffe), 'to adventures with the fair sex', even to enlisting in the East India Company's army – in short, to anything but law. At length, having fulfilled his residence qualifications at the Middle Temple, Tone returned to Ireland in December 1788, and was called to the bar in July 1789. For a time he practised on the Leinster circuit but, as he recalled, 'I soon got sick and weary of the law' and, in any case, politics and pamphleteering beckoned.

Pamphleteer 1790-91 A new political association, the Whig Club, had just been set up in Dublin, and in April 1790 Tone published *A review of the conduct of administration during the seventh session of parliament*, in defence of its principles. Tone, with typical candour, later described this pamphlet as 'barely above mediocrity, if it rose so high'. His next pamphlet was prompted by the threat of war between England and Spain in the summer of 1790. In July 1790 he published *Spanish war! An enquiry how far Ireland is bound of right to embark on the impending contest on the side of Great Britain*. This was an altogether more assured performance than the previous effort. In it, Tone dismissed any notion that Ireland had 'an obligation . . . to follow Great Britain to war', or that 'an injury or a benefit to one is an injury or benefit to the other', and he ridiculed the idea that Ireland shared in British military triumphs: 'What are the victories of Britain to us? Nothing! . . . The name of Ireland is never heard: for England not our country we fight and we die'.

Some years later, Tone proudly claimed that in *Spanish war!* 'I advanced the question of separation with scarcely any reserve, much less disguise'. This was not altogether an exaggeration, for there was a separatist tone, so to speak, to the whole pamphlet, and this brought Tone notoriety. It may also have cost him whatever chance he had of a seat in parliament in the whig interest. Indeed, with the

publication of this pamphlet, even Tone's future legal career was placed in serious jeopardy. To add to his troubles, the Rev. Edward Fanning, Matilda's grandfather who had helped the couple financially, died in 1791 and there was to be no further income from his wife's family.

On the credit side, Tone had formed a friendship with Thomas Russell (qv), whom he had met by chance in the public gallery in the Irish house of commons in July 1790. They had quarrelled over politics, but had resolved to discuss matters again; and they had quickly become firm friends. Russell's radical ideas on Irish politics, possibly formed during his stay in Belfast in 1790, had a great impact on Tone, and played a part in steering him in the direction of republican separatism.

When they had first met, Russell was a half-pay army officer who had seen service in India. In August 1790, however, he had been commissioned as an ensign in the 64th Foot, then stationed in Belfast, a largely presbyterian town with a population of about 18,000. Russell travelled north to join his regiment. It was to be a fateful move for, under the influence of the French revolution, Belfast was then seething with political unrest. Reformers there, who had failed in their attempts to secure parliamentary reform in the mid 1780s, were planning a new campaign with the same objective. However, the catholic question – the admission of Irish catholics to the political arena – , the single issue on which previous reform movement had foundered, was still bitterly divisive. Russell, perhaps recalling some of Tone's views on this topic during their stay at Irishtown, asked his friend to suggest some appropriate resolutions for consideration at a Volunteer parade in Belfast on Bastille day, 14 July 1791. On 9 July Tone replied, enclosing his resolutions, but he also revealingly declared as his 'unalterable opinion' that 'the bane of Irish prosperity is the influence of England,' and that separation 'would be the regeneration of this country'. This letter, or rather a defective copy of it, was soon in the hands of the authorities at Dublin Castle and during the 1790s it was cited time and time again to prove that the whole United Irish project *ab initio* was separatist rather than reformist. What happened to Tone's resolutions was revealed in his diary:

July 14 1791. I sent down to Belfast resolutions suited to this day and reduced to three heads.

1st. That English influence in Ireland was the great grievance of the country.

2nd. That the most effectual way to oppose it was by a reform in parliament.

3rd. That no reform could be just or efficacious which did not include the catholics.

However, to his disgust, the final resolution 'in concession to prejudices was rather insinuated than asserted' and, in effect, buried. In a fury, Tone resolved to become, as he put it, 'a red-hot catholic', and he sat down to write what became the most

famous pamphlet in Irish history: *An argument on behalf of the catholics of Ireland*, published in August 1791.

'I am a protestant of the Church of Ireland, as by law established', he began, ' . . . a mere lover of justice and a steady detester of tyranny' and then, his credentials established, he proceeded to point out forcefully to his readers that not only were catholics capable of liberty but that there could be no liberty for anyone in Ireland until 'Irishmen of all denominations' united against the 'boobies and blockheads' that governed them, and sought parliamentary reform. Tone's pamphlet had a great impact. It quickly ran through a number of editions, and within three months 6,000 copies had been sold and a further 10,000 were printed in 1792. It was distributed widely, not just in Ireland but further afield: the noted English reformer Joseph Priestley tried to buy six copies; while Dublin Castle, for its part, quickly obtained a copy and sent it to London with the comment that it was 'a pretty specimen of the sentiments of Irish reformers'. However, the work's novelty, as Tone's biographer, Marianne Elliott, notes, should not be exaggerated. The notion of a united front of all denominations in Ireland pursuing parliamentary reform had been the conventional wisdom in advanced reformist circles since the early 1780s; William Drennan (qv) and Joseph Pollock (qv) had both been skirting with the idea for some time; so too had William Todd Jones (qv), and there were signs that elements within Ulster presbyterianism were looking afresh at Irish catholics in the light of the activities of French catholics. However, that said, it was Tone's achievement to bring to a precise written form ideas and arguments that had been hitherto in the air, and it was his *Argument* that broke the log-jam holding up the development of a coherent reform strategy. His hard-hitting prose, his skilful arguments, his deft switches from defendant to prosecutor, his compulsive rhetoric, and indeed the evident passion which infused the pamphlet – all so different from his first work barely a year earlier – presented a formidable case, and one that in effect went unanswered. Tone had managed the difficult feat of appealing not only to the hard-headed pragmatic dissenter eager for reform but also to those presbyterians who saw in the fall of the French monarchy the beginnings of the fulfilment of a prophecy that would conclude with the fall of the Anti-Christ and of catholicism itself. Both groups, usually dubbed 'New Light' and 'Old Light' respectively, were invited to take part in the crusade for reform in cooperation with the Irish catholic. On the publication of this pamphlet, Tone was invited to Belfast to take part in the setting up of yet another new political club. On 11 October 1791, in the company of Thomas Russell, who had earlier resigned his commission, he arrived there.

United Irishman 1791–2 Tone began to keep a diary on his trip to Belfast and, from his journal entries of his stay there, he and Russell appear to have spent most of their time drinking or recovering from the effects of over-indulgence. Such an impression is not altogether misleading: Tone was an intensely social being who loved conviviality and relished debate fuelled by alcohol; and Russell was a kindred spirit. There was, however, a serious side to all the dining, late nights, and general junketing, for Tone was becoming acquainted with the advanced radicals of Belfast

and, as the drink flowed, he was learning of the difficulties that lay in the way of fulfilling the aims of the Society of United Irishmen.

This society had been convened on 14 October and had held its inaugural meeting on 18 October 1791. Tone quickly established his authority over the proceedings, suggesting a new name for the society (preferring the 'United Irishmen' to the 'Brotherhood'), drawing up its resolutions (a tougher version of his July ones), and penning its declaration calling for 'AN EQUAL REPRESENTATION OF ALL THE PEOPLE IN PARLIAMENT'.

In its *Declaration and resolutions* published at its inauguration, the Society of United Irishmen had called for 'a complete and radical reform of the people in parliament', arguing that only by this means could the malign weight of English influence in the government of Ireland be combated, and maintaining that no reform could be 'practicable, efficacious or just' which did not include Irishmen of every religious persuasion. This document had been passed unanimously but Tone soon discovered that many of his Belfast hosts still harboured a mental reservation concerning whether or not Irish Catholics were in fact capable of liberty. As well, there were clear indications that the doctrine of the United Irishmen would not be received with enthusiasm by Irish Catholics, still deeply suspicious of Irish Presbyterians, and accustomed to look to the British government for relief.

On 27 October Tone left Belfast and returned with Russell to Dublin, where they planned to set up a Dublin Society of United Irishmen. But after the heady days of debate (and imbibing) in Belfast, Dublin was inevitably something of a let-down. The Dublin Society of United Irishmen was duly constituted on 9 November; and while Tone was active in its proceedings, he was by no means the moving force. James Napper Tandy (qv) a long-time radical in Dublin politics, took the lead, and he shared the running of the society with William Drennan, whose pen now began to turn out a stream of publications to propagate the cause of the United Irishmen. Tone became secretary to the Society but this was a supporting role and he appears to have grown bored. Tone and Drennan did not get on, Tone's exuberance clashing with Drennan's measured caution, and there may have been some literary rivalry as well. All in all, after his triumph in Belfast, it was emphatically not the homecoming that Tone had hoped for.

Catholic agent 1792–3 In addition, Tone's finances were a pressing worry, for Matilda was expecting their third child, William, born in April 1792. Little money was coming in from Tone's legal work, and his (unsigned) contributions to the United Irish paper, the *Northern Star*, may not have been remunerated. Without doubt Tone was at a low ebb in his fortunes and prospects when in July 1792 he was appointed, in succession to Edmund Burke's son, Richard, assistant secretary to the Catholic Committee with the handsome salary of £200 a year. Tone's writings had been well received by the more radical members of the Catholic Committee, principally John Keogh (qv) and Richard McCormick (qv), and they could see positive advantages

in having him as in effect secretary to their committee. By replacing Richard Burke with Tone, the Catholic Committee was clearly committing itself to a much more aggressive policy on political rights for Irish Catholics. Burke had, by and large, stood for maintenance of the existing order, hostility to any Catholic–Presbyterian alliance, and hatred for the principles of the French revolution: it was notorious that Tone stood for the reverse of all these.

The period from April 1792 to April 1793, when Tone was in fact agent for the Catholics, has a strong claim to being regarded as the happiest time of his life. In July he journeyed to Belfast, where he renewed acquaintance with his former contacts, ‘the old set’ of reformers; and in August, accompanied by John Keogh, he travelled to those parts of Co. Down where there had been sectarian troubles between the Protestant Peep-of-Day Boys and the Catholic Defenders. On his return from the north, throughout the late summer and autumn of 1792, Tone worked indefatigably to ensure that the Catholic Convention to be summoned by the Catholic Committee for Dublin would be truly representative of Catholic opinion. He travelled extensively throughout the north and west of Ireland organising the election of delegates. The convention duly assembled in Dublin in December 1792, and drew up a petition to George III which was entrusted to five delegates, who, accompanied by Tone, brought it directly to London and laid it before the king.

At this time, relations between Britain and revolutionary France were at breaking-point and war was declared on 1 February 1793. In view of the coming war, the British government had considered it vital to conciliate the Catholics of Ireland. Accordingly, the Catholic Relief Act of 1793, offering Irish Catholics the county franchise on the same terms as Irish Protestants – but not the right, if elected, to sit in the Irish House of Commons – was pushed through the Irish Parliament in March 1793. Towards the end of April 1793, the Catholic Committee dissolved itself, confident that its work was in effect done, and apparently believing that full emancipation could not be long delayed. Tone, however, denounced the relief offered as ‘partial and illusory’ and he nearly came to blows with John Keogh over it; but he was not supported. His career as agent to the Catholics was over, and though he was promised £1,500 for his services, he could not conceal his disappointment.

Government crackdown 1793–5 With the outbreak of war with France, Dublin Castle instituted a crackdown on Irish reformers who had professed admiration for the French, and by the end of the year the United Irishmen and the reform movement were in disarray. In quick succession, the Volunteers were proscribed, the holding of elected conventions was banned, and a number of United Irishmen, notably Archibald Hamilton Rowan (qv) and William Drennan, were hauled before the courts on charges of seditious libel. Moreover, Tone’s personal situation showed no signs of improvement. He had few legal briefs, and a new addition to his family (Frank, b. June 1793) added to the financial pressure he was under. Not surprisingly, he began to consider leaving Ireland and seeking his fortune elsewhere, possibly in the United States.

In April 1794 the Rev. William Jackson (qv), a clergyman of the Church of England of Irish parentage, and a secret agent in the service of the French government, arrived in Dublin to sound out the prospects for a French invasion of Ireland. A meeting was arranged between Jackson and Archibald Hamilton Rowan, then in prison; and Tone was soon brought into the discussions. At Rowan's request, Tone agreed to draw up a document outlining the situation in Ireland. In this hastily composed memorandum, he wrote that the presbyterians and the catholics could be relied upon to rise up against England 'if they saw any force sufficiently strong to resort to'. The presbyterians, he wrote, are 'the most enlightened body of the nation . . . are steady republicans, devoted to liberty and through all the stages of the French revolution have been enthusiastically attached to it'. They were 'enemies to the English power from reason and from reflection'. By contrast, the catholics, 'the great body of the people are in the lowest degree of ignorance and are ready for any change because no change can make them worse'. In conclusion, he stated that 'there seems little doubt but an invasion in sufficient force would be supported by the people'.

On 28 April 1794 Jackson was arrested at his lodgings on a charge of high treason, and his papers seized. The case against Jackson was a relatively strong one, for he had been under surveillance for some time and his letters had been intercepted. Similarly, that against Rowan was also strong: Rowan himself conceded as much by escaping from Newgate prison on 1 May 1794 and making his way to France. By contrast, that against Tone was comparatively weak. None of the incriminating documents were in his handwriting and he could always claim entrapment by government agents in his defence. On the other hand, lack of evidence had not prevented a stinging sentence of fourteen years transportation to Botany Bay being imposed on the Scottish radical Thomas Muir some months earlier in Edinburgh and, whatever the outcome, Tone was well aware that he could expect a lengthy period in custody before being brought to trial. Who would support his wife and family while he languished in prison? The United Irishmen had been banned following Jackson's arrest; and the catholics might choose to forget their now discredited agent. To head off a prosecution, Tone entered into a compact with Dublin Castle, brokered by a former Trinity friend, Marcus Beresford (qv). Tone would make a statement explaining his role in the Jackson affair, but he would not reveal confidences or name names, nor would he be called upon to give evidence in court. He would merely confirm what the government already knew about the Jackson mission. In return, he would not stand trial and he would undertake to remove himself out of the kingdom.

After delaying for nearly a year, Tone made his preparations for exile in the USA, selling everything except some 600 books which were to go with him, and signing over his Kildare property (a cottage on an acre of land) to a local businessman, Mathew Donnellan. Fortunately for Tone, the reconstituted Catholic Committee honoured its earlier promise to pay him £1,500; and when he had settled his debts, he was left with the sum of £796 to start his life in America. On 20 May 1795 Tone and his party, which included not only Matilda and the children, but also his younger

(and wayward) brother, Arthur, and his sister, Mary, left Dublin for Belfast, whence they were to embark for America in some three weeks' time.

Before Tone had left Dublin, he had held discussions with Thomas Addis Emmet (qv) and Russell, and had revealed his plan to make his sojourn in America a brief one and 'to set off instantly for Paris and apply in the name of my country for the assistance of France to enable us to assert our independence'. He received significant support for this course of action from the Belfast radicals on his arrival in that town. Before he left Belfast, Tone and his friends visited McArt's Fort, high up on the Cave Hill, overlooking Belfast, and there they swore 'never to desist in our efforts until we had subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence'. A day or two later, on 13 June 1795, the Tone party boarded the *Cincinnatus* and sailed for America.

In America 1795 Tone and his 'family' landed at Wilmington, Delaware, on 1 August 1795 and journeyed the short distance to the then capital of the US, Philadelphia. There Tone met Hamilton Rowan, who had made his way to that city earlier from France, and after discussing matters with him Tone approached the French minister, 'Citizen' Pierre Adet, with his plan to go to France in order to urge French intervention in Ireland. Adet was wary and non-committal; but while he discouraged Tone from going immediately to France, he did agree to forward his memorial to Paris: and there matters rested. In view of Adet's cool response, Tone was by no means optimistic that his plan would be received favourably by the French authorities. To Tone's dismay, what had been conceived as a short sojourn in the US – a launching-pad for his mission to France – had begun to appear as if it could become a permanent exile.

The prospect that he might have to stay in America was a most unwelcome one to Tone for, from an early date, he had conceived a remarkable antipathy for the country, its climate, and its inhabitants. It was, however, the politics of the new republic that most aroused Tone's indignation. In his eyes, the Americans had proved themselves utter ingrates by refusing to side with the French in their war with the British, and he was convinced that Washington, 'a high-flying aristocrat', and his allies in the US senate were pursuing policies designed to frustrate true republicanism in order 'to bring in more dollars to the chests of the mercantile peerage of America'. To Tone's fury, notwithstanding the American revolution and the severance of formal links with Britain, 'aristocracy' seemed to be gaining the upper hand over 'democracy' in the US. 'I bless God I am no American', he noted, and he bluntly advised Russell: 'never come here unless you are driven'.

Despite his revulsion at life and politics in the US, Tone realised that he might have to stay there, and he began to search for 'a small plantation' away from Philadelphia in case 'my lot was cast to be an American farmer'. He decided against a farm on the frontier – Indian tomahawks were persuasive in this respect – and instead purchased a farm of some 180 acres near Princeton, New Jersey. He wrote to

Russell asking him to purchase some seed for him for planting in the spring of 1796, and in the meantime he planned to occupy himself during the winter by writing a history of the Catholic Committee, using the voluminous notes and memoranda he had brought with him to America. It was not to be. On receipt of letters from John Keogh and Thomas Russell urging him to continue with his mission, Tone applied once more to Adet. This time the French minister agreed that Tone should go to Paris in person to support his plan for a French invasion of Ireland, and he offered him money to cover his expenses and a letter in cypher to take with him. With the full support of Matilda and his sister, Maria, on 1 January 1796 Tone sailed from New York and a month later he landed at Havre de Grace. The French authorities at Le Havre recorded this description of 'James Smith', the alias Tone travelled under: '30 ans, 5 pieds 4 pouces, cheveux et sourcils chatains, yeux bruns, nez aquilin, bouche moyenne, menton rond, visage oval et un peu gravé, front bas' ('30 years, 5 ft 8 in., chestnut hair and eyebrows, brown eyes, aquiline nose, average mouth, round chin, face oval and a little pock-marked, low forehead').

For all its brevity, there are grounds for seeing Tone's sojourn in America as significant in his evolution as a revolutionary and as a United Irish agent. From the moment he had arrived in the US, he had taken precautions to avoid discovery by the British agents whom he believed thronged the public offices of that nation's capital. Thus he had kept contact with Hamilton Rowan to a minimum – he refused to allow himself to be seen in public with him – and, on security grounds, he had firmly quashed Hamilton Rowan's suggestion that they should make a joint approach to the French minister, Adet. Again, in his letters to Russell and to others, which he must have known would fall into British hands, he gave every appearance of being – unhappily but firmly – settled in the US. There is little doubt that Tone's letters from America were encoded: they frequently contained cryptic phrases which were surely designed to show his friends there that he had by no means abandoned his mission. Moreover, he cautioned Russell against using the post office when making contact with him; and rather than use conventional means, he chose to dispatch his brother Arthur to Belfast to tell a select few there that he had in fact sailed for France as pledged. All of these were perhaps elementary precautions, but Dublin Castle's deception as to Tone's whereabouts was in fact so complete that long after his arrival in France, it believed he was still in America.

Tone had hated America, appalled at her 'mercantile aristocracy', disgusted by her boorish inhabitants – and tormented by the thought that his beloved daughter Maria might marry one of them. By contrast, he was to love France and during the time he spent there his affection for the country grew, so much so that he arranged for his wife and family to join him.

Revolutionary ambassador 1796–8 On his arrival in Paris (15 February 1796) Tone (who had travelled as an American artisan, 'James Smith') presented his credentials to the American ambassador, and future president of the US, James Monroe, and then made his way to the French foreign ministry. He had an interview

with the Irish-born French government official Nicholas Madgett (qv) (1738–1813), who was able to tell him that the French government, the directory, was already seriously considering an expedition to Ireland. Tone wrote a memorandum calling for a force of 20,000 French troops, commanded by a leading French general, to be landed near Dublin. Gen. Lazare Hoche, a long-time advocate of French intervention in Ireland, and Lazare Carnot, in charge of the directory's war strategy, committed themselves to the plan. Tone had helped turn French attention towards Ireland, and his skilful advocacy would keep Ireland at the centre of French plans for the rest of the year.

From March 1796 on, however, as his journals poignantly testify, Tone suffered disappointment and frustration as the project of an Irish expedition was beset with delays. Against these setbacks, Tone met Hoche in July 1796 and was reassured by his commitment to an Irish invasion. Between the two men a close friendship sprang up which continued until Hoche's premature death in September 1797. In July 1796 Tone was appointed *chef de brigade* (brigadier-general) in Hoche's army and this eased his financial worries and was very gratifying to his pride: Tone's natural bent for soldiering had at last been gratified. Finally, on 16 December 1796, a French fleet sailed from Brest crammed with 14,450 soldiers. On board one of the sails of the line, the *Indomptable*, was 'Citoyen Wolfe Tone, *chef de brigade* in the service of the republic'.

The expedition may be accounted a complete failure. Encountering extremely severe winds and mountainous seas, the fleet was quickly scattered, and while a number of ships reached Bantry Bay on 22 December, they were unable to disembark their soldiers, and in early January 1797 they limped back to Brest. For Tone, the months after Bantry Bay were a further trial. To the agony of frustration experienced on board the *Indomptable* – to be within sight of land but yet unable to put ashore – was added the nerve-wracking and depressing voyage back to Brest and the inevitable recriminations that ensued on dry land. It was quite clear that there could be no immediate reprise of the expedition. Tone departed for Paris, and while Hoche assured him that the directory had merely postponed, not abandoned, a further descent on Ireland, he was not to be consoled. The only bright light for Tone, in a very gloomy period, was that his family had arrived at Hamburg in January, but it was not until May 1797 that he was able to join them in Holland. In the meantime, Tone found himself in Paris, and then on attachment with the Armée de Sambre et Meuse in the Low Countries. In April he made his way to Hamburg through the Batavian Republic – as France had renamed its ally, the Netherlands. There followed an all-too-brief Tone family reunion, for the directory had deputed the Batavian Republic to undertake an expedition to Ireland, involving some 15,000 troops and making use of the Dutch fleet in the Texel, and Tone was ordered to report for duty in early July. Because of contrary winds the fleet was unable to sail throughout July and August. In his frustration, Tone proposed a bold plan: a landing at the nearest point in England followed by a march on London. He travelled to see Hoche to put his plan to him, but Hoche was a sick man and he died of consumption

on 14 September 1797, with Tone at his deathbed. Hoche's death effectively brought to an end any chance of this Irish expedition.

After Hoche's death, Tone quit the Armée de Sambre et Meuse and journeyed to Paris, where he received welcome, if hollow, assurances that the French government would never abandon its Irish strategy, and that even if peace with Britain were concluded, Ireland would not be forgotten. In December 1797 he had a number of meetings with Napoleon Bonaparte, the new power in France. Bonaparte listened intently but he remained non-committal about an Irish expedition. As we now know, his attention was fixed on the Mediterranean Sea, not the Atlantic, and it is likely he affected an interest in an Irish expedition as a diversion from his real objective.

For Tone, the early months of 1798 were a period of increasing frustration. United Irish refugees from the government's crackdown in Ireland had begun to arrive in Paris, and many of them sided with James Napper Tandy, who was openly critical of Tone, accusing him of pursuing his own interests at the expense of his country's. Tone's military rank was an object of particular jealousy. Disgusted by these petty intrigues, Tone was relieved to be ordered on general duty for the proposed invasion of England and then, when that was abandoned, he was posted to the defence of Le Havre. While there, Tone learned by chance of the rebellion in Ireland on 17 June 1798, some three weeks after its outbreak. Taken by surprise, the directory struggled to mobilise an invasion force for Ireland but it was not until 22 August that Gen. Jean Humbert (qv) landed at Killala, Co. Mayo, with about 1,100 men (including Tone's brother Mathew). A further force of some 3,000 men under Gen. Hardy, with instructions to land in the north of Ireland, was dispatched in September. Among the United Irishmen who sailed with Bompard, and the only one on board his flagship, the *Hoche*, was Theobald Wolfe Tone. The *Hoche* was intercepted by a squadron of Royal Navy vessels commanded by Sir John Borlase Warren and, following a furious six-hour sea-battle in which Tone distinguished himself, the *Hoche* struck her colours. Taken ashore at Bunrana, Co. Donegal, on 31 October, he was immediately spotted by Sir George Hill (qv), a former classmate at Trinity and a noted loyalist in the north-west of Ireland. In irons, and under an escort of dragoons, Tone was conveyed to Dublin, where he was lodged in the Provost prison.

Trial and death At that time, both courts martial and civil courts were sitting, and the authorities in effect could choose which to employ for selected prisoners. The decision was made that Tone be tried by court martial, generally speedier and reputedly more predictable than the civil courts, and one was duly assembled on 10 November 1798. The trial, like countless others in the post-rebellion period, took little more than an hour. For the role he had now to play, Tone wore his uniform of *chef de brigade*: 'A large and fiercely cocked hat with broad gold lace and the tricoloured cockade, a blue uniform coat with gold and embroidered collar and two large gold epaulets, blue pantaloons with gold laced garters at the knees and short boots bound at the top with gold lace'. He made no attempt to disavow his guilt: on

the contrary, he freely acknowledged the facts to be as claimed by the prosecution (though he balked at the word 'traitor'), and he only sought in return to read an address to the court. This declared that he had always been a separatist, that he had indeed enlisted in the enemy's army with a view to winning French assistance for his project, and he continued:

Under the flag of the French republic I originally engaged, with a view to save and liberate my own country. For that purpose I have encountered the chances of war amongst strangers; for that purpose I have repeatedly braved the terrors of the ocean, covered as I knew it to be with the triumphant fleets of that power, which it was my glory and my duty to oppose. I have sacrificed all my views in life; I have courted poverty; I have left a beloved wife, unprotected, and children whom I adored, fatherless. After such sacrifices, in a cause which I have always conscientiously considered as the cause of justice and freedom – it is no great effort, at this day, to add the sacrifice of my life.

He ended with a plea to be shot – like those French royalists taken at Quiberon in 1794 – rather than hanged. His request, however, was denied, and he was sentenced to die the death of a traitor in two days' time. Cornwallis (qv), the lord lieutenant, did, however, waive the severing of the prisoner's head after death and the posting of it in a prominent place, as the court martial had ordered.

A few of Tone's friends from Trinity and the Irish bar – John Philpot Curran (qv) and Peter Burrowes (qv) were prominent – attempted what amounted to a legal rescue. Tone had not held a commission in the British army, they argued, and therefore no military tribunal was competent to try him. In addition, they claimed that, because the rebellion was over and the civil courts were sitting, Tone ought to have been tried before the king's bench. The purpose of these pleas was not to effect an acquittal, or to have Tone tried by civil court – any court would have found him guilty – but to win a delay, a stay of execution. The only hope for Tone was that some mitigating circumstance in his case, some powerful intervention from outside or, simply, the passage of time could possibly save him. An injunction suspending Tone's execution was in fact granted, but at that point news arrived that he lay stricken with his throat cut, and that he could not be moved. Tone's wound was undoubtedly self-inflicted: the fact that he languished for a number of days afterwards without accusing anyone is proof of this; and all talk of murder should be discounted. However, whether Tone intended to commit suicide must remain an open question. It is possible that Tone, like Curran and Burrowes, was seeking to delay his execution in hopes of a commutation. A deep wound to the throat would have been sufficient to effect a stay of sentence. Tone's mistake, it may be suggested, was to cut too deeply; and hence the explanation for his cryptic remark 'I am sorry I have been so bad an anatomist'. On 19 November 1798 Tone died; he was 35 years old; his last words were 'What should I wish to live for?' He was buried in Bodenstown graveyard, Co. Kildare, on 21 November 1798.

Reputation 'If Tone did not, in his lifetime, achieve greatly', remarks Sean O'Faolain (qv), 'he started much. Without him, republicanism in Ireland would virtually have no tradition.' In large measure, the tradition that O'Faolain alludes to was based on the publication in 1826 of Tone's literary remains – his journals or diaries, an autobiographical memoir, some letters and most of his public writings. William Tone, with the encouragement of his mother, Matilda, edited his father's papers and oversaw their publication in two very substantial volumes in Washington, DC, near where the Tone family had eventually settled after their return from Europe in 1816. William excised a good many of Tone's strictures on America and Americans: he also removed much of Tone's criticism of Matilda's family, the Witheringtons; and he deleted what little there was of his father's amorous adventures. What remained, however, amounted in total to some 1,200 closely printed pages, and these still constitute an indispensable source both for the history of the early 1790s in Ireland, and for the period Tone spent in France. These writings make an important contribution to the literature of travel and to the literature of exile, and because they were written at the time they have an immediacy that is not found in the subsequent retrospective memoirs of other participants in the revolutionary 1790s. They are also very revealing of Tone's personality: in his diaries, probably the finest written by any Irishman, he charts his feelings as he deals with the various setbacks and minor triumphs that beset his quest. He reveals his deep knowledge and love of English literature, especially Shakespeare and the theatre, exhibits his fondness for irony and self-mockery, conveys an impatience with anything that looks like humbug or pretentiousness, and communicates a sense of fun and gaiety that has endeared him to readers ever since. Predictably, the Young Irelanders, notably Thomas Davis (qv) and John Mitchel (qv), saw much to admire in Tone, for his aim to substitute 'the common name of Irishman' for the sectarian labels of protestant, catholic and dissenter, chimed in well with their objectives. With the positive identification of Tone's grave in 1842 (by R. R Madden (qv)), the Young Irelanders promoted Bodenstown as a place of pilgrimage for advanced nationalists. The Fenians, too, found Tone's advocacy of physical force, and foreign intervention, inspiring, and so also did Patrick Pearse (qv), who in 1913 at Tone's grave at Bodenstown delivered a famous threnody on him.

The sheer mass of Tone's published material, however, poses a problem for the historian. Can these weighty tomes be taken as an unequivocal endorsement of Tone's importance in the 1790s? Or, put another way, if the journals and memoirs had been seized and destroyed before publication, how now would stand Theobald Wolfe Tone's reputation? Certainly, Tone cannot be regarded as the sole founder of the Society of United Irishmen. Others played a role here; but it was Tone's *Argument* that broke the log-jam in the path of this new departure in Irish history, it was he who suggested the name of the society, and, it may be suggested, he was the moving spirit behind its formation. Again, from 1792 to 1793 Tone had been 'agent' to the Catholic Committee during the high point of its activities, and his relative success in this role has been frequently overlooked. He was a key organiser of the Catholic Convention that met in December 1792, and though

disappointed by the outcome, the partial victory achieved through his and others' efforts would ultimately be built on by Daniel O'Connell (qv) in order to win full catholic emancipation in 1829. Lastly, Tone was crucial to the French alliance, and throughout his period in France, he was the main – though not the sole – advisor to the directory on their Irish projects. Even if all Tone's papers had been lost, the documentation in the French archives on his activities in France is conclusive as to his continuing importance in the period 1796–8.

Tone was not without his faults; and we are well aware of them because of the candour of his writings. He was utterly blind to the havoc wreaked by the French war machine on Europe (and on France); he had only a hazy idea of the furies that lurked beneath the surface of Irish life and which would have undoubtedly emerged after a successful French invasion; and at times he displayed an irresponsibility towards his wife and family that is startling. He had a sombre side too: and his mood undoubtedly darkened and turned vengeful after 1797 as he contemplated each setback to his plans and learned of Dublin Castle's onslaught on the rank-and-file United Irishmen. But he was a loyal friend, with a capacity for friendship and a gift for conviviality that won him admirers among his contemporaries, and which has endeared him to later generations. He had sought justice for the catholics even though in doing so he had turned his back on the ascendancy. He had believed that the Irish government of the 1790s was wholly bereft of moral authority, and he had acted accordingly.

Likenesses and papers Likenesses and portraits of Tone include the anonymous 'The unfortunate Theobald Wolfe Tone' published in *Walker's Hibernian Magazine* (October 1798); a miniature of Tone in French uniform by his daughter-in-law, Catherine Anne Tone, in private possession, but reproduced as a frontispiece in Elliott, *Tone*; a death-mask of Tone in TCD, reproduced in Elliott, *Tone*; and an anonymous portrait of Tone in a volunteer uniform held by the NLI and reproduced on the dust jacket of Tone, *Writings*, i. Archival material relating to Tone include Archives municipales du Havre (for the description of Tone – my thanks to Dr S. Kleinman for this reference); TCD, MSS 2041–50, 3805–9; and Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris, Correspondence politique Angleterre, vols 582–93 (available on microfilm in NLI).

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Thomas Russell (1991); Tom Dunne, *Theobald Wolfe Tone: colonial outsider* (1982); Thomas Bartlett, 'The burden of the present: Theobald Wolfe Tone, republican and separatist', D. Dickson, D. Keogh, and K. Whelan (ed.), *The United Irishmen: republicanism, radicalism and rebellion* (1993), 1–15; Thomas Bartlett (ed.), *Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone edited by his son . . .* (1998); T. W. Moody, R. B. McDowell, and C. J. Woods (ed.), *The writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone, 1763–98* (3 vols, 1998–2006); Declan Kiberd, *Irish classics* (2000)

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