

Theobald Wolfe Tone and Thomas Russell:
The Creation of an Irish Identity

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Theobald Wolfe Tone and Thomas Russell:

The Creation of an Irish Identity

Most of the things 'Everybody Knows' are wrong, the rest are merely unreliable

- Neil Gaiman

To my parents, Michael Anthony Troy and Elizabeth Brennan Troy, without
whose teaching, love and guidance this would not have possible,

and to my ancestors, for whom I hope this manuscript does the justice that
they deserve

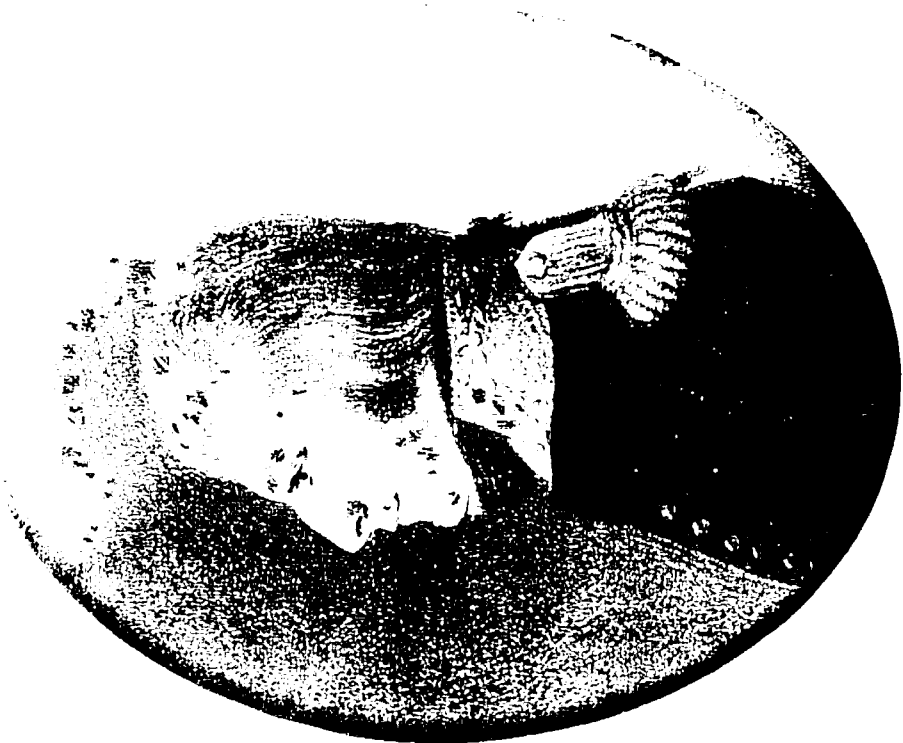
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Thomas Russell (Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*)



Theobald Wolfe Tone (Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence*)

Introduction

I, A.B., in the presence of God, do pledge myself to my country, that I will use all my abilities and influence in the attainment of an impartial and adequate representation of the Irish nation in Parliament and as a means of absolute and immediate necessity in accomplishing this chief good of Ireland, I shall do whatever lies in my power to forward a brotherhood of affection, an identity of interests, a communion of rights, and a union of power among Irishmen of all religious persuasions without which every reform must be partial, not national, inadequate to the wants, delusive to the wishes and insufficient for the freedom and happiness of this country.

- Oath of the United Irishmen¹

Economically, socially, and politically, eighteenth-century Ireland lacked a 'brotherhood of affection.' Ruled by a government which placed restrictions upon the political voice, economic liberty and social freedom of native catholics and dissenting protestants, Irish divisions ran deeply through society. The corruption of political life, combined with social stratification and the emergence of new economic classes, begat an Ireland in desperate need of rejuvenation. In the realm of politics, reformers warned of an impending breach of contract on the part of the Irish government, for Paine wrote that the "right of a Parliament is only a right in trust, a right by delegation."² The Dublin parliament disregarded the existence of almost ninety percent of the Irish population, for the presbyterians and catholics did not possess the means to express their political voice. Voice and identity, then, become critical concepts in late eighteenth-century reformist thought. Men would have to observe the differences within Ireland and consciously strive for a

¹Just one of hundreds of oaths drawn up by the United Irishmen. The transformation of the United Irishmen from a reform oriented society to a revolutionary group began with the creation of the oath. Quoted from Letter 313 of *The Drennan Letters*, D.A. Chart, ed. (Belfast, 1931), 66.

²Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), 120. For further discussion on the influence of Locke, and 'New Light' Presbyterianism, and Paine on United Irish thought, see Nancy Curtin. *The United Irishmen: Popular Politics in Ulster and Dublin, 1791-1798* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994) especially pg. 15-18; Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3-34 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

national identity.

Without an ‘impartial and adequate representation of the Irish nation,’ Ireland’s government failed to fulfill one of its basic roles: adhering to the public will. Historian Marianne Elliott states that the Lockean contract theory “assumes a surrender of individual liberty, by mutual consent of a community, to a government which in return undertakes to act for the general good. The contract assumes mutual obligation; but in its more radical form of government as a trust, the obligations are one-sided and the government can be rejected when that trust is seen to have been betrayed.”³ Government, in the eyes of the reformers, betrayed not only the Lockean notion of liberty through representation by denying an inclusive parliament, but more importantly denied classical republican notions of the public good, or *res-publica*. “Every government,” according to Paine’s *Rights of Man*, “that does not act on the principle of the *Republic*... that does not make the *res-publica* its whole and sole object, is not a good government.”⁴ By ignoring the public will, indivisible by nature, government ruled not through the common interest of all Irish but of its own volition. Further, it lacked the classical republican concept of virtue. Virtue was the only protection against tyranny and corruption, “the cancer which invaded the body politic and brought it to the death agonies of tyranny.”⁵ Through an appeal to the public good and the virtue of the Irish, reformers believed that a ‘unified’ Ireland could counter the tyranny of government. Reformers brought classical republican and Lockean notions of virtue, liberty, and the public good to a government they felt to be in desperate need of change. The focus of this paper is not upon the theories, but the influence these notions had upon the identities of the

³Marianne Elliott, *Watchmen in Sion: The Protestant Idea of Liberty* (Belfast: Field Day pamphlet, 1985), 11-12.

⁴Paine, *Rights of Man*, 178.

⁵Curtin, *The United Irishmen*, 14.

reformers who promoted them.

To Irish reformers, parliament governed in the name of a slim minority of protestants who lived within the 'Pale.' This aristocratic term for the intangible barrier separating the powerful world of the Dublin protestants from their inferior country counterparts referred primarily to the area known as College Green.⁶ The 'Pale' represented both the physical geographical world and the exclusive social environment of the protestants governed by an institution known as the Protestant Ascendency. Those who lived outside of the 'Pale,' at a place "below the beasts of the field," were restricted by law and governed by force.⁷

One group of men made a concerted effort to destroy the 'Pale' by incorporating the segregated religious sects through union. Union, in the language of the eighteenth-century Irish reformer, meant an idealistic attempt at undermining sectarian divisions and ultimately reform the government of Ireland. The United Irishmen, the largest and most radical of the reform-minded groups in the 1790s, included in their platform redistribution of parliamentary seats, universal manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, equal electoral districts, abolition of property qualifications for candidates to parliament and salaries for members of parliament. Put simply, as Elliott states, "the declared object of the new society [the United Irish Society] was parliamentary reform, its

⁶College Green refers to the area of Dublin including Trinity College and the Irish Parliament, named for the grassy knoll separating the two buildings. For further study on the 'Pale' and the Protestant Ascendency in general, see R.B. McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution: 1760-1801* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1979), chapters 2, 6, and 7 in particular; R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), A general survey of Irish history, but the treatment of politics in chapters eight and ten are quite good; Jacqueline Hill, 'The Meaning and Significance of Protestant Ascendency, 1787-1840' in *Ireland after the Union* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), later in the time period, but still quite good; James Kelly, 'The Genesis of "Protestant Ascendency"' in *Parliament, Politics and People: Essays in Eighteenth Century Irish History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1989); and Jim Smyth, *The Men of No Property: Irish Radicals and Popular Politics in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), especially the first chapter.

⁷Theobald Wolfe Tone, *The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone Written by Himself and Extracted from his Journals*. Ed. William Theobald Wolfe Tone (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1828), 55.

means the union of the Irish people.’⁸ The United Irishmen sought to replace the tightly structured and conservative Protestant Ascendency with a government which would abide by their general principles of liberty, independence and union. To achieve these ends, the Society of United Irishmen had to convince all Irishmen that it was “necessary to forget all former feuds, to consolidate the entire strength of the whole nation, and to form for the future but one people.”⁹

Within the ranks of the United Irish leadership, two men played fundamental roles in the attempt to create a new Ireland. Theobald Wolfe Tone and Thomas Paliser Russell had hopes of establishing a new course for politics and society within Ireland. While many early Irish reformers focused on the political instability and corruption of the Irish government, Tone and Russell looked beyond mere political reform and saw the absence of a ‘union of power among Irishmen of all religious persuasions’ as the weakest link of Irish life.¹⁰ Convinced that “Union among the people is better for any Nation than hatred and animosity,”¹¹ Tone and Russell sought to shatter the elitist foundations of the Irish government and create a united Ireland.

Tone and Russell, born protestant and bred to fulfill traditional protestant roles as lawyer and soldier, broke through the bounds of their identity, or created a ‘new language’ in the words of historian Eric Foner, in their effort to transform Ireland.¹² By confronting the elite establishment with a ‘social program’ of catholic incorporation, they challenged the very

⁸Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 22.

⁹Tone, *The Life of Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 63.

¹⁰For discussion of reform in Ireland, see R.B. McDowell. *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution*. See chapters six and seven for discussion of the Revolution of 1782 and the Grattan Parliament, and chapter two for trends in reform since the Treaty of Limerick and Poyning’s Law. See also R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland*. For a general survey, the discussion of the political changes of 1782 and the Grattan years in chapter ten are quite good; but see McDowell for the more authoritative study.

¹¹Journals of Theobald Wolfe Tone, Trinity College, Dublin (TCD) MSS 2041.

¹²Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Language, as Foner uses the term, is not entirely dissimilar to my ‘language’ of a transformation of identity within Tone and Russell.

foundation of the Protestant Ascendancy. Power, according to the protestants, derived from the subjection of the catholic masses. Their right to rule delicately hung between the Irish catholics who composed upwards of 80 percent of the population and the British government which treated the protestants as 'colonists.' The balance is referred to as a 'garrison' mentality by historian Thomas Pakenham.¹³ Attacking the precarious position of the Ascendancy by calling for union and a re-examination of the catholic position both marginalized Tone and Russell and forced each to create a new identity outside of the 'Pale.' By calling for union, each moved beyond the religious classifications of protestant/presbyterian/catholic and became an Irishman.

Both Tone and Russell preached a message of sectarian unity, but this is not meant to suggest that these men were cut from the same mold. Tone used his academic training and oratorical style to win over opponents with his eloquent speeches and articles. His years at Trinity College taught him the language of political reform and exposed him to the political writings of the likes of John Locke and Cicero. Tone envisioned himself living on the same stage populated by such 'world citizens' as Thomas Paine. He reshaped his identity through reformist ideology, but had little contact with the Irish 'masses' for whom he fought and died. In contrast, Russell, a realist and pragmatist, lacked the intellectual gifts of Tone, but sought inspiration directly from the people of Ireland. He learned the language of the catholics, Irish Gaelic, and spoke to the common people about their desires and dreams for a new Ireland. Despite the vast differences between these two men, a bond of friendship formed as each progressed in his own way towards the goal of a united Ireland.

Tone and Russell both chose the path their lives would follow, and by doing so made an

¹³Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The History of the Great Irish Rebellion, 1798*, (New York: Random House, 1969).

active choice to abandon their former partisan identities to become Irishmen. Irish historian C. Desmond Greaves once wrote, “No man is born great. Nor despite the adage, does anybody ever have greatness thrust upon him. It is always acquired, and at that only through the performance of actions important to society.”¹⁴ Their actions, not their protestant births, dictated the greatness of Tone and Russell. Their fame, especially within recent Irish history and cultural tradition, is due to the strength and persuasiveness of this ideology. Both Tone and Russell proudly wore the uniform of soldiers fighting for a fundamental change in society, but each continued their fight in separate ways. Tone’s exile from Ireland forced him to abandon his homeland, though never his principles or ideals, during his travels to America and France as he searched for a way to rid Ireland of its corrupt government. Russell, imprisoned in 1796 for sedition, held true to the notion that “liberty will, in the midst of these storms, be established, and God will wipe off the tears from all eyes.”¹⁵ Because of this, he suffered three years of imprisonment in Newgate Gaol and returned to Ireland in 1803 to resume the fight for ‘Union’ among Irish. Both men died at the hands of the British government, almost entirely forgotten, their personal legacy lost during their years away from Irish soil.

Their historical legacy, though, survives through the incredible ability of each man to abandon his indoctrinated belief of the ‘garrison’ mentality of the protestant state, which called for physical repression of the catholics to prevent vengeance and economic suppression of the dissenters to halt growing influence. Their remarkable achievement, then, should be seen as an attempt to break out of their protestant identities and help create an Ireland founded upon an

¹⁴C. Desmond Greaves, *Theobald Wolfe Tone and the Irish Nation* (Dublin: Fulcrum Press, 1991), 12.

¹⁵Thomas Russell, Letter from Russell to Ms. McCracken of October 1803. Quoted in Dr. R.R. Madden’s *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times*. Vol. 1, Third Series. (Dublin: James Duffy, 1846), 253.

equal union of all peoples, with government working in the best interests of all its citizens. In many ways, Irish history is still in its infancy. Some critical moments, such as the political crisis at the end of the eighteenth-century, have been subject to more extensive study, but not nearly to the extent this time period has been studied within British or American history. Marianne Elliott and Denis Carroll, Irish historians, have written biographies of Tone and Russell, respectively. Elliott's biography, an authoritative account of Tone's tragic life, neatly ties Tone and his struggle to the chaotic political situation of the time. Unfortunately, one of the main points of the biography is the legacy of Tone, or the 'Cult of Tone' as she labels it.¹⁶ His legacy was not eclipsed by his failure to lead the rebellion of 1798 or his death at the hands of the English. But by concentrating on how he has been perceived since his time, she largely ignores how he understood and defined himself. She does not overlook his attempt at uniting a divided country, but allows the failure of the internal union of the Irish to color her analysis of his life. In the end, history proves that the 'Great Irish Rebellion of 1798' failed. Tone and Russell failed to establish a shared community of Irishmen. They failed to bridge the deep sectarian divisions between peoples in their attempt to create an Ireland of 'brotherhood' and 'union.' In fact, the United Irish attempt to create a harmonious community in Ireland increased social tension and turned the Rebellion of 1798 into a bloody sectarian massacre. Elliott sees this as the real point of the story and discusses the extremely significant event of Tone's attempt at internal union only as an afterthought. This is far from an afterthought, however, for few Irishmen since Tone and Russell have been able to transform their identities in quite the same way. Worse yet, by concentrating on how the finale of Tone's life has affected Irish history, Elliott ignores the transformation Tone underwent as he

¹⁶The final chapter of Elliott deals exclusively with the various legacies Tone has left, and what he represents to each of the various groups who hold him in esteem. See Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 411-419.

worked toward the goal of Union. This must be treated as the principal accomplishment of these men.

Unlike Tone, Thomas Russell's life is hidden in obscurity, both due to his lack of self-aggrandizement and his nearly illegible handwriting. For these unfortunate reasons he has been all but ignored in the secondary literature. Thomas Pakenham's study of the 1798 Rebellion, *The Year of Liberty*, entirely disregards Russell's role in shaping the United Irish ideology prior to 1798 as well as the part he played in the 1803 rising. The biography of Russell by Denis Carroll is a disappointment and does little justice to a figure as intriguing as Russell. Carroll's study centers more on political events in Ireland instead of attempting to describe a man who, in many ways, was the most radical of the United Irishmen. Marianne Elliott and Nancy Curtin previously studied the political context of the United Irishmen, so Carroll's work contributes little new material to the field. This, unfortunately, leaves the chapter on Thomas Russell in R.R. Madden's *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times* (1846) as the last major work in English to give Russell the credit he deserves.

Biographies of major historical and controversial figures, such as Tone and Russell, are bound to be written with some level of personal admiration or disagreement. Because of the legacy this era has left upon the Ireland of today, judgement and bias are especially difficult to keep in check while examining this period. For example, Elliott describes Tone as "passionately Irish. But he was part of an elite and had a very Protestant perception of the Irish masses. He thought them vulgar, lacking in spirit and prone to graft and deceit."¹⁷ This is, unfortunately, true. But Tone saw the possibility that, with emancipation, "they [the catholics] would become like

¹⁷Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone: Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 418.

other people.”¹⁸ Taking history into the realm of slander, Frank MacDermot wrote in his 1939 biography of Tone, “his [Tone’s] inconsistencies do not prove that he was a mere self-seeker, but they do reflect his impatience, impair his authority, raise doubts as to his wisdom, and suggest that fear of poverty and obscurity played a larger part than might be desired in molding his thought and conduct.”¹⁹ MacDermot even goes so far as to say, “in private life Tone was, first and foremost, extraordinarily likable. There are some men whom you must forgive, even if they rob a church.”²⁰ Tone obviously never ironed out the inconsistencies within his ideology, but incomplete theories do not merit the censure of a biased historian. On the other side of the ideological fence, C. Desmond Greaves lashes out against MacDermot and ignores all contradictions to place Tone within the Pantheon of Irish nationalists. Displacing all blame from Tone, Greaves claims that the “ultimate disappointment of his hopes... was due to the simple fact history itself withdrew the opportunity it had offered before Tone’s brilliant skill had sufficed to make avail of it.”²¹ Tone and Russell were human, imperfect creatures prone to vices. They deserve to be judged on their actions, not damned and blamed for events out of their control. A delicate balance must be struck here, one which few Irish historians succeed in creating. The sectarian feud which Tone and Russell gave their lives to try to end has become a battle even within the secondary historical literature.

The first section of this paper will rebuild the historical stage upon which Tone, Russell and the

¹⁸Journals of Theobald Wolfe Tone, TCD MSS 2044.

¹⁹Frank MacDermot, *Theobald Wolfe Tone: A Biographical Study* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1939), ix-x.

²⁰*Ibid.*, x.

²¹Greaves, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 16.

United Irishmen lived in the late eighteenth-century as each strove to direct the action of Irish reform. This is also the story of an attempt at creating a national identity, which the United Irishmen defined through union, by examining the transformation of the identities of Tone and Russell. No longer would institutions such as the 'Pale' hold the reins of power through elitism, but all men could live together as one people. It is through an understanding of the internal politics and history of reform in eighteenth century Ireland that we begin to comprehend the significance of the call to union, and the corresponding transformation within Tone and Russell. Analysis of personal ideology, fundamental to their identities, will be gleaned from the journals and diaries of each, written during the crucial years prior to the rebellion.

The second section will continue the examination of the personal ideologies of these men, via an analysis of two pamphlets that argued for the unconditional equality of all Irish, including the catholics. These pamphlets, Tone's *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (1791) and Russell's *Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present State of the Country* (1796), represented an attempt to convince the Irish not only of the need for a strong internal union, but also for a fundamental change in the definition of 'Irishman.' Previous studies of these men, and of the United Irishmen in general, have examined these two pamphlets as political tracts only, if not discounting their importance altogether. Greaves believed that Tone's *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* was a "model of sober political judgement,"²² while Carroll erroneously claims that the "thrust of the *Letter* [Russell's *Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country*] is entirely political."²³ The lack of understanding of these tracts

²²Ibid., 58.

²³Denis Carroll, *The Man from God Knows Where: Thomas Russell, 1767-1803* (Dublin: Garton Press, 1995), 119.

alone calls for a new analysis. This study will go beyond mere political analysis and examine these tracts as illustrations of the identity metamorphosis which occurred within Tone and Russell.

The story of what happened during the late 1780s and 1790s is the story of a movement for change within Ireland. Men like Tone and Russell transformed their identity as they challenged the existing state armed with a lexicon from the past, liberty and independence, and a language of their own, union. Each sacrificed a life of economic stability and social elitism to affect a change upon the Irish state and society. Tone and Russell were to pay dearly for this choice. Yet, knowing the possible consequences of their actions, they chose to defend a people whom members of the elite believed were “ignorant, and therefore incapable of liberty.”²⁴ This thesis, then, becomes the story of how, by challenging the elite-established authority, two men broke the confines of their protestant identity, and how, through an understanding of the plight of the catholic masses, they created an Irish identity.

²⁴Theobald Wolfe Tone, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, 5th ed. (London: Connolly Books), 26.

*Part I**The Principles of Reform and Beyond: The United Irishmen,
Theobald Wolfe Tone and Thomas Russell*

Reform in eighteenth-century Ireland evolved from a hushed word spoken in the musty back rooms of parliamentarian residences to a proclaimed call in the Irish parliament on behalf of the Ascendency to a corrupted chant heard on the tongues of the 'masses' in 1798. The American Revolution demonstrated that people were willing to fight tremendous odds for the right to win back the rights England had long denied them. The French Revolution, the most important political and social event of the century, forced the protestant and presbyterian Irish to reexamine their political situation and gave the presbyterians and catholics cause to question the authority of the Dublin parliament. The French Revolution, too late to fundamentally alter the form of Irish reform, was of vital importance to Ireland considering the 'legendary' ties between these two catholic countries. Just as France threw off its cloak of servitude and donned the armor of Liberty, the presbyterians and catholics began to strive for greater liberty within Irish society. The revolution also fundamentally changed the internal situation within Ireland, creating an environment which produced "an alliance between the protestant reformers and the catholics."²⁵ Reformers believed that the Irish government could no longer use the argument of ignorance to justify the continued oppression of the catholics. Neither could the 'Pale' continue to ignore the rumblings of the 'lower orders,' in the form of rural 'risings' and 'riots' by the catholics and the economic growth of the presbyterians, due to their inferior status. Thomas Paine and proponents of the 'New Light' presbyterianism argued forcefully that all men were born capable of living with

²⁵Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 4.

liberty, and all men deserved the right to live in freedom protected from governmental corruption. These principles became intertwined with the movement for reform in Ireland, creating a legacy which the United Irishmen would inherit. Further, Tone and Russell borrowed much from the Irish reform movement and the principles of Locke and Paine as they strove to fundamentally change the Irish Parliament, themselves, and, most importantly, Ireland.

1. The Irish Path to Reform: 'Patriots,' Volunteers and The United Irishmen

A proper examination of the nature of reform in Ireland in the eighteenth-century can not begin without an understanding of the three distinct, sectarian communities into which Ireland's five million inhabitants were divided. The protestants, whom Tone figured did not number above a tenth of the population, "were in possession of the whole of the government, and of five-sixths of the landed property of the nation."²⁶ The Protestant Ascendancy, a contemporary term used to describe the elite, protestant dominated government, controlled the "church, the law, the revenue, the army, the navy, the magistracy, the corporations- in a word- ...the whole patronage of Ireland."²⁷ Given power initially through English settlement, protestant control of Ireland was solidified through the catholic repression of the Cromwellian invasions (beginning 1649) and the Ascension of William and Mary to the throne of England (1688). By the middle of the eighteenth-century, though, the "long quiescence of the catholics and the growing prosperity of the country created a novel sense of confidence, independence and in many ways a sense of their own

²⁶Tone, *Life*, 53. Throughout this paper, the term 'protestant' will refer to members of the established Anglican Church of Ireland. The 'presbyterians' are not classified as protestants, but they do represent a separate branch of protestantism in Ireland. The 'catholics', obviously enough, are those Irish who follow the teachings of the Roman Catholic church. The lack of capitalization of religious sect names adheres to the tradition of Marianne Elliott in *Partners in Revolution*, in tribute to both her historical analysis and international contribution of this influential work.

²⁷Ibid.

Irishness among some protestants.’²⁸ Out of this ‘confidence,’ many protestants developed a belief that the ties between Ireland and England were too restrictive and prevented Ireland from utilizing her economic growth and population explosion to compete with powers such as Britain.

Challenges from the other two major religious sects, however, began just as the Ascendency solidified its control and strengthened its confidence. The dissenters, whom Tone estimated at about fifteen percent of the population of Ireland, issued their challenge to the Protestant Ascendency in two ways.²⁹ Dissenter predominance in the economic sphere, specifically in textiles and linen, directly defied the traditional protestant elite whose power stemmed from landed wealth. Since government only recognized wealth in these terms, the dissenters utilized their newly established economic strength to demand political concessions. Extra-parliamentary groups, such as political clubs and conventions, sprang up to fight for presbyterian rights.

The final group, who numbered the vast majority of Irish, were completely excluded from the political and social worlds inhabited by the protestants and prohibited from the economic sphere controlled by the presbyterians. Victims of the British invasions, the catholics lost all possessions and rights as a ‘defeated’ and ‘conquered’ people. Tone believed that “there was no injustice, no disgrace, no disqualification, moral, political or religious, civil or military, that was not heaped upon them.”³⁰ The penal laws, codified in the early eighteenth century, attempted to establish a protective check against rising catholic power. Catholicism prohibited entry into the

²⁸Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 9-10.

²⁹Dissenters, as used here, is an interchangeable term for presbyterian. There is another use for the word dissenter, signifying those within the presbyterian community who ‘dissented’ from the governmental elite and strove for a program of reform. It is frequently quite difficult to determine which use historians mean, so I will try to differentiate as best I can.

³⁰Tone, *Life*, 55.

parliament, and the 'Pale' for that matter. Catholics could neither vote nor own land, though they rented and laboured the same land their ancestors controlled from the protestants. Access to elementary education was difficult, and no catholic was allowed to enter the 'sacred' halls of Trinity College, the definitive protestant institution. There were, however, a growing number of catholics who excelled even under these harsh conditions in the mercantile profession, for few penal code restrictions inhibited catholic participation. By the mid-eighteenth century, catholic merchants in Cork and Galway effectively dominated the Irish mercantile economy. Each religious group desired a different type of reform, from the increased internal political power of the protestants to the economic and political rights of the presbyterians to the extreme practical social demands of the rural catholics.

First, Resolved, That the weight of English influence in the Government of this country is so great, as to require a cordial union among *ALL THE PEOPLE OF IRELAND*, to maintain that balance which is essential to the preservation of our liberties, and the extension of our commerce.

Second, That the sole constitutional mode by which this influence can be opposed, is by the complete and radical reform of the representation of the people in Parliament.

Third, That no reform is practicable, efficacious, or just, which shall not include Irishmen of every *religious* persuasion.

- Resolutions of the Society of United Irishmen, 18 October 1791³¹

Illustrated by the above resolutions and the oath at the beginning of the introduction, the United Irishmen focused upon the common themes of liberty, independence and union. appealing in a unique way to each of three social groups. Historian James Epstein wrote, in his discussion of radicals and their ideology, “[p]olitical language is by its nature imprecise. Political rhetoric lacks

³¹As Quoted in Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 140.

sharp philosophic and linguistic clarity.”³² This sentiment is shared by Elliott who, reflecting on the radicalism of 1790s Ireland, wrote, “the aims and beliefs of the United Irish Society before 1794 were confused, and apart from central themes of catholic emancipation and a radical reform of parliament, there appear to have been as many opinions on detail as there were individuals.”³³ None the less, the themes of liberty, independence and union, which arose out of the eighteenth-century reformist tradition, form the basis of the United Irish literature. Attempting to break through the rhetoric to glean an understanding of these terms, union signified the creation of a common brotherhood of Irish peoples, a fraternity in the French revolutionary use of the word. Crossing social, economic, and political lines, union would strengthen a weakened Ireland and restore her to her rightful place of power. Connected to union, then, was the idea of Irish independence. This word held varied meanings during the late eighteenth century, for during the 1780s and early 1790s, independence referred almost exclusively to decreased political and economic regulation from Britain. By the years 1795-6, the term came to denote a full break from Britain, political independence in the American colonial sense. Through independence, in either sense, Ireland could strive for the elevation of her position on the world stage. Finally, the term liberty or freedom can be used to address the Irish internal situation. Divisions between classes, religions, and social groups were enforced by penal laws, restricting access into fields controlled by the Protestant Ascendancy. The repeal of selected penal laws during the 1770s and 1780s only reminded the presbyterians and catholics what freedoms and rights were still withheld from them. This legitimized oppression, boarding on the tyranny Locke, Paine, and the French Revolution

³²James Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 20.

³³Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 26.

wished to counteract with republican virtue. must be seen as the obstruction which prevented the much sought after union of Irish peoples. Rhetoric, however ill-defined, was a powerful force in the Irish reform movement and offers critical clues into the true nature of their appeals.

As an oppressed state, Ireland attempted to establish a greater degree of independence from England beginning with the Cromwellian invasions. Elliott points out that the “Irish were only half-conquered, half-repressed; the remaining freedom only emphasizing the injustice of persecution.”³⁴ This situation involved the protestants, presbyterians and catholics. For most of the eighteenth-century, it was not the catholics but the protestants who vocalized objections to their plight of unjust persecution. The Declaratory Act of 1720 legally subjected Ireland to the English parliament, as the “imperial parliament... had power to make laws binding Ireland and that the Irish house of lords was not a court of appeal.”³⁵ The ‘Patriot’ movement in the mid-eighteenth century, led by Irish parliamentarians Henry Flood and Henry Grattan, and heavily influenced by the radical Dr. Charles Lucas, argued for increased independence of the protestant state by challenging the English right to rule Ireland as a colony. The protestants crucial role in the defeat of James II led them to believe they deserved better treatment than that given to colonists. In their eyes, they deserved treatment as Englishmen, an argument heard in the 1770s from the American colonists. Protestants of the Ascendancy class saw the Declaratory Act and Poyning’s Law as examples of English efforts to retract or repeal English rights from the Irish.³⁶ Or, more concisely put, “[t]hese arguments formed the basis of the mid-century campaign of the

³⁴Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 8.

³⁵McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution*, 132.

³⁶Originally written in 1494, Poyning’s law was continually revised to reflect the current relationship between England and Ireland. The law, though, always required that Irish bills passed by Parliament had to be transmitted to the English Parliament for ratification and acceptance. See Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 23, 84, and 236-237 for more information.

so-called 'patriots' in the Irish parliament to restore rights thought to have been usurped by the parliament in London."³⁷ Ireland possessed a parliament, yet her people were treated as if the parliament served no function and ultimately meant nothing. The existence of the Dublin parliament, in the eyes of the Irish protestants, warranted a degree of respect she was denied by the English.

Within this argument is found a curious duality. The protestant Irishman wished to be treated as British, for they descended from the families of invading English protestants. In this way, they would not abandon their heritage. But, they also wanted to be seen as Irish, distinct from their English roots and rulers of a new country which was not a colony. In effect, they wanted the best of both worlds: the traditional English rights along with the potential power of an independent Irish state.

The year 1782 witnessed a historic and fundamental vicissitude in the relationship between Ireland and England, as the issue of independence once again came to the fore. The Irish parliament lacked sufficient authority to challenge London alone. A tacit alliance was fashioned between the Protestant Ascendancy, represented by the 'Patriot' party, and the Volunteers, a citizen militia created to protect Ireland while her native troops were away fighting the rebelling Americans. Elliott states that the Volunteers were the "embodiment of one of the most cherished principles of the Glorious Revolution, the right of every citizen to arm in defense of his property."³⁸ Not bound by governmental control and considered extremely dangerous by the British government, the Volunteers focused on the reformist platform of free-trade and curbing

³⁷Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 10-11.

³⁸Ibid., 11. See 11-15 for a further discussion of the Volunteers. See also McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution*. Chapters five and six set the stage nicely for the reforms of the 1780s. Foster, *Modern Ireland*, 241-258, also tells the tale of the 'Politics of "Patriotism"', but lacks the detailed analysis of McDowell.

“excessive ministerial interference.”³⁹ The alliance forced Westminster to agree to a series of concessions, which became known as the ‘constitution’ of 1782. The ‘constitution’ in theory granted the Irish parliament full governing privileges in Ireland, save the royal veto. It was only in the mid-1790s that the Irish would discover that in reality the ‘constitution’ did not grant Ireland its independence; through the office of Viceroy, the highest governmental position within Ireland, England still had the final word in Irish affairs.

The ‘constitution’ of 1782 represented more than a theoretical increase in political independence from England. It also represented an alliance spanning sectarian boundaries. According to Tone, it was the “Dissenters who composed the flower of the famous volunteer army of 1782, which extorted from the English ministry the restoration of what is affected to be called the constitution of Ireland.”⁴⁰ This alliance, in many ways, assumed fundamental importance for the United Irishmen, for it represented practical proof that religious dividing lines could be erased when uniting against a common enemy to achieve concessions. The dissenters, allied with the protestant parliamentary ‘Patriot’ party, forced England to choose between slight concessions and war. War, in 1782, was not a realistic choice for an English army which was recently humiliated by the Americans.

While the protestant-presbyterian alliance resulted in a triumphant victory for the protestants of the Pale, it induced no legislation to address the social needs of the presbyterians and catholics. Even the Volunteers, with the dissenters as a major force, only called for political reform through a “redistribution of seats, shorter parliaments, an extension of the franchise to

³⁹Ibid., 12.

⁴⁰Tone, *Life*, 54.

leaseholders, the ballot, registration of voters and a total exclusion of placemen and pensioners.”⁴¹ Future United Irishmen, such as protestant leaders Dr. William Drennan and Archibald Hamilton Rowan, did not want to stop with the basic Volunteer plan for reform. They wished to open debate on social change and extend the rights of the franchise to catholics, but with a 50 pound property value exclusion. This call, even considering Drennan estimated 500-1000 catholics possessed property enough to fulfill this requirement, split the Volunteer Convention of 1784 and ended their program for reform.⁴² Few protestants and presbyterians were prepared in the 1780s for the liberty of the catholics, even through gradual emancipation, for their newly acquired independence was not yet secure.

In November 1788 another eruption over the volatile issue of independence took shape in the form of the regency crisis in Britain. The political turmoil brought on by the insanity of King George III reached the shores of Ireland scant weeks after the storm rose in England. The regency bill, or more accurately the vague nature of the proposed regency, forced into question again the “fiction of separate crowns for Ireland and England, even though held by the same person.”⁴³ A group, led by Lord Shannon and William Ponsonby, sought to preserve the ‘constitution’ of 1782 by appealing to the prevailing political wind of the English Whigs. Rumors abounded in Dublin about a new Whig Viceroy as the Irish parliament divided into opposing factions. Ponsonby and Shannon, in a demonstration of their support for Whig principles, wished the Prince of Wales to assume the title of regent of Ireland. clearly differentiating the crowns of England and Ireland. The King’s ‘recovery,’ though, spoiled the hopes of this new political opposition. George

⁴¹Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 13.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 14.

⁴³Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 78. See 77-80 for a full discussion of the regency crisis and its effect upon the Irish Parliament.

Nugent-Temple-Grenville, first Marquess of Buckingham and Viceroy of Ireland, did not take kindly to this opposition element and actively sought to ostracize Ponsonby and Shannon from the Irish Parliament. In reaction, they formed the Irish Whigs in August 1789.

Many of the founding members of the United Irishmen began their political ‘careers’ with the Irish Whigs, but Tone remarked that the “principles they advanced were such as I could conscientiously support, *so far as they went*, though mine went much beyond them.”⁴⁴ One of the limiting factors of the reformist stance of the Whigs was the paradox behind their desire for independence. Elliott writes, “[t]he contradiction between the fight for Irish rights and the exclusion of the majority of the Irish people from any participation in those rights was not immediately apparent to the Protestant reformers. The Volunteers as a whole still thought in terms of a Protestant state.”⁴⁵ Radicals wished to address this injustice, while the majority of the Whigs were apprehensive to take action.

The next logical step, for radicals like Tone and Russell, involved establishing their own political club, a ‘Brotherhood’ as Drennan referred to it. This club would address social concerns as a route to increased political reform. As the secret committee of the house of commons reported, their principles were, “first, the propagation of the principles of freedom and toleration; second, the establishment of a national convention of the people of Ireland; and third, communication with similar organizations in France, England, and Scotland.”⁴⁶ The influence of political thinkers such as Locke and Paine is all too evident in the principles of this ‘Brotherhood.’ In the tradition of Paine, the *Northern Star*, the public voice of the United Irish Society run by

⁴⁴Tone, *Life*, 38.

⁴⁵Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 14.

⁴⁶As Quoted in Curtin, *United Irishmen*, 43.

renounced reformist Samuel Neilson, adopted the motto “The Public Will Our Guide-The Public Good Our End.”⁴⁷

Theobald Wolfe Tone, hoping to duplicate the success of college debate societies, like his own Trinity Historical Society, as forums for political debate, established a political club in Dublin in early 1791. The group included Drennan and Russell, among others. This organization, which did not last long enough to vote on a name, quickly “degenerated into a mere social club.”⁴⁸ In May 1791, months after the collapse of the Dublin group, the first communication detailing concrete plans to establish a new political society were written. Soon after, Tone addressed his pamphlet, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*, to the protestant and presbyterian reformers of the north hesitant over catholic emancipation and enfranchisement. This pamphlet roused sufficient interest from reformers to warrant another attempt at creating a political club. The United Irish Society emerged from the Northern Whig Club, of which Tone, Russell, Drennan, Samuel McTier, William Sinclair, and Samuel Neilson were members. They saw no organization for political reform emerging out of these societies, but rather understood them as social groups meeting under the auspice of reform; the United Irishmen ran counter to this trend. These men, along with eight others, met in Belfast. Samuel Neilson, a leader of a secret group of Belfast Volunteers, took action on a proposal from Drennan to establish a society for “uniting Catholic and protestant in Ireland.”⁴⁹ By October of 1791, the impetus for reform had begun. On the 14th, this impetus became the Society of the United Irishmen. The first official meeting occurred on the 18th and they adopted the resolutions declaring their reform program.

⁴⁷ As quoted in Nancy Curtin, *The United Irishmen*, 14.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 44.

From 1791 to 1794, the United Irishmen continued to spread their message of reform as they expanded from the Belfast branch into Dublin and through Leinster and Ulster. They reprinted the 'Koran of Belfast,'⁵⁰ Paine's *Rights of Man*, in cheap editions available to a wider public or serialized in newspapers such as the *Northern Star*. They actively supported the catholics during the Catholic Convention of 1792-3, an attempt to create a unified voice of catholic protest. Tone was nominated by the Catholic Committee as 'Agent to the Catholics' in gratitude for his work in support of catholic freedom and equality, and in the hopes his work would continue.

The year 1794, however, saw a complete reversal in governmental mentality. No longer would the Irish parliament allow the questioning of governmental authority, for the current political situation would not allow such leniency. The English parliament was too preoccupied with the war against France to concern itself with the internal bickering of the Irish. Left without a defined set of political objectives from England and feelings of betrayal and isolation after British capitulation over the Catholic Relief Act of 1794, the Irish parliament sought to crack down on French republican and revolutionary ideology embodied within the political clubs. The government repressed both the Volunteers and the Dublin United Irish Society. Not only did government reaction destroy any sense of catholic unity, it also backed reformers into a difficult corner. Reformers were now forced to chose between taking their fight for reform outside the 'legal' means or sacrificing their ideology in the face of governmental repression. The removal of Earl Fitzwilliam as Viceroy of Ireland in 1795 convinced the United Irishmen that the government would permit no change, and that the only way to 'reform' the Irish parliament was to fight.⁵¹ It

⁵⁰Tone, as quoted by Curtin, *The United Irishmen*, 22.

⁵¹An in depth discussion of the Fitzwilliam affair is undertaken in chapter 3.

was during the ‘underground years’ that Thomas Russell bravely published his pamphlet, *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country*, in 1796. Government officials arrested and threw him into Newgate Gaol four days after the publication of the work.⁵² Released in March 1799, he never stood trial and was never officially charged him with any crime. Neither Tone nor Russell played an active part in the internal events leading up to ‘Great Irish Rebellion of 1798,’ though Tone would make two dramatic returns accompanied by French fleets and Russell would try to raise the forces of union again in 1803.

Russell wrote, “P.P. [the code name for Russell] has ruined himself in the pursuit of the good of his country.”⁵³ And Tone recorded, “For that purpose [separation from England and liberty for Ireland] I have encountered the chances of war among strangers; for that purpose I 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.”⁵⁴ Each could have lived a comfortable and prosperous life, part of the Protestant Ascendency as a lawyer and a soldier. They fully realized, demonstrated by the above references, the possible consequences of their action. In light of all this, though, something drove them to sacrifice what they had and take up a mantle. They believed this platform would transform Ireland, and allow her to compete with the economic and political power of England. Something would not allow either man to ignore the principles of liberty, independence and union. Each grew

⁵² Carroll, *The Man from God Knows Where*, 120.

⁵³ Thomas Russell, *The Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell: 1791-1795*, C.J. Woods, ed., (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1991), 77. The use of code names, such as P.P. for Russell and Mr. Hutton for Tone, was a defensive reaction to protect themselves should these journals ever fall into the hands of the government.

⁵⁴ “Wolfe Tone, on Being Found Guilty of Treason” *The World’s Famous Orations*. William Jennings Bryan, ed., vol. VI, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), 134.

up a part of the world they so fiercely fought, a world in which the vast minority controlled the reins of power. Late in the 1780s, Tone and Russell decided to forgo their careers and sacrificed their lives for a greater cause. Something had changed. It is this something which forced them to fight, and in doing so transformed them into Irishmen.

2. Theobald Wolfe Tone: Leading Light of the Irish Darkness

To subvert the tyranny of our execrable government, to break the connexion with England, the never-failing source of our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country- these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of all past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter- these were my means.⁵⁵

Theobald Wolfe Tone's language, filled with passion and zeal, derives much of its power from arguments of the past. His adherence to classical republican liberty and virtue to combat tyranny, his tribute to Paine's notion of 'abolishing' the past, his honor to Irish reformers through independence and his ideal of national unity are all brilliantly summed up in this excerpt from his autobiography. (Tie into the biography)

Tone was born on 20 June, 1763, the eldest son of Peter Tone, a Dublin coach maker, and Margaret Lamport Tone, a converted catholic whose family had extensive interests in shipping.⁵⁶ His siblings, William, Matthew, Arthur, and Mary, played an important part in Tone's life for he envisioned himself as his siblings' protector. Tone devoted little time to his youth and adolescence in his *Life*, composed during his exile in 1796. In fact, he discussed up the first twenty-two years

⁵⁵Tone, *Life*, 62.

⁵⁶Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 9-11.

of his life in fewer than ten pages. He also made short work of his educational background, summing it up with the following words, "I began to look on classical learning as nonsense; on a fellowship in Dublin College, as a pitiful establishment: and, in short, I thought an ensign in a marching regiment was the happiest creature living."⁵⁷ Tone, though an honored scholar during his time at Trinity, claimed he was "very idle, and it was only the fear of shame which could induce me to exertion."⁵⁸ Constant quarrels with his father over his desire to enlist in the army came to naught, and he was "too proud"⁵⁹ to enlist without the permission of his father as his brother William had done. Tone twice repeated years at Trinity. The first time Tone attributed to an idleness of study, protesting his father's determination to make him a lawyer. The second resulted from punishment for standing as second in a duel which took a young man's life.⁶⁰

Tone's passionate antipathy towards academia did not extend to the Trinity College Historical Society. Tone was an active member, auditor and speaker of this debate society from 1784-1787. Though it is "unlikely... that Tone's outlook would have been radicalized by the debates in the Historical Society... he would have received there his earliest grounding in the fundamental political principles of the age."⁶¹ The Society provided Tone with his first opportunity to develop his oratory skill under the guise of preparation for a legal career, and was one of the few institutions connected with education which he admired. His participation, accompanied by his passion for rhetoric, won him "a scholarship, three premiums, and three

⁵⁷Tone, *Life*, 23. The terms Dublin College and Trinity College were then, and are throughout this paper, used interchangeably.

⁵⁸Ibid., 20.

⁵⁹Ibid., 23. An interesting remark, for one wonders if it is Tone's position within the family as first born or his sense of duty to his father which he is too proud to sacrifice.

⁶⁰Ibid. Tone did not have to fulfill his duty in the duel, for he seconded a young man called Anderson who shot his opponent through the head.

⁶¹Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 33.

medals from the Historical Society.”⁶²

Tone’s career path to the Irish bar would lead him through the university, and eventually to the Middle Temple in London. During his time in Dublin, he met a young woman named Martha Witherington who lived on Grafton Street. Tone gained entrance to the Witherington house through an interest in music which he shared with Martha’s elder brother Edward. Tone described Martha as “not sixteen years of age, and as beautiful as an angel,”⁶³ yet treated this ‘angel’ with a curious sense of paternal authority by renaming her Matilda after an older woman with whom he had an affair.⁶⁴

Tone left for London to acquire his legal training, only to state in his *Life*, “I had no great affection for study in general, but that of the law I particularly disliked; and to this hour I think it an illiberal profession, both in its principles and practice.”⁶⁵ He lapsed again into idleness, claiming that he “never once opened a law book, nor was I ever three times in Westminster Hall in my life.”⁶⁶ After eight terms (two years) at the Middle Temple, he would sum up his legal training with, “[a]s to law, I knew exactly as much about it as I did of necromancy.”⁶⁷

Obviously lacking the determination and desire to give himself fully to “study the profession to which I was doomed,”⁶⁸ Tone turned his attention to writing. With a few friends, he produced a ‘burlesque novel’ called *Belmont Castle* around 1788, then turned his pen to matters

⁶²Tone, *Life*, 26.

⁶³Ibid., 25.

⁶⁴See Elliott’s *Wolfe Tone* for an in depth discussion of the choice of names for his wife, as reflecting past loves and romantic tendencies. 25-31, 38.

⁶⁵Tone, *Life*, 29.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸Ibid.

more political. It would seem that in his boredom with study, Tone had found a new passion. One of his first works was a private letter to William Pitt pleading for England to “establish a colony in one of Cook’s newly discovered islands in the South Sea on a military plan.”⁶⁹ The importance of this letter is difficult to determine. Tone’s journal related the story of a bitter man who, jaded by a lack of response from an admired hero, swore vengeance upon Pitt. He passionately recalled, “[i]n my anger I made something like a vow, that, if ever I had an opportunity, I would make Mr. Pitt sorry, and perhaps fortune may yet enable me to fulfill that resolution.”⁷⁰ Elliott, Tone’s biographer, gives little credence to the passionate reaction of Tone, and does not even mention the vow of revenge against Pitt. Tone’s ire may have been raised by Pitt’s actions during the 1790s, but Pitt’s lack of response to Tone’s letter seems to have contributed to Tone’s belief that government was not from the people and ignored the public will. The passion with which Tone dwelt on the letter in his *Life* alone is reason enough for the relationship between Tone and the lofty Pitt to be re-examined.

Tone continued to comment publicly on political matters after his departure from the Middle Temple and his return to Ireland in 1788. He joined the Irish bar in February 1789, propelled by a desperate “want of success.”⁷¹ Tone again returned to writing to support for his wife and young daughter. He possesses enough ambition and skill to conquer his desired goal, and it would seem that even his disillusion and dislike of the law would not have stopped him from success. It would seem that there was another distraction.

Tone’s own words reveal a man who had not yet found his calling. Trapped within the

⁶⁹Ibid., 32.

⁷⁰Ibid., 32-33.

⁷¹Tone, *Life*, 36.

'fast-track' to a legal career he considered 'illiberal' and 'nonsense,' Tone seems to be akin to the 'lost' modern day student harboring feelings of alienation. Unhappiness with his chosen profession forced him to search elsewhere for fulfillment. It was not alienation or desperation which forced his hand, but a love of rhetoric displayed through his involvement with the Trinity College Historical Society. Imbued with the principles of Locke, Cicero, Newton and Demosthenes, Tone's rhetorical flair led him down the logical career path of politics.

Tone turned his attention not to the traditional politics of the Irish parliament, but the politics of the recently established Irish Whig Club. This entry into politics, however slight, allowed Tone to examine in greater depth the political problems of Ireland, and use his various talents to further the cause of Irish reform. Though not fully accepting of their principles, Tone grudgingly saw the Whigs as the "best constituted political body which the country afforded"⁷² at the time and began to pen political works for the Whigs. He wrote his first tract, "A Review of the Conduct of Administration During the Last Session of Parliament," on 18 March 1790, followed by a work called *Spanish War!* in July 1790. This pamphlet argued against Irish support for British aggression towards Spain. This extremely rebellious argument effectively suggested that Ireland did not have to supply troops for political matters to which her people did not agree. In so doing, Tone "advanced the question of separation, with scarcely any reserve, much less disguise; but the public mind was by no means so far advanced as I was."⁷³ It was during a session of parliament devoted to the Spanish situation that one of the great friendships of Irish history, and also one of the most tragic, began. Tone and Russell met in the public gallery of the Irish House of Commons during the July 1790 debates concerning the Spanish situation. This meeting,

⁷²Ibid., 36.

⁷³Ibid., 40. See Elliott's *Wolfe Tone* for further discussion of these works and their effects.

described as “one of the most fortunate of my life,”⁷⁴ ended in a friendship and working alliance which lasted until the death of Tone in 1798. Russell would never forget his elder partner, and the influence each had on the other would further define the Irish identities they were creating.

Tone’s career after meeting Russell can be largely summed up as the history of the United Irishmen. Tone was their ‘leading light,’ the man who bridged the chasm between the protestant reformists, presbyterian radicals and the catholic masses. He became the ‘Agent to the Catholics,’ granting him a salary and the ability to abandon his despised profession. He was a political pamphleteer, and a reform minded soldier seeking liberty and freedom for all Irish. This path, though, forced him to leave his home in 1795, exiled for crimes of treason and sedition. The government did not take kindly to Irish radicals talking openly with French agents, and smiled on the opportunity to get rid of one of the most vocal and popular of the United Irishmen. Tone first went to America, a country he was disgusted with, then continued to France. His role as soldier for reform brought him to France, as he plead the case of Ireland to the new French government, and even established something of a friendship with Director Carnot. His persuasiveness was rewarded with the military aid of Admiral Hoche, one of the ablest men in the French fleet. Three times French troops attempted to land in Ireland, and three times they failed due to weather and miscommunication. The third time, in 1798, Tone, a French officer, was taken prisoner by the English forces, the only French officer to be imprisoned. He was tried, sentenced to death by hanging and was dead on 19 November, 1798 of a self-inflicted knife wound.⁷⁵

⁷⁴Tone, *Life*, 40.

⁷⁵Though largely disproved and ignored by most modern historians, there is a theory (or nationalistic folk-tale) that Tone did not commit suicide as was reported by the British government. The most persuasive argument made against this, though, is the simple case that Tone was sentenced to be hanged. He pleaded in his final speech to the court-martial assembly to recognize him as an officer of the French army (as he was a *chef de bridage*) and sentence him to death by firing squad, the traditional death of a military officer. See Tone, *Life*, 314-317 for William Tone’s analysis of his father’s demise. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 397-402 for an objective analysis. See Greaves, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, 104-105 for

3. Thomas Paliser Russell: Quiet Torchbearer for the Irish

I confess I am quite proud of this club [the United Irishmen]... It is the first ever instituted in the history of this kingdom for the removal of religious and political prejudices. I think it as an event in the history of this country and, if properly managed, as the dawning of liberty.⁷⁶

Russell has not graced posterity with the wealth of personal background that Tone left. His journals dealt little with personal details, and he never took the time to record his life experiences in the same way as Tone. His writings, though, relay the story of a passionate man interested in social reform. He spoke of his travels, his acquaintances, his ideology, but extremely little of himself. R.R. Madden states that “Russell had no desire, on any occasion, to thrust himself into the foreground of the public picture; it was a matter of indifference to him what place he occupied in it.”⁷⁷ What hints we receive of him are through common statements with hidden meanings. Russell was less concerned with propagandizing himself than with selling his cause and his beliefs to the people of Ireland, and more concerned with his role as “the soldier of Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸ William Drennan, the ‘grandfather’ of the United Irish movement, always “judged [Russell] an agent on the part of the Catholics.”⁷⁹ This section, then, must become less a biography and more of a study of the enigmatic figure who would be titled, ‘The man from God knows where.’

Into our townlan’ on a night of snow

the mysterious circumstances which have led many to believe the murder theory, or see MacDermot, *Theobald Wolfe Tone*, for his belief that the fact that Tone “cut his own throat is, in fact, as sure as anything in history” (305).

⁷⁶As quoted in Curtin, *United Irishmen*, 9.

⁷⁷R.R. Madden, “Memoir of Thomas Russell,” *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times*, 3rd series, vol. 1, (Dublin: James Duffy, 1846), 184.

⁷⁸Ibid., 263.

⁷⁹Dr. William Drennan to Mrs. Martha McTier. February 1796. *The Drennan Letters*. 222

rode a man from God knows where;
 None of us bade him stay or go,
 nor deemed him friend, nor damned him foe,
 but we stabled his big roan mare;
 for in our townlan' we're decent folk,
 and if he didn't speak, why none of us spoke,
 and we sat till the fire burned low.⁸⁰

Russell was born on 21 November 1767, the youngest of five children, in a village called Drumahane in County Cork. His father, John Russell, was a lieutenant of the Eighty-third Infantry Regiment of the British Army. His mother, Margaret O'Kennedy Russell, of catholic blood, died before Russell was nineteen. Denis Carroll, biographer of Thomas Russell, suggests that both sides of the family descended from catholic backgrounds; however, the mere possession of such catholic ancestry does not substantiate claims that his religious descent contributed to the formation of his reformist thought. He received a private education at the hands of his father. Considering the range of interests Thomas Russell held, from geology to botany to poetry, this home education reflected well upon his father. Their family moved numerous times during Thomas' adolescence, from Drumahane in the Southwest to Durrow in County Laois to Dublin in the early 1780s. Russell's father diverted his son towards the clerical life, for his "proficiency in biblical studies and an interest in religious practice evinced suitability to church ordination."⁸¹ Russell, however, would never have an opportunity to demonstrate this 'proficiency,' for in 1783 he followed in the footsteps of his father and brother by taking up the sword of the soldier at the tender age of fifteen.

⁸⁰Florence Wilson, 'The Man From God Knows Where.' Quoted in Denis Carroll's *The Man From God Knows Where*. 248.

⁸¹Carroll, *The Man From God Knows Where*, 15.

Russell, who in less than twenty years would be fighting British troops in Ireland, enlisted in the 52nd Regiment of Foot. He left for the Malabar coast of India to join his brother, Ambrose, in February, 1783. After his transfer and promotion to ensign in the Hundredth Foot, he shone as a model soldier through tales of his rescue of a wounded colonel from the field.⁸² He returned home on half-pay, probably resulting from soldier cut backs in response to reductions in public spending, and “again contemplated taking holy orders.”⁸³ Madden posits quite a different analysis of Russell’s return by referring to a story in which Russell became enraged with the “unjust and rapacious conduct pursued by the [British] authorities in the case of two native women of exalted rank in the country.”⁸⁴ Whether or not the story is true, Russell’s personal sense of honor and devotion to the cause of oppression is fully demonstrated. Whatever the reason for Russell’s return, he was a young and attractive officer with the enchanting world of the Dublin Ascendancy open to him.

“A tall handsome man... dark complexion, aquiline nose, large black eyes, with heavy eye-brows, good teeth, full chested, walking generally fast and upright, and having a military appearance... speaking fluently, with a clear distinct voice, and having a good address”⁸⁵

Not even the order for the arrest of Russell could deny his striking physical appearance, a trait which is altogether missing from his portrait (See Illustration 3, page vi). Mary Ann McCracken continued lauding Russell’s virtue with these words,

“A model of manly beauty, he was one of those favoured individuals whom one cannot pass in the street without being guilty of the rudeness of staring in the face

⁸²Ibid., 17. See for further details concerning this story and possible later links to Tone.

⁸³Ibid., 16.

⁸⁴Madden, “Memoir,” 145.

⁸⁵Taken from the order for Russell’s arrest in 1803. Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 94.

while passing, and turning around to look at the receding figure...Martial in his gait and demeanour...the classic contour of his finely formed head, the expression of almost infantine sweetness which characterized his smile, and the benevolence that beamed in his fine countenance, seemed to mark him out as one, who was destined to be ornament, grace and blessing of private life."⁸⁶

It was Russell's beauty and his love of beauty, though, which would tear him between the world of physical pleasure and the higher world of religious piety and spiritual purity.⁸⁷ This psychological turmoil is best represented by Russell's inability to express his love for Eliza Goddard. Cursed as Petrarch for Laura or William Butler Yeats for Maude, Russell watched in tormented distress as Eliza married another. Commenting on Eliza, Russell lamented, "Love. Roushfoault says, is the most selfish passion. It was well exemplified in me."⁸⁸ On another occasion, Russell reflected on the presence of Eliza at a social occasion, "I believe I behaved like a fool and that my agitation was visible. I several times tried to turn about and my courage fail'd me.... She look'd beautiful and innocent and I loved her if possible more than ever."⁸⁹ It casts quite a contrast to the man who spent many a night in the arms of less than 'respectable' women.

Russell's life was far from that of a carefree playboy, though. Plagued by unquenchable physical desires and a love of drink, Russell lived a demanding, difficult life. Tone mocked Russell's constant struggle with physical desire by nicknaming him 'P.P.' Russell does not explain this, and seems unconcerned by the subtle irony of the title. 'P.P.' according to Madden refers to

⁸⁶ From quotes of Mary Ann McCracken. Ibid.

⁸⁷ For more information on the internal turmoil of Russell, see *Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell*, 49-52, 86-87 (a discussion of political rights for women, even more interesting considering his personal life), and 108. 153-157 (both accounts of Eliza Goddard, an infatuation for Russell. Much like Yeats' Maude, Russell would live in torment of his love for a woman who would not have him). See also, Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 94-97 for information about Tone's reactions to this duality in his friend.

⁸⁸ Russell. *Journals and Memoirs*, 108.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 181-182.

a “parish priest, a profane person, swearing occasionally, frequently ‘very drunk,’ ‘gloriously drunk,’ and disorderly.”⁹⁰ Elliott expounds on Madden’s analysis by pointing out that the reference to ‘P.P.’ was taken from Swift’s *Memoirs of P.P. Clerk of This Parish*, “the story of a pious young man, led astray by pleasure and women.”⁹¹

Lacking economic stability after his exit from the army, Russell was forced to borrow from friends and take whatever jobs he could find to support his elder sister, Margaret, and nieces, MaryAnn and Julia Martha. He was appointed librarian, at the request of fellow United Irishman William Sampson, for the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge (one of many growing political and social clubs of the time), and employed as justice of the peace in County Tyrone, and Seneschal for the Mayor Court in Dungannon. Madden, quoting from court transcripts, related Russell’s sentiments on resigning from the Mayor Court, “*he could not reconcile it to his conscious to sit as magistrate on a bench when the practice prevailed of inquiring what a man’s religion was before inquiring into the crime with which a prisoner was accused [sic].*”⁹² Each of these ‘odd’ jobs, considering his educational direction intended him for the clergy, brought him into contact with the people of Ireland. Any personal deficiencies were off-set by his “depth of sympathy for the lower orders... [which] gives a substance to his attack on the ruling classes which is not always evident in Tone.”⁹³

Writing to William Drennan, Martha McTier, intrigued by Russell’s character, said,

I am much interested for this seemingly unfortunate young man Russell. He seems very poor, is very agreeable, very handsome and well informed, and possessed of

⁹⁰Madden, “Memoirs,” 148.

⁹¹Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 96

⁹²As quoted in Madden, “Memoirs,” 155.

⁹³Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 95.

most insinuating graceful manners. His dress betrays poverty, and he associates with men every way below himself, on some of whom, I fear, he mostly lives...⁹⁴

In the same letter, Ms. McTier related a story which uniquely portrays Russell's passion and intensity. The growth of the United Irishmen in Belfast gave many among the militia cause for alarm by 1793. There was a growing sentiment that French principles were no longer a form of political protest, but treason against Ireland. Ireland now had a stake in the war against France, and the United Irishmen, by supporting these principles, betrayed the cause. One night in Belfast, passions were raised by a chance meeting of some United Irishmen and a party of militia. Insults were exchanged, and these United Irishmen returned to their lodgings to tell Russell and Putnam McCabe of the situation. Both Russell and McCabe rushed out to confront the militia. Ms. McTier wrote, "Russell went up close to them, did not speak one word, but, it seems, surveyed them with such a countenance that... they pursued, and coming up with Russell, demanded the reason for that look of insolence."⁹⁵ One of the gentleman insisted on fighting Russell, loudly proclaiming his status as 'Lord Cole.' Russell's reply was quite simple, " 'You are very fond of that title: take care, or it may not be long till you lose it' ."⁹⁶ It is unclear whether the continued invocation of the noble title raised Russell's ire, or if the primary reason for his anger was the insult first levied against the United Irishmen. The demonstration of the militiaman's noble birth, simply, did not alleviate the tension of the situation. The tempers of the militia were cooled by the following day, and they sought out Russell to apologize even though Russell had "been the first offender by look, which, even at moonlight, was, it seems, worse than a sentence."⁹⁷

⁹⁴Mrs. Martha McTier to William Drennan. 16 November, 1793, *The Drennan Letters*, 175.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid.

Russell was “much less worldly than Tone”⁹⁸ and concerned himself more with the local fight against tyranny in Ireland than with the world stage which Tone lived on. He was part of the Irish struggle and bound to the fight for Irish freedom. Russell’s concern was exclusively for his country. This is not to deny Tone’s concern for Ireland, but merely to point out that Tone’s rhetoric addressed more than the Irish situation. Tone possessed an overpowering ideology of freedom and liberty, but Russell’s interest was liberty and freedom in conjunction with his beloved country. Russell’s interest in France went only as far as the possibility that the French could help the people of Ireland. As Madden claimed, Russell “was ardently attached to the land of his birth.”⁹⁹

For Russell, Irish politics was a “struggle between good and evil, a stage on which God would finally intervene on the side of justice and right.”¹⁰⁰ Laments such as “Poor Ireland! P.P. [Russell’s code name] has ruined himself in the pursuit of the good of his country,”¹⁰¹ must be seen in the light of this “messianic streak.”¹⁰² The reform movement could not fail, for it was righteous and pure, and hence had the support of God, for “Providence orders all for the best.”¹⁰³ “MEN WILL SEE,” according to Russell, “THE ONLY TRUE BASIS OF LIBERTY IS MORALITY, AND THE ONLY STABLE BASIS OF MORALITY IS RELIGION [sic].”¹⁰⁴ Oppression and tyranny, unnatural states for humanity, ran counter to the Divine state of liberty. For Russell, the fight for change in Ireland was not just going to bring her to the forefront of

⁹⁸Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 95.

⁹⁹Madden, “Memoirs,” 147.

¹⁰⁰Carroll, *The Man from God Knows Where*, 8.

¹⁰¹Russell, *The Journals and Memoirs of Thomas Russell*, 77.

¹⁰²Carroll, *The Man from God Knows Where*, 8.

¹⁰³Madden, “Memoirs,” 201.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 202.

Europe, but would also complete a divine plan for the freedom of all Irish peoples.

Imprisonment forced Russell to gaze upon the events of 1798 through the iron bars of Newgate Gaol. Exiled to Fort George, Scotland, in 1799, Russell planned his return to Ireland and another rebellion. Believing that “the people will never abandon that cause” and “equally sure that it (the cause of liberty) will succeed,” Russell returned to Ireland in 1802 to gather his forces.¹⁰⁵ Along with Robert Emmet, who was responsible for raising Dublin, Russell traveled to the north, the ‘hot bed’ of reform and insurrectionary activities during the early 1790s. The events of 1798, though, changed the political nature of the north. Sectarian violence quickly silenced the protestant reformers fearful of catholic violence. Northerners quickly informed the government of Russell’s activities, as he walked throughout Antrim petitioning for assistance. The Irish government arrested, tried and convicted Russell. The morning of the execution, Russell finished a simple letter to his sister. In it he asked her to “[r]emember it’s in the cause of Virtue and Liberty I fall.”¹⁰⁶ He was led to the appointed place, said “I forgive my persecutors; I die in peace with all mankind, and I hope for mercy through the merits of my Redeemer Jesus Christ,” pardoned and blessed his executioners, and was hanged on 21 October, 1803. After the body was lowered, he was decapitated and the head was displayed to the gathered crowd. His revolutionary career is summed up by his simple tomb engraved only with the words ‘The Grave of Russell’ in a remote church-yard.

What was the something which drove each man? For Tone, his academic background and scholarly pursuits, such as the Historical Society, gifted him with the erudite language of reform.

¹⁰⁵As quoted in Madden, “Memoir,” 201.

¹⁰⁶As quoted in *Ibid.*, 268.

His knowledge of the principles of Locke and Paine, along with classical republican theories, enabled him to appeal to learned protestants on behalf of a people who had been long ignored by the Ascendency. Gifted by a language based on practical experience, Russell possessed the ability to speak the 'language' of the catholics. Indeed, he alone among the United Irishmen attempted a study of the Irish catholic language Gaelic, assisting on a translation of the Bible into Gaelic. Tone, their spokesman and 'Agent,' and Russell, the United Irishman closest to the cause of the catholics, form a unique whole. As partners in the fight against injustice and corruption, they created a language through which all Irish could communicate. In very different ways, Tone and Russell shattered their previous identities by directly challenging the establishment and seeking to create an Ireland without distinctions of any kind. Whether or not these men must be seen as naive fools or idealistic prophets is not going to be decided here. What these men did, though, was argue for a change in their country based on popular principles of the day. Let us now turn to their words, and see how they described their identities to the Irish nation.

Part II

*The Public Identity: The Published Writings of
Thomas Russell and Theobald Wolfe Tone*

While Tone and Russell's decision to support the 'catholic cause' began their journey down a difficult path, it was their words which challenged others to follow them. Both wrote numerous pamphlets and newspaper articles, gave speeches, and traveled extensively to promote their private cause. Two tracts, though, stand out as ideal representations of how Tone and Russell viewed their country, its peoples, and ultimately their place within the structure. Born into the elite, a protected and insulated group, Tone and Russell decided not to stand by and watch as sectarian division tore Ireland apart. Two idealistic men, preaching the message of unity and change to a country which needed both, searched for an identity by attempting to define the term 'Irishman.' Their transformed mentality, reflecting the belief that the Ascendency lacked virtue and denied liberty, is only half the picture. More importantly are the ways in which Tone and Russell attempted to challenge others, to make others question and judge the government as they did.

An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland and *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country* challenge the reader and force him to confront the harsh realities of Irish life. Curtin, in her chapter on 'Literary Mischief,' describes the works as "straightforward appeals to the reason and civic virtue of the reader."¹⁰⁷ While this analysis is true, it denies the wider implications of the pamphlets. The tracts possessed obvious appeal, for Tone's work sold almost 10,000 copies in 3 editions, along with 4 serials, and Russell's pamphlet "rapidly

¹⁰⁷Curtin, *United Irishmen*, 188.

passed through two editions.”¹⁰⁸ Written works are reflections of both the audience to which the tract is directed, as well as a mirror cast backwards at the author. To divorce the author from his work denies the personal dimension which gives the tract its passion and life. We have caught a brief glimpse of the lives of both Tone and Russell. Now, let us examine how their experiences influenced their writing, further shaping and molding their identities as Irishmen.

1. *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* by ‘A Northern Whig’ (Theobald Wolfe Tone)

The year 1791 witnessed the birth of a fierce contest, waged between the government and a new breed of reformers, led by Dr. William Drennan, for the support of the Catholics. Marianne Elliott states in her biography of Theobald Wolfe Tone that the “race was on for the Catholic soul.”¹⁰⁹ Within the context of this struggle for Catholic support, Tone wrote one of his most influential pamphlets, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland*. He composed his text with the intent of heightening the awareness of the reformers of the north, and the Volunteers and Ulster dissenters in particular, to the need for Catholic liberation and internal Union. The Belfast Bastille Day celebrations of 1791 gave reformers reason to meet and discuss their objectives. It also allowed them the opportunity to appeal to the Volunteers, who assembled in Belfast at that time. Thomas Russell, asked by *Northern Star* publisher and reformer Samuel Neilson to make an appeal to the Volunteers as an officer, pleaded with his friend Tone for assistance. Tone’s appeal to the Volunteers, on behalf of proposed ‘Brotherhood’ of reformers, was rejected because of

¹⁰⁸Elliott, *Tone*, 123; Madden, “Memoirs,” 164.

¹⁰⁹Elliott, *Wolfe Tone*, 131.

provisions calling for the emancipation of the catholics. Volunteer spurn of Tone's personal appeal to catholic freedom granted him the opportunity to take up his political pen and apply his "considerable talents towards the Catholic cause."¹¹⁰ The result was *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* (hereafter referred to as the *Argument*), written around 1 August 1791 under the guise of 'A Northern Whig.'¹¹¹ This pamphlet, in harmony with the ideology and principles of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* published in March 1791, was designed to arouse protestant and presbyterian interest for both the cause of reform and for the emancipation of the catholics.

Tone's pamphlet addressed the critical questions of the day. Why had parliamentary independence failed during the past 10 years? With the call for reform heard so clearly from people like Drennan and the Volunteers since the 1780s, Tone questioned why no action had been taken concerning the current political and economic situation in Ireland. Worse yet, the oppression and degradation of the catholics, though not as intense as the seventeenth century, was still tacitly accepted by the Irish parliament.

Tone structured the *Argument* around his belief that internal sectarian divisions was Ireland's most pressing problem. Based on the failure of radical reformers to incorporate catholic emancipation into the Volunteer program of reform in the 1780s, Tone believed that "we are taught this salutary truth, that no reform can ever be obtained, which shall not comprehensibly embrace Irishmen of all denominations."¹¹² By attacking the divisions among the Irish people, Tone launched a polemic that addressed all areas of Irish life: from the political battle over

¹¹⁰Ibid., 44.

¹¹¹Ibid., 126.

¹¹²Tone, Theobald Wolfe, *An Argument on Behalf of the Catholics of Ireland* 5th ed. (London: Connolly Books, 1969), 21.

representation to the social struggle of catholics against oppression to economic contentions over trading rights. The pamphlet's broad critique of Irish society intended to recruit readers into the battle for societal change and the creation of an Irish nation. To achieve this end, Tone used the language of the United Irishmen to rally protestant and presbyterian support for the catholic cause. Themes such as liberty, independence and union appear throughout the pamphlet, linking previous reform to the new ideology of the United Irishmen.

Tone prefaced his *Argument* with these enthusiastic and ironically prophetic words,

Already, I hold the Revolution commencing in the public mind- the day is broke, and every hour brings success nearer- to us investigation is victory- the cause of the Catholics is the cause of Truth, Justice, and Liberty, and under that conviction, it would be almost impious to doubt the event.¹¹³

Filled with idealism and hope, Tone's interest lay not in the subtle play of power that drew some reformists seeking personal glory, nor lay in merely increasing the prominence of Ireland through this Revolution. Tone's belief in 'Truth, Justice and Liberty' was not grounded in religious belief as was the case for Russell. Instead, it stemmed from his ideological belief in the righteousness of Paine's assertion that all men are born with inherent rights which must be respected. "After Paine," he wrote, "who shall, or who need, be heard on the subject [of reform and liberty]."¹¹⁴ The catholics could never achieve the common rights Paine called for without a shattering of the elite establishment. As the 'Pale' fell, so too would the Protestant Ascendency as its oppressive governing body.

Driven by his ideological desire for change, Tone's pamphlet can not be examined as a mere political tract. In attempting to convince his readers of the necessity of catholic liberation,

¹¹³Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 9.

Tone assumes the identities of the many different peoples of Ireland. Bridging the gaps between groups meant possessing an understanding of each sects' language. Tone, speaking in what the reader assumes to be his voice, wrote as a disillusioned protestant, "I am a Protestant of the Church of Ireland as by law established, and have again and again and again taken all the customary oaths by which we secure and appropriate to ourselves all degrees and professions, save one [that of merchant], to the exclusion of our Catholic Brethren."¹¹⁵ Tone's words barely shielded his disapproval and disgust for the current system of exclusion, an institution created by his 'brethren.' "I see Protestantism is no guard against corruption;" Tone continued, "I see the most profligate venality, the most shameless and avowed prostitution of principle go forward year after year, in assemblies, where no Catholic can by law appear."¹¹⁶ Again, a sense of shame pervades Tone's writings, founded in a lack of understanding of the Protestant Ascendancy's treatment of the catholics. By birthright he was born into the elite of Ireland, yet stated early on in the *Argument* that "I feel little propensity to boast that I have the honour to be an Irishman, and a Protestant."¹¹⁷ For Tone, pride in both being an Irishmen and at the same time a protestant created a duality within which he found no comfort.

Tone's ability to illustrate and understand the 'garrison' mentality of the elite protestants, countered with a passionate appeal for freedom and liberty on behalf of the catholics, was the key to the success of the *Argument*. Achieving this balance required both embracing, while at the same time distancing himself from, his protestant roots. He had to convince his mainly non-catholic audience that he approached the issue of catholic emancipation from an ideological and

¹¹⁵Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 34.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

rational perspective. "I am," Tone wrote, "no further interested in the event [inclusion of the catholics] than as a mere lover of justice, and a steady detester of tyranny."¹¹⁸ This is one of a series of statements opening the pamphlet in which Tone presented his personal position. In so doing, he presented not only his ability to speak the language of the protestants, but also the language of reform. His references to 'tyranny' and 'justice' referred to classical republicanism theorists such as Cicero and Demosthenes, but also to the 'new' language of reform through Paine. In this vein, he continued by writing, "Liberty is the vital principle of man: He that is prepared to live, is prepared for freedom."¹¹⁹

In one of the most interesting moments in the *Argument*, Tone attempted to fully disassociate himself from his protestant background, pleading in the voice of a catholic and appealing on behalf of a people who lacked a voice to speak for themselves. Assuming their identity, he passionately wrote, " 'Are we not men, as ye are, stamped with the image of our Maker, walking erect, beholding the same light, breathing the same air as Protestants: Hath not a Catholic hands: Hath not a Catholic eyes, dimensions, organs, passions.' "¹²⁰ Tone's appeal, while quite novel and intriguing, seems written from the standpoint of a father, gazing down upon a small child and telling the child how to understand his plight. While it may be presumptuous for Tone to speak in the voice of a catholic, he sincerely believed that no one else could nor would do it. Tone's words curiously foreshadow his official appointment as 'Agent to the Catholics' by the Catholic Committee in 1793. Continuing in his 'catholic' identity, Tone asked that the protestants "not grudge us existence, or that for which alone man should exist- Liberty: Say not that we are

¹¹⁸Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁹Ibid., 26-27.

¹²⁰Ibid., 36.

unprepared; Liberty prepares herself: Say not that we are ignorant, lest ye judge yourselves."¹²¹

This final phrase quietly attacked the notion that the constitution of 1782 guaranteed the liberty and independence of the protestants. The 'catholic' Tone asked who judged the protestants 'prepared' for liberty, and who now denied this liberty to the catholics.

Tone did not confine his discussion to the catholics, for, like Paine, he fashioned his appeal in a universal language. Tone argued that all men who lived within a society based in oppression and tyranny were "free in theory... slaves in fact,"¹²² and that all men strove for liberty. Including himself in this group of oppressed peoples, he aspired to identify with the Irish catholics. Tone's crossing of the sectarian border proved critical to his full understanding of the catholic situation, as well to the transformation of his identity. Without proper understanding of the nature of the catholic fight, Tone's transformed Irish identity would have meant nothing.

In his 'catholic' persona, Tone regarded the protestant elite as the enemy, for they enslaved and denied liberty to the catholic people. Tone wrote, "[w]e plunge them [the catholics] by law, and continue them by statute, in gross ignorance, and then we make the incapacity we have created, an argument for their exclusion, from the common rights of man!"¹²³ Now, these same protestants contended that the subservient nature of the catholics was reason to keep them down. "If ignorance be their condemnation," Tone paradoxically enquired, "what has made them ignorant? Not the hand of Nature: For I presume they are born with capacities, pretty much like other men: It is the iniquitous and cruel injustice of the Protestant bigotry, that has made them

¹²¹Ibid., 36.

¹²²Ibid., 19.

¹²³Ibid., 26.

ignorant.”¹²⁴

Returning to his protestant voice, Tone’s ability to debunk the claims of catholic ignorance and preach the message of the rights of man is beautifully demonstrated when he wrote,

What answer could we make to the Catholics of Ireland if they were to rise, and with one voice, demand their Rights as Citizens, and as Men? What reply justifiable to God, and to our conscience? None. We prate and babble, and write books, and publish them, filled with sentiments of freedom, and abhorrence of tyranny, and lofty praise of the Rights of Man! Yet we are content to hold three millions of our fellow creatures, and fellow subjects, in degradation and infamy, and contempt, or to sum up all in one word, in Slavery!”¹²⁵

Tone invoked the spirits of justice and truth by calling upon God to hear the cries of tyranny and witness the suppression of freedom. “Is liberty a disease,” Tone asked with a challenging air, “for which we are to be prepared for inoculation; if so fasting and abstinence, and long suffering be preparation, there are no men under Heaven better prepared than the Catholics of Ireland.”¹²⁶

These are strong words from a wealthy protestant, one likely to be among the first victims in the event of a catholic rising. Yet, the words invoke a certain feeling of guilt without dealing with concrete reasons why the catholics were prepared for liberty. These were the dominant themes in late eighteenth- century radicalism, yet they are left nebulous.

Unfortunately, proclamations like these seem geared more to incite zeal and passion than concretely illustrate and define broad ideological principles such as the ‘Rights of Man’ and ‘Slavery.’ Locked within these words is found a rather interesting duality. When Tone attempted to address particulars, his message became confused and oftentimes contradictory. His belief in

¹²⁴Ibid., 26.

¹²⁵Ibid., 35.

¹²⁶Ibid., 27.

the immediate acceptance of the catholics, one of the major objectives of the *Argument*, must be re-examined in the light of statements such as,

The liberation of the Catholics will be a work of compact, and like all other compacts, subject to stipulations. It will be for the wisdom and moderation of both parties to concede somewhat; allowance must be made on the one hand for the difficult sacrifice of parting with power, obtained in injustice, and long held by force...

Here, Tone referred to 'stipulations', 'moderation' and 'concessions'. This is not the language of unconditional acceptance of the catholics. This is the language of political realism. Gone are the condemnations of 'Slavery' and 'oppression.' Catholic liberty, specifically defined by the majority of catholics as freedom from tithes and land rents, must be understood in contrast to Tone's lofty and ambiguous abstract principle of Liberty. Tone was writing to a group of protestants and presbyterians who initially rejected his political treatise because of his call for immediate catholic emancipation. Now, let us read the rest of the above statement,

on the other hand there may be something to be pardoned in men condemned to ignorance by the law of the land, and whose minds have for a century been irritated by injuries, and inflamed by open insults, or still more offensive connivance and toleration.¹²⁷

Here, Tone resumed his universalist language since he is safe from trying to deal with the practical details of how the 'liberation of the Catholics' will be effected. Personally, Tone believed in immediate acceptance and reiterates this throughout his writings. It may be that the idealistic conception of catholic liberty hit a roadblock when confronted with issues like property re-distribution, re-definition of the franchise, and re-classification of voting standards. Tone's

¹²⁷Ibid., 23.

political thought never matured to a point where he elucidated what would happen after liberty was achieved and the program of political reform had been successful.

On the topic of education Tone wrote. "Give them [all catholics] education, open their eyes, shew them what is law, in some other form than that of a penal statute; give them franchise, as you have already in a certain degree given them property; let them be citizens, let them be men."¹²⁸ It seems rather clear that Tone is not talking about the same education that he received at Trinity. The duality is apparent even within this single sentence. He wrote of education as showing the catholics 'what is law,' then casts as incredible appeal to 'let them be citizens. let them be men.' His language does not seem consistent, for the particulars of education comes across as a strange form of societal training in laws, neatly contrasted to the universal appeal of equal treatment to the catholics as 'men.'

As to property, Tone naively believed that "[i]n the minds of the few remaining [Irish families of ancient lineage]; one hundred years of peace have cooled off all resentment."¹²⁹ Under a common union of the Irish, though, property would lose its exclusive character and all men would work for the common good of all Irish. "What interest," Tone wondered, "could a Catholic member of Parliament have, distinct from his Protestant brother sitting on the same bench, exercising the same function, bound by the same ties?"¹³⁰ What exactly would happen with property, though, is left undefined. With the repeal of the penal laws, competition would begin for property. Protestants, joined by presbyterians and catholic merchants would, of course, control the lion's share of the land. Tone made no calls for a redistribution of land, for Tone had not

¹²⁸Ibid., 26.

¹²⁹Ibid., 32.

¹³⁰Ibid., 33.

rejected all of his elite ideals. He apparently accepted a revolution in which the lower-classes did not control the land, but gained the basic Rights of Man. In a way, the freedom attained through the revolution granted the catholics the ability to control the land through the protestant ideals of hard work and commitment.

Tone, continuing his attempt to address particular aspects of the Irish situation, turned his attention in the *Argument* to practical issues of union and independence. Trying to address and allay protestant reservations over catholic enfranchisement, Tone attacked two major arguments employed by protestants against catholic emancipation: "First, the danger to the church establishment; and secondly... the resumption of Catholic forfeitures."¹³¹ Even here, Tone's protestant background surfaced as he referred to the catholic land stolen by conquering protestants as 'forfeitures.' The idea of a catholic 'vengeance' interconnects to both these arguments. Though fears were subsiding, some still envisioned an attack which in one fell swoop would repay the protestants and dissenters for hundreds of years of subjection. Tone responded simply, "[t]he fallacy lies in supposing that what was once true in politics, is always true,"¹³² and called upon protestants to, "put away childish fears, and look our situation in the face like men: let us speak to this ghastly spectre of our distempered imagination, the genius of Irish Catholicity! We shall find it vanish away like other phantoms of the brain, distempered by fear."¹³³ Tone merely wanted to force protestants to examine the catholics without the inherent fear of vengeance and belief in catholics' vulgar nature coloring the perspective of the protestants.

Another major concern for most protestants, not altogether unwarranted based on past

¹³¹Ibid., 22-23.

¹³²Ibid., 28.

¹³³Ibid., 22.

events, were the prevailing currents of Jacobitism amongst catholics. Their support of James II in the late seventeenth century had led to the penal laws and to protestant speculation over another 'foreign invasion' supported by the catholics. Tone wrote, "I say the man [James II] is dead; there is no Pretender."¹³⁴ He referred to two rebellions supporting the Stuart family in England, whereas "not one sword or trigger drawn in the cause in Ireland."¹³⁵ It is unclear how Tone explained this, but it does seem that he realized that the catholics would lend their support to any man or association prepared to grant them the freedom they desired. Connected to this are the legends and tales prophesied an invasion force which would rescue and liberate the catholics from their oppressors. James II, for many Irish catholics, represented the first attempt at their 'salvation.' With his defeat at the Boyne in 1690, catholic eyes turned yearningly to France and focused on the natural 'brotherhood' bond of religion which united these two peoples. Jacobitism and Jacobinism became one and the same amongst Irish protestants- something to fear and repress in the catholics. Tone, breaking his usual enlightened position regarding the 'masses,' counters by saying that "the peasantry of all countries are alike... [t]hey will follow their leaders."¹³⁶

Like the Irish 'masses,' Ireland was fighting for increased independence. Earlier reformers, especially the 'Patriots,' focused on greater control of the Irish state. This, of course, only referred to the protestant Irish. Tone, not yet ready to call for complete dissolution of the British link, demanded a shift in power. Put simply, "The misfortune of Ireland is, that we have no National Government, in which we differ from England, and from the rest of Europe."¹³⁷ Tone

¹³⁴Ibid., 29.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Ibid., 27.

¹³⁷Ibid., 11.

judged this imbalance of power as one of the greatest evils cursing Ireland. As a colony, Ireland was used as a market for English goods. Ireland lacked the ability to create a healthy economy for herself under English domination. Tone pondered, “Need more be said, than that a nation governed by herself will pursue her interests more steadily, than if she were governed by another, whose interest might clash with hers?”¹³⁸ The parallels between Tone’s position and those of American colonists fifteen years previous are unmistakable, though explicit mention is not made of the similarities.

Further echoing recent arguments from the Americans, Tone called for equal trade allowances that would allow Ireland to trade without the expressed permission of the British. This was not unique to Tone; most merchants were asking why British goods poured into Irish markets while Irish goods had to be distributed by British merchants, not Irish ones. This trade imbalance was yet another reminder of the subservience of the Irish to the British, and a further reminder of the dejected place Ireland held among the civilized nations of Europe. In this vein, Tone wrote, “[s]hall we be content to remain in our present and inglorious state, unknown and unheard of in Europe, the prey of England, the laughing-stock of the knaves, who plunder us?”¹³⁹

Based on the fervor with which Tone approached the tyrannical conduct of the British towards the Irish, his discussion of the role of the king comes as a great surprise and serves as a striking contrast. England and Ireland shared a sovereign, yet the Irish expected him to govern each state independently and fairly. As Tone wrote, “[h]e is in theory, and I trust in practice, equally interested in the welfare of both countries.”¹⁴⁰ Allegiance, according to Tone, should be

¹³⁸Ibid., 19.

¹³⁹Ibid., 22.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., 17.

paid to the English monarch, not the English nation represented by the English parliament. The Irish government “derived from another country, whose interest, so far from being the same with that of the people, directly crosses it at right angles,”¹⁴¹ and these two governments were joined in the person of the English monarch. Tone’s objection centered not on the British king, but Ireland’s treatment and subjection by the British parliament.

All three of these obstructions to independence, the imbalance of power, the unequal trade allowances, and the lack of distinct sovereign, share a common theme. Within each of them is the hidden claim that Ireland lacked an identity. In the end, whether or not she had a parliament did not matter. Ireland was ultimately governed by another nation, one that did not have Ireland’s best interests at heart. Another country, and another parliament, had final ruling over the laws of Ireland. Therefore, they had a measure of control over Irish life. Tone called for Ireland to seize power and to find her own identity, within her own people. This leads us to Tone’s most passionate, and also most dangerous, argument: union.¹⁴²

Tone spent little time discussing the details of the union of Irish peoples, and none on how things would work after the Union had achieved its goals of Independence and Liberty. Tone wrote, “[t]he people are divided, each party afraid and jealous of the other; they have only the justice of their cause to support them, and that plea grievously weakened by the acknowledged exclusion of three fourths of the nation from their rights as men.”¹⁴³ Tone called for the establishment of a bond not based on religion, but derived from ‘citizenship.’ According to Tone, “[t]he proximate cause of our disgrace is our evil government, the remote one is our own intestine

¹⁴¹Ibid., 12.

¹⁴²Considering the events of 1801, the Union between England and Ireland, the term Union here will be used exclusively to refer to the internal union amongst the Irish people which was the principal goal of Tone and Russell.

¹⁴³Tone, *Argument*, 37.

division, which, if once removed, the former will be instantaneously reformed.”¹⁴⁴

The corruption of ‘our evil government’ and its lack of insight into Irish problems had a severely disconcerting effect upon the majority of the populace, who had little or no say into the corridors of power. Tone wrote, “corruption is the only medium of Government in Ireland.”¹⁴⁵ He claimed that the only way to rid Ireland of its evils was a common bond among its inhabitants, *all* its inhabitants. To exclude the catholics from the government of Ireland again would constitute a call for the continued corruption of Government and a resumption of previous evils. He believed that “[t]he people here are despised and defied: their will does not weigh a feather in the balance, when English influence, or the interest of their rulers, is thrown into the opposite scale.”¹⁴⁶ A common union, for him, was the only way to engender “a strength in the people, which may enable them, if necessary, to counter-act the influence of that government, should it ever be, as it indisputably has been, exerted, to thwart her prosperity.”¹⁴⁷ Union must be, for Tone, the only solution, as “[t]heir restoration to the rank of Man, will be a work of peaceful contract, not of implacable war with their Protestant Brethren.”¹⁴⁸

After a century of slavery, Tone and the United Irishmen realized that catholic emancipation could only be achieved by uniting against a common enemy: the illegitimate protestant government. Nancy Curtin explains the union process by saying, “Tone persuaded the Dissenters that the enemy of their enemy was their friend. The common enemy was clearly an illiberal Anglo-Irish ascendancy backed by British power. It was expedient as well as just.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 11.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 13.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 18.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., 32.

therefore, that Catholics should be included in any demands made to alter this undesirable state of affairs.”¹⁴⁹ The union, which can be seen as an alliance of convenience, was a daring maneuver designed to bring together disparate elements within Ireland. Tone desired a united Ireland, an Ireland in which religion mattered less than the common link shared by all: residence on the island of Hibernia. Tone concluded his *Argument* with a final plea for union and change. He wrote, “[l]et them [Irish protestants and presbyterians] look to their fellow slaves, who by coalition with them, may rise to be their fellow citizens, and form a new order in their society, a new era in their history: Let them once cry Reform, and the Catholics; and Ireland is free, independent, and happy.”¹⁵⁰

2. *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country* by Thomas Russell, a United Irishman

Ireland experienced striking and violent change in the five years between the appearance of Tone’s *Argument* and Russell’s *Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country* (now simply referred to as the *Letter*). One of the first indications of the changes was the immediate move to arrest Russell after the *Letter*’s publication on 12 September 1796. While writing to a friend early in 1798, Russell declared that the government had no charge against him and was imprisoned because “I am only thought to be dangerous. What folly!”¹⁵¹ What events could have occurred to change the mood of the government so drastically that the government

¹⁴⁹Curtin, *The United Irishmen*, 45.

¹⁵⁰Tone, *Argument*, 39.

¹⁵¹Madden, “Memoirs,” 196-197.

received Tone's *Argument* as a means of political and social protest, yet labeled Russell's *Letter* seditious and confined him to Newgate Gaol outside of Dublin for two and a half years?

Russell's *Letter* largely consisted of an examination of the events which mutated Ireland's government from secure and stable in its confidence into a paranoid monster lashing out against any possible threat. Beginning with the Convention of Volunteers' failure to incorporate catholic emancipation in 1784, Russell traced the path of reform and social movement within Ireland. He concentrated heavily on past failures, such as the Catholic Convention and the Fitzwilliam Viceroyalty. He also attempted to explain why reform and social transformation was vital to Ireland.

Russell began his story at the moment Tone ended his in the *Argument*. The Volunteer Convention's failure to succeed in calling for reform for the catholics led to an eight year battle to vocalize catholic demands. "Unacquainted with the remote cause," Russell believed that the catholics "felt nothing but the oppression of the tax-gatherer, tythe-proctors, and their landlords. Unconnected by any band of union, and having none of the ability, education, consequence, or integrity to espouse their cause. they remained in a state of hopeless despondency."¹⁵² The catholics possessed no understanding of the true nature of politics, and did not realize that the oppression and hardships they felt resulted from the direct actions of the Irish government, the 'remote cause' in Russell's language. If the catholics attempted to address "what they conceived to be grievances, by partial disturbance, they were crushed in a moment by the power of government, supported by the whole landed and ecclesiastical bodies."¹⁵³ 'Partial disturbances,'

¹⁵²Thomas Russell, *A Letter to the People of Ireland on the Present Situation of the Country* (Belfast: Northern Star, 1796), 2.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*

small-scale riots demanding lower prices and rents, were the logical consequence for these downcast people. “That the lower orders,” he continued, “thus left to themselves, conceiving that they were oppressed and without people of knowledge or consequence to advise or protect them, should at times commit unjustifiable actions is not surprising.”¹⁵⁴ Catholic understanding of the political system stopped with their absentee landlords and the Church. In fact, the whole hierarchy of Ireland, Russell maintained, rested on the subservience of the Catholics. “Personal courage.” Russell wrote, “necessary to protect them from personal insult, they possessed to an eminent degree; but a century of slavery had divested them of political courage or a wish for political disquisition.”¹⁵⁵

Two organizations attempted to counter the ‘century of slavery’ and bolster the ‘political courage’ of the Catholics. The United Irishmen, founded in 1791, declared their support for a union of all Irish as a means of achieving political reform. They represented a major step towards bridging the sectarian divisions within Ireland. Russell, as one of the founders of this movement, took particular pride in the United Irish policy of spreading “similar associations through the country, as it was evident that when the people knew each other, interest as well as affection, would make their friendship permanent.”¹⁵⁶ Russell’s travels throughout Ireland brought him closer to the Irish ‘masses’ than any other United Irishmen. His travels also provided him the opportunity to establish a permanent bond of friendship between differing peoples. The United Irish Society hoped to further this bond of friendship by providing a voice to the Catholic people who were led by government to “entertain no hopes from liberality or justice of the Protestant or

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 12.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 3.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 8.

Dissenting interest.”¹⁵⁷ Initially unconcerned by the growth of the United Irishmen, government fears rapidly increased during the years 1793-1794.

The convening of the Catholic Convention by the Catholic Committee in 1792-1793, the second major event, increased government paranoia and ire. The Catholic Committee, divided between conservative and radical forces, published an address in 1792 which “produced some trifling relaxation of the penal code.”¹⁵⁸ The radical element of the Committee, roused by the inactivity of the Protestant Ascendency, forced the ‘catholic question’ upon an unwilling government. The result was a petition appealing to the English parliament. As the Irish protestant elites “gabbled... about anarchy, and confusion, and mobs, and United Irishmen, and Defenders, and Volunteers,”¹⁵⁹ the king approved the Catholic Relief Act of 1794, already discussed in the previous chapter. Russell believed that government, finding no legitimate excuse for the repression of the catholics, diverted the interest of the country towards the danger of catholic reform and focused on the importance of the Irish role in the war against France. The Irish parliament, whose cries of sectarian chaos and ‘anarchy’ were ignored by the English, felt once again isolated and defensive. As such, the protestants increased the “despotick sway” with which they governed Ireland, and returned to their ‘garrison’ mentality by instituting harsh programs of political repression.¹⁶⁰ The policy of repression resulted in the exile of Theobald Wolfe Tone on charges of conspiring with French agents and the trials of such eminent Irishmen and United Irishmen as Dr. William Drennan and James Napper Tandy. Russell claimed government realized

¹⁵⁷Ibid., 2.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

the “only cause then adequate to depress such a people was disunion, so long as that prevailed, so long could this aristocracy plunder and insult the country, and even quarrel among themselves for the division of the spoil with impunity...”¹⁶¹

Russell, though, continued by spelling out a simplistic proposal to counter governmental tyranny, “but when ever a UNION of the people takes place- when they once consider all Irishmen as their friends and brethren, the power of this aristocracy will vanish.”¹⁶² The United Irishmen embodied this program of union, and the attempt at uniting the peoples of Ireland against an aristocracy which would not listen to their demands. Russell, assuming a degree of United Irish success, wrote, “a system of brotherly love and union and a revival of national spirit has been rapidly taking place among the people; it was to be expected that this would be approved.”¹⁶³ Their suppression in 1794, according to Russell, had to be considered as another attempt by the government to maintain control of their domains. According to Russell,

The most spirited part of the north was dragooned; proclamations were issued; volunteers were disarmed; arbitrary imprisonments were inflicted; prosecutions were instituted; the gun-powder and militia bills were passed; the nation was foiled in its pursuit (of catholic emancipation), and *put down*; terror was the order of the day.¹⁶⁴

To Russell, the goal of government was assurance that there was “no national spirit in Ireland.”¹⁶⁵

As government forced the United Irish underground and with the catholics lamenting their depressed state, the internal situation continued to decline. Two more events forced the Irish to

¹⁶¹Ibid., 8.

¹⁶²Ibid.

¹⁶³Ibid., 14.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 4.

re-examine the nature of Irish politics. Since 1782, the Irish parliament had claimed independence from Britain, excepting the royal veto. The Irish considered the office of Viceroy as the representative of English interest, yet his power greatly reduced because of the 'constitution.' In 1794, English Prime Minister William Pitt appointed Earl William Wentworth Fitzwilliam to the position of Viceroy as a political favor to the Duke of Portland.¹⁶⁶ This appointment drastically changed the way many Irish viewed the relationship between England and Ireland. Fitzwilliam arrived in Ireland with orders from both Pitt and Portland not to raise the catholic question. Fitzwilliam, as quoted by Russell, asserted that "*his orders from England and his own intentions* [intentions] *were not to bring on the Catholic question if it could be kept back.* [sic]"¹⁶⁷

Shortly after his arrival, Fitzwilliam requested the Irish parliament unconditionally repeal the penal codes. The catholic, dissenter, and reformers expressed their delight as "[a]ddresses and petitions poured in from all parties in favour of it (the repeal)."¹⁶⁸ All parties, that is, except the protestants. Because of their inclination to govern by tyranny and as "calm thinking villains," Russell ignored them in much the same way they had ignored public opinion amongst the catholic masses. England, obviously expressing a disinclination to confront the catholic question in 1796, quickly recalled Fitzwilliam. Russell, assuming the voice of harsh Irish official, reacted to catholic interference in the Fitzwilliam affair by writing,

'Mind your looms, and your spades and ploughs; have you not the means of

¹⁶⁶The Fitzwilliam Affair has been studied more extensively by historians than other areas of Irish history because of the involvement of the Duke of Portland, William Pitt, and the shift in opinion which occurs in Ireland as a result of this incident. See Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 69-70, 73-74; *Wolfe Tone*, 246-250; McDowell, *Ireland in the Age of Imperialism and Revolution*, 445-461; and most recently an examination from the British perspective by David Wilkinson, "The Fitzwilliam Episode, 1795: A Reinterpretation of the Role of the Duke of Portland," *Irish Historical Studies*, May 1995, 315-339.

¹⁶⁷Russell, *Letter*, 14.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

subsistence; can you not earn your bread, and have wives and get children; and are you not protected so long as you keep quiet; and have you not all that you can earn, except so much as is necessary for us to govern you; leave the government to wiser heads and to the people who understand it, and interfere no more!’

Russell’s language, which focused more on practical problems than the academic flair, harkened back to the arguments of Thomas Paine and classical republican theorists concerning governmental responsibility and representation. The people, having no active involvement in government, possessed no voice nor opinion in the daily actions of government. “Great pains,” Russell claimed, “have been taken to prevent the mass of mankind from interfering in political pursuits; force, and argument, and witt, and ridicule, and invective, have been used by the governing party.” Government not only ignored the people, but actively sought to exclude them, knowing their position and goals, from politics. This leads to the most important and all-encompassing aspect of Russell’s *Letter*.

Tone, while claiming nothing but antagonism against England throughout his career, maintained in the *Argument* that the British king could be a potential ally for the Irish against the tyrannical Irish parliament. The Ascendency was seen as tyrannical, and the catholics even appealed to the British in 1793, hoping to break the tyranny of the protestant elite. By 1795, though, Irish reformers reconsidered the role of England. As in the Fitzwilliam affair, Britain continued to show her disregard for Irish interests through the revolutionary wars. The war against France, beginning in 1792, was “prophanely styled a war to preserve man and the Godhead.”¹⁶⁹ Not only did Russell vehemently object to the appeal to God on behalf of an erroneous principle, but saw no reason this war defended the position of man. In fact, most of his

¹⁶⁹Ibid.

Letter focused on how the war disregarded the interest of man, specifically the interest of Irishmen. Russell introduced his main argument by claiming that “it is the DUTY of every man in society to attend to government and politics of the state in which he lives.”¹⁷⁰

Running contrary to the governmental ideal of the Protestant Ascendancy, Russell believed that all men were responsible for the actions of their country. He wrote,

Every person who drinks whiskey, or any thing stronger than water- every person who wears shoes pays something to the government; it is therefore clearly their duty to know in what manner their money, the produce of their labour, is applied; if it is to a bad purpose they are accountable.

Bringing the argument to bear directly upon the English use of Irish soldiers in their war against France, Russell continued, “if the war be unjust on our part, every man killed in it by the Irish is *murdered*, and every acquisition made by it robbery.”¹⁷¹ Simply because all Irish were not directly involved in their government did not mean that they were not culpable for the actions of the “insolent enslavers of the human race” who rule.¹⁷² Accountability derived not from voting in the Irish parliament, but from citizenship.

The duty of the Irish people was also the duty of the Irish nation. “Now let every person seriously ask himself,” Russell pleaded, “what injury did the French do to the Irish- and how are we justified in making war on them.”¹⁷³ Ireland was engaged in an ideological war against France, yet many within Ireland did not support the ideological position the Irish fought for. In fact, it was not Ireland’s position at all, but England’s. This was the nature of the English link. England had

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 19.

¹⁷¹Ibid., 20.

¹⁷²Ibid., 15.

¹⁷³Ibid., 20.

the right to employ Ireland in her service, forcing the Irish to solve her problems and fight her wars. Russell claimed that “near *one-third* of the seamen in the British navy are Irish. Above 150,000 Irish soldiers have been employed in the war.”¹⁷⁴ The English navy could not rule the seas without the help of the 15,000 recent Irish recruits.¹⁷⁵ Yet, Ireland was still treated as a subservient territory and Russell saw union as the only chance for amelioration. Ireland was treated as a clearing-house for British goods, a warehouse for exports, and a factory and barracks for future soldiers. The Irish obviously possessed a vested interest in the war against France, yet had no vested interest in either the outcome nor a part in the victory spoils. To an extent, Russell argued for an isolationist mentality, impossible given the nature of the ‘relationship’ between England and Ireland. Considering this ‘relationship,’ “a man may be forced to act against his reason and his conscience.”

Here, Russell returned to an earlier argument: the ‘remote cause.’ This was last discussed in connection with the catholics ignorance of the true nature of the political situation. England unveiled her true nature as the ‘remote cause’ in Irish affairs, oppressing Ireland and subjecting her people. Britain, having “plunged this unfortunate country into all the guilt and calamity of the present war with more alacrity than the gentlemen of the opposition (the Irish government),”¹⁷⁶ became a target of aggression for the Irish reformer. After 1795, the British government personified the corruption and ignorance previously thought to solely belong to the Irish parliament. “Power,” Russell believed, “long continued in any mortal hands, has a tendency to corrupt: and when that power is derived from birth or fortune, and held independent of the

¹⁷⁴Ibid., 21.

¹⁷⁵Elliott, *Partners in Revolution*, 138.

¹⁷⁶ Russell, *Letter*, 6.

people, it is still more likely to be abused."¹⁷⁷ Whether it be the Irish or English parliament, power by birth, power through the exclusion of the catholics, was power through injustice.

Russell used a subtle metaphorical device to identify Ireland with the catholics. Ireland, just as the catholics, was a nation oppressed by Britain. Governed with an iron hand by another nation which the Irish felt had no right to involve themselves in their affairs, Ireland strove for the same idealized liberty as the catholics. Russell even stated that the "Government did not scruple to act diametrically opposite to their sentiments [catholic opinion towards Fitzwilliam], thereby showing how completely the spirit of the people was down in their judgements."¹⁷⁸ Why should the people support a government that treated their wishes as muted cries.

Russell's exposure to the lower orders, and their 'deaf cries,' allowed him a view of what oppression and tyranny mean to them. Russell demonstrated his understanding of the lower class when he wrote,

It is well known that the traveler will receive in the most wretched cabin in the wildest parts of Ireland all the hospitality that the circumstance of the owner can afford: he will get his share of milk, if there is any, and of potatoes; and if he has lost his way he will be guided to the road for miles, and all this without the expectation or the wish for a reward: from such a people the commission of such crimes are less to be expected, than from those who so falsely and infamously traduce them."¹⁷⁹

This quotation, which does not seem to belong in this pamphlet, has a strange ring of an advertisement. Russell used the kindness and generosity of the catholics, however, to bring to light an interesting point. How ignorant could these people be if they live according to the rules of

¹⁷⁷Ibid., 16.

¹⁷⁸Ibid., 14.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., 12.

the Christian religion? Russell, who believed heavily in the teachings of Jesus the Christ, saw this not as evidence of catholic foolishness, but rather as proof that the catholics were good and righteous people. Beneath an exterior of oppressions and tyranny were a kind and gentle people. Russell hoped that the protestants, the oppressors, could identify with the catholic position through an understanding of their position with relation to England. He also wished that the protestants could appreciate the simple catholics, just as Russell learned to admire them during his travels.

Both Tone and Russell refer to the catholic position as one of 'slavery,' inferring the impossibility of the catholics to improve their own state. Russell, unlike the paternalistic Tone, approached the problem more from the point of moral encouragement. His emphasis on 'personal courage' seems slanted to uplift, not help up, the catholics. Russell wrote, "[e]very man has a life to lose, though perhaps no property- laws, therefore, affecting life, should have his concurrence,"¹⁸⁰ and "[t]he mass of the people are entitled to a share in the government as well as the rich." Both of these quotations reflect Russell's desire to incorporate the catholics fully into the fold.

Russell's pamphlet contained more than a few themes which illustrated the personality differences between he and Tone. As Denis Carroll pointed out, "he [Russell] was imbued with a sense of divine providence and convinced of a universal battle between good and evil."¹⁸¹ Because of his religious fervor, Russell's arguments always contained an element of religious righteousness. He wrote, "The great object of mankind should be to consider themselves as accountable for their actions to God *alone*, and to pay no regard or obedience to any men or

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 16.

¹⁸¹Carroll, *The Man From God Knows Where*, 220.

institution, which is not conformable to his will.”¹⁸² For Russell, oppression was not only contrary to the inherent rights of man, but also averse to the natural will of God. Russell wrote,

The God of Heaven and earth endowed these men with the same passions and the same reason as the great, and consequently qualified them for the same liberty, happiness and virtue; but these gentlemen [Protestant elite] conceive themselves wiser than the Deity: they find that he was wrong, and set about rectifying his work; they find the moral qualities and political rights of their fellow creatures commensurate with their fortunes.¹⁸³

The meaning of these words could not have been missed by the members of the Irish Parliament. The contempt Russell had for the elite’s attempts at overriding the natural laws of God is barely hidden in his words. Russell believed that “[n]o human law can justify a breach of the law of God, and whenever laws are made in contradiction to it, they should be resisted.”¹⁸⁴ Obviously directed at the penal laws, he pulled no punches in his attack. He may not have been a superior rhetorician, but his passion surely makes up for any lack of style. Russell concluded his pamphlet with the following words, “[t]he means are the most delightful that life can afford, the cultivation of brotherly love to our fellow creatures, and the end the greatest that the imagination of man can conceive, that of being acceptable in the sight of the Almighty, all perfect and adorable author of Nature.”¹⁸⁵

There is one section of the *Letter* which stands out as an oddity. Russell wrote, “[i]n proportion then as the people show any desire to assume political consequence, these gentlemen will all unite with the English party against the common enemy- the people- and in proportion as

¹⁸²Russell, *Letter*, 23.

¹⁸³*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 24.

the people are crushed and torpid.”¹⁸⁶ The mention of the people as the ‘common enemy’ seems odd from a man who knew the ‘masses’ better than any other United Irishman. Russell, while examining the present situation in terms of the governmental response, still refers to himself as an ‘enemy.’ He did not stay within this language for the entire pamphlet, but used it consistently for much of his discussion. It is as if he is attributing the martyr mentality to himself, examining the situation from his standpoint of sacrificial lamb. Russell seemed to accept, even revel, in his position as part of the opposition, rather than the governmental norm. He played with the typical governmental response of a garrison defender, to label threats as enemies and attack all which posed a challenge. It is odd for a man like Russell, a simple man who told his story in basic language, to use an oratorical device as complex as role reversal. Yet, this character ‘acting’ was necessary to demonstrate his argument that the government, as illiberal and tyrannical, considered reform dangerous and those who espoused reform as ‘enemies.’ Russell’s creation, or at least casting of himself in the part of the ‘enemy’ is an interesting twist to his ‘rebellious’ side.

For Russell, the process of reform, connected to the transformation of his identity, involved turmoil, oftentimes failure, but always a fight. Based on his analysis of the previous decade of Irish history, Russell believed that righteousness had to struggle against adversity on the way to acceptance. The emancipation of the catholics passed through the turmoil of ignorance and the blind eye of protestant elites, the deaf ear of the dissenters, and the heavy hand of English influence. Russell too passed through turmoil and ordeals, tortured by a love which he dare not confront and burdened by economic hardships. Both, then, were purified by the fires of strife and molded by the hands of a Divine Creator. Reform, ordained and approved by God, was inevitable.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 5.

“The means,” Russell concluded, “are the most delightful that life can afford, the cultivation of brotherly love to our fellow-creatures, and the end the greatest that the imagination of man can conceive, that of being acceptable in the sight of the Almighty, all perfect and adorable author of Nature.”¹⁸⁷

Both the works of Tone and Russell can be examined in the same light. Both are written by socially secure men, attacking a foundation which could crumble quickly upon their heads. Yet, each launched violent attacks against the system in unique ways. Tone launched his attack from an academic perspective, using lofty language which left practical realities obscure and ill-defined. He believed the catholics had the potential to become prosperous members of the establishment, but this growth would take time. They would first have to recover from their years of ‘catholic’ training and learn the ways of a ‘protestant’ country. Russell, as we have seen, based his polemic on the immorality of the Protestant Ascendancy’s position and on first hand knowledge of what toll the protestant’s defensive stance had taken upon the catholics. Russell thought that they only factor inhibiting catholic achievement and success was the oppression of the protestants. Tone suffered enormously for his passion in the Irish fight: he was thrown out of his native land. Russell suffered a more obvious fate, confinement to a small cell. Even knowing the possibilities, Tone and Russell stood against members of their own class and social background to decry the tyranny which they saw around them. Beyond this, though, is the perspective each man brings to the catholic fight. Tone’s identity rested within the political and civic sphere, as we have seen. Russell, however, concerned himself much more with the practical social issues such as the tithe

¹⁸⁷Ibid., 24.

and property rights.

Both, regardless of their area of concentration, saw an inclusive union of the Irish as critical to any further success. Nothing more could be achieved, such as the desired political reforms, without union. In many ways, union was so fundamental to the cause of the United Irishmen that neither Tone nor Russell attempted to define society after all men were equal. For them, the process of uniting the people of Ireland would eliminate all internal problems. While so simple for Tone and Russell, union would prove an enormous stumbling block in the 1790s. This hurdle would be so great, as illustrated by its devastating failure in 1798, that the call for union, excepting Russell's doomed attempt in 1803, would never be heard again.

Conclusion

As to 1798, we leave the weak and wicked men who considered sanguinary violence as part of their resources for ameliorating our institutions, and the equally wicked and villainously designing wretches who fomented the rebellion, and made it explode in order that in the defeat of the rebellious attempt, they might be able to extinguish the liberties of Ireland. We leave both these classes of miscreants to the contempt and indignation of mankind.¹⁸⁸

This Daniel O'Connell quote, from a speech given in 1841, illustrates with shocking clarity the ways in which history can be misunderstood, even warped. O'Connell believed his career to be aimed at goals diametrically opposed to those of the United Irishmen. He worked towards the goal of liberty for the catholics. He saw no reason nor rational for the need to turn to violence. O'Connell, unfortunately, concentrated on the religious affiliation of these men instead of their ideals and goals. In so doing, he misunderstood how close the views of Tone and Russell, and even the pre-revolutionary views of the United Irish, were to his goals. The Society was not created with the purpose of arming and gathering people to drive the British from the shores of Erin. The tragedy behind O'Connell's quote lies both within the surface understanding of the United Irish movement, and deeper within the unspoken transformation which O'Connell merely ascribes to a conscious decision on the part of the United Irish themselves.

A surface understanding of the Rebellion of 1798 would probably led one to believe in the basically violent nature of the United Irishmen. Indeed, the first sentence of Marianne Elliott's study of the international politics involved in the Rebellion is "[t]he most important legacy of the

¹⁸⁸Elliott, Marianne. *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France*. 367.

1790s to Irish history is that of militant republicanism.”¹⁸⁹ One would also be inclined to believe that the Society’s goal was stabilizing and further stratifying a divided, sectarian Ireland. This, as I have tried to show, was never true. The issue here is the transformation of the United Irishmen from a non-violent reform society into an underground movement full of revolutionary sentiment. Tone and Russell were forced to shift their identities once again, for the events of 1795 demonstrated that government was not about to allow reform. They were forced to turn to force, the threat of revolution, to achieve their goal of liberty for the catholics and a united Ireland. For them, it mattered not the path to change, so long as change occurred.

Tone and Russell were ‘reformers’ because of their deep desire to institute a change within Irish society. The practical realities of catholic tyranny, economic oppression and general subservience of the Irish people cause ideological problems for these men. Whether their grievances be rooted within the rhetoric of classical republican liberty or within the ‘New Light’ ideology encompassing Lockean notions of representation and duty, Tone and Russell made their choice to fight against what they saw as fundamentally flawed. Throughout the 1790s, however, the number of things they saw as ‘wrong’ within Irish society increased. The British link became a more obvious burden, government oppression became fiercer, and political freedom more scarce. Their hand, one may say, was forced into a revolutionary position. Just like the catholics, they quickly realized that the elite was not going to listen to them; and that the government was not going to passively walk down the path of reform. Identity shifted to a violent self. This is their legacy, but far from their intent.

What Tone and Russell sought to create, through their ‘revolutionary idealism’ or simple

¹⁸⁹Elliott, Marianne. *Partners in Revolution*. xiii.

naivete, was a society not bound by the sectarian conflict which is such an obvious part of Irish history. They sought to break from their backgrounds and challenge the system on a new level, one where all men stood free and equal. This was their idealism, and the history of Ireland in the later part of the 1790s is the story of the death of this idealism. Death came not at their hands, for the knife was held by a country which was not yet ready to accept their words.

On 1 January, 1801, the principles which the United Irishmen espoused for almost ten years, namely liberty, independence and union, were forever corrupted. The Act of Union, put into effect on this day, linked Ireland to Britain and dissolved the Ascendancy's parliament. The voice of Ireland became one aspect of the Great Britain. The Harp of Erin, symbol of Ireland adopted by the United Irishmen, became just another icon associated with the British crown. But Ireland would never be the same after 1798. The idealism of change was dying with the rise of Napoleon and the realization that the *ancien regime*, the hierarchical order of exclusion, was not going to allow itself to be swept away. The United Irishmen represent the last time religion was ignored or overlooked as insignificant. After the Rebellion of 1798, no group would believe that religious differences could be overcome through idealism. The bloody massacre of 30,000 to 100,000 Catholics in the summer of 1798 assured that the power of religion and the differences between religions would never again be discounted. As the bicentennial of the 1798 Rebellion nears, Tone and Russell's legacy and the United Irish goals of liberty, independence and union of all Irishmen still ring hauntingly unfulfilled within an Ireland of the 1990s.

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